



The second issue

A more expansive reading of the surrogacy law can help more couples

The Supreme Court’s recent observations about the legality of going in for surrogacy for the second child has raised the fundamental issue of what a law is meant to regulate. In a petition in the Court, a couple facing secondary infertility sought to use surrogacy, as under the Surrogacy Act, surrogacy cannot be resorted to for the second child. Their advocate argued that the state cannot interfere in the private lives and reproductive choices of citizens. Secondary infertility is when a couple is unable to conceive, or carry a pregnancy to term, though they have previously birthed children naturally. The causes are similar to primary infertility – Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, endometriosis, and lifestyle factors. The petitioners sought an exemption to have a second child through surrogacy, submitting that the definition of ‘infertility’ in the context of surrogacy, both in the ART and the Surrogacy Acts, was not restricted to only primary infertility. Under Section 4(iii)(C)(II) of India’s Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021, a couple is eligible for surrogacy only if they do not have any surviving child (biological, adopted, or through surrogacy). Exceptions are made only if the existing child is mentally or physically challenged or has a life-threatening disorder. The government submitted arguments supporting the view that surrogacy cannot be deemed a fundamental right, and that it involves the use of another woman’s body. While the judge orally remarked that the restriction imposed under the provision was “reasonable”, the Court has decided to examine whether a law banning married couples facing secondary infertility from using surrogacy to have a second child amounts to a restriction on the reproductive choices of citizens.

It may be noted that the Court recently diluted the age specification for surrogacy, allowing age relaxation for couples who had frozen embryos prior to passing the Act. If the avowed intent of the law, as argued at the stage of debate, is to prevent commercial surrogacy, or exploitative situations taking advantage of vulnerable women, besides regulating the mushrooming fertility centres (in conjunction with the ART Act), then to impose restrictions differentiating between primary and secondary fertility seems like splitting hairs. Currently, there is no law restricting the number of children a person can have in India, though many States have incentivised a two-child norm in terms of government benefits, jobs or political offices. A more expansive interpretation of the law, facilitating, for all those in need, access to the benefits of technology, is likely to satisfy two requirements – assisting intending parents, and preventing commercial surrogacy.

Justice in food

Justice in food systems implies transition to healthy, affordable diets

By showing that food alone drives five of the six breached planetary boundaries and about 30% of greenhouse-gas emissions worldwide, the new ‘EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy, sustainable, and just food systems’ report shows how food systems are at the centre of the overlapping climate, biodiversity, water, and pollution crises. Foods from animals account for most agricultural emissions whereas the grains dominate nitrogen, phosphorus, and water use. Only combined action, including cuts to food loss, enhanced and durable productivity gains, and dietary changes, can reverse these trends. The prediction on biogeochemical flows is stark: current agriculture leaves a global nitrogen surplus more than twice in excess of the safe limit. Efficiency gains left uncorrected by good policy can also spur more output that then erases environmental savings. The Commission is pragmatic, too, acknowledging that a response combining everything from dietary changes to emissions mitigation would still only barely return the world’s food systems to safety *vis-à-vis* the climate and freshwater crises by mid-century; the pressure on nutrient security will remain. It does make one questionable assumption, that GDP will grow 127% in 30 years, whereas policy should focus on lower growth and worse climate shocks.

According to the report, India maintains a cereal-heavy diet while meeting benchmarks by 2050 entails more vegetables, fruits, nuts and legumes, which could raise average consumer prices. Affordability is already fragile in areas that import many of these foods, leaving consumers exposed to price shocks. Justice thus implies a transition towards healthier, more diverse diets while keeping prices in check. But changing diets may not always be desirable: preferences are anchored in religion, caste, and convenience, and on necessity *vis-à-vis* midday meals and procurement commitments. Rather than a diet-first strategy, then, new standards can cut harmful inputs, fiscal measures can make minimally processed foods cheaper, and procurement can normalise regionally familiar, more affordable dishes. Even then, supply-side reform is essential to overcome water stress, degraded soils, and fossil fuel dependence in cold chains and processing. India also needs to move away from implicit, open-ended incentives to extract groundwater. Finally, the Commission identifies market concentration, weak incentives for preventing labour and ecological harm, and undue corporate influence as factors that could stall change. Justice on the other hand demands stronger collective bargaining by workers and small producers and consumer representation in regulatory processes. These safeguards are partial at best today and need to become guaranteed in practice.

As India’s wealth gap stretches to levels unseen since Independence and technology races ahead of policy, we find ourselves hurtling toward a collision of crises, job-shedding automation, gig economy precarity, climate-driven displacement and a mental health time bomb fed by chronic insecurity. At this moment, ideas such as universal basic income (UBI), once dismissed as utopian, deserve a fresh, pragmatic look. A UBI can cushion mass unemployment, restoring consumer demand when machines outnumber workers, rewarding unpaid care that props up the formal economy, and rebuilding a social contract frayed by pandemics and capitalism alike. In India, where welfare systems are often plagued by inefficiencies, exclusions and complex eligibility filters, a UBI offers a radical yet simple proposition: a periodic, unconditional cash transfer to every citizen, irrespective of income or employment status. Re-examining it is no longer an academic indulgence. It is an urgent policy imperative. By embedding dignity, autonomy and simplicity into its design, a UBI challenges us to rethink what a welfare state ought to provide in the 21st century.

Universality is the primary strength of a UBI. Where Bismarckian and Beveridgean models peg security to past employment or bureaucratic proof of hardship, a UBI anchors it in citizenship alone, transforming social protection into a streamlined, rights-based pipeline that is resilient to automation shocks, climate emergencies and the invisible labour of care. It bypasses the administrative complexities of targeted welfare and removes the stigma associated with poverty-based entitlements. It aims to create a basic floor of income security for all, ensuring that no one is left behind due to bureaucratic lapses or conditional access.

The argument for a UBI in India

India’s current welfare landscape, though expansive, remains fragmented and uneven. Schemes suffer from leakage, duplication, and exclusion. A UBI offers a way to streamline welfare delivery, particularly as digital infrastructure, such as Aadhaar and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) platforms, matures. But the argument for a UBI is not just administrative; it is fundamentally moral and economic.

The macro numbers flatter us. Earlier this year, the Press Information Bureau (PIB) claimed that India ranks fourth globally in income equality, citing the consumption-based Gini index. However, this measure focuses on household expenditure, not income or wealth, and thus masks the true extent of economic inequality. According to the World Inequality Database, India’s wealth inequality Gini stood at 75 in 2023. The top 1% of the population owns 40% of the national wealth, while the top 10% controls nearly 77%. These figures suggest a level of concentration unseen since colonial times.

At the same time, India’s GDP growth – 8.4% in



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In today’s crisis-ridden world, ideas such as a universal basic income (UBI) are an urgent policy need

2023-24 – has failed to translate into broad-based prosperity. Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz has long argued that GDP, while measuring economic output, does not account for the quality of life, environmental sustainability or equity. This disconnect is underscored by India’s ranking of 126 out of 137 countries in the 2023 World Happiness Report – behind Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. GDP-centric narratives obscure rising precarity, job insecurity and social stress.

A modest, unconditional deposit, landing in every Jan Dhan account without forms or favours, means that a gig-worker can buy vegetables even when the app is quiet and a rickshaw driver’s child can start the school term with new shoes. So, a UBI chips away at extreme concentration, reduces the lure of one-off freebies, and anchors growth in every kitchen rather than just in quarterly spreadsheets.

Pilot studies within India, including the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)-led initiative in Madhya Pradesh (2011-13), found that UBI recipients experienced better nutrition, increased school attendance, and higher earnings. International trials in Finland, Kenya and Iran showed similar results, with improved mental health and food security, without reducing willingness to work.

Automation and artificial intelligence add urgency to the case for a UBI. According to a McKinsey Global Institute report, up to 800 million jobs worldwide could be displaced by 2030 due to automation. India’s semi-skilled and informal workforce is especially vulnerable. A UBI can provide a buffer during this transition, allowing time for upskilling and repositioning in the labour market.

It will rework the citizen-state relationship

The philosophical case for a UBI is equally compelling. For decades, the relationship between the citizen and the state has been largely transactional, defined by market participation and economic contribution. A UBI offers a structural antidote to the very populist, consumer-as-voter politics Shruti Kapila critiques. It removes the political incentive to dangle ad hoc freebies, free power here, a loan-waiver there, that parties deploy to manufacture short-term allegiance. When income security is decoupled from partisan largesse, voters are less hostage to transactional giveaways and more empowered to judge governments on systemic outcomes: quality of schools, rule of law, and ecological stewardship. In this sense, a UBI shifts the relationship from consumerism (“Vote me in, get subsidised units of electricity”) back to citizenship (“You already possess a basic economic right; now demand good governance”). It replaces the politics of paternal patronage with a rights-based social contract, undercutting populist schemes that thrive on scarcity, targeted subsidies and moral grandstanding.

Worries that a basic income cheque would make everyday prices explode do not match how

As the next phase of SIR rolls on, the case of Assam

With the Election Commission of India (ECI) in the midst of a new phase of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) across multiple States, after its Bihar pilot project, the key allegation that the Opposition has levelled against the ECI has been that the poll body seeks to conduct a “backdoor NRC” – a reference to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that was prepared in Assam and demanded in other States as well by certain groups.

In a press conference on October 27, the ECI had clarified that the second phase of the nationwide SIR would not extend to Assam, which would be going to the polls next year. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) said that while the Citizenship Act, 1955, makes separate provisions for Assam, the citizenship ascertainment under the Supreme Court of India’s monitoring is “about to be completed” – a claim which needs to be contextualised and that gives rise to a fundamental question about the ECI’s jurisdiction.

Issue of jurisdiction

It does not require any reiteration to state that one of the key criticisms of the Bihar SIR was the ECI asking for proof of citizenship on the basis of limited documents for anyone who was not on the electoral rolls in 2003. This is so because the ECI’s own guidelines require anyone whose citizenship is found to be doubtful to be referred to the competent authority under the Citizenship Act.

In the Assam exception and its subtle explanation, however, the ECI has swept the biggest doubts under the carpet on its jurisdiction in ascertaining citizenship, as conducting any such exercise in Assam would have presented a novel legal hurdle – that of the NRC already prepared in Assam under the constant monitoring by the Court and, ultimately, the legal necessity to put the residents of the State through another rigorous exercise regarding their citizenship despite not being the empowered authority under the Citizenship Act.

Why the CEC’s explanation that the citizenship



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By skipping Assam for Special Intensive Revision, the Election Commission of India conveniently avoids questions as to its jurisdiction as a citizenship verification authority

ascertainment for Assam is about to be completed is a smokescreen is because the NRC in Assam had already been prepared under the Supreme Court’s monitoring over five years ago. On August 31, 2019, the Office of the State Co-Ordinator, NRC, Assam issued a press release titled “Publication of Final NRC on 31st August, 2019”, thereby notifying that the process of updating the NRC in Assam had concluded. This was a watershed moment for Assam and India, making Assam the only State after Independence to have conducted, and concluded, an exercise on such a large scale and under the monitoring of the top court of the land.

According to the State Coordinator’s press release, a total of 3.30 crore people had applied through 68.38 lakh applications. After years of deliberation and consultation with the stakeholders, a meticulous legal architecture was developed to scrutiny and verify citizenship documents. The gigantic exercise was carried out with the involvement of nearly 52,000 State officials and under the constant monitoring and supervision of the Court. The exercise concluded with 3,11,21,004 people found eligible for inclusion in the final NRC, while 19,06,657 people were excluded. This massive exercise was conducted at the cost of over ₹1,600 crore.

If the NRC is allowed to stand, as it constitutionally and legally should, the ECI must focus on its primary role of conducting free and fair elections, and not assume the mantle of a parallel citizenship tribunal. Assam already carries the burden of being the only State where a full-scale citizenship verification has been conducted under the Supreme Court’s watch, and its residents deserve to be spared from another round of uncertainty and bureaucratic scrutiny. Anything less would have the possibility of unsettling the fragile social fabric and diminishing trust in India’s institutions.

Section 6A, a unique regime for Assam

In the background of the NRC was a key issue central to the debate on citizenship in Assam – Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955.

people live where such cheques already exist. Big inflations, Weimar and Zimbabwe happened when factories shut and debts were owed in foreign money, not because ordinary people got a little extra spending money. Fund a UBI responsibly, keep the shelves stocked, and it becomes a cushion against hardship, not a spark for price hikes. Rather than dismiss a UBI as fiscally unviable or politically risky, we must engage with it seriously, as a tool to reduce poverty, mitigate inequality, and strengthen democratic citizenship.

It is important to recognise that a UBI is not a panacea. It will not by itself create jobs, fix public health systems or transform education outcomes. But it can serve as a base – providing a minimum level of economic security upon which individuals can build lives of agency and aspiration. It also recognises and supports unpaid labour, especially the care work undertaken predominantly by women, which remains invisible in traditional economic metrics. A UBI is not about promoting dependency; it is about expanding opportunity.

Some issues such as funding

Despite its promise, a UBI raises legitimate concerns. A minimal UBI of ₹7,620 a person a year – equivalent to the poverty line – would cost around 5% of India’s GDP. Funding such an initiative would require either raising taxes, rationalising subsidies, or increasing borrowing, each of which has its economic implications. Moreover, a UBI’s universality could dilute its redistributive intent by allocating resources to affluent sections alongside the poor.

A practical way forward would be to introduce a UBI in phases. Vulnerable groups – women, the elderly, persons with disabilities and low-income workers – could be prioritised. This targeted rollout would allow for evaluation and infrastructure building before full-scale implementation. A UBI could also complement, rather than replace, essential schemes such as the Public Distribution System and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act , particularly in the early stages.

Another key challenge is technological access. While Aadhaar and Jan Dhan have expanded financial inclusion, gaps remain in digital literacy, mobile access and bank connectivity particularly in tribal, remote, and underserved areas. These gaps must be closed to prevent exclusion from a scheme intended to be universal.

As the Indian state seeks to modernise its welfare architecture, a UBI deserves a central place in the conversation. History suggests that India will revisit the question sooner than we think. The calculus is no longer ‘Can we afford UBI?’ but ‘Can we afford the democratic cost of mass insecurity?’ Universality, not means-testing, is the architecture fit for a 21st-century welfare state.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The first phase

I cast my vote in the first phase of the Bihar Assembly elections (Jagdishpur constituency) and it was a proud and memorable moment for me as I was

voting for the very first time. Standing in line with people from different backgrounds made me realise the true strength of democracy. The arrangements were smooth,

and officials were very cooperative. Casting my vote gave me a sense of responsibility toward shaping Bihar’s future. I urge every eligible citizen to vote in the next phase

and choose their candidates and parties based on their own judgment and beliefs. Let us vote wisely to build a stronger and better Bihar. **Md. Sabir Hussain,** Arrah, Bihar

What the people of Bihar need is not another round of familiar promises but a road map for progress. The State’s youth and diaspora have talent, energy and ambition, yet politics

remains stuck in the old cycle of caste and populism.

Rachita, Chandigarh

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

Are AI-based tools for mental health helpful or harmful?



Neeraj Kumar
Founder and CEO, Peak Mind, which is harnessing technology to help Indian students mitigate challenges they face, especially those related to mental health



Jamila Koshy
Bengaluru-based psychiatrist with more than three decades of experience in the field of mental health, in the Army, and in public and private hospitals

PARLEY

Last week, Open AI reported that over a million people discuss suicide or self-harm tendencies with ChatGPT every week. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based tools are now being developed to support mental health in India, especially for students in institutions such as IIT Kharagpur and at coaching institutions for engineering and medical entrance exams. Is this helpful or harmful? Neeraj Kumar and Jamila Koshy discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Priscilla Jebaraj. Edited excerpts:

Dr. Koshy, you have several clients who have used an AI chat bot as a companion and maybe even as a therapist. In what ways do you think it may have been helpful or harmful for their mental health?

Jamila Koshy: Several people – students, younger people, and often engineering students – are using these AI tools, both for information as well as for therapy. I have found that there can be a lot of mistakes in the information that AI sources give. When it comes to [using AI for] therapy, I have a lot of reservations. Patients seem to talk to this bot as if it is a person. They think they don't have to go to the hospital/clinic and wait in line, so this is convenient. It is like their personal therapist; it is always there for them. But this is not a real interaction, so it is deceptive. I have tried out the bot. It says things like, 'I'm so happy you called me today. I'm willing to listen to you. I understand your problem and I would like to help you. Would you like to tell me more?' As if it is a real person there. This is not useful because it cuts out the need for therapy. Though the bot may tell you to go and meet a therapist, the need is being unconsciously undermined.

Mr. Kumar, Peak Mind has developed an AI-driven app that is being used by students in top coaching institutions and at an IIT. How does your app and your AI chatbot, Peakoo, help them? How is it different from chatting with ChatGPT?

Neeraj Kumar: All institutions have active helplines and counselling teams in-house. Every month, there are campaigns that ask you to come and seek help. Still, there is a huge stigma [when it comes to seeking help]. How do you check a fever? You use a thermometer. But if I ask you, how is your mental health, you will make a guess. Making mental health measurable is the first part where tech and AI are helping us. At Peak Mind, we have validated screening



GETTY IMAGES

assessments. AI interprets all the conversations users have on Peak Mind, tracks their mood, and alerts us early against any potential self-harm, using our suicide tech algorithm. When we see signs of distress and self-harm, alerts are raised and sent to the right authorities at the institute. It provides an AI companion for students to talk to about basic confusions or overwhelming emotions. They may have these due to relationships, academic pressure... Institutions are struggling to bring people who need help to counsellors. Most students have never gone to a counsellor. They feel overwhelmed at the thought of seeking help. There is a transition that needs to happen and technology and AI are bridging that gap.

Compared to ChatGPT, Peakoo is well-trained in the Indian context. There are guardrails. There is a limit to what can be discussed with an AI companion. Peakoo guides the user to the institute counsellor. Beyond conversation, the app also provides validated CBT [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy]-based tools as a therapist would: thought re-framing, journaling, mindfulness meditation activities, a breathing protocol or grounding technique.

Dr. Koshy, do you think this is a helpful way of nudging students who need therapy towards a therapist? Do you have any suggestions on making it more helpful?

JK: I suppose there is no way back from this because this is already in the public domain. This is not what I would choose at all. By doing this, we are furthering the stigma. We are saying you do not need to go out, you can handle this on your own. Calling it a companion is personalising the AI, and that is harmful. Call it an AI tool instead. Remove all first person references because it is not an 'I', it is not a companion, it is a mechanical tool. I doubt that the AI is going to be able to pick up on suicidal



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NEERAJ KUMAR

tendencies, because it is programmed to recognise words such as death or death wish. [As a psychiatrist], we don't recognise suicidal tendencies just by those words. We look at the person, we see their connections with people, we see how withdrawn they are, we see whether there is a change in the way they related to us earlier. We see whether they have dropped a word not about death, but about feeling isolated. When we entrust this screening to an AI tool, we are in danger of missing a lot. That is my biggest fear. There are people who talk to these bots for a long time. That should not be allowed. If a person needs to talk to a bot more than three times, I think they need a therapist.

CBT techniques can't be used before a diagnosis because the commonest things that slip through are the major psychoses. People with psychosis don't come and say, I have this. We have to see it. Often it is visual. It is a combination of things which helps us pick it up. I am sure the bot will miss at least some of it.

Mr. Kumar, what is the source of the initial intelligence that informs the bot?

NK: We have a large team of qualified psychologists and psychiatrists who use all the trained models. I am not talking about issues which need clinical intervention. We help students build trust in the human counsellor available in the institute. A qualified team does research and trains the bot in analysing conversations in multiple languages... We keep adding new words every week for the screening. So far, we have been able to raise more than 10,000 critical alerts and save more than 100 suicidal cases in our work.

Apart from your team's initial input, AI learns from its users. Are there any ethical and privacy concerns about the mental health of students being used to train AI?

NK: You cannot breach the user's privacy and confidentiality. User identities are not disclosed to the team which looks at the conversations. We are the first level of support. The moment somebody says they want to go deeper, they are diverted to a human being. We are only the

initial stage, which users can safely vent to. If there are pre-qualified tools available, those are again recommended by a team of psychologists and psychiatrists. Beyond that, they are directed to the human teams in our partner institutions and they take the cases offline.

When OpenAI says over a million people are discussing suicide with ChatGPT each week, it indicates that people are lacking real companions to discuss their feelings with. What can parents and institutions do to build up that kind of real-life support for students so that they don't depend on AI?

JK: It is usually students who are a little awkward or isolated, or in new situations, or who have serious mental health problems who are using AI. Some kids come with an adjustment problem, which is a 'level one' issue. My concern is that the feedback that bots are giving is not the feedback that humans would give. If a student talks to another student about their problems, they won't always get a very mature response. They will sometimes get somebody who brushes them off, or is mean to them, or bullies them. This is the real world. Students have to learn to navigate this world where responses are not perfect. If the bot is always validating their responses, I'm not sure if we are actually preparing students for the real world. In a conversation with a patient, particularly if I know them well, at some point I push back. Bots are not able to provide a real space. It may be a safe space, but it has to be a limited space.

To build real-life support, parents need to expose children to lots of experiences, listen to them, and help them make friends.

NK: Nothing can beat human conversations. We have created a lot of modules for everyday interactions and experiences. Every two hours on our platform, we do a short activity: breath work or meditation, mindfulness, affirmations, gratitude, compassion. Thousands of students come, join it, and then ask questions. So normalisation happens. It is a community activity. We extensively work in the coaching sector, and we have found that 65% students go through moderate to severe anxiety that is unrecognised and unaddressed. If they are at a stage where they need to see a counsellor or psychiatrist, they should go ahead and do that. But in between, they do get some support.



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NOTEBOOK

The experience of travelling alone as a woman to cover elections

Years ago, several questions were asked of women reporters in smaller cities and towns, but things seem to be changing slowly

Sobhana K. Nair

In the second week of February 2017, I reached a hotel in Moradabad at 8 p.m. The first phase of polling for the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections had just concluded and there were six more to go. Having spent the entire day in the field talking to voters, I looked forward to some food and rest.

At the dimly lit check-in desk, the receptionist, a man in his mid-40s, asked, "Are you alone?" The question, and the tone in which it was said, instantly raised my hackles. "Yes," I replied firmly, trying to inject authority into my voice. I am not sure whether that fooled him. It certainly didn't fortify me. I grabbed the keys, waiving off the hotel staff who wanted to carry my luggage, and ran to my room. I locked the door and placed a chair against it. Looking back, I wonder if I was overreacting, convinced that solo women travellers are always at risk. Maybe not. I am okay not knowing the answer.

For the upcoming Assembly polls in Bihar, I travelled across three cities from Gaya to Darbhanga. The setting was not very different from Moradabad. The reception, however, was very different. No one questioned me or asked why I was travelling alone. There were no curious stares, no condescending remarks, no words of caution. I felt safe.

This experience was not limited to Bihar. As a woman traveling alone to Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities, I have noticed a perceptible change in the demeanour of hotel staff. I saw this during my travels for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections as well. The reception was mostly neutral.

There were other heartening signs as well. At Darbhanga, the market was shutting down for Chhath celebrations the next day. Only a few dhabhas were open. I sat alone to eat a meal. On the table next to me, two young women sat down and ate with abandon, happily asking for second helpings. It felt good to watch them. In July, I was in Bihar for a story on the Special Intensive Revision exercise, con-

ducted by the Election Commission of India to "clean up" the electoral rolls in the State. The Opposition had called for a bandh. Our car was stuck on the highway, somewhere between Purnia and Madhubani. There was a long traffic jam. I was getting anxious about losing time and not being able to talk to enough people. I got out of the car to talk to a group standing at a tea shop. They told me that a booth-level officer was at their village. One of them agreed to drop me there on his motorcycle. I had only my phone and diary with me. I went along. From there, another group took me to another village just so I could speak to more people. When I called my photographer from there, I realised that I had travelled some 7 kilometres with strangers from the place where the cab was stuck. But not for a moment did I feel unsafe.

This is not to say that the world has suddenly become safe or that my anxieties related to my gender have vanished. I still plan my trips meticulously – booking hotels in advance and charting routes carefully. I make sure to stop in reasonably large towns where I can find clean, safe accommodation. It often means I can't take detours or make unscheduled stops. Before leaving for Bihar, I spoke to several male colleagues who were also covering the elections. Their itineraries were not as rigid as mine. In contrast, a young female reporter from a news portal called me from Patna, worried about finding a safe hotel in Seemanchal.

I am aware that the first generation of women reporters crossed higher barriers, travelling to the farthest corners without giving in to the farce of wearing socially acceptable clothes or limiting themselves to "softer beats". They opened the doors for us. I am glad that field trips for women reporters are no longer the heroic adventure they once were.

We have certainly come a long way. But we still have a long way to go.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Soaking in the atmosphere



Devotees participate in the Ganga aarthi on the occasion of Tripura Purnima at the holy Banganga Tank in Mumbai. EMMANUEL YOGINI

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 7, 1975

Moroccan peace marchers cross Spanish Sahara border

Spanish Sahara, Nov. 6: In scenes reminiscent of a biblical epic, tens of thousands of Moroccan volunteers walked through blinding dust storm in searing desert heat to-day to start their occupation of the Spanish Sahara.

They walked for three hours to a point just four kilometres from the Spanish dissuasion line of alleged minefields, barbed wire and heavy armoured units.

The Hindu

A senior gendarmerie officer controlling the march said, "We will stay here overnight and tomorrow morning, we will see."

Spain has termed this military line the "line of discussion" beyond which it refuses to allow the Moroccan marchers to pass.

Meanwhile Rabat Radio to-night reported the marchers – about 40,000 strong – were some 18 kms inside Spanish territory. The march volunteers were eight kms, from Douara, a meeting point of desert caravan tracks, the Moroccan radio said.

In principle the rest of the 3,50,000 marchers are due to start crossing into Spanish Sahara in groups of about 20,000 at a time as from to-morrow.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 7, 1925

Universal wheel and engineering company

(From a correspondent): An entirely new and interesting factory for the manufacture of cycles, motorcycles and other types of vehicles has just been opened in Mount Road, Madras. This, we believe, is the first of its kind in India. The idea of starting a new industry in India, was first mooted by Mr. S.A.A. Annamalai Chettiar, the well known banker and financier, whilst on a visit to England.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Indians flown home after fleeing Myanmar cyber scam centre

270 India has repatriated 270 citizens from Thailand after they fled from a cyber scam centre in Myanmar's Myawaddy following a police crackdown. The group, including 26 women, was brought back on two Indian Air Force aircraft from the Thai town of Mae Sot. PTI

Net profit reported by NHPC for the September quarter

1,219 In ₹ crore. The National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) reported a consolidated net profit of ₹1219.28 crore for the September quarter, marking a nearly 15% increase from ₹1060.34 crore a year earlier. PTI

Children rescued by railway police during protection drive

25 The Railway Protection Force (RPF) of Eastern Railway rescued 25 children from various stations under its jurisdiction, officials said on Thursday. The minors were found at the Howrah, Lalgola, and Jasidih stations, with 22 of them travelling in the Jasidih-Tambaram Express. PTI

Projected value of the recycling market due to solar power by 2047

3,700 In ₹ crore. According to new studies by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, recovering materials like silicon, copper, and aluminium from discarded solar panels could supply 38% of the industry's raw materials. ANI

Emergency calls handled by Delhi Fire Service over 15 years

4 In lakh. The Delhi Fire Service has handled over four lakh emergency calls in the past 15 years, with 6,611 lives lost in incidents including fires, collapses, and road accidents. Data from 2009-2024 shows a sharp rise in fatalities, reaching 1,303 deaths in 2023-24. PTI

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Why the nomination process needs reform

The Representation of the People Act (RP), 1951 mandates that only qualified candidates can contest an election. However, the process of verifying said qualifications has accumulated complexity over the years, with too much importance being laid on procedural technicalities than actual ‘defects of a substantial character’

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kannan Gopinathan

A young woman from Dadra and Nagar Haveli called last week about the recent municipal council elections. This is a district in which I once served as Collector and Returning Officer. Her father's nomination for municipal councillor had been rejected with no hearing or chance at verification. She asked, “Sir, is this how elections work?” The honest answer is yes. And that is the problem.

One often hears about how nominations of candidates contesting elections are rejected over technicalities without any chance for clarification. However, the fact of that matter is that such rejections are lawful. The most undemocratic part of India's electoral process occurs before a single vote is cast – at the stage of nomination scrutiny.

The politics of procedure

India's electoral nomination process vests extraordinary discretion in a single official – the Returning Officer (RO). The Representation of the People Act (RP), 1951, particularly Sections 33 to 36, and the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961, govern the nomination process. Section 36 authorises the RO to scrutinise nominations and reject those deemed invalid. The RO's power under Section 36(2) to conduct a “summary inquiry” and to reject nominations for “defects of a substantial character” is extraordinarily wide, and largely un-reviewable before polling, since Article 329 (b) bars courts from interfering mid-election. The law says no nomination should be rejected for defects not of a substantial character. But there are no written guidelines on what is substantial. And the only remedy to protest it is an election petition after the polls, when the damage is irreversible. In a democracy, this absolutism dressed in legal language has the potential to become a tool of political exclusion.

In Bihar this year, a Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) candidate's nomination was rejected for leaving some fields blank. Last year in Surat, Opposition candidates were eliminated after proposers denied signatures, delivering a Lok Sabha seat unopposed. In the 2019 elections in Varanasi, decorated BSF jawan Tej Bahadur Yadav was rejected because he could not obtain an Election Commission certificate overnight. In Birbhum, former IPS officer Debasish Dhar was kept off the ballot when his no-dues certificate from the government was delayed. Yet, there is no publicly available consolidated dataset on rejection grounds, patterns, or party-wise breakdowns. This opacity shields the weaponisation of procedure.

Procedural traps

Section 36 of the RP Act mandates that only qualified candidates can contest. However, the process of verifying qualification has accumulated complexity over the years. Well-intended judicial interventions have paradoxically worsened the problem. Supreme Court directions mandating detailed affidavits on assets, liabilities, and criminal cases were meant to ensure transparency, yet each new disclosure requirement added another opportunity for technical rejection. For example, in *Resurgence India versus Election Commission* (2013), the Supreme Court held that false declarations lead to prosecution but don't invalidate nominations, only incomplete ones do. This means that a candidate who



Gruelling rules: RJD candidate from the Saran constituency, Rohini Acharya, files her nomination papers for the Lok Sabha elections, in April 2024. ANI

lies but fills all columns stays on the ballot, and one who makes a good-faith error can be rejected. The system now punishes incomplete declarations more harshly than dishonest ones.

A missing signature, a mismatched electoral number, a form filed at 3:05 PM instead of 3:00 PM, a blank column in an affidavit, a delayed oath, a missing no-dues certificate – any of these can end a candidacy. The burden of proof thus lies entirely on the citizen seeking to exercise a legal right, and not on the official denying it. This is constitutionally backwards. The right to be voted for is the necessary twin of the right to vote. Without candidates to choose from, the ballot is ritual without substance. The first principle must be that every qualified citizen has a presumptive right to contest. That right can be denied only when the RO establishes, with clear evidence, a substantive constitutional or statutory disqualification. Technical paperwork errors cannot be a reason for disqualification.

Some of the common procedural technicalities on which nominations are rejected include:

The oath trap: Every candidate must take an oath before a specified authority after filing nomination but before scrutiny. If it's too early, it's invalid, and if too late, the nomination is rejected. Moreover, if it is not before the specified authority, your form is again bound to be rejected.

The notarisation trap: Every Form 26 affidavit (an affidavit which needs to be filed by the candidate along with nomination papers) must be notarised by a specified authority. Not having done so can result in rejection of the nomination.

The certificate trap: Along with nomination papers, the candidate is liable to submit no-dues certificates from municipal bodies, electricity boards, or other government departments; clearance certificates from the Election Commission for government servants; and various other bureaucratic attestations, each of them a veto point when it comes to the time of scrutiny. Thus, each issuing office becomes a

potential chokepoint where deliberate delay can eliminate a candidacy.

These procedures, once designed as safeguards, have turned into potential opportunities for delay and manipulation.

Here, bureaucratic compliance is being rewarded over democratic legitimacy.

Facilitation, not filtration

Other democracies show a different approach. In the U.K., ROs help candidates fix errors before deadlines. Canada mandates a 48-hour correction period. Germany requires written notice of problems, time to remedy them, and multiple appeal layers. Australia encourages early submission to allow corrections. The common idea being that officials are facilitators, not sentinels.

India also has a checklist system. The RO Handbook instructs ROs to point out defects at the time of filing and record them in a checklist. But this checklist has no legal standing. The Handbook itself clarifies that the checklist “will not prevent the Returning Officer from pointing out other defects, if any, discovered later during scrutiny.” A nomination can be marked defect-free at filing, yet rejected at scrutiny for defects the RO discovers later. The candidate has no right to rely on the checklist, and the RO faces no legal obligation to honour it. The checklist thus remains as an illusion of transparency without offering any real protection to the candidate.

The RO's role must shift from discretion to duty. When a deficiency exists, the RO must issue a detailed written notice specifying the exact error, the legal provision violated, and the correction needed. Candidates must get a guaranteed 48-hour window to fix it after receiving this notice.

The law must thus classify deficiencies into three categories: (1) technical or paperwork defects such as missing signatures, blank affidavit columns, clerical errors, no-dues certificates etc. These cannot justify rejection; (2) matters requiring verification of authenticity such as disputed signatures, challenged documents etc. These require investigations before rejection; and (3)

constitutional and statutory bars. These should lead to immediate and absolute disqualification. Moreover, every rejection order must be reasoned. The RO must specify which exact requirement was not met, which provision of law was violated, what evidence supports the finding, and why the defect is substantial enough to justify rejection.

A digital solution

The Election Commission of India (EC) can build a nomination system that is digital-by-default; one that doesn't depend on excessive paperwork. This is not to argue for a digital-only framework, but a digital-by-default framework that can eliminate disqualifications based on blank columns and misspelt names or typos. The entire nomination process could move to an integrated online portal linked with the electoral roll. The system could automatically validate voter ID, age, and constituency details. Oath, affidavit submission, proposer verification, and deposit payment could all be digital. Moreover, every nomination's progress such as when it was filed, verified, deficiency notified, corrected, accepted or rejected, should be visible on a public dashboard with timestamps and reasons.

Upholding democracy

When a nomination is rejected arbitrarily, two rights are violated: the candidate's right to contest and the voters' right to choose. The world's largest democracy deserves a nomination process that is modern, fair, and inclusive, where the burden of proof is on the state to justify exclusion, not on citizens to prove their right to participate.

The EC should work towards a citizen-friendly nomination process that would end the bureaucratic red tape around disqualifications for blank columns, wrong payment modes, misplaced signatures, misspelt names and typos, no dues certificates or a delayed oath. It should work towards a simplified process that removes the possibility of using procedure as politics.

Kannan Gopinathan is a former IAS officer who is now part of the Congress.

THE GIST

India's electoral nomination process vests extraordinary discretion in a single official – the Returning Officer (RO).

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IN THE LIMELIGHT



Surreal beauty: Scaffoldings are put up as restoration work goes on at the dome of the Taj Mahal in Agra on October 17. AFP

The actual Taj story: how a monument’s history has been warped

Tushar Goel’s film, ‘The Taj Story’, has reignited controversy over the Taj Mahal’s origins, claiming it is a Hindu temple rather than a mausoleum built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. The film’s debut highlights debates about the interplay of history and ideology in contemporary India

Ziya Us Salam

A little over 60 years ago, Purushottam Nagesh Oak slept and dreamt. He woke up and claimed that the Taj Mahal in Agra was actually a Hindu palace going back all the way to 4th century. Friends of Mr. Oak, an English teacher-turned-lawyer-turned-journalist but never a historian, told him that the Taj Mahal couldn’t have been a fourth century structure as the technology employed in building the Taj in the 17th century didn’t exist back then. The fantasist turned a pragmatist, and Oak brought his argument forward by a few centuries. The Taj was now claimed to be a Hindu temple. This was in 1989. He wrote articles and a book too, but found no support from historians. Even the Supreme Court dismissed his claims as “a bee in his bonnet” in 2000.

But post-2014, history is like a revolving door, you enter and exit at your ease and pleasure. You pick and choose, you circumvent and invent. Dress it up as a movie and claim you are looking at history anew. That is how we get a movie like Tushar Amrish Goel’s *The Taj Story*, starring former BJP MP Paresh Rawal; just like we had *The Kashmir Files* and *The Bengal Files*, starring Anupam Kher and Mithun Chakraborty, all ideological

partners of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

With *The Taj Story*, Goel goes where no historian has gone. Proof, evidence and knowledge amount for nothing as the director makes a case for the Mughal monument being actually a Hindu temple, much like the BJP leader Sangeet Som who called it alternately a Shiva temple and a monument built by a man who incarcerated his father. Mr. Som obviously couldn’t make out a Shah Jahan from an Aurangzeb and hence got mixed up. Much like Oak, oops, Goel, who sees no difference between history and mythology, facts and fantasy.

Recorded history

Talking of facts, the Taj Mahal was built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan after his favourite wife Arjumand Bano Begum breathed her last after bearing the last of their 14 children. Its chief architect was Ustad Ahmed Lahori. The land for her last resting place was procured from Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber who had inherited it from Raja Man Singh, a celebrated general of Akbar, who was Shah Jahan’s grandfather. Shah Jahan compensated Jai Singh with four havelis from the royal property for the massive haveli in which rests Mumtaz Mahal. His *firman* to Jai Singh, the latter’s agreement and the Mughal emperor’s subsequent

letter of granting him four havelis in lieu of one, are all part of history; unlike the claim of *The Taj Story* which talks in terms of a massacre and genocide of the locals for fulfilling the wishes of an emperor and his consort!

The work on the tomb started in 1632 with the finest craftsmen from across the country and West Asia. The chief mason was Mohammed Hanif from Baghdad who earned ₹1000 a month for his efforts. The pinnacle was built by Qayam Khan of Lahore and its Quranic inscriptions were done by Amanat Khan Shirazi. The mosaic work was done by local Hindu workers. Above all, some 20,000 workmen toiled for 22 years to build the monument to love. Its white marble came from Jaipur, lapis lazuli from Sri Lanka, crystal from China and coral from Arabia. The monument uses the double dome technique, previously seen only in the Humayun’s tomb in Delhi, and never seen in the country before the arrivals of the Turks.

Not the first time

Over the years, many have tried to appropriate credit for its beauty and majesty. In the 17th century, it was claimed by many in the West that the architect of the Taj was Venetian Geronimo Veroneo, a jeweller by profession. Then came the claim by

Mughal Beg in Tarikh-e-Taj Mahal that it was designed by Muhammad Effendi, an architect supposedly sent by the Sultan of Turkey. Effendi though was as much an architect as Oak was a historian. In the mid 19th century it was claimed that the monument was the result of the genius of Frenchman Austin de Bordeaux, a jeweller. However, Austin died in 1632, the year the work on the Taj began. With his death all claims of Austin being the Taj’s architect were buried. And facts began to be raised.

As for fantasy, well there is Goel’s film, never mind its claim of presenting the “untold history of the Taj Mahal”. The film, replete with stereotypes of kohl-lined, skullcap-donning Muslims aims at building a nation’s memory on unreasoned mythology, far removed from the well argued debates of history. Much like Oak’s view that Christianity was nothing but Krishan-Niti. Not game for any ridiculous claims in an insipid film which opened with a mere 14% attendance in the first show? Watch M. Sadiq’s 1963-saga *Taj Mahal*. Sure, you would remember its song, ‘*Jo wada kiya woh nibhana padega*’, penned by Sahir Ludhianvi and sung with much love by Mohammad Rafi and Lata Mangeshkar. Sadiq’s film with Pradip Kumar and Bina Rai in the lead cast, made no effort at replacing history with mythology.

THE DAILY QUIZ

With ‘democratic socialism’ becoming a topic of discussion following Zohran Mamdani’s victory in the New York mayoral elections, here’s a quiz on its purveyors

Srinivasan Ramani

QUESTION 1

Mr. Mamdani quoted this democratic socialist in his victory speech; name this Indian statesman inspired by Fabian socialist principles.

QUESTION 2

Mr. Mamdani’s biggest and most high-profile political backer in the mayoral elections was himself first elected mayor in the city of Burlington in Vermont, before embarking upon two major presidential primaries as an unapologetic “democratic socialist”. Who is this?

QUESTION 3

With both the U.S. and Canada regarded as advanced capitalist countries, very few “democratic

socialists” or socialist minded leaders have been at the apex of power in North America. But this Canadian leader broke the mould as a socialist who was responsible for the institution of the single payer, universal healthcare system in the country. Name him.

QUESTION 4

Wielding executive power in his country when the person who is the answer to question no 1 became prime minister in his, this person was also responsible for the National Health Service, a comprehensive public funded healthcare system that endures to this day. Name him.

QUESTION 5

A more thoroughbred Marxist than others mentioned in this quiz, this person, a revolutionary, was a discerning critic of the Bolshevik revolution’s authoritarianism and a co-founder of the Spartacus League in Germany. Name her.



Visual question:

Identify this Indian democratic socialist who is credited with introducing foam-cushioned seats in second-class sleeper coaches for the first time in India. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. Kohli represents this team in domestic cricket. **Ans: Delhi**

2. Number of centuries Kohli has scored. **Ans: 82**

3. Kohli’s first half-century in domestic cricket happened at Feroze Shah Kotla against this team. **Ans: Haryana**

4. Kohli led the team to victory in the U-19 World Cup in Malaysia in this year. **Ans: 2008**

5. Kohli’s international career began with an ODI tour in this country. **Ans: Sri Lanka**

6. Kohli scored his maiden Test century here. **Ans: Adelaide, Australia**

Visual: This is considered Kohli’s signature stroke. **Ans: Cover drive**

Early Birds: Arun Kumar Singh| Sudhir Thapa| Rakesh Sharma| Varnika Semwal| Nitin Rana



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

Upendran

“Why are you limping?”
“I wore a new pair of shoes yesterday. The shoes bit me.”
“Shoes don’t ‘bite’. Animals bite, people bite. Shoes, on the other hand, ‘pinch’. For example, I couldn’t walk very quickly because my new shoes kept pinching.”
“I hate it when that happens. My new sandals kept pinching me, so I took them back to the shop.”
“Before putting on a new pair of sandals, I always apply vaseline on my feet. It prevents the sandals from pinching.”
“That’s a pretty good idea. I must try it. But what if the sandals continue to pinch?”
“Good question. You could always pinch someone else’s sandals!”
“Pinch somebody’s sandals? What do you mean?”
“When you ‘pinch’ something from someone, you take something from someone without his/her permission. For example...”
“...so, ‘to pinch’ means ‘to steal’.”
“That’s right. It’s used in informal contexts. For example, I can say, the thief pinched my cousin’s wallet.”
“During summer, we pinch mangoes from our neighbour’s tree.”
“That’s a good example. I used to pinch my sister’s pencils when I was young.”
“Somebody pinched my his car.”
“One can also ‘pinch’ ideas. The Russian scientist accused the Americans of pinching his idea.”
“Sujatha accused me of pinching her ideas for my essay.”
“Poor Sujatha! She’s ill. You know that, don’t you?”
“Yes, I do.”
“I paid her a visit yesterday. She looked pinched and...”
“...looked pinched! Who would dare pinch Sujatha? I don’t think...”
“...when you say that somebody is looking pinched or has a pinched look, it means that he/she is looking pale, tired, or haggard. This usually happens when the person is cold, tired, or ill. For example, when they brought Ram home from the hospital, there was a pinched look on his face.”
“When Ramesh got off the roller-coaster, his face was white and pinched. Can I say that?”
“You certainly can! Here’s another one. The dog hadn’t eaten anything in three days. Its pinched face told us that its end was very near.”
“Couldn’t you come up with a little more cheerful example? By the way, could you lend me Rs. 100?”
“What’s the matter? Are you pinched for cash?”
“How many times are you going to ‘pinch’ me today?”
“Oh, I don’t know. Do you know what ‘pinched for cash’ means?”
“I guess it means ‘not have enough money’.”
“Yes! When you are pinched for something, you don’t have enough of it.”
“We had moved out of our old flat because we were pinched for space. Does that sound OK?”
“Sounds good to me.”
Published by The Hindu on August 18, 1998.

Word of the day

Foppish: affecting extreme elegance in dress and manner

Synonym: dandyish

Usage: *She married a foppish aristocrat.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/foppishpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈfɒp.ɪʃ/

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

Karnataka’s menstrual leave policy: progressive step or symbolic gesture?

While the move has received appreciation, it has also sparked a debate on whether a single day is sufficient and if it will achieve its intended purpose; doctors say that it could make a big difference for women living with painful periods or other conditions, but add that focus should be on helping women manage menstrual discomfort effectively

Afshan Yasmeen

Karnataka has become the first State in the country to approve one day of paid menstrual leave per month for all women employees, covering both government and private sectors. Odisha and Bihar have similar policies for government employees, while Kerala has implemented this in universities.

Cleared recently by the Karnataka Cabinet, the policy is being hailed as a progressive measure recognising menstrual health as a legitimate workplace concern. The leave, amounting to 12 days a year, applies to women in government offices, educational institutions, factories, and private organisations. While the move has received widespread appreciation, it has sparked debate on whether a single day of leave is sufficient and whether it will achieve its intended purpose.

How it came about

Describing the decision as a “momentous occasion,” Sapna S., associate dean and head, school of law, Christ (Deemed-to-be) University, said it marks a progressive step towards gender equity and aligns with the principles of affirmative action enshrined in the Constitution.

Dr. Sapna, who chaired the 18-member committee that drafted the policy, said it resulted from extensive consultations and comparative studies. “We reviewed global practices from countries such as Finland and Japan. The committee included gynaecologists, psychiatrists, professors, employees, NGOs, and trade unions. Though there were suggestions to reduce the leave to half a day or change the name, our persistence paid off, and the government approved 12 days, aligning with our original proposal,” she said.

On concerns of misuse, she said that a sub-committee will frame implementation guidelines for the policy. “Misuse can occur with any law. But accommodating menstrual leave can boost productivity and employee well-being in the long run.” She also emphasised the need for sensitisation programmes to prevent stigma or discrimination, adding, “Female-intensive workplaces should have these provisions intact, as they reflect the true spirit of gender equity.”

Citing global research, Dr. Sapna said menstrual pain was a serious health concern. “A 2018 *Quartz* article quoted John Guillebaud, a reproductive health professor at University College London, as saying patients described menstrual cramps as ‘almost as bad as having a heart attack.’ That itself underscores the need for understanding and supportive policies,” she noted.

Gynaecologists note that menstrual experiences vary widely, from mild discomfort to debilitating pain. Some women may experience fatigue, mood



Seeking change: Students staging a protest demanding 12 menstrual leaves per semester for female students in Delhi University. ANI

swings, migraines, or heavy bleeding, while others may have minimal symptoms.

Hema Divakar, division director at Well Women Healthcare, International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (FIGO), said conditions such as adenomyosis, endometriosis, fibroids, or hormonal imbalances can cause severe pain or heavy bleeding and require medical treatment. “Instead of blindly asking for a day’s leave, girls and women should undergo a wellness check to identify and address root causes. Many of these issues can be fixed,” she said.

While welcoming the policy, she cautioned that menstrual leave may be more symbolic than practical. “Menstruation is a recurring physiological process affecting each woman differently. Pregnancy leave allows the mother’s body to recover and facilitates bonding with the newborn. Granting a one-day leave for menstruation may not make much sense,” she said. She also warned that mandatory menstrual leave could inadvertently reinforce workplace bias. “From an employer’s perspective, there may be hesitation in assigning women critical roles or leadership responsibilities if they



A 2018 *Quartz* article quoted John Guillebaud, a reproductive health professor at University College London, as saying patients described menstrual cramps as ‘almost as bad as having a heart attack.’ That itself underscores the need for understanding and supportive policies

DR. SAPNA
Head of committee that drafted the policy

are perceived as taking frequent leave. This could deepen gender inequity,” she noted.

Stating that menstruation was no longer a “hush-hush” subject thanks to greater awareness through education and social media, Dr. Divakar said: “Prevent illness, promote wellness should be the mantra. The focus should be on helping women manage menstrual discomfort effectively rather than offering a symbolic one-day off.”

Suhasini Inamdar, senior consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at

Motherhood Hospitals, Bengaluru, said menstrual leave was a woman’s right. “In ancient times, women took four days off from household work purely for rest, to preserve physical and emotional well-being, not as a sign of impurity. The original intent has been lost over time,” she said.

Calling the policy a “welcome and much-needed step,” Dr. Inamdar said it recognises menstrual health as integral to overall well-being. Severe menstrual pain, or dysmenorrhea, affects women of all ages, particularly younger women or those with gynaecological conditions. Stress, lack of exercise, and poor sleep can further aggravate symptoms. Persistent pain should be medically evaluated rather than dismissed as normal, Dr. Inamdar said.

For mild to moderate discomfort, simple measures such as hot compresses, hydration, light exercise, and rest can help. Over-the-counter pain relief may also be used. For severe or recurrent pain, consultation with a gynaecologist is essential. “Conditions such as endometriosis or fibroids require targeted treatment, which could include hormonal therapy or lifestyle adjustments,” Dr. Inamdar noted.

Need for awareness

For women living with painful periods or conditions such as endometriosis, adenomyosis, fibroids, or PCOS, menstrual leave can make a significant difference, said Sunitha Mahesh, medical director and senior consultant gynaecologist at Milann Birthing Hospital, Bengaluru.

“These conditions can cause severe cramps, heavy bleeding, and exhaustion, making it difficult to get through daily life. Having the option to take a day off allows women to rest without using their regular sick leave,” Dr. Mahesh said. However, she emphasised that severe or unusually heavy periods should not be dismissed as normal.

“It’s important to consult a gynaecologist to identify the underlying cause and receive appropriate treatment – whether through medication, a procedure, or lifestyle changes – to make future cycles easier to manage,” she said.

Dr. Mahesh highlighted the need for greater awareness among women, noting that many assume intense pain or heavy bleeding is normal and therefore delay seeking medical help.

While menstrual leave can offer temporary relief, Dr. Mahesh underlined that addressing the root cause is key for long-term well-being. She also called for workplace policies that are flexible, optional, and free from stigma. “Every woman’s cycle is different, and symptoms can vary widely. Policies should be sensitive, and no one should feel pressured to disclose personal details or fear that taking leave will affect their performance,” she said. (yasmeen.afshan@thehindu.co.in)

THE GIST

Karnataka has become the first State in the country to approve one day of paid menstrual leave per month for all women employees. The leave applies to women in government offices, educational institutions, factories, and private organisations

Citing global research, doctors say that menstrual pain was a serious health concern and that the policy recognises menstrual health as integral to overall well-being. Some experts warn that the leave could inadvertently reinforce workplace bias

Doctors call for workplace policies that are flexible, optional, and free from stigma. Policies should be sensitive, and no one should feel pressured to disclose personal details or fear that taking leave will affect their performance, they say

Lack of skilled support adding to rising maternal deaths in Afghanistan

Divya Gandhi

Afghan women are giving birth without skilled support, and maternal deaths, which could have been prevented, are on the rise, says a correspondence by three clinicians in the latest edition of *The Lancet*, which also explains the cause.

“Afghanistan today faces a maternal health crisis that is as much political as it is medical. When girls are banned from studying beyond grade 6, nursing and midwifery schools are shuttered, and female health workers are restricted in their ability to work, the results are tragically predictable.”

Shutting down female education and employment in healthcare is a decision with “fatal consequences” in Afghanistan, “where cultural norms already restrict women from being treated by male doctors,” say the authors, who include, Amina Nasari, CUNY School of Medicine, New York. The inaccessibility to emergency obstetric care could lead to fatal haemorrhages, eclampsia, sepsis, and obstructed labour.

Fragile health system

In 2024, the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan estimated that 17.9 million people in Afghanistan re-



Reeling under impact: The bans on women’s work and education, specifically in midwifery and nursing, must be lifted, says a new *Lancet* correspondence. AP

quired health assistance that year; the country has “a fragile and under-resourced healthcare system, fraught by unequal access to services, ongoing communicable disease breaks, critical unmet maternal and child health needs, high rates of malnutrition, and significant morbidity and mortality rates as result”, says a United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) report.

It adds that UNICEF has reported Afghanistan “having one of the world’s highest maternal mortality rates with 638 mothers dying for ev-

ery 100,000 births, exacerbated by acute shortages of qualified birth attendants in the country.”

Minimal ante-natal care

There is much to be done for antenatal care too in Afghanistan. For instance, no more than 6.2% of women received good-quality antenatal care, according to a paper published in *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* in January 2025.

The *Lancet* correspondence references the 2022-23 Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, which

Alleviating a crisis

These are the four strategies offered by latest *Lancet* correspondence to overcome the maternal health crisis



- Lift the bans on women’s work and education
- Female health
- Donors must make women-only services non-negotiable
- Data must drive decision making. Numbers will help target resources

Afghanistan has one of the world’s highest maternal mortality rates with 638 mothers dying for every 100,000 births, according to the UNICEF

found that only 36.3% of mothers received a postnatal check within two days of delivery. “In December, 2024, Afghanistan’s authorities banned women from higher education in health sciences, including

nursing and midwifery. This decision cut off one of the last viable pathways to train skilled female providers who are essential to maternal and newborn survival,” say the authors: clinics have closed; female-only outreach teams suspended; and humanitarian agencies have stopped maternal and newborn services when barred from deploying female staff.

Earlier this year, another correspondence in *The Lancet*, the authors, including Prof. Nasari, said that according to UNICEF, the ban on secondary education for girls alone cost the Afghan economy at least \$500 million in 2022.

“Allowing the 3 million girls from that year’s cohort to complete secondary education could have contributed \$5.4 billion to the economy. The decision also undermines an already fragile health-care system by blocking one of the few remaining paths for women to contribute to health care.”

Four strategies

The latest correspondence offers four strategies to overcome these attacks on maternal health: First, lift the bans on women’s work and education, specifically midwifery and nursing; second, “the existing fe-

male health workforce must be protected and expanded and midwifery schools should be reopened without delay”; third, “donors must make women-only services non-negotiable.” And fourth, “data must drive decision making... Numbers, not anecdotes, will strengthen advocacy and help target resources.”

The lack of health-care access “translates to a surge in home births without the presence of trained professionals, no access to emergency interventions when complications arise, and a tragic increase in preventable maternal and neonatal deaths,” says the *Lancet* correspondence.

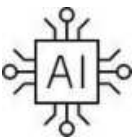
And now, Afghan women have lost “their last hope” as Taliban has shut down Internet, says a *BBC* report from September.

“As clinicians, we must be clear: restricting female health workers is not tradition. It is a policy with a measurable death toll... let Afghan women train, work, and lead in health care and beyond. The health of mothers, the survival of newborns, and the wellbeing of entire communities depend on it... This is not just a health-care issue; it is a human rights crisis,” the authors conclude. (divya.gandhi@thehindu.co.in)

Sensible policy

Centre’s adaptive regulatory model for AI is correct

India’s newly released AI Governance Framework signals a welcome pragmatism in the approach to deal with the rapid rise of artificial intelligence. Rather than rushing to draft a new law to control AI, the Centre has opted for an adaptive regulatory model that reviews and updates existing laws to address emerging risks. This approach recognises that technology is evolving faster than legislation can keep up, and that flexibility, not overregulation, will better serve innovation and inclusion.



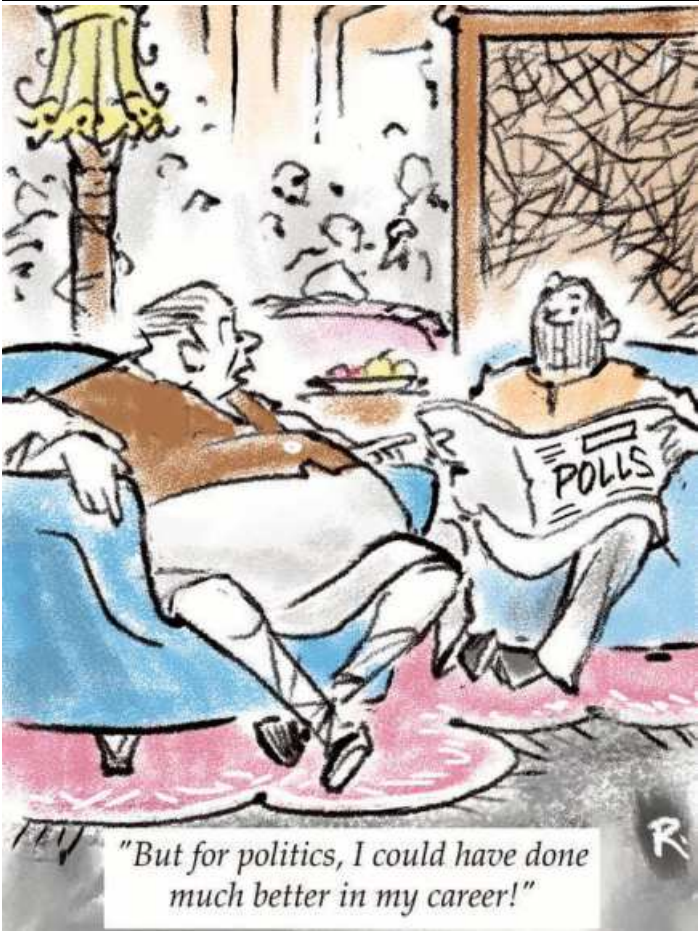
The framework, issued by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, rightly identifies critical grey areas, such as the definition of “intermediary” in the Information Technology Act, 2000, which predates the emergence of autonomous or generative systems. Questions around who bears liability when AI-generated content causes harm, or how personal data can be used to train algorithms, remain unresolved. Equally important are the data-protection principles of purpose limitation and storage minimisation under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. These traditional safeguards, which restrict data use to a specific purpose and require its deletion once that purpose is served, sit uneasily with AI’s reliance on large, continuously updated datasets. AI models depend on large volumes of historical data and often continue to store data indefinitely, both for retraining and to maintain performance consistency. The model itself may ‘remember’ patterns or identifiable traces of the data it was trained on, even if the raw data is deleted.

Without clear guidance or exemptions, developers and deployers of AI systems will operate in legal uncertainty. The framework, therefore, calls for a comprehensive review of India’s legal architecture to close such regulatory gaps before they widen further. However, the government must ensure that this review does not become another slow-moving process, like the data protection legislation that took more than six years to be enacted, and is still not fully implemented. Given the speed at which AI is reshaping everything from governance to employment and media, delays in legal clarity could prove costly.

The framework must also be viewed through the lens of competition and market concentration. The Competition Commission of India, in a recent market study, warned that AI systems can enable novel forms of algorithmic collusion and create new barriers to competition. The global AI ecosystem is already concentrated in the hands of a few large firms that control the core “AI stack”: cloud infrastructure, high-quality datasets, and large foundation models. This dominance, combined with their ability to cross-subsidise services, such as offering free AI tools in India, could stifle smaller start-ups and deter innovation.

Overall, India’s middle-ground approach stands out compared with the European Union, which has chosen a rules-heavy model, and the US, which has taken a hands-off stance, letting market forces and voluntary frameworks shape the sector.

POCKET



The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has fired the opening shot in what could become the most consequential cost reform in Indian finance since liberalisation. Its October 2025 consultation paper on the comprehensive review of the Mutual Fund Regulations, 1996 does more than tweak numbers, it redefines purpose.

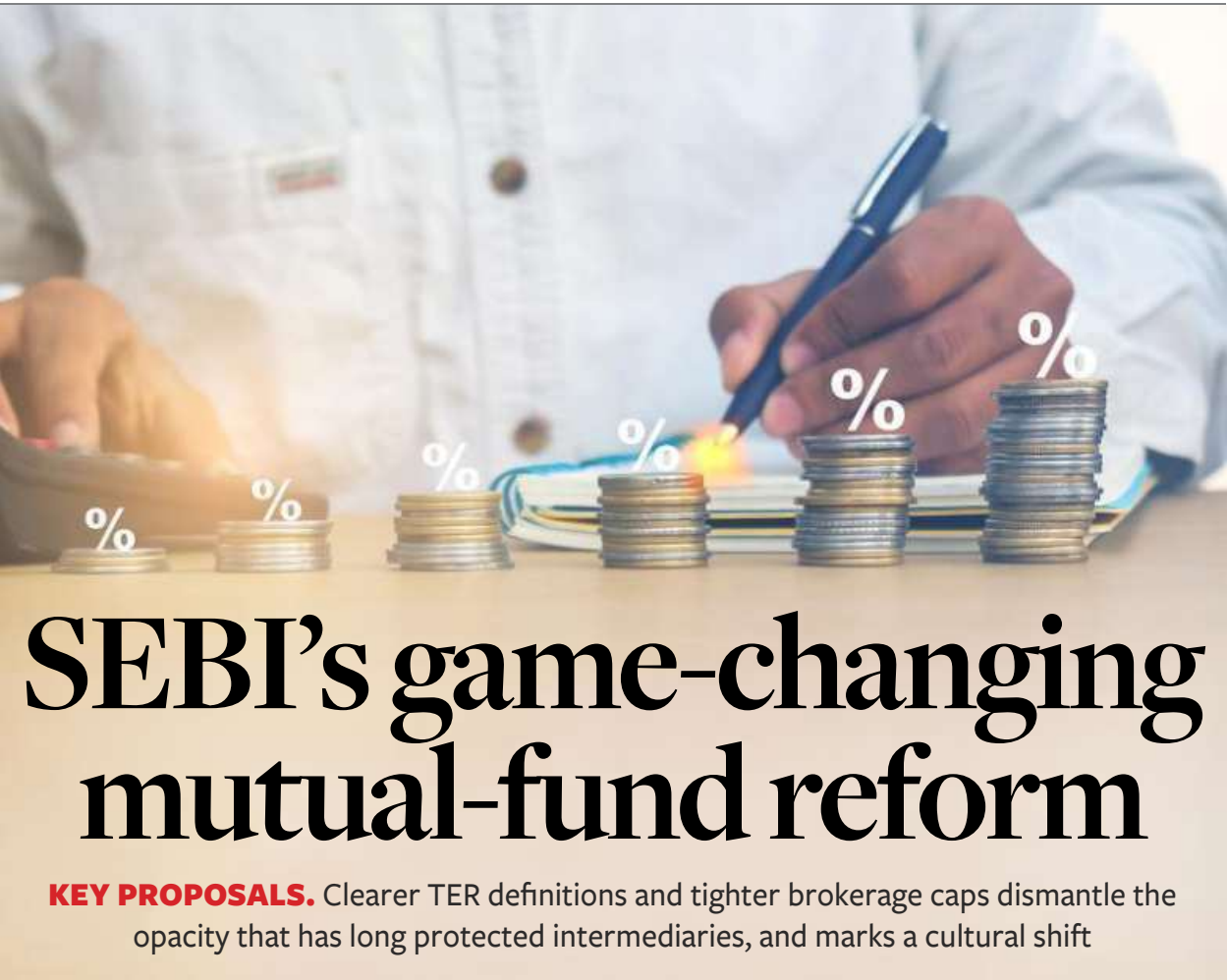
SEBI is shifting the axis of regulation from product protection to investor empowerment, while its counterpart, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), still seems to guard complexity more than clarity.

Expense ratios have long been the silent killer of compounding. SEBI now proposes that the Total Expense Ratio (TER) on open-ended schemes exclude brokerage, taxes, and statutory levies, revealing what fund managers actually earn. It also seeks to slash brokerage caps from 12 basis points (bps) to 2 bps in cash markets and from 5 bps to 1 bp in derivatives.

These reforms attack a chronic inefficiency: investors paying twice for research, once within the management fee, again through trading commissions. Even a 0.2 per cent annual saving compounded over 20 years adds lakhs to investor wealth. The true victory, however, is not numerical it’s philosophical.

ALIGNING FEES WITH PERFORMANCE
SEBI’s most radical idea is an optional performance-linked expense ratio, where fund houses earn more only when they outperform. If implemented, India would join global markets where “value-for-fee” replaces “fee-for-assets.” Fund managers would finally be rewarded for skill, not scale. Together, clearer TER definitions and tighter brokerage caps dismantle the opacity that long protected intermediaries and mark a cultural shift — investors can now see what they pay and why.

TRANSPARENCY REDEFINED
The paper also proposes excluding statutory levies GST, stamp duty, and STT from TER ceilings so that government taxes no longer masquerade as fund costs. Equally bold is SEBI’s plan to rewrite the 1996 Regulations in plain language, remove redundant clauses, and digitise disclosures. For perhaps the first time, India’s financial rulebook might read like a guide for citizens, not a manual for compliance officers.



SEBI’s game-changing mutual-fund reform

KEY PROPOSALS. Clearer TER definitions and tighter brokerage caps dismantle the opacity that has long protected intermediaries, and marks a cultural shift

GETTY IMAGES

THE DISTRIBUTION PARADOX
Every reform disrupts a comfort zone. Lower TERs mean thinner commissions, and thinner commissions change distributor behaviour. As income from mutual-fund sales shrinks, intermediaries may pivot toward higher-margin, higher-risk products Portfolio Management Services (PMS), Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs), and structured notes where disclosure is looser and investor safeguards weaker.

This cost-arbitrage migration could push household savings from transparent mutual funds into opaque instruments. SEBI’s next challenge, therefore, is to extend disclosure parity and suitability norms across investment categories so that progress in one arena doesn’t create risk in another.

THE MIRROR TEST
IRDAI’s Unit-Linked Insurance Plans (ULIPs) still blur investment with protection. Unlike mutual funds that show a true post-cost NAV, ULIPs deduct mortality and administrative charges through periodic unit cancellations — making the NAV appear to rise even as

ownership shrinks, a mathematical illusion that flatters returns. IRDAI’s 2019 ULIP rules mandate benefit illustrations and yield-gap caps (3 per cent for terms under 10 years, 2.25 per cent for longer), yet costs remain layered and distributor-driven. Mortality charges exceed standalone term plans, surrender penalties limit liquidity, and portability is restricted. The contrast between regulators is stark: SEBI’s approach is fiduciary align incentives, disclose every rupee, empower comparison, while IRDAI’s remains distributor-centric, where commissions dominate and complexity conceals. Over time, the difference compounds; a ₹10,000 monthly SIP in a low-cost equity fund can nearly double the corpus of a ULIP.

THE INVESTOR’S CHOICE
For Indian households balancing protection and growth, the rule is clear: buy term insurance for life cover — it is transparent, portable, and cost-efficient — and invest through mutual funds for wealth creation — they are benchmarked, diversified, and increasingly low-cost. SEBI’s reforms reinforce this distinction, proving that simplicity often compounds better than complexity. Unless IRDAI mirrors this transparency by mandating after-cost disclosure and capping commissions, insurance-linked products will remain financial cul-de-sacs. Yet beyond numbers, SEBI’s reform is

about trust — it transfers informational power from distributors to investors and from incentives to outcomes. If implemented well, India could become a rare market where regulation internalises behavioural finance, simplifies choice, and rewards clarity. But for that to endure, distributors must evolve from selling products to offering advice.

THE ROAD AHEAD
SEBI’s reform will endure only if three conditions hold — uniform cost and disclosure standards across mutual funds, PMS, AIFs, and structured products to close regulatory gaps; strong suitability norms to ensure that high-risk products reach only informed investors; and coordination with IRDAI and PFRDA to harmonise reporting and post-cost return metrics. For IRDAI, the task is to simplify ULIP cost sheets and truly unbundle insurance from investment. For distributors, survival will depend on earning trust, not trails. Ultimately, India’s mutual-fund revolution was built on trust, not tax breaks. SEBI’s 2025 proposal deepens that trust by making every layer of cost visible and reminding the industry that scale without stewardship is hollow. The next decade will decide whether Indian finance remains a maze of incentives —or evolves into a system where investors, not intermediaries, truly win.

The writer is Professor of Finance, IMT Ghaziabad

AI guidelines: A close look at the fineprint

The norms aim to balance adaptive governance and rigid regulation and look to prevent bias, protect vulnerable groups

bl.explainer

S Ronendra Singh

What are India’s AI governance guidelines about?
The guidelines have been drafted by a high-level committee under the chairmanship of Prof. Balaraman Ravindran, IIT-Madras. These are intended to guide policymakers, researchers, and industry to build better national and international cooperation for safe, responsible, and inclusive AI adoption. It seeks to ensure that India’s core commitment to inclusion translates into practical measures that prevent algorithmic bias and protect vulnerable groups from potential harm. This framework is designed to support evolving conceptions of safety and trust while promoting technological innovations through consistent dialogue between the government, domain experts, industry, and civil society. The guidelines are based on seven principles: building trust, putting people first, focusing on promoting innovation rather than restraint, fairness and equity, accountability, and design that is transparent, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Why is it important? What does it mean for the country?
The primary goal at this stage is to

leverage AI for economic growth, inclusive development, resilience and global competitiveness. Given India’s talent advantage, the widespread adoption of AI across sectors can yield productivity gains, drive growth and create jobs. Further, AI-based applications with multilingual and voice support are being deployed across agriculture, healthcare, education, disaster management, law, and finance, enabling digital inclusion and creating a real positive impact. A balanced framework would help maximise these benefits, while retaining the regulatory agility and flexibility to intervene and mitigate risks as and when they emerge. Key sectors such as pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, manufacturing, media and social sectors hold significant potential for AI adoption, but to realise this potential requires a governance framework to enhance awareness, infrastructure, and investments. Initiatives like IndiaAI Mission are steps toward fostering AI adoption. Expanding domestic capacity while accelerating responsible adoption across sectors is critical to advancing India’s goals of inclusive growth and global competitiveness.

Is the government going to make a separate law/regulation on AI with these guidelines?
No. The Committee’s current



AI. For adaptive governance REUTERS

assessment is that many of the risks emerging from AI can be addressed through existing laws. For example, the use of deepfakes to impersonate individuals can be regulated by provisions under the Information Technology Act and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, and the use of personal data without user consent to train AI models is governed by the Digital Personal Data Protection Act. India is taking a techno-legal approach to embed legal requirements directly into system design. According to the government, it is both a design philosophy and a family of architectures that make regulatory principles automatically enforceable in practice. MeitY, as the nodal Ministry, is responsible for the overall adoption and regulation of AI systems. Its role is to promote innovation and adoption of AI technologies, while providing regulatory guidance in collaboration with bodies such as the AI Safety Institute (AISi) and

the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In). A new body called the ‘AI Governance Group’ (AIGG) will be set up to coordinate policy on AI governance across all Ministries. It will be a small, permanent and effective inter-agency body responsible for overall policy development and coordination on AI governance in India. It should be supported by a Technology & Policy Expert Committee (TPEC), which will advise the group on strategy and implementation.

How is it different from the frameworks of countries like the US, the European Union, or South Korea?
India’s approach contrasts with that of the European Union, which has adopted a binding AI Act categorising systems by risk levels. The US, on the other hand, has left it to market forces to determine the rules. India’s framework, by comparison, seeks a middle path, promoting AI as a driver of inclusion and competitiveness, while relying on adaptive governance rather than rigid regulation. This is one of the unique approaches which is built from the ground up, and this is not a version of the EU or US models, the committee said, adding that it has looked at India and India’s needs, its ecosystem, and then built the frameworks completely ground up.

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to ‘Letters to the Editor’, The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Health matters
The article ‘Why the real deal for group health insurance?’ (November 6), makes a cogent argument for waiver of GST on group health insurance. But we cannot overlook the fact that the group medical insurance which constitutes a lion’s share of the large pie of insurance premium, hides many serious, unjust practices embedded in its very nature. The most atrocious being that the groups generally get favourable terms in the form of discounted

premium, lax underwriting norms and favoured claim settlement. This leads to unnecessary inflated premium for the hapless individual health insurance buyer: a sort of cross subsidy. That an individual health insurance buyer has to fund the shortfall caused by the group insurance segment is unfair. One hopes the authorities look into this underlying anomaly and also resolve it.
Jose Abraham
Kottayam (Kerala)

Banking boost
It is really heartening to learn that the total balance under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has crossed ₹2.75 lakh crore mark (November 6). Banking habit among the public plays a significant role in the economic growth, as savings and credit creation go hand in hand. As far as India is concerned, it is imperative that the banks have their loan portfolio simple and effective to maximise their profits and also bring down their

non-performing assets significantly.
S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai
Telecom tangle
The Editorial ‘Turning point’ (November 6) is a well-articulated commentary on the telecom sector especially with respect to the AGR dues. The edit argues for a strong, viable third operator to ensure a vibrant sector. The Supreme Court’s recent ruling gives much leeway to the government to take measures

including reliefs on the AGR front. This is timely. Indeed, the government has already done the heavy-lifting by converting substantial dues of Vi into equity. But there is no talk on the role of BSNL/MTNL in the crucial telecom sector. Already huge amounts have been poured into the PSUs and it is time to take stock. There must be a clear-cut roadmap for these to play a meaningful role in India’s telecom sector.
V Vijaykumar
Pune

Prioritise safety

Weaknesses in railways must be addressed quickly

A collision between a local mainline electric multiple unit (Memu) passenger train and a goods train near Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, has once again put the spotlight on India's railway-safety preparedness. Initial investigation suggests that the accident occurred after the passenger train passed a signal set at danger — a reminder that human error and signalling lapses remain persistent weak points in India's vast network. The tragedy comes even as the Union Cabinet recently cleared ₹24,634 crore worth of multitracking projects across four states, adding nearly 900 km of lines. Expansion, however, cannot be a substitute for safety. While “consequential” train accidents declined from 55 in 2019-20 to 31 in 2024-25, each such mishap underscores that progress on safety is uneven. The government has allocated about ₹1.16 trillion for safety-related expenditure in 2025-26, with track renewals accounting for around one-fifth of this amount, according to the FY26 Budget estimates. Safety expenditure as a percentage of railway expenditure has declined from 27 per cent in FY19 to 21 per cent in FY26.

Modernisation measures, such as installing the indigenous anti-collision system, Kavach, and the expansion of track-circuiting and electronic interlocking, are steps in the right direction. Yet, implementation remains patchy. The Economic Survey 2024-25 noted that of the 62 pending stations identified for electronic interlocking, only 25 were completed in FY25, leaving 37 yet to be upgraded. Managing both heavy freight and dense passenger traffic makes the challenge even tougher, while fatigue among the staff adds to safety risks. Nevertheless, the Indian Railways has made encouraging technological strides. The recent collaboration of the railways with Dedicated Freight Corridor Corporation of India Ltd (DFCCIL) aims to use artificial intelligence- and machine learning-based inspection of rolling stock and tracks. CCTV cameras are being installed at all level crossings to prevent collision and trespassing. However, these scattered efforts need to be brought together under a single, well-coordinated safety strategy that connects technology, infrastructure, and human factors.

Safety demands a multipronged strategy. First, broaden the deployment of digital signalling, and fully roll out anti-collision systems like Kavach on all high-density and high-risk routes. Second, adopting predictive maintenance through sensors and artificial intelligence-based surveillance can help detect and fix vulnerabilities before they cause accidents. Third, crew management must receive focused attention: Better working conditions, fatigue monitoring, recruiting additional loco pilots, and specialised training on new technologies can drastically reduce human error. Fourth, independent safety audits should be mandatory for every expansion or modernisation project, ensuring that signalling, braking, and emergency systems keep pace with capacity growth. India undoubtedly needs more tracks, faster trains, and broader connectivity. But speed without safety is no achievement. The goal must evolve from “faster” to “safer and faster” for every new kilometre of railway line laid. For India's 24 million daily passengers, trust in the railway system rests not just on efficiency or expansion, but on the assurance that the journey ahead is safe.

The learning curve

QS rankings reflect gaps in education governance

The latest QS Asia University Rankings reflects the challenges India faces as it seeks to position itself as the services capital of the world. The country sees its status as a preferred location for the global capability centres of the world's leading corporations as an indicator of its buoyant domestic intellectual capital. But the annual rankings collated by Quacquarelli Symonds, a global higher-education analytics firm, suggest that the country may not be able to count on this human resource without critically reforming its higher education.

India not only lost its top place as the most represented higher-education system to China, several of its marquee institutions saw a significant drop. This year, 137 Indian universities entered the list, bringing the country's total to 294. China's energetic and enabling policy of promoting higher technical education can be seen in an addition of 261 institutions, making a total of 395. No Indian institution made it to the top 10; those rankings were filled by Hong Kong, China, and Singapore, the emerging hub of global innovation. In contrast, India's top-performing university was the Indian Institute of Technology (Delhi), or IIT Delhi, which weighed in at 59, a drop of 15 places from 44 last year. IIT Bombay dropped from 48 in 2025 to 71, and IIT Kharagpur dropped from 60 last year to 77. All the major IITs — including Madras and Kanpur — recorded their lowest ranks since at least 2021. Of the seven institutions that figure in India's top 10 rankings, only Chandigarh University improved, from 120 to 109. No Indian university is ranked in the top 100 globally, although several from China figure among them, including Peking University at rank 14.

The irony of this poor showing is that it comes at a time when the Indian government has introduced several reforms in higher education over the past decade — greater governing autonomy for the IITs, relaxed norms for central universities to raise resources, and easing the path for the entry of foreign universities. None of this has encouraged Indian students to stay at home for higher studies. According to government data, the number of Indian students studying abroad has touched 1.8 million this year, up from 1.3 million in 2023. This steady surge abroad is as much a function of the limited seats available in top Indian institutions as of the job opportunities available in these jurisdictions. These trends point to a serious quality deficit in Indian higher education, suggesting that both central and state universities need to pay attention to teaching standards and resources.

This is true not just for institutions focused on technical and scientific research, which the QS ranking criteria appear to favour, but also for the arts and humanities. The neglect of the latter cannot be downplayed. But rising intervention in university appointments and attempts to harness curricula to specific ideologies by central and state political administrations have steadily undermined the integrity and quality of higher education. Increasingly, talented academics and the best students look elsewhere for opportunities for better-resourced independent research. A neutral but enabling environment for research, whether in the arts or sciences, is the sweet spot for which India should be aiming.

Yes Bank: A collective win

How in saving Yes Bank, India's financial system reaffirmed its ability to act with purpose

The recent entry of a Japanese financial giant into India's banking sector through a significant investment in Yes Bank has been widely welcomed. There are signs that more such overseas investments may follow. It is being rightly celebrated as a sign of strength and resilience of the Indian banking system.

What had probably faded away from public memory, as it typically does, is the spectacular collapse and the painful rescue of the bank, which played out about five years ago. This rescue was unique in how the regulator, government, and public and private banks worked in perfect harmony. It kept a bank alive, protected its depositors, and did not defray public funds. It also culminated in the creation of conditions that allowed significant overseas equity to enter later. Some stories deserve to be told again!

It was March 2020 and Covid-19 was in full flow. Yes Bank, then the fourth-largest private bank, was in a grave situation. Its capital-raising efforts had repeatedly failed, and the bank was drowning under a mountain of non-performing assets, compelling the regulator, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), to supersede the board and place the bank under a moratorium.

Depositors faced withdrawal limits, market confidence was fragile, and the financial system, already coping with aftershocks from a couple of other events, risked losing public trust. The pandemic made stabilising the banking system even more complex.

An unusual path to stability

The RBI's Yes Bank Reconstruction Scheme was unlike any previous resolution. Instead of merging the troubled bank into a larger entity, which would have meant the end of its brand and identity, a decision was taken to preserve it. This reassured depositors that their bank was likely to survive and continue serving them.

Equally innovative was the composition of the rescue team. The RBI brought together a consortium of banks, led by State Bank of India (SBI), to inject equity and restore confidence. Seven other private banks, big and small, joined hands. For

competitors to invest in and rescue a rival institution was unprecedented. Yet, there was a shared recognition that financial system stability was paramount.

This was a system-led solution, market-oriented in design, collective in spirit, and transparent in execution. It reflected confidence in the strength of domestic institutions and demonstrated that the banking system could safeguard itself without burdening the exchequer.

The RBI's intervention was carefully balanced and well sequenced: Liquidity support, a clear legal framework, effective communication, and, above all, the early lifting of the moratorium within a fortnight or so of its imposition. That speed was vital in preserving depositor confidence.

Retaining the Yes Bank brand ensured continuity for its customers and employees. By mobilising multiple banks as investors, it avoided concentration risk and moral hazard. By introducing lock-in provisions and tax neutrality, it aligned incentives without distorting market discipline.

Navigating the uncertainty

Within SBI, I recall, there was naturally a sense of trepidation. The investment in subsidiaries and associates was going to more than double. No one could fully estimate the extent of the stress, or the time and effort required to restore the bank to a safe state. There was no clear visibility as to how quickly or smoothly SBI would recoup such a substantial financial outlay. But there was clarity of purpose: If State Bank of India does not step in as the lead investor, who else would?

Executing the reconstruction within compressed timelines demanded a high level of coordination. It reaffirmed that when the stakes are systemic, coming together to cooperate becomes an institutional duty rather than an individual choice, notwithstanding even the Covid-19-induced social distancing.

For me personally, it was both humbling and instructive. The then chief financial officer of SBI was moved out to lead Yes Bank 2.0, which pitchforked me into the finance role at SBI after years in



BANKING & BEYOND
SWAMINATHAN J

It's time to reclaim India's digital billions

American platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook (Meta), and X dominate India's digital space, drawing hundreds of millions of users — yet most of the economic value flows abroad. If revenues reflected user share, Meta's 900 million Indian users alone would represent about \$45 billion annually. Across platforms like Google, Amazon, and Microsoft, India's digital engagement exceeds \$100 billion in value captured overseas.

In contrast, China blocked global apps early on and fostered homegrown giants such as Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu, Weibo, and ByteDance, keeping the value of its 1.4 billion users within its borders. Today, firms like ByteDance (\$155 billion) and Alibaba (\$137 billion) rival India's largest conglomerates, including Reliance and Tata in scale. Had India pursued a similar path instead of focusing primarily on technology for governance and inclusion, much of the revenue, jobs, and innovation now concentrated abroad could have strengthened India's own digital economy.

Beyond economics, control of user data is now strategic power. Data reveals social trends and political moods, shaping markets and democracies. The Cambridge Analytica scandal showed how Facebook data could influence elections, while Google and Amazon use data dominance to strengthen their grip on artificial intelligence (AI) and commerce. Even WhatsApp's reported backdoor access for US agencies raises sovereignty concerns. For India, hosting nearly a billion internet users, ensuring sovereignty over its data is not just an economic goal but a cornerstone of digital independence and national security.

Unlike China's state-controlled firewall, India operates in an open, globally connected internet. A “Great Firewall” model would neither suit India's democracy nor its millions already on global platforms. India's path must be to compete, not close — by building homegrown platforms that win users by choice through innovation, security, and local relevance.

India's biggest challenge lies in the powerful

network effects of global platforms, where users gain more value by staying, shutting out new competitors. Yet the past decade has seen a turning point — the rise of Indian-origin platforms like Zomato, Zoho, Paytm, PhonePe, and Razorpay. These successes signal a deeper shift: India's digital enterprises are ready to challenge global dominance and claim their place at the high table of the digital economy. Several forces are now converging to make this transformation real.

While much attention is on India's massive digital base — 900 million internet users — the real story lies ahead. Over the next decade, another 500 million Indians will come online as incomes, education, and connectivity rise. This next wave represents a vast untapped market for Indian companies to capture with localised, affordable, and culturally attuned solutions. As homegrown platforms grow, they draw in users traditionally on global platforms. The shift is already visible. Nykaa, for example, drew neo-rich, new-gen, brand-conscious users from global ecommerce giants.

India's vast linguistic diversity — once a barrier to digital adoption — is now a strategic advantage. Homegrown platforms can outpace global rivals by building apps that natively speak to every Indian. By embedding local language interfaces, and culturally attuned content, Indian startups can unlock untapped markets and turn linguistic depth into a distinct competitive edge.

For years, digital dominance relied on network effects — bigger user bases meant unbeatable platforms. That logic is fading. AI now rewards learning over scale. As American economist Hal Varian noted in 2019: AI improves through better data and smarter models, not sheer numbers. Boston University professor James Bessen has shown open-source AI has lowered entry barriers for startups. In this new era, advantage flows from the depth and diversity of data and the creativity of algorithms. With its vast, youthful, and diverse population, India has one of the richest user datasets and is well-placed to leverage this shift — from



OFF THE GRID
AJAY KUMAR

“might not only save the world from drug addiction, but from what he perceived to be Communism”.

Pound, who created anti-Semitic radio broadcasts supporting the Axis powers between 1941 and 1945, also encouraged his American mentee John Kasper — a suspect in many synagogue bombings — to set up a bookshop that hosted yoga classes.

Mr Home goes on to write about Major J F C Fuller and Major Francis Yeats-Brown, who “learned the bulk of their yoga at the feet of elitist occultist” but “attempted to deceive the public into believing they'd learned their smarts in India”.

These men published books on yoga during the inter-war years. Fuller, who was known as “Boney” because of his admiration for French military general Napoleon Bonaparte, was a member of the British

Union of Fascists and “implicated in plots to overthrow the UK government and replace it with a puppet Nazi regime”.

Speaking of the time that one has spent in India at the feet of Indian masters is a way of claiming authenticity and credibility as yoga practitioners. To this day, one can find Americans and Europeans travelling to places such as Varanasi, Rishikesh and Dharamsala in large numbers to train as yoga teachers so that they can set up yoga studios when they return home. It would be unfair, however, to label all of them phoney. One does not need to be Indian to be a yogi, a fact that is reiterated by the United Nations' annual observance of June 21 as the International Day of Yoga.

What's more intriguing about Fuller is his view that “the authoritarian nature of the relationship between

retail and digital banking. As a nominee director of SBI in the reconstructed Board of Yes Bank, my brief was clear and demanding. It was not only to protect SBI's investment, but to use the bank's digital capabilities to scale retail so the balance sheet could be de-risked, moving away from its large, deeply stressed corporate book.

As the head of finance in SBI, the most challenging part then was handling investor relations. The market misread the reconstruction as an unlimited bailout, and SBI's stock lost nearly half its value. Those were long days — and longer calls, numbers, and explanations. Seeing the stock trade later at about three times the then 52-week high was a moment of great satisfaction.

The turning of the page

Five years on, Yes Bank's financial position has strengthened, its capital buffers are healthier, and a global bank is a strategic investor. A bank that once struggled to raise minimum capital has successfully completed multiple rounds of capital augmentation by attracting investors, both old and new.

The recent transaction is noteworthy for another reason. None of the investing banks incurred any losses, reflecting a resolution design that was both commercially sensible and systemically sound. This outcome is significant not merely for the balance sheets involved but for what it says about India's capacity to handle financial stress without panic and without public money.

Why it is worth remembering

Technology can enhance access, but trust remains the real currency of banking. With the benefit of now being on this side of regulation and supervision, I can confidently say that trust in the regulator, in the system, and among institutions was what ultimately turned a moment of anxiety into a successful exercise in collective responsibility.

That is why the recent headlines should be read in full. They are not only about a new investor. They are also about a system that learned, adapted, and delivered. In preserving a bank, the system preserved something larger. It preserved the confidence in its own ability to self-correct. That, in my view, is the enduring legacy of the Yes Bank rescue.

The author is deputy governor, Reserve Bank of India. The views expressed here are personal

scale to intelligence, from networks to knowledge.

A few decades ago, Indian digital startups struggled to attract the investor backing needed for global scale. Today, homegrown companies have proven they can innovate, scale, and compete in a mature ecosystem. The rise of Unified Payments Interface (UPI), Aadhaar, and open network for digital commerce (ONDC) has created a strong foundation for entrepreneurship while robust domestic and global capital flows fuel growth. The conditions seem right for India to build the next global digital platform. Its new generation is — bold, risk-taking, and driven by ambition. Gen Z's confidence and creativity are fuelling a surge of innovation, making world-class digital enterprises from India more likely than ever.

A rising sense of Aatmanirbhar Bharat and “vocal for local” is turning users into agents of economic nationalism and data sovereignty. Many now choose Indian apps to strengthen national capability and retain value at home.

While these trends strengthen the case for India-originated digital platforms, the government can catalyse their growth. With over 20 million employees, the public sector is one of the world's largest organised customer bases. Even partial adoption of Indian platforms for communication, procurement, or data management could create instant scale and credibility. The government can drive this through incentives and procurement preferences — permitted under the World Trade Organization framework — to prioritise homegrown digital solutions.

India stands at an inflection point in its digital journey — shifting from the world's largest user base to a major producer of digital power. National Informatics Centre's move to host all “gov.in” emails and data on Zoho's Indian servers or use of Arattai as messenger app marks a decisive step towards digital sovereignty. With a confident new generation of innovators, India now has the scale and self-belief to shape its own digital destiny marked by creation.

The author is chairman, UPSC, and former defence secretary of India. The views are personal

Contorting yoga with ideology



BOOK REVIEW

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

London-based poet, novelist, pamphleteer, and activist Stewart Home, who makes “headstand paintings with the canvas placed above him and brushes held in his toes”, wants to “discourage those thinking of taking up modern postural practice for health reasons from doing so”.

This mission, articulated in the concluding chapter of his book *Fascist Yoga: Grifters, Occultists, White Supremacists and the New Order in Wellness*, is an unusual entry point into yoga because it is not geared towards boost-

ing productivity, losing weight, or finding a work-life balance.

Instead of trying to sell yoga as an ancient one-stop solution to modern woes, he urges the reader to be sceptical of what is on offer. He writes, “I can't and wouldn't want to prohibit modern yoga. Nevertheless, if someone wishes to pursue a back-bending yoga practice — or become a contortionist — they should know in advance that it may result in long-term physical injuries.”

Mr Home examines the nexus between yoga, fascism, White supremacy and the occult in North America and Europe from the twentieth century right up to its heyday in the 1970s. His statements must be understood in that political and cultural context rather than extrapolating them hastily to make sense of how yoga evolved elsewhere in the world, especially in India.

He believes that “most of the claims made about modern postural practice

are at best hype, and for the most part mythological”. It is evident that the author is not a fan of subtle jibes and passive-aggressive humour. He prefers to mount a frontal attack on what he views as “fakery”.

This assessment of yoga might sound outlandish, especially to Indian readers diligently doing their *surya namaskars* every morning to make their bodies strong and supple. However, the author's work is worth engaging with if one wants to grasp how yoga has been appropriated, packaged and sold in the West by people whose political views seem disconnected from the image of peace, equanimity and wellbeing that is often associated with the practice of yoga.

Among the exponents of “fascist yoga”, one finds American poet Ezra Pound who believed that yoga and breathing techniques taught by his teacher, Yogi Ramacharaka (American occultist William Walker Atkinson)

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2025



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Happening today

● **THE CENTRE WILL LAUNCH A YEAR-LONG** nationwide commemoration of Vande Mataram on Friday, marking 150 years of the national song composed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. The event at Delhi's Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium will see Prime Minister Narendra Modi release a commemorative stamp and coin.

● **THE SUPREME COURT ON FRIDAY** will hear the case related to the management of stray dog population. A bench headed by Justice Vikram Nath is likely to pass some directions after states filed status reports detailing their efforts in the last three months.

● **PM NARENDRA MODI** begins a two-day visit to his constituency of Varanasi on Friday. He is scheduled to flag off four new Vande Bharat Express trains on Saturday, which will operate on the Varanasi-Khajuraho, Lucknow-Saharanpur, Firozpur-Delhi and Ernakulam-Bengaluru routes.

Business as Usual

By EP UNNY



EXPLAINED



HAS BIHAR'S GROWTH CAUGHT UP WITH THE REST OF INDIA?

Bihar's overall base of economic activity is small, and its growth rates can thus flatter to deceive **P 14**

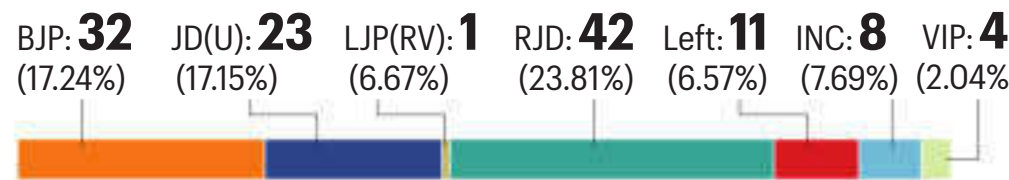
S.I.R. WITH ZERO APPEAL, HIGHEST TURNOUT SINCE 1951, PUREST ROLL: CEC

At 65%, highest turnout in 75 yrs: Half of Bihar votes

Women wait to cast their votes in the first phase of the Bihar Assembly elections, outside a polling booth in Patna on Thursday. ANI **P 7, 8**

64.66% OF 3.75 CRORE electors cast their votes in the 121 constituencies which went to polls in the first phase of the Bihar Assembly elections on Thursday.

How these seats voted in 2020

Cycles in 2006 to *das-hazari* this time: Nitish banks on the *mahila*

Santosh Singh & Deeptiman Tiwary
Bettiah, Munger, Darbhanga, Gopalganj, November 6

THE SPEED with which the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana (MMRY), announced by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar just before the announcement of the Bihar polls, has acquired a moniker is just one sign of its popularity. The other is the voices on the ground, with women beneficiaries lining up behind the MMRY

scheme they have dubbed "*das-hazari* (for the Rs 10,000 it entails)".

The scheme is one of several that Nitish Kumar has introduced in his two decades in power for the benefit of women. In 2006, months after taking over as CM, he started the popular bicycle scheme that was a runaway success and helped him build a loyal base of women supporters. The focus on women voters is important, given that they tend to turn out to exercise their franchise more than men. In 2020, 59.69% of women

voters cast their vote, while only 54.45% of men did. The gap was higher in 2015, with women voters recording a 60.48% turnout while 53.32% of men did. While Phase 1 on Thursday saw a record 64.66% turnout as of 8.30 pm, the gender-wise break-up was not available immediately.

Working in Patna, Vibha Devi took a two-day leave to go to her village in Nalanda to fill a form for the Rojgar Yojana, with Rs 10,000 deposited into her account soon after. Of course, she would vote for the JD(U), she says. "*Jekar khay-bay, okre na gaybay? Na debay vote te kodhi fut jaytay* (Won't I

● Bihar's Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana

ONE WOMAN from each family, between ages of 18 and 60 years and a permanent resident of Bihar, eligible

INITIAL ₹10,000 to be transferred into beneficiary's bank account, to start a self-employment venture.

BY EARLY October, this had been done for over 1.21 cr women, next disbursement scheduled for Nov 7.

BASED ON performance, the beneficiary to get additional assistance up to ₹ 2 lakh, 6 months later.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

CONCERNS GROW AS MARKET EXPANDS

Red flags in Govt: Can GenAI models track prompts of officials, leverage citizens' data?

Soumyarendra Barik & Anil Sasi
New Delhi, November 6

WHAT HAPPENS when a government officer uploads an internal note to an AI chatbot for a quick summary? When a police department asks an AI assistant to optimise CCTVs across a city? Or when a policy-maker uses a conversational model to draft an inter-ministerial brief? Can the AI system analyse such prompts at scale, identify the user, infer their role, draw patterns across queries and predict strategic intent?

These questions are being debated in sections of the Union government, *The Indian Express* has learnt, amid growing concern about the rapid proliferation of generative AI (GenAI) platforms in India, especially those run by foreign firms, often bundled as free ser-

E. EXPLAINED

The concern: Inference, data

Generative AI platforms can draw deeper inferences about users from their prompts because every input reveals intent, tone, preferences, and context in real time. Besides, some AI companies have signed distribution deals with telecom operators and their free subscription is usually linked to phone numbers.

EXPRESS exclusive

Senior officials say the core issue is not only data privacy but inference risk: whether these systems can derive sensitive insights indirectly from users' behaviour, re-

lationships, and search patterns.

Two broad areas are under discussion. First, whether queries made by top functionaries — senior bureaucrats, policy advisers, scientists, corporate leaders and influential academics — could be mapped to identify priorities, timelines, or weaknesses.

Second, whether anonymised mass usage data from millions of Indian users could help global firms.

One issue being discussed, sources said, is whether to "protect" official systems from foreign AI services.

"We don't know what the level of tracking is on these services, and whether they are able to identify the significance of a user's prompts to make inferences from it. For now, the foreign LLMs are most popular, and there can be more safety in running them directly on a computer rather than on a

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

FIR filed, CM orders probe into land deal linked to Ajit Pawar son

Alok Deshpande & Manoj More

Mumbai, Pune, November 6

MAHARASHTRA CHIEF Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Thursday formed an inquiry committee to probe allegations of irregularities in a Pune land deal, involving a company linked to Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar's son Parth Pawar, saying "serious issues are coming forward at the primary level" regarding the transaction.

Ajit Pawar, who heads rul-

ingly NCP, denied any role in the deal. "I had heard something (about the deal) around three-four months ago. I had clearly said at that time that I will not tolerate any wrongdoing. I don't know what happened after that," he said. Parth Pawar denied any wrongdoing on his part.

Responding to a query from *The Indian Express*, Fadnavis said Additional Chief Secretary (Revenue) Vikas Kharge "will conduct the inquiry". Pune District Collector Jitendra Dudi

said the sale deed would be cancelled, and that the Tehsildar and Sub-Registrar in charge have been suspended.

The deal pertains to 40 acres in Mundhwa area of Pune city, near the upmarket Koregaon Park area. The Opposition has alleged that the land, reportedly worth Rs 1,800 crore, was allegedly sold to Amedea Enterprises LLP, where Parth is a partner along with an individual identified as Digvijay Patil, for Rs 300 crore with a stamp

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Not just PMLA, UAPA, give reason for arrest in all offences, says SC

'At least two hours before production in court for remand; flows from constitutional safeguard for personal liberty'

Ananthakrishnan G
New Delhi, November 6

IN AN important judgment with a bearing on personal liberty, the Supreme Court ruled Thursday that the requirement of furnishing grounds of arrest to a person placed under arrest will apply even to offences under the Indian Penal Code and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and not just offences

under special statutes like the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

The bench of Chief Justice of India B R Gavai and Justice A G Masih said, "The constitutional mandate of informing the arrestee the grounds of arrest is mandatory in all offences under all statutes including offences under IPC 1860 (now BNS 2023)."

"The requirement of informing the arrested person the grounds of arrest, in the light of and under Article 22 (1) (Protection against arrest and detention in certain cases) of the Constitution of India, is not a mere formality but a mandatory binding constitutional safeguard which has been included in Part III of the Constitution under the head of Fundamental

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

How many times did she vote, asked Rahul about voter with over 200 photos on rolls; once, she says



Not my fault that my photo appears several times... told them it should be fixed, hasn't been done yet: Charanjeet Kaur, JASBIR MALHI

The Indian Express tracked down 17 in Ambala village, at least 12 with valid ID say they voted in 2024 Haryana polls

Sukhbir Siwach & Abhimanyu Hazarika
Dhakola (Ambala), Sonapat, November 6

CLAIMING THAT the 2024 Assembly elections in Haryana had been "stolen", Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi showed Wednesday a photograph of a woman which featured 223 times on the voter list

in two booths during the polls. "The EC needs to tell us how many times she voted," he said.

The EC may not have responded to Gandhi, but sitting at her residence in Dhakola village in Ambala district, 75-year-old Charanjeet Kaur has an answer: Voted just once.

The Indian Express visited the village that suddenly finds itself in the spotlight after Gan-

dhi's press conference, and found that Charanjeet's photograph does appear alongside the names of at least 255 voters in booth numbers 63 and 65 in Dhakola village, which has a total of 2,117 registered voters. But for many of the 255, this isn't breaking news.

The Indian Express tracked 17 such individuals and found

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

● PLAYERS END UP DISCOVERING NEW CITIES, DISCUSSING TOPICS FROM SOCIOLOGY TO PHILOSOPHY, MUSIC TO CHESS

At Chess World Cup, beyond the board, Grandmasters' favourite move: A walk

Amit Kamath
Arpora (Goa), November 6

AS THE sun sets on the Goan village of Arpora and another day at the FIDE World Cup ends, the road to Resort Rio, the venue where most of the players are also staying, gets busy. Not with vehicles, but Grandmasters. They set off in little groups, many wearing shorts and track suits that are a far cry from their usual attire of custom-fitted suits.

Where are they headed? Well, wherever their feet take them. For a sport that demands

hours of being seated at one place, walking has spawned its own folklore in chess. Some Grandmasters talk about five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand once ending up in another village while he went for a walk. It's a fable that makes even Anand chuckle while dismissing it. He did add though that whenever he played the Tata Steel Chess event in the Dutch town of Wijk aan Zee, he always walked on the rest days to the neighbouring town of Beverwijk.

"Beverwijk is about 6 km from Wijk. An hour to get there, an hour back. Then, you also

walk inside the town itself. There are many towns where I walk a lot, extremely long walks. Usually, I walk to relax," Anand tells *The Indian Express*. "In any city that has a riverbank, I'd go for a walk along that, like in Paris. In many German cities and towns, I would take extremely long walks and just let my mind wander. Hopefully, you don't get lost."

Among the other top names here and the only player to win the World Cup twice, Levon Aronian, too, is known to take long walks.

"Three to four hours is normal for me. Especially after games. At tournaments, I usually walk with close friends



Grandmasters Levon Aronian and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave take their customary walk at the FIDE World Cup venue in Goa. AMIT KAMATH

like (Russian Grandmasters) Boris Gelfand and Vladimir Kramnik. We'd discuss everything: sociology, philosophy, music, arts. Or just chess. Just talking, understanding things and changing opinions. Some of my best memories are about discovering cities with my friends while walking. They don't have any purpose, these walks. Just to see how the people in that city live. When you're a chess player, you're so focused on your work that you don't get to observe things, observe humans in their natural lives," says the 43-year-old Armenian Grandmaster.

One such long walk in Goa in 2002 during the World Jun-

ior Championship, Aronian says, changed his life. He spotted a temple and walked in. There, he met a stranger and, after a short conversation, decided to turn vegetarian, a decision he's stood by since then.

However, when world champion D Gukesh plays in India these days, walks are rarer because he's constantly approached for selfies and autographs. But his father Rajinikanth says he walks "plenty" when abroad for tournaments.

"I haven't met a chess player who doesn't like going for a walk," says Tania Sachdev, the Grandmaster who has transitioned into commentary. "It's a healing way to get your mind

off things. I loved to walk before games when I used to play. If I am going out for lunch, I would pick a place that would require at least 20 minutes of walking. If there was a longer route to the playing venue from my hotel, I would take that. Walks have served every chess player in different ways."

Sometimes walks are also about having a brainwave. Koneru Humpy says she reached the Women's World Championship in 2011 because of an idea that popped up during one such walk.

"During the 2011 Doha Women's Grand Prix, the day before the final round match

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAMNATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

JNU's tradition of debate is in the dock

SINCE ITS INCEPTION, JNU's reputation as an institution of academic excellence has owed much to a vibrant culture of debate involving the university's students, faculty and administration. This argumentative ethos, nurtured by internal mechanisms that encouraged the resolution of disputes through dialogue, has not only been a catalyst for JNU's consistently credible performance in the national rankings for higher institutions, but is also one of the major reasons for a large number of JNU students going on to become prominent faces in political parties of all hues. Today, however, the university is at a crossroads. An investigation by this newspaper into the growing number of court cases the university is involved in sheds light on the fraying relationship between the administration, faculty and students. The institution has featured in over 600 Delhi High Court cases during the tenure of the current vice chancellor, Santishree Dhulipudi Pandit, and her two predecessors.

That a large number of these cases pertain to protests and free speech-related issues is disquieting. It suggests that a space where students and faculty were once encouraged and empowered to ask questions and raise doubts is under siege, let down by those whose responsibility it was to nurture it. In several cases, the HC has called out the JNU administration for procedural lapses. It decided in favour of students in at least 19 of the 38 cases that were adjudicated during the tenure of the current VC. Litigation had peaked under her predecessor, M Jagadeesh Kumar (2016-2022), when the university was involved in 118 cases — 92 of them filed by students. The court offered them relief in 40 cases, citing violation of the principles of natural justice in at least 15.

Litigation may have been more muted under the current VC, but the administration has persisted with its sledgehammer approach. The Students' Discipline and Conduct Rules, which came into effect in 2023, list expulsion from hostels, rustication from the university and penalties up to Rs 20,000 — way more than the average fee of its postgraduate courses — as punishment for any protest within a 100 m radius of an academic or administrative building on campus or even around faculty residences. One of the lawsuits pertains to a Rs 6,000 fine imposed on a student for writing graffiti on the university's walls — a longstanding JNU tradition. In 2023, JNU adopted the motto "*Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya*" (from darkness unto light). This paper's investigation shows that the university administrators have much to do to enable JNU's students to live up to this credo of knowledge without fear.

Playing catch-up with China in the AI race

THE AI RACE is heating up, with countries across the world drawing up ambitious plans and channelling huge resources into this space. In 2024, global private AI investments touched \$252.3 billion, as per Stanford's Artificial Intelligence Index report. The US widened its lead over other countries, with investments touching \$109.1 billion. But, despite pouring in billions of dollars, it may well turn out that China, not the US, wins the AI race. That's what Nvidia chief Jensen Huang has said in a recent interview. While fears of Chinese dominance have been voiced since the release of Chinese AI model DeepSeek, when the chief of the most valuable company in the world — Nvidia's market capitalisation recently touched \$5 trillion — whose chips form the backbone of the AI ecosystem, says so, it warrants a deeper examination.

According to Huang, who has earlier said that US AI models are not significantly ahead of the Chinese models, China is racing ahead due to lower energy costs and looser regulations. The massive data centres that are needed to handle AI processing require large amounts of power. Goldman Sachs, an investment firm, estimates that with the AI revolution gathering steam, data centre power demand will go up by 160 per cent. This surge in demand is already causing prices to soar in certain areas in the US. Reportedly, the Chinese are addressing this issue by offering energy subsidies that cut costs by half for large data centres, provided they use Chinese chips. This not only helps support their domestic chip industry, it also reduces reliance on Nvidia's chips, whose supply is itself facing hurdles — the Trump administration has not allowed the firm to sell its most advanced chip, Blackwell, to China.

On the issue of regulation, Huang has argued that the new rules on AI by US states could result in "50 new regulations". The fragmented regulatory landscape in the US means that firms will have to wrestle with varying requirements across jurisdictions. This could raise costs, impact innovation. As India moves towards building its own AI ecosystem — from chips to data centres and large language models — it must keep these issues in mind.

Trump wants to be Xi — or is that a joke?

LONG BEFORE GEN Z became a victim of Instagram envy, there were aphorisms that warned people of the perils of jealousy — from the 10th commandment's injunction against "coveting your neighbour's house, farm... and goods" to "comparison being the thief of joy". As it turns out, wanting what you can't have isn't something that afflicts just regular people. The most powerful covet more power, and elected heads of state want courtiers instead of colleagues.

At a meeting with Republican senators earlier this week, US President Donald Trump recalled his meeting with Xi Jinping and asked his cabinet to emulate their Chinese counterparts. It seems that senior Chinese leaders sat formally at their meeting in Busan and refused to speak unless allowed to. "I want my cabinet to behave like that. I'm demanding that. I want them sitting up like that — just nice and straight," Trump said. He took a dig at V-P JD Vance as well: "Why don't you behave like that, J D? J D doesn't behave like that. J D butts into conversations..."

Trump's detractors, at home and abroad, might think his jokes cut a little too close to home — he has been accused of leaning towards authoritarianism. Perhaps it's important to remember that the grass is sometimes greener on your own side. For Trump, even as he continues to provide fodder for comics at home, a silent deputy and a non-existent opposition is still a joke at best and a wish at worst, unlike in so many aspiring superpowers. And, for all his faults, Trump did a great job with the punchline.

IN ZOHRA MAMDANI'S victory speech, two prominent references, to Eugene V Debs and Jawaharlal Nehru, might at first seem like discrete, unconnected invocations. One was a firebrand mobiliser; the other rose to the heights of nation-building and statesmanship. Debs helped create a potent tradition of socialism in the United States; he stands as one of the towering figures of decolonisation. Yet these references are neither random nor rhetorical flourishes. Conceptually and historically, they are closely intertwined.

The surprising thread connecting Debs and Nehru is Roger Baldwin, the founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Baldwin and Nehru were close friends. Baldwin shaped many of Nehru's views on America and advised him on the Congress party's American strategy. The two worked together in the League Against Imperialism until Baldwin broke with it over concerns about communist influence — a position Nehru himself shared. Baldwin had worked with and was deeply aligned with Debs's anti-imperialism and his defence of conscientious objection.

Debs saw racism and the exclusion of immigrants not as aberrations but as tools of bourgeois self-interest. For him, it was the working class — not the privileged elite — that heralded a genuinely open and cosmopolitan society. In contemporary parlance, one might say that the cosmopolitanism of the city is the cosmopolitanism of labour, not of capital.

Nehru himself was interested in whether the ACLU could take up the cause of political prisoners in India. The ideological thread connecting these figures belonged to a historical moment we have

largely forgotten — when civil liberties, anti-racism, socialism, open societies, and decolonisation were all considered part of a single emancipatory movement. Freedom and justice were indivisible.

Baldwin warned Nehru that the fight for Indian independence would have to be waged on two fronts: Against "the hidden enemy of Wall Street, backed by the American government, and against Britain". The former, he said, would always seek to preserve India as a source of revenue for the British Empire. Civil liberties, in this view, were a cause of the Left — distinguishing it from communism and far removed from today's libertarian appropriation. What is so resonant about this connection is the reminder that civil liberties once meant defending even the rights of those accused of conscientious objection and treason. In an age when the definition of treason has expanded to the point that the very idea of a "political prisoner" has lost meaning, this history bears remembering.

History comes full circle in curious ways. It is fitting that Amrit Singh, the daughter of the last Nehruvian, Manmohan Singh, should emerge as one of the leading lights of the ACLU. Mamdani, in connecting Debs and Nehru, is not deploying a freshly minted Gen Z progressive vocabulary; he is retrieving an older, forgotten idiom of 20th-century politics.

Poignant moments in politics are rare; they are easily eclipsed by the brutalities of power. Yet Mamdani's invocation of Nehru recalled a formative episode in Nehru's own life — his first engagement with city government



PRATAP
BHANU
MEHTA

Poignant moments in politics
are rare; they are easily eclipsed
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Mamdani's invocation of
Nehru recalled a formative
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A millennial unafraid of grinning, unembarrassed by TikTok



NIKHIL
TANEJA

ON THE NIGHT Zohran Mamdani became mayor of New York City, ending his victory speech to the clarion call of 'Dhoom Machale', between the screaming crowds, the words of Jawaharlal Nehru and the euphoria of a participatory politics, the striking visual we were left with was of the 34-year-old flanked by the women in his life.

Zohran held hands on one side with his wife Rama Duwaji, who he referred to as "hayati" (my life), and on the other with his mother, filmmaker Mira Nair, who joked in a recent interview that she was the "producer of the candidate". His father, Mahmood Mamdani, stood beside Rama, and all three were embraced on stage by Zohran. It was a heartwarming sight: A brown, mixed-heritage, South- and African-Asian diaspora family, on the dais, flashing million-dollar smiles, minutes after Zohran thanked his parents for making him the man he is today.

This man feels like a breath of fresh air amidst the toxic masculinity propagated by the right-wing politics of the last decade, of the kind that has led to the rise of a certain kind of loud, angry, fearful and fear-mongering man, who has weaponised the epidemic of male loneliness to accumulate personal power and wealth.

This is a man who espouses the worldview behind Elon Musk's declaration, "the fundamental weakness of Western civilisation is empathy" on The Joe Rogan Experience — incidentally the podcast he gets his politics from. This is a man who echoes the fear of being cancelled for an opinion, a fear that is based on the views his multi-millionaire idols express in their books, podcasts, stand-up shows and media appearances.

This is a man who at the very least dismisses Andrew Cuomo's 13 sexual harassment allegations, and at most is convinced

that "boys will be boys". He believes that masculinity means looking "macho", that protein should be consumed as powder and that the only permissible pronouns are alpha/male.

Then, along comes Zohran Mamdani, who can easily be characterised as, if I may be so bold as to use a Gen Z term, a "certified pookie". He's a Millennial unafraid of grinning, unembarrassed by TikTok trends, uncompromising in his principles, unabashed in his allyship, unassuming in his demeanour and unfiltered in his joy.

He "sims" for his wife on Instagram, jokes about his failed career as a rapper and can't bench press 61 kg. He's also an outspoken feminist, a trans ally, a supporter of the Palestinian cause, a proud Muslim, and a politician who isn't backed by the money of the oligarchy but by a movement of the people.

Zohran's masculinity is the antithesis of the manosphere. It's a masculinity of saying "my brother" over "bro", of embracing another man because of shared humanity, and not just a shared sense of humour.

It's a masculinity of smiles over smirks, that shines brightest for supporters with similar values, and yet never looks down on those with dissimilar beliefs.

It's a masculinity of vulnerability over vitriol, of speaking from a place of empathy rather than a position of anger.

It's a masculinity of hope over hostility, of compassion as coalition, resilience as resistance and kindness as courage. It's a healthy, gracious, positive masculinity because it makes space instead of taking up space.

As the world cheers for the politician Zohran Mamdani, I'll be rooting for the man that he is: A soft boy with values that go hard.

The writer is co-founder
and chief, Yuva

at the age of 34, when he was elected chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board. This is the same age at which Mamdani becomes mayor. At first, Nehru saw the role as a distraction from national politics, and he shared the perennial frustration of city leaders: How little actual power they possess. But he soon convinced himself that it was within the board's reach to make "life more bearable, a little less painful to the inhabitants of Allahabad".

As Mohammed Aqil's research shows, Nehru's municipal priorities were, unsurprisingly, centered on the marginalised — the property rights of prostitutes, *ekkawalas*, and the urban poor. It was the city that made Nehru's sense of India's problems more concrete. Transport policy became a site of tension between providing free rides and increasing the wages of *ekkawalas*. Ironically, given India's later fiscal history, Nehru vehemently opposed octroi as a regressive tax. He preferred to tax the rich, using the employment of multiple servants as a proxy for wealth.

Housing was central to his agenda, and he admired the Vienna model of financing housing for all, with higher charges for those who could afford to pay. He was an ardent advocate of free public spaces and believed that cities were the incubators of civic ideals. At least during his Allahabad years, Nehru saw statism as diminishing civic virtue, while socialism — understood as cooperative relations among citizens — strengthened it.

Nehru's time in prison made him sympathetic to Lewis Lawes, the warden of Sing Sing Prison in New York, who believed that

more than 80 per cent of prisoners were not anti-social or inherently bad — that better economic policy, education and employment could empty the prisons.

Later, Nehru developed a distinct vision for India's cosmopolitan cities such as Bombay and Madras. He saw them as polyglot zones whose vitality came from linguistic and cultural diversity. His reluctance about the reorganisation of states stemmed from a fear that linguistic nationalism would erode this cosmopolitan spirit. The unapologetic celebration of polyglotness was a quintessentially Nehruvian hallmark.

Nehru's relationship with American leaders and geopolitics was often testy. Yet the India-US relationship has always been entwined at the level of ideas — through vast movements of intellectual, political and spiritual exchange. It is a history of ideological affinities, not of ethnic showcasing. We often recall Gandhi's influence on American life, but we forget Nehru's intellectual presence, choosing instead to participate in the lazy condescension of posterity.

Martin Luther King Jr, who himself acknowledged Nehru as an inspiration, offered perhaps the most eloquent tribute to Nehru's enduring presence: "In all these struggles of mankind to rise to a true state of civilisation, the towering figure of Nehru sits unseen but felt at all the council tables. He is missed by the world, and because he is so wanted, he is a living force in the tremulous world of today."

Inevitably, these threads of freedom ended in disappointment, but what potential they carried.

The writer is contributing editor,
The Indian Express

Thank you, Zakir, the stadium became an intimate space



SHUBHAJIT
ROY

LAST SUNDAY, I went to a stand-up comedy show. I had seen some short videos of the comedian and somewhat liked the humour but I was certainly not a fan. I had been to stand-ups before, but in intimate settings where one can see the expression on the comedian's face when he or she tells the story. The emotional connection is established immediately. But this was a stadium, where we watched the comedian from afar on giant screens.

He began with tales of his childhood in small-town Indore: Goofing around with friends, where a study session would end up in a bike ride to Bhopal — 200 km away — and back, in order to "freshen one's mind". And his relationship with his parents: His schoolteacher father was the disciplinarian and his homemaker mother the caring one; here, he asked young people not to be ashamed of being "mamma's boys". His father was aloof and distant, yet caring in his own subtle way. "*Papa-log insaan theek hote hain, bas unki language kharab hoti hai* (Fathers are decent people, but their language is not good)." When he moved to Delhi and Mumbai to make a life for himself as a writer, his father told him not to be scared of anyone: He had his back.

Once, while working as a copywriter in Delhi, he was asked by his boss — who was unimpressed by his Father's Day messages — to call his father and say "thank you" — something he had never done. Under duress, he did so, and his father asked, "Yes, what happened?" He stuttered, "Papa, I want to say something." "OK, how much money do you need?" "No, Papa... I just want to say thank you." Silence for 30 seconds. "Yes, *aage?*" his father asked. "Nothing more, Papa," he hung up. A few hours later, he saw missed calls from his father, mother, friends, girlfriend and the security guard. His father was waiting outside his apartment. "*Beta*, thank god you are OK. You said thank you and disconnected the phone. I thought..."

The comedian was Zakir Khan. When the 38-year-old performed at the Indira Gandhi indoor stadium last weekend, it became the biggest comedy weekend in India for a single comedian. In August, Khan had become the first Indian comedian to perform a show in Hindi in Madison Square Garden in New York. So, when he said he was going on sabbatical for a few years, there was a collective gasp. He quickly said he would return.

In a polarised environment, where comedians' identity often frames and limits their comedy, where they are targeted by mobs and the state, where comedy often means the free use of abuse, I just want to say, "Thank you, Zakir."

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40 YEARS AGO

November 7, 1985



PM on N-bomb

INDIA WOULD HAVE made the bomb if it had felt the need, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi told newsmen in Bombay after dedicating the 100 MW nuclear research reactor Dhruva at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre. Gandhi said the country did not feel the need for a nuclear bomb, while replying to a question on the "Islamic bomb". "When India feels the need to go nuclear, we shall inform the people," Gandhi said.

Infoservice

PRESS A BUTTON, and you can watch for such information as the railways, Air India and Indian Airlines timetables, delays in departures and arrivals, stock exchange rates, sports and economic news and general information on your TV. The new service of Doordarshan will be inaugurated by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on the second channel of television. New equipment and a "key pad" will have to be attached to the television.

Border impasse

HOPES OF AN early breakthrough in the longstanding border dispute between India and China did not materialise. The sixth round of official-level talks, when substantive issues pertaining to the border were taken up sector by sector, concluded in New Delhi with both sides only reiterating and clarifying their positions in the eastern sector. A political-level discussion, on the basis of these clarifications, might be able to break further ground.

Raid in Sri Lanka

MILITANT TAMIL SEPARATISTS attacked a village in the northeast, killing six civilians as security forces braced for possible retaliatory raids by militants after an armed forces sweep in the region killed 33 of their number, security sources said. The sources said this was their second attack on a village in the region in four days which caused civilian casualties.

N-tech transfer

THE COUNTRY HAD made tremendous progress in nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and this was now poised for transfer to industry, according to Raja Ramanna, chairman, Atomic Energy Commission. He was addressing newsmen prior to meeting PM Rajiv Gandhi, dedicating the Dhruva nuclear reactor. Dhruva would not be subjected to international inspection as it had indigenous technology, he said.

ICMR on killer gas

THE INDIAN COUNCIL of Medical Research (ICMR) has found some evidence of cyanide poisoning in victims of the Bhopal gas disaster but that did not rule out exposure to methyl iso-cyanate (MIC), a top ICMR official said. "The ICMR has never stated that MIC was not involved," he said. He was commenting on a report in the London Observer quoting Indian scientists as saying cyanide was responsible for the disaster.

DIS/AGREE

THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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

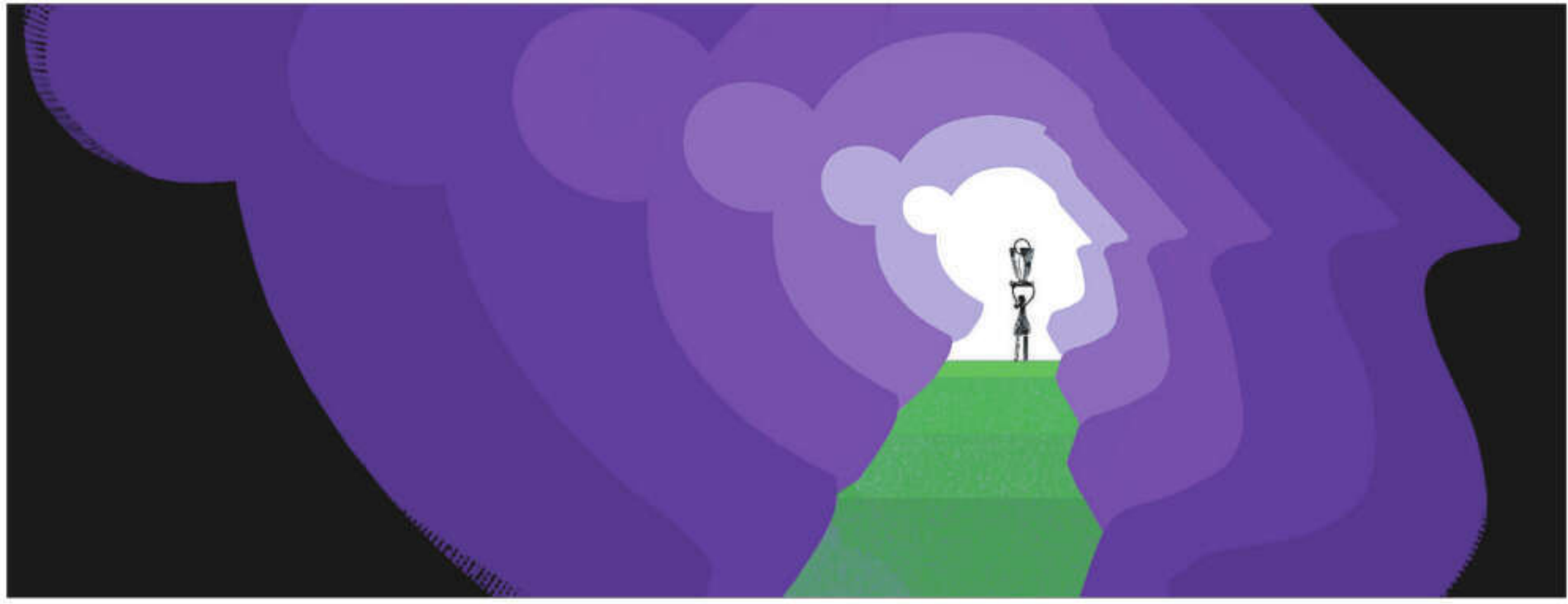


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Is it fair to compare the women's World Cup victory to the Kapil's Devils' 1983 win?

For women's cricket, it's 1978, not 1983



PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

OF THE MANY reels floating on the internet after the Indian women's cricket team's World Cup victory, one features Amanjot Kaur's parents on the day of the final, watching the match on television in a room full of family. As Kaur holds on to the catch that dismisses South African captain Laura Wolvaardt and the room erupts in joy, the two go quiet, their eyes moist. Over a decade ago, Bhupinder Singh, a carpenter, had not baulked when his daughter declared she wanted to play cricket. When the neighbourhood boys wouldn't take her because she didn't own a bat, he had carved her one himself.

Then there's 22-year-old Kranti Gaud from Madhya Pradesh's tribal heartland of Ghuwada, whose father led her to a cricket academy too, brushing aside whispers about propriety and a woman's purpose. The youngest of six siblings, Gaud's dreams often felt larger than their resources. But her family embraced them nonetheless.

Stories such as these are scattered across the breadth of this victory — a mosaic of perseverance stitched by young women and their families who refused to stop at the threshold of what society thought they should be. It is tempting to compare this triumph with that of the men's cricket team in 1983, as if the arc of history can only be traced in familiar symmetry. But to group the two moments together, or to measure one against the other, is to misunderstand the differences in both terrain and trajectory.

The 1983 men's team were, by every yardstick, outsiders. They arrived in England as underdogs, burdened by few expectations even at home. Kapil Dev's men came into their own in a world where professionalism was embryonic, exposure meagre, and where emotional audacity had to compensate for material scarcity. The catch that dismissed Vivian Richards, and the improbable, impossible victory, rewired India's sporting imagination. That maiden win built a marketplace, birthed a commercial empire — television deals, sponsorships, ce-

lebrity status, and the eventual juggernaut that became the Indian Premier League.

The women's 2025 victory, in contrast, did not arrive from the margins, even if many of its players did. This is a team that has had global exposure; some have played two World Cup finals and carry the weight of near-misses, including the 2017 World Cup final. Their success is not a fairy tale but the culmination of years of incremental progress. To understand that journey, one must look not to 1983 but to 1978, the year India's women cricketers played their first World Cup. Led by the trailblazing Diana Edulji, and despite the Women's Cricket Association of India (WCAI)'s limited support, it was a team that shaped the course of possibility. They travelled with borrowed kits, paid for their own travel, persevered through losses, gender bias, lack of infrastructure and institutional support — the WCAI only formally came under the BCCI in 2006 following the ICC's mandate.

Every generation of women players since then has nudged the arc further. Each has walked an extra mile so that the ones after could run a little faster. Shanta Rangaswamy and Edulji made the sport visible. Anjum Chopra, Mithali Raj and Jhulan Goswami nurtured it through decades of apathy and handed it over to Harmanpreet Kaur, Deepti Sharma and others to forge a resilience that no longer needs justification, only direction.

The temptation to measure women's cricket by the same metric as that of men is not just lazy, it is also limiting. For women players, progress has never been linear; it had to be wrested inch by difficult inch. To call 2025 another 1983 is to flatten this story into nostalgia, erasing the texture of stubborn endurance. Each moment of celebration in 2025 rests on countless invisible victories that came before — and will, hopefully, follow more frequently now: A father shrugging off patriarchal unease; a widowed mother standing up for a brave new dream; a coach taking on a player because he can see only ambition and talent, not gender; a system smoothening their path as it does for their male counterparts.

The yardstick of men's cricket cannot contain this story. Theirs was a revolution that changed the game; this one has changed who gets to play it.

The writer is senior associate editor, The Indian Express, paromita.chakrabarti@expressindia.com



SHOBHA PANDIT

AT THE START of the Women's World Cup, I heard many versions of "women can't play cricket. Go to the kitchen and cook."

But ever since I played my World Cup in 1978, and was told by strangers to go stand "*chulhey ke saamne*", I knew what would happen next. The blood boils first, and then turns so icy that nobody can stop you from winning. You tell yourself that these men only know of women working at the stove.

On the day of the final, I heard something else. A big fan of men's cricket said that they had no clue the men's team were playing a T20I series in Australia at the same time. On that day, I also heard about a top woman player, a star, whose family faced criticism for letting her play. By the end, we were talking about the big endorsements she can earn. That, for me, is the 1983 parallel with 2025.

Both teams broke ground but to those who say it was easier for the women — please pick up a bat, face the crowd's pressure while chasing a 300-plus score against Australia, win, and then blubber. Results speak. All of India fell in love with cricket after Kapil Dev, and India fell for the sport, once again, after Harmanpreet Kaur. When we played in the 1970s and 1980s, our matches barely had any spectators except in Eden Gardens. Now, not only has the women's team defied those who didn't even want them to play, it has used this defiance to earn a world title. Women's cricket has changed forever. We want players beyond Smriti Mandhana and Harmanpreet to earn millions in endorsements — show them the money. The fact is, nobody can ignore women's cricket now.

Some personalities from 1983 resonate with 2025. It's not just the last catch running back, but Harmanpreet is like Kapil — quiet, speaking only when spoken to, with immense intelligence and intuition. Jemimah Rodrigues is

like Sunil Gavaskar — focussed, correct on the field, but jovial off it. Smriti's batting is elegant like Sandeep Patil's, and Renuka Singh is like Roger Binny. Deepti Sharma is Mohinder "Jimmy" Amarnath, a fearless all-rounder. Amanjot Kaur, like Jimmy, has a short run-up. Richa Ghosh can be compared to Kris Srikanth, happy-go-lucky and a buccaneer, but also like Virender Sehwag from 2011.

Kapil's team faced the fastest bowlers of the day, on challenging English wickets. And Harmanpreet's team faced Australia. Although the Cup was won with teamwork, just like in 1983, the semi-final needed a special one-woman show from Jemimah. She is, incidentally, from my school, St Joseph's, Bandra. We Josephites are known for our fighting spirit and teamwork, and knowing what to do in any match situation. Away from the field, we bring the roof down with jokes and songs, and on it, we are on our toes, letting the fielding speak for our fitness.

Jemimah faced a lot of odds and I know when she's down, she speaks a lot to Jade Joy Rodrigues, her Jack Russell terrier. I did not move an inch after she came out to bat against Australia in the semi-final, and she proved to be a god-send for India, a blessed soul who brought the team back after three losses. She took me right back to the 1983 feeling. Like Gavaskar, she was a pillar for the team, and held fort doggedly. But I still get goosebumps replaying the last Harmanpreet catch.

The difference between then and now is that this team had a lot of support from the BCCI unlike Kapil's team, from whom nobody expected anything. Both teams held their nerve, and the women had to fight to restore the faith of their fans after three losses. Both teams fought their battles silently, and proved why they shouldn't be underestimated.

Like the men in the 1983 squad, the women in the 2025 team come from all corners of India. This diversity, fighting spirit and assertive body language are lovely to see. But the "*zidd*" they displayed is very Indian, very 1983. They wanted to show that you can't give up on Indian women.

The writer was a member of the 1978 World Cup team

150 years on, Vande Mataram is still nation's soul, evokes unity



YOGI ADITYANATH

IT IS NOT merely a phrase; it is the eternal heartbeat of the Indian soul, echoing through the consciousness of this sacred land for over a century and a half. It is a divine mantra of national awakening, one that illuminated a nation bound in chains, rekindled identity amidst despair, infused courage into resistance, and ultimately gave form to freedom itself.

This song carries neither the lure of power nor the bias of caste, creed, or region. It embodies the collective consciousness of India, an awareness forged through millennia of civilisation, culture, and spiritual traditions. It reminds us that a nation is not merely a geographical territory, but a living, nurturing mother. Our reverence, devotion, and loyalty to her are what define our true identity. 'Vande Mataram' reflects the Indian philosophy of life, where patriotism is not confined to politics but manifests as devotion, discipline, and selfless service to the motherland.

The creation of 'Vande Mataram' marked a spiritual and cultural renaissance. At a time when British rule sought to suppress India's cultural and religious consciousness, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay infused new life into the nation's spirit by weaving this song into his novel *Anandamath*. When the monks of *Anandamath* sang 'Vande Mataram', it was not mere praise of the land; it was a clarion call for freedom. It was inspired by the Sanyasi Movement, the first organised expression of India's self-confidence in the face of colonial rule. In 1875, when Chattopadhyay penned the words *Sujalam suphalam/ Malayajashitalam/ Sasyas-hyamalam/ Mataram*, he awakened the slumbering soul of India.

During the 1905 Bengal Partition movement, echoes of 'Vande Mataram' filled schools, meetings, rallies, and every street where the dream of freedom stirred. It became the final chant of revolutionaries as they faced the gallows. When Rabindranath Tagore sang it, the melody became a spiritual experience. It wove together religion and patriotism, devotion and duty, into one sacred stream of feeling. It inspired countless Indians to offer themselves in the *yajna* of freedom, whose flames illuminated the dawn of Independence.

The architects of independent India revered 'Vande Mataram' as a symbol of the nation's soul. Today, it continues to evoke pride, reverence, and unity among Indians across generations. It is timeless, transcending the boundaries of era or geography, reflecting the divinity of Bharat Mata, who is the living em-

bodiment of civilisation, culture, and eternal consciousness.

The 150th anniversary of 'Vande Mataram' is a moment for reflection. Are we truly living by the spirit that inspired countless patriots to lay down their lives? Have we imbued in our own conduct the same devotion, discipline, and dedication to our motherland?

It is regrettable that today, some self-proclaimed intellectuals question the sanctity of 'Vande Mataram'. At times, they dismiss it as communal; at others, they seek to confine its universality within sectarian bounds. Such tendencies are born of ignorance and historical amnesia, and reflect not only a disregard for national sentiment but also a grave insult to India's cultural unity and spiritual heritage.

Indeed, 'Vande Mataram' is not a song belonging to any one religion, sect, or community; it is the voice of the Indian soul itself. It is a hymn of reverence to the motherland. That is why, on January 24, 1950, the Constituent Assembly of India unanimously adopted 'Vande Mataram' as the national song. In the words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, "This is a song that unites the nation with its eternal message of devotion and strength. For generations, millions of Indians have felt an immense surge of patriotism while singing 'Vande Mataram'.

Through its words, we have envisioned a vibrant, glorious, and self-confident India."

Today, as India strides confidently on its path of self-reliance and development, the inspiration that guides this journey is the same spirit Chattopadhyay ignited a century and a half ago. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, as the nation advances with the mantra of *Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat*, 'Vande Mataram' continues to strengthen our sense of unity. The song reminds us that India's true power lies in its diversity, in the harmony of its languages, cultures, and ways of life.

'Vande Mataram' is not merely an expression of salutation to the motherland; it is a pledge to protect her, to make her prosperous, and to uphold her pride. When a farmer toils in his field, a soldier guards the nation's borders, a teacher shapes young minds, or a youth brings glory through innovation, 'Vande Mataram' finds its living expression in their actions. The younger generation must embrace the essence of this song, making it a part of their daily lives. Even in this era of rapid technological change, if love for the motherland and a sense of duty remain steadfast in our hearts, 'Vande Mataram' will continue to resonate eternally.

This song reminds us that the motherland is not an abstraction; it is a living force. To revere her is among the highest acts of life. 'Vande Mataram' teaches us that patriotism is not a momentary emotion; it is a lifelong act of devotion and duty.

The writer is Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh



ILLUSTRATION: KOMAL

It is regrettable that today, some self-proclaimed intellectuals question the sanctity of 'Vande Mataram'. At times, they dismiss it as communal; at others, they seek to confine its universality within sectarian bounds

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Politics of empathy

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'Remarkable victory but real rest begins now' (IE, November 6). Zohran Mamdani's election as New York's mayor marks not just a personal milestone but a generational shift in politics. His rise reflects a growing yearning for sincerity, empathy, and purpose in public life. At a time when populism and division dominate global discourse, Mamdani's campaign offered an alternative rooted in inclusivity, fairness, and social justice — and New York's people responded. It represents a clear pushback against politics built on fear, privilege, and exclusion. Yet, the true test begins now — translating ideals into policy amid institutional and financial challenges. Still, Mamdani's victory rekindles faith that hope remains a credible political force.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Need for expertise

THIS REFERS to the article, 'Not just dynasts, look at the political parachutists' (IE, November 6). The critique of para-

chutists is pragmatic, emphasising the need to "touch the political grass". However, given the scale of operations, efficiency, and planned growth India needs to propel itself along the developing-economy curve, we might have to open our parachutes for the professionalism and expertise they bring, as exemplified by the liberalisation and the nuclear programmes led by Manmohan Singh and A P J Abdul Kalam.

Abhinandan Bhatia, New Delhi

Dreams destroyed

THIS REFERS to the editorial 'J&K's missed chance to play the game' (IE, November 6). The downfall of the Indian Heaven's Premier League in Jammu and Kashmir exposes a deeper rot — how corruption and short-term profiteering destroy the very dreams they claim to build. For a region struggling to rebuild its identity through peace and participation, sport was a statement that normalcy had returned. Instead, the unpaid players and unfulfilled promises now stand as metaphors for betrayal.

Manya Sawhney, Zirakpur



ZERO HOUR
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

Won't you give me my flowers while I'm living/ And let me enjoy them while I can/ Please don't wait till I'm ready to be buried/ And then slip some lilies in my hand — *Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs (Song from the 1960s)*

FONDLY REMEMBERING FIVE advertising greats I knew and worked with.

Piyush Pandey (1955-2025) and I were colleagues at Ogilvy from 1984 to 1991 — he in Mumbai, I in Kolkata. Sometime in the mid-1980s, Mani Ayer, the then managing director of Ogilvy, hand-picked 10 of us for a weekend retreat. The 10 so-called happening kids on the block — direct with the MD. Piyush was the oldest among us. He was over 30, the rest of us in our mid-to-late 20s.

One piece of advice Ayer gave us was precious: "Take your work seriously, but don't take yourselves too seriously." Soon

after our weekend retreat, nine of us got promotions in the two departments were in: Client servicing and creative. One did not. He was gently moved out of client servicing and given a new, odd-sounding designation: copy chief (languages). Sweet irony. The guy who was seemingly being shunted around went on to become "India's David Ogilvy". (Pandey, *dekho kya term create kiya tumhare liye*)

Cut to 2022. Both of us happened to be in Goa at the same time. So, we made a plan. Dinner at Fat Fish, Arpora. Politics was off the menu. Starters: Nostalgia from our eight years at Ogilvy; updating ourselves about former colleagues. Main course: Bringing each other up to speed about our families. Piyush always had so many stories to proudly share about his siblings (including, of course, Ila Arun and Praseoon Pandey). Dessert: Illness. Life. Legacy. Three hours just flew by. That was our last meeting.

Sumit Roy, our former colleague at Ogilvy, has this to say: "A word about the person who gave Piyush the platform he needed. It was Suresh Mullick who spotted Piyush's ability and had him head the Language Department. From that moment,

Piyush never turned back. Together, they united India with *Miley Sur Mera Tumhara*. Suresh's heart was rooted in Hindustani classical music. Piyush's heart was rooted in Hindustan."

Suresh Mullick (1940-2003) was the creative director at Ogilvy, who conceived the iconic film *Spread the Light of Freedom*, launched on Independence Day, 1987. The following year, Suresh came up with another Big Idea — *Ek Sur*, later renamed *Mile Sur Mera Tumhara*. In Piyush's words, here's what happened: "*Mile Sur* was the late Suresh Mullick's concept. So, he gave me the opportunity to write the lyrics for his film. He had so many top lyricists in Mumbai to choose from, but he opted for me. I wrote the entire song over a dozen times till he approved it. Then, the voice of Pandit Bhimsen Joshi turned some ordinary lyrics into magic."

In a similar manner, the generous Piyush gave credit to Rajeev Rao. Yes, it was Rajeev who created the memorable commercials for Hutch, which featured pugs.

Rituparno Ghosh (1963-2013) was a genius. The world fondly remembers him as a multiple award-winning national and international film director, who famously

directed Aishwarya Rai in *Chokher Bali*. But before all that fame and glam, Rituparno was in advertising. He was a creative director at Response, Kolkata, an agency set up by the irrepressible Ram Ray. Ritu's office was within walking distance of mine. He would infrequently come across during the lunch break, but never ate a morsel. We once compared salaries: A cool Rs 9,000 a month!

Pradeep Guha and Bhaskar Das were two of my favourite rock stars of the advertising/media world in Mumbai. The yarns, the fond memories created over decades, will run into many columns. These two flamboyant media magicians who lived life king-size on Mumbai's allegorical equivalent of Madison Avenue were quintessential Bengali babus at heart.

Postscript: There were other advertising greats. The only reason they do not feature in the list above is because I did not know them personally: Alyque Padamsee, Subhas Ghosal, Gerson da Cunha... and many more. To all of them: May you Rest In Perfection (RIP).

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

● GLOBAL

Crisis in Sudan: Current trigger, old faultlines, and the human cost



EXPERT EXPLAINS

BY GURJIT SINGH

HISTORY WAS repeating itself in Sudan, the head of the Red Cross said recently as reports of mass killings in the Darfur region emerged last week.

Sudan was among the earliest African countries to gain independence from colonial rule. It participated in the landmark Bandung Conference in 1955 (of 29 Asian and African nations, including India), and was Africa's largest country till South Sudan broke away in 2011.

On April 15, 2023, Sudan was plunged into its worst crisis in decades when violent clashes broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a powerful paramilitary group under General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti). What began as a power struggle between two rival generals has evolved into a brutal civil war that has devastated the nation's economy, fractured its society, and triggered one of the largest displacement crises in the world.

The staggering losses

Two years into the conflict, over 150,000 people are reportedly dead. Thousands of children have perished due to malnutrition; nearly 13 million people—one in three Sudanese—have been forced from their homes. Of these, 8.8 million are internally displaced, while 3.5 million have fled across borders.

In August 2024, the Famine Review Committee, an independent expert panel, officially confirmed famine in parts of Darfur, particularly in the Zamzam IDP camp, where thousands are dying from hunger and disease. The scarcity of food, water, fuel, and medicine has reached catastrophic levels. Hospitals have been destroyed or abandoned, and medical supplies are nearly impossible to obtain.

Even before the war, over 3 million women and girls in Sudan were at risk of gender-based violence. The current chaos has deepened their vulnerability: reports of mass sexual violence, forced marriages, and child recruitment have become alarmingly frequent.

The fighting began in Khartoum, quickly spreading to Darfur, Kordofan, and Gezira, engulfing major cities and rural communities alike. Both sides have committed grave human rights abuses, including airstrikes on civilian neighbourhoods, ethnically targeted massacres, sexual violence, and widespread looting.

The recent violence

Only a few years earlier, Sudan was at the threshold of democratic change. The ouster of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019 ignited optimism that a new era of civilian-led governance was imminent. But those hopes collapsed after a military coup in 2021, which dissolved the fragile transitional government and returned power to rival factions within the security establishment.

The SAF and RSF, allies in maintaining the coup, turned on each other as negotiations over integration of forces and control of key institutions broke down.

The fighting began in Khartoum, quickly spreading to Darfur, Kordofan, and Gezira, engulfing major cities and rural communities alike. Both sides have committed grave human rights abuses, including airstrikes on civilian neighbourhoods, ethnically targeted massacres, sexual violence, and widespread looting.

Ethnic rivalries, competition for resources

The SAF-RSF rivalry is deeply rooted in Sudan's historical regional, ethnic, and economic divides. The RSF traces its origins to the Janjaweed militias that fought in the Darfur conflict of the early 2000s—armed Arab groups mobilised by the Bashir regime against non-Arab communities, like the Massalit, Fur, and Zaghawa. That conflict left deep scars of ethnic mistrust, displacement, and injustice, which the current war has reignited.

At the same time, Sudan's vast geography, stretching from the Sahel to the Red Sea, has long been a site of competition for arable land, water, and resources. Climate change has intensified these pressures. Repeated droughts and floods have eroded livelihoods, forced pastoralists and farmers into confrontation, and driven migration from the countryside into contested territories.

Control over fertile land, gold mines, and Red Sea trade routes has become a strategic prize in this war.

The RSF's stronghold in Darfur gives it access to lucrative gold fields and cross-border trade networks, while the SAF controls strategic ports and central agricultural zones. International actors, including regional powers, have stakes in the outcome. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Russia (through the Wagner Group's remnants) have all been accused of providing covert support to one side or the other, turning Sudan into a proxy arena for competing interests.

Life in conflict zones

Behind the staggering statistics lie individual stories of loss and resilience. In the displacement camps of White Nile State, families surviving on meagre rations of sorghum and lentils. Children scavenge for firewood and water while their parents queue for hours to receive aid that rarely arrives. Yet amid the destruction, Sudan's people show extraordinary courage: volunteers running makeshift clinics, teachers holding classes in camps, communities sharing food when aid doesn't come.

As the world turns its gaze elsewhere, Sudan is becoming a prolonged humanitarian black hole, its people forgotten amid global crises. Ending this suffering requires sustained diplomatic engagement, humanitarian access, and a renewed commitment to civilian-led governance.

GURJIT SINGH IS FORMER AMBASSADOR AND AUTHOR OF THE HARAMBEE FACTOR

● ECONOMY

Has Bihar's growth caught up with the rest of India?



UDIT MISRA

AS BIHAR goes to polls, the big macroeconomic question is: Has the state's growth trajectory bridged the gap with the rest of the country? Further, what happens when it is compared with states like Maharashtra or Punjab, where Bihar's residents typically migrate to in search of better lives? And what about similarly weaker and contiguous states, like Uttar Pradesh?

There are two opposite views about Bihar. One, that it was and continues to be a basket case when it comes to economic development, and two, that Bihar's image does not do justice to its recent economic resurgence. Where does the truth lie?

Analysing any dataset will be limited by the choice of variables one incorporates. Here's an attempt to use data from the RBI's annual Handbook of Statistics on Indian States to answer these queries.

Beyond the absolute economic output, understanding the pace at which the state is improving also matters. We have compared Bihar with a selection of six states—Maharashtra, Punjab, Kerala, Gujarat, UP and West Bengal. The idea behind this choice is to capture geographical diversity, migration trends, and the states often bundled along with Bihar as laggards.

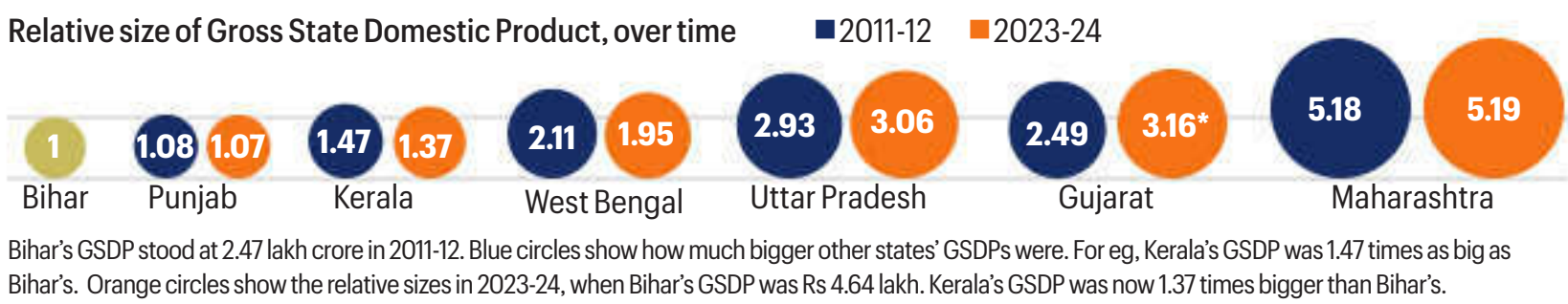
Total economic output

To measure the overall size of the economy, we will consider the "real Gross State Domestic Product", which is a metric that removes the effect of inflation over time. Bihar's real GSDP has grown from Rs 2.47 lakh crore in 2011-12 to Rs 4.64 lakh crore in 2023-24, meaning that Bihar's output nearly doubled over this period.

But, more importantly, how does it stand in relative terms? If other states grew at faster rates, Bihar would find itself a laggard. The *graphic* alongside shows how much bigger the GSDP of each of the six states is relative to Bihar's GSDP in 2011-12. Maharashtra's GSDP was 5.18 times that of Bihar's. If this ratio gradually comes down, then it implies that Bihar has not only grown on its own but also bridged the gap with these states.

As the calculation shows, in terms of the

How much state has grown, where it lags behind others



Bihar's GSDP stood at 2.47 lakh crore in 2011-12. Blue circles show how much bigger other states' GSDPs were. For eg, Kerala's GSDP was 1.47 times as big as Bihar's. Orange circles show the relative sizes in 2023-24, when Bihar's GSDP was Rs 4.64 lakh. Kerala's GSDP was now 1.37 times bigger than Bihar's.

PER CAPITA INCOME INCREASE IN ABSOLUTE TERMS (BIHAR)

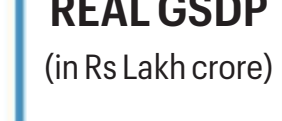


Size vs Bihar (number of times)

STATES	2011-12	2023-24
Kerala	4.5	5.03
Maharashtra	4.58	5.09
Punjab	3.93	4.04
Uttar Pradesh	1.47	1.58
West Bengal	2.37	2.47
Gujarat	4.02	5.66*

Source: RBI, Indian Express research, *data until 2022-23

BIHAR'S REAL GSDP



VALUE ADDED BY MANUFACTURING TO BIHAR'S ECONOMIC OUTPUT



Size vs Bihar (number of times)

STATES	2011-12	2023-24
Kerala	2.37	1.85
Maharashtra	16.31	10.32
Punjab	2.32	1.73
Uttar Pradesh	5.46	5.3
West Bengal	4.56	4.46
Gujarat	8.82	11.41*

total economic output, Bihar did bridge the gap with a few states. The biggest improvement was relative to West Bengal.

With Punjab and Maharashtra, Bihar largely maintained the same size difference over the years, whereas the gap increased with UP and Gujarat, driven by these states substantially increasing their own output.

In Gujarat's case, its total economic output was less than 2.5 times Bihar's in 2011-12, but over the next 12 years, it was over three times Bihar's output.

Per capita economic output

The next key variable is the average economic output in these states and how Bihar's growth performed relative to them. Here, the "real Net State Domestic Product" was considered.

The *table* alongside on per capita income again shows how per capita output has increased in absolute terms—Rs 21,750 to Rs 32,174. But did Bihar bridge the gap with the rest of the states? No.

As the calculations show, in terms of per capita output, Bihar's growth was not fast enough, and the gap between Bihar and the rest of these states actually widened, evidenced by the increasing ratios.

Key Points

There are two opposite views about Bihar. One, that it was and continues to be a basket case when it comes to economic development.

Two, that Bihar's image does not do justice to its recent economic resurgence. Where does the truth lie?

● POLITICS

Weather, security threats: Factors that decide number of polling phases

Damini Nath

New Delhi, November 6

THE 2025 BIHAR Assembly elections, being held in two phases, are the shortest polls in the state in at least 20 years.

The EC takes the decision to schedule elections—when and in how many phases—after taking into account several factors, including the logistics, the weather and other elections that may be due.

Here's a look at what goes into election scheduling.

What is the present situation in Bihar?

The EC announced the schedule on October 6, with polling in two phases on November 6 and November 11, and counting of votes on November 14. The number of phases has gone down from three in 2020, five in 2015, six in 2010 and four in 2005.

This time, the polling is being held in 121 Assembly constituencies in phase one and



Voters in queue at a polling station during the first phase of the Bihar Assembly elections, in Patna on Thursday. PTI

122 seats in phase two. The EC has also increased the number of security personnel deployed.

How does the EC schedule elections?

As per the Constitution, the Lok Sabha

Shortest polls in 20 years

● In Bihar, the number of phases has gone down from three in 2020, five in 2015, six in 2010 and four in 2005.

● The first phase of polling was on November 6. The next is on November 11, and the counting of votes is on November 14.

and Vidhan Sabhas have a five-year term, so the elections to elect a new legislature should be completed before the end of that term.

With the date of the end of the term available five years in advance, the EC starts preparing for the elections well ahead.

It takes into account any other elections that are due at the same time, so that they may be clubbed. It also considers weather conditions, for example peak winter and snowfall in the northern states, or the monsoon, which makes some areas difficult to access.

Festivals, the agricultural cycle, holidays, are all kept in consideration, so are school examinations, as polling parties at booths are generally made up of local school teachers.

One of the most important factors the EC considers is the number of security forces needed to deliver a violence-free election. In the case of states affected by Left-Wing Extremism or other security

concerns, more security personnel are needed, leading to the polling being split into more phases.

Why is this Bihar election short?

In the case of Bihar, no other state is going to polls at this time.

When asked why this election is shorter, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar said on October 6: "Voter awareness, availability of CAPFs (Central Armed Police Forces), the assessment of law and order and the enhancement in the capacity of the EC and its officials—looking at all these factors, it was felt appropriate to conduct the elections in two phases."

The scheduling of the Bihar polls had become controversial in 1995, in the tenure of then Chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan. Seshan took on the task of cleaning up the polling process at a time violence and allegations of booth-capturing were prevalent. He postponed the elections four times due to clashes breaking out.

2 THINGS TO KNOW

Un-bear-able: Why Japan had to call in troops to tackle rising bear attacks

WITH 12 DEATHS reported across more than 100 bear-related attacks in Japan since April, the government on Wednesday deployed soldiers of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in the northern city of Kazuno to trap the animals. The move comes after a record number of bear sightings and attacks on humans in the country in recent years, with Kazuno Mayor Shinji Sasamoto telling *Reuters* that townspeople "feel the danger every day".

What's behind the rising tensions over the animals? It's not that bears are unknown to Japan. Brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) are observed frequently in Hokkaido, the northernmost of the four main Japanese islands, while Black bears (*Selenarctos thibetanus*) are



Japan Self-Defense Forces personnel set up a box trap to capture bears in Kazuno. AP

WILDLIFE

and kill bears, who were then coveted for their fur or as a source of ingredients for medicinal products. Of late, however, the dangerous profession is not finding many takers. Larger shifts, such as climate change impacting the growth of food sources, and Japan's high rural-to-urban migration, are also making bears venture beyond their earlier range to more villages, increasing the chances of man-animal conflict.

Moviemakers move Kerala HC: What censor board considers to suggest cuts

THE KERALA High Court is hearing a petition by the makers of the Malayalam movie *Haal*, over the Central Board of Film Certification's (CBFC) decision to grant it an "A" certificate along with mandatory cuts.

The petitioners say the Board's directions "fully tamper (with) the movie."

The film deals with issues like policing interfaith relationships. The petitioner argues that the edits sought by the board, such as blurring the name of a Christian college and altering scenes linked to religious identity, strip meaning from those themes.

The Cinematograph Act, 1952, which created the CBFC, authorised it to examine films before release. It does so based on the suitability for different audiences.



The Malayalam movie *Haal* deals with issues like interfaith relationships. IMDB

LAW

The Act permits the board to request changes before issuing a certificate, guided by the constitutional limits on speech and expression as fundamental rights. Changes may be sought if the film meets the "reasonable restrictions" under Article 19(2) of the Constitution.

The CBFC also works within executive guidelines issued by the Central government, giving it room for a broader public interest lens that is often interpreted through concerns over religious sensibilities, law and order risks, or portrayal of institutions such as the police. The filmmakers in *Haal* argue that this elasticity has stretched far beyond what the statute envisages.

AMAAL SHEIKH

Clear the air

There are no quick-fix solutions to pollution in Delhi as the failed cloud seeding experiments have shown

CLOUD SEEDING WAS never meant to be a silver bullet to solve the very serious problem of air pollution in Delhi, where indices were recorded in the “poor” category on Thursday and are expected to deteriorate further. But the failure of cloud seeding trials to produce any precipitation in the capital last week was disappointing. These first attempts have not had any meaningful impact. The Delhi government stalled the trials saying they would be carried out again, indicating that such attempts could be fruitful when the moisture content in the clouds is higher. However, a study by Indian Institute of Technology Delhi suggests that is an illusory goal, as it found the city’s winter season (October to February) to be unsuitable for cloud seeding. The study cited “a fundamental lack of sufficient moisture and saturation during the peak pollution months when the intervention is most needed”. The analysis, which is yet to be peer reviewed, used data from 2011-21 to identify only 92 days over the decade as conducive for the purpose.

The practicability of cloud seeding itself is in doubt, let alone any positive impact. Last year, the Union environment ministry had told Parliament that it was infeasible as an emergency step to improve Delhi’s air quality. According to its assessment, clouds over North India during winter are transitory and already cause rain, and that besides the absence of requisite cloud conditions in Delhi, there was a possibility of dry air beneath clouds evaporating any precipitation before it reaches the ground. It also raised concerns about the chemicals (such as silver iodide and sodium chloride) used for seeding clouds. Cloud seeding or artificial rain is not a new phenomenon. Although using it to combat air pollution is a relatively new idea, most cities globally that adopted it have abandoned the practice. Its use is almost exclusively for drought relief, that too during rainy seasons.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled Delhi government’s first budget announced in March had seen an allocation of ₹300 crore for pollution control. Although, at about ₹3 crore, the failed cloud seeding trials may not be a major item of expenditure, the government would be better advised to rethink the allocation. The previous Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Delhi had toyed with the idea of cloud seeding two years ago, but couldn’t execute it due to unfriendly weather. The Delhi government should heed expert opinion and approach the problem with greater seriousness; pollution levels are frighteningly high and this is a public health emergency. Be it the AAP government’s odd-even scheme for vehicles introduced nearly a decade ago, and which too was a failed experiment, or a propensity to blame stubble-burning in neighbouring states, the political authorities in the capital have time and again resorted to gimmicks and passing the buck. To make matters worse, even as air quality plummeted predictably on Diwali with the relaxation of the cracker ban, reports of negligence at monitoring stations and suspect sensors have led to allegations of fudged pollution data. Any neglect or cover-up is suicidal.

What is desperately needed is a coordinated approach among all states in the region. This would warrant steps to curb biomass burning in industries and households, stubble-burning by farmers, industrial and vehicular pollution, and construction and road dust, besides promoting public transport. These are the long-term changes that the administration should push and people across strata must buy into. There are no quick-fix solutions like cloud seeding.

AI bubble has sucked in France and Germany, too

IF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE is indeed a bubble, it’s been inflating a lot of companies in places well beyond the tech-bro heartlands of the US. Europe might be an AI laggard, but some of its grand old industrial names have been riding the boom as merly as an Nvidia Corp. shareholder (at least before this week’s so far minor market correction.)

The AI race for virtual godhood has been running into human-scale bottlenecks such as land, labour, and electricity. And Europe’s unsexy industrial champions including France’s Legrand and Schneider Electric (both founded in the 1800s) have been eagerly offering the picks and shovels for the data-centre gold rush. Think server racks, heat-dissipating coolers, power-management tools, and all the other stuff that’s essential to a spending splurge that might add up to \$7 trillion by 2030. Along with Germany’s Siemens and Switzerland’s ABB, Europe has its own “Data Centre Four”, which is being pump primed by the Magnificent Seven.

Even the drag of Donald Trump’s tariffs hasn’t stopped the shares of Legrand—based in central France—from outperforming Nvidia’s in 2025. A century on from Legrand’s pivot to electricity, when it crafted light switches from porcelain, it gets about a fifth of its revenue from kit such as rear-door heat exchangers used to cool servers. Most of it is sold to Alphabet, Amazon.com, and other Big Tech hyperscalers.

None of this is glamorous. But it’s critical when you’re training large-language models, which can gobble up more than 10 times the energy traditionally used by data centres, according to *Bloomberg Intelligence*’s Omid Vaziri.

It’s part of what venture-capital firm Air Street Capital calls AI’s “industrial era”, with pharaonic projects being unveiled at pace and power supply emerging as a chief constraint. The market for data-centre infrastructure increased by 18% in the second quarter of this year, to \$8.9 billion, according to Dell’Oro analyst Alex Cordovil. And he expects strong growth through 2026. European companies’ earnings calls are now peppered with AI references. The availability of equipment like Siemens Energy’s turbines for natural-gas plants is being strained by AI demand.

But how long will the good times roll? Bill Ford of investment firm General Atlantic warns of “irrational exuberance” and Big Tech earnings are failing to dispel fears of a prolonged correction. Legrand and ABB are trading at historically lofty enterprise values of 20 times underlying earnings—giddy heights in what was once a comparatively unloved stock-market corner. Risk abounds. AI spending may be curtailed by diminishing returns. European suppliers’ own ability to maintain a competitive edge may fade. Giant, energy-sucking data centres may encounter local opposition. Their economic value is uncertain and their impact on power bills can be heavy.

There’s no airbrushing the carnage that would follow a tech-company market meltdown. Yet there are some safety nets for European industrials. A slowdown in new data centres shouldn’t lessen the need to retrofit existing ones. Investment in these vast sites might even shift from the US to Europe, whose \$183-billion construction pipeline is ahead of Northeast Asia’s \$79 billion. And these companies aren’t entirely in hock to data-centre mania. They’re plugged in more broadly to the real-estate and electrification business. While Europe’s real economy isn’t going gangbusters, there’s scope for the continent’s leaders to invest more in infrastructure as they try to jumpstart growth to counter the rise of the far right. All it needs is political will.

An equally important question is if Europe’s companies will be as adept at adopting AI as they are at supplying its builders. European Union figures suggest only 13.5% of its companies used AI tools last year. In a region struggling with declining birth rates and productivity, improving this number could be a game changer. Investment in telecoms and technology helped drive France’s knockout growth in the third quarter. “France doesn’t have oil but it does have ideas,” was a notion voiced during the 1970s oil shock. Europe still doesn’t have much of the black stuff but it does have data. Its future may depend on putting it to good use. Selling picks and shovels is respectable business, but a little gold wouldn’t hurt.

● GROWTH STRATEGY

IN CELEBRATING A ‘CONSUMPTION BOOM’, INDIA MAY BE UNDERMINING FOUNDATIONS OF A SUSTAINABLE MODEL

The great growth illusion

M MUNEER

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



tanks, and fiscal balance deteriorates.

The post-2010 China experience is instructive. As they sought to “rebalance” toward domestic consumption, investment growth slowed and productivity decelerated. While household spending provided short-term stability, the economy struggled to sustain its earlier dynamism. Even for a manufacturing behemoth, consumption-led growth cannot substitute for continuous investment in productive capacity. For us, with lagging manufacturing and increasing dependency on imports, the risks are far greater.

GST cuts lead to lower government revenues, which means fewer funds for infrastructure, education, and R&D, all critical for the *Viksit Bharat* goals of 2047. It is highly uncertain in today’s tariff-ridden geopolitics whether sharp acceleration of the economy will happen to offset the revenue loss. In such a scenario, fiscal deficit will impact transformative initiatives.

The real risk is structural, not economic. A consumption-driven model tempts firms to chase easy demand instead of investing in innovation and long-term competitiveness. When spending surges, they will resort to importing rather than building capacity, feeding a loop of rising imports, weak investment, and shrinking productivity—an early version of the middle-income trap.

Proponents of consumption-first growth say India’s vast middle-class market is its ace card in a protectionist world—a blunder many MNCs had believed in years

ago. Some economists claim that booming domestic demand will “power India’s manufacturing future”. It’s a comforting narrative, but not yet borne out by data. Manufacturing still struggles with deep-rooted bottlenecks, including tangled supply chains, skill gaps, and regulatory drag. Without structural reform, consumption will enrich importers, not producers, while inflation quietly erodes the gains.

The much-publicised “Make-in-India” dreams require more than buoyant domestic demand. China and South Korea didn’t rely on domestic consumption. What’s

needed is confidence in the market for institutional investments, innovation ecosystems, and global competitiveness. Essentially, stable taxation, solid supply chain infrastructure, affordable credit, energy reliability, skilled labour, and predictable regulation. A temporary consumption boom does little to build these.

Now comes the generational dimension. The famed demographic dividend of a youthful workforce will yield returns only if new, productive jobs are created in manufacturing and technology, not in inhumane q-com delivery. A consumption-centric economy tends to create employment in retail and services which are low in productivity. Without a manufacturing surge, the demographic dividend could quickly turn into a demographic liability, with millions stuck in low-wage, high-risk work.

Economies that relied on consumption without matching investment have

The smarter path is not to abandon consumption stimulus but to anchor it in supply-side strategy

Embrace biostimulants as a green solution



NAVEEN P SINGH DINESH C MEENA

Respectively Principal and Senior Scientist with ICAR-NIAP, New Delhi

FEW IMAGES CAPTURE the spirit of Green Revolution more vividly than the sight of sacks of chemical fertiliser stacked on a farmer’s porch, symbols of hope that once promised to transform India’s food security overnight. The sacks represent the dramatic shift in agricultural practices starting in the 1960s, when modern inputs like high-yield seeds, mechanisation, irrigation, and synthetic fertilisers replaced traditional farming methods. Yet, behind this promise lies a complex legacy of both miraculous productivity gains and emerging environmental and economic challenges. The chemicals that rescued India from famine in the 20th century now pose a threat. Fertiliser use has topped a national average of 139.81 kg/hectare (ha) and risen as high as 247.61 kg/ha in states like Punjab. The resulting bounty hides mounting costs, bills, declining soil health, water contamination, and biodiversity loss for smallholders. Today, nearly one-fifth of India’s agricultural greenhouse gases come from fertiliser use.

As farmers struggle with crops amid heatwaves and erratic monsoons, a new class of green farm aids is taking root: biostimulants. They are derived from an array of natural sources: seaweed, humic and fulvic acids, amino acids, vitamins, and beneficial microbes. What makes biostimulants unique is not what they add, but what they awaken. When applied to crops, these compounds stimulate physiological responses, boosting nutrient absorption, drought tolerance, and root growth, while enhancing yield quality and resilience.

Unlike chemical fertilisers that can exhaust soils, biostimulants help restore them.

Globally, the biostimulants market is projected to surge from \$4.03 billion in 2024 to nearly \$10 billion by 2032, with Indian demand set to treble in less than a decade. Seaweed extracts, humic substances, and protein hydrolysates top the list, collectively commanding over half the global share. This shift is no accident. Indian consumers are demanding healthier, residue-free food; farmers are searching for cheaper, more effective ways to cope with climate stress. For smallholder and export-oriented growers alike, biostimulants represent both an entry to premium organic markets and an insurance policy against unpredictable weather.

But this green revolution risks getting mired in chaos. Until recently, India’s biostimulant market was an unregulated wild west, with nearly 30,000 products on offer and little clarity about efficacy or safety. Recognising both the promise and peril, the government amended the Fertiliser Control Order in 2021 to cover biostimulants, tightening definitions, efficacy requirements, and trial protocols. Only 132 products, as of now, have passed the bar, primarily protein hydrolysates, humic substances, and seaweed extracts, mainly approved for high-value crops like vegetables. To get on the list, manufacturers must submit ro-

bust field trial data from multiple agro-climatic zones, as well as chemistry and safety analysis. The aim is to replace faith and marketing claims with evidence and trust.

Among biostimulants, seaweed-based products are the rising stars, accounting for 41% of the market. India’s coastline could make it a seaweed powerhouse, but it produces less than 0.1% of the world’s seaweed—74,083 tonnes against a potential of 9.7 million tonnes. Cultivation is done in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Lakshadweep, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and restricted to two major species.

Challenges are varied—from lack of technical knowhow and post-harvest facilities, to high transport costs, seed shortages, storms, and pests. Yet the rewards are immense. One hectare of *Kappaphycus* can generate up to ₹13.28 lakh per year, offering sustainable livelihoods and empowering women in coastal communities. The Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana is supporting a seaweed “blue growth” push, but beyond policy support the sector needs robust supply chains, better training, and investment in processing to make exports viable.

New agri-input invites scepticism. Farmers are wary of inconsistent results, lack of clear guidance, and high-cost, low-return “miracle” solutions. The government has responded by tightening standards and refusing provisional registration

They can meet growing demand for eco-labelled, traceable agri-exports, and help India build green-export industries

Political inversion in NY

Zohran Mamdani’s ascent to New York’s mayoralty embodies a political inversion—a city’s yearning for ideological clarity amid national drift. As America lurched rightward last year, seeking order through retrenchment, New York’s decisive swing left underscores a wider repudiation of centrist complacency. The social contract of moderation—promising shared

seen diminishing returns. Many oil-rich Gulf countries discovered that using public wealth to fuel consumption rather than diversification left them exposed to shocks when oil prices fell. Only when they began channelling resources into manufacturing, logistics, and knowledge industries did their growth stabilise. The government, at this juncture, must heed that lesson.

To be clear, consumption is vital to economic dynamism; no economy grows with austerity alone. But it must be the result of productivity gains and investment, not their substitute. The government’s instinct to boost demand is understandable, especially in a global slowdown. But without infrastructure investment, industrial policy, and value-chain integration, it is highly unlikely that India’s structural ascent will not be stalled.

The smarter path is not to abandon consumption stimulus but to anchor it in supply-side strategy. GST cuts should be targeted toward sectors where domestic manufacturing can scale: textiles, auto components, renewable energy equipment, and consumer electronics under production-linked incentive schemes. Every rupee of foregone tax should be seen as an investment in domestic value addition.

We have a narrow window of opportunity. Global supply chains are realigning away from China; new technologies are reshaping manufacturing; and its young workforce is poised to drive productivity for decades. Squandering this moment on a consumption sugar high would be a strategic mishap. The test of policy wisdom lies in how much more productive the nation becomes in the years ahead, not in how much Indians consume.

India’s growth story can’t run on shopping carts and 10-minute deliveries. It must run on factories, skills, and ideas—the true engines of progress. Consumption can dazzle for a season, but production endures. A GST cut may thrill the media, but if it doesn’t empower producers it’s like painting a rusting car and calling it new. The true test of policy wisdom isn’t how much India buys, but how much it builds.

If Green Revolution was built with the help of urea and phosphates, India’s next agri-revolution could be sown with seaweed, microbes, and the intelligence of nature

extensions for unproven products as of June. Even among approved products, access and understanding remain uneven. Extension services are stretched, with only one agent for every 800–1,000 farmers. Awareness and dissemination initiatives are crucial for small and marginal farmers to benefit from the biostimulant boom.

Biostimulants fit squarely into India’s vision of sustainable, climate-resilient agriculture. They can meet growing demand for eco-labelled, traceable agri-exports, and help India build green-export industries. With support for research, regulatory streamlining, and targeted incentives, they could become a pillar of our agricultural and trade strategies. Scaling up requires policy resolve, science-based validation, farmer-friendly education, and trust.

India’s challenge is to move beyond pilot projects and bring biostimulants to its 138 million farmers. This requires public-private research tie-ups, infrastructure investment for seaweed and other emerging sectors, and a commitment to quality and monitoring, while fostering innovation and local entrepreneurship.

If Green Revolution was built with the help of urea and phosphates, India’s next agri-revolution could be sown with seaweed, microbes, and the intelligence of nature. The transition is underway, but its success hinges on ensuring every farmer—from Punjab to the Andamans—can trust what goes into the soil and reap the rewards that biostimulant innovation promises.

Views are personal

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Need to improve board transparency

Apropos of “Back to business” (*FE*, November 6), the Tata Trusts’ long tradition of unanimity was broken by the initial vote to oust Mehli Mistry but the later extended the olive branch and put a lid on the controversy. With Mistry out of the way, Noel Tata can place people of his choice to fill vacancies on the Tata Sons board. But

the larger issue of conflict of interest and improving board transparency should not be brushed under the carpet anymore. The Mistry episode highlighted the fact that differing visions can create friction even in the most respected Indian corporate house. Noel Tata will have to ensure that he maintains clarity and purpose, and that institutional stability continues beyond individual roles. —Bal Govind, Noida



CONTRAPUNTO

For the execution of the voyage to the Indies, I did not make use of intelligence, mathematics or maps

— CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Courting Citizens

People are the most important part of governance & justice delivery. Official buildings must reflect that

To CJI Gavai's credit, he said something people in establishment top jobs rarely articulate in India – don't intimidate citizens, make them feel welcome. Talking about the new Bombay high court complex that will be built in Bandra, CJI's central point was, it must be built with restraint. Why, many will ask, used as they are to the in-your-face grandeur that defines seats of power, many of them built by British imperialists who wanted to show natives their place in the scheme of things. CJI comes to this question from the opposite end – a court's architecture must speak to those who seek justice. It should make citizens feel they belong there, not that they are crossing into forbidden territory where they don't matter much. Court buildings should reflect human scale, they should have open access, visible public spaces, and, most important, convey approachability.

The idea that court buildings, as well as all buildings that house various 'high offices of the state' (this is, btw, another term that's encoded with the idea that power is too grand for mere citizens to fully comprehend), must be imposing goes back to times when kings ruled over subjects. Most modern democratic states, despite the rhetoric of citizenship and democracy, fully embraced the idea that official buildings must look forbidding. Power acts as a narcotic, even for those who believe in fairness, accountability and free elections. But if govts exist to serve people, then why should govts work out of buildings that scare people?

The US Supreme Court building may convey permanence and order but its imposing stairs and high porticos likely hinder the everyday litigant's sense of belonging. Contrast with Australia's high court. Its modern brutalist architecture expresses inclusion rather than exclusion. New Zealand's Supreme Court goes further, embedding local culture in its design. This is architecture that says: our justice grows from our soil, our culture. Across Scandinavian countries, court building architecture is simple and inviting. Closer home, Chandigarh's high court reflects a modern democracy through its design. India needs many more such official buildings – functional style, comfortable waiting spaces for citizens, the architecture clearly telling visitors that people are Very Important Persons. Yes, we are a long way from getting there. Most members of our governing classes would find this idea risible. But no less a person than CJI has made this point – and if Bandra's Bombay HC building is built the way he recommended, it would mark a good start.

Garbled Positioning

GPS was always hackable, now the tools to do so are widespread. The result is navigational chaos

For over 40 years, GPS has made flying safer. It was a US military tech until Reagan opened it up for civilian use in 1983, after Soviets shot down Korean Air Lines flight 007 for straying into their territory, killing 269. But now, GPS's days as an essential navigation tool may be numbered. Like public Wi-Fi, it's vulnerable to hackers. As TOI reported Thursday, planes approaching Delhi airport, India's busiest, now regularly experience GPS spoofing – strong misleading signals that override actual GPS satellite signals and may lead a plane astray. The interference starts about 110km from the airport, causing confusion and congestion. On Tuesday night, seven Delhi-bound planes had to be diverted to Jaipur for a resuit.

This has become a global problem, with up to 1,500 incidents reported daily. Most occur over conflict zones in West Asia, Ukraine and Russia, but India's border areas are also affected. In March, govt said 465 spoofing incidents were recorded in Amritsar and Jammu air corridors. Now, it's Delhi. Although spoofing is mostly an annoyance – planes and airports have other means of navigation – it can sometimes have serious, even dangerous, consequences. In one case, an airliner's clocks were reset several years forward, keeping it grounded for weeks. Last Christmas, GPS interference by Russian anti-drone defences allegedly paralysed the navigation system of Azerbaijan Airlines flight 8243, which was then hit by a Russian missile and crashed.

The danger's not limited to air travel. Ships use GPS, and so do you daily – while driving, banking, or making a call. It is the clock of all our complex tech. The good news is that better and secure clocks using atomic and quantum principles are coming. But we've got to be on our guard against spoofing until then.

Balancing act

Two simple exercises that can help us better walk the tightrope of life

Jug Suraiya

I've always known, and others have told me, that I am mentally unbalanced. But of late I've noticed that this lack of balance, of stable equilibrium, is not just mental but also physical. While going up flights of stairs, or a steep incline, doesn't pose a problem for me, it's when I'm coming down steps or a sharp gradient that I need to hold on to something for fear of falling; I feel unbalanced.

As a child, though I repeatedly tried to do so, I never could learn how to ride a bicycle, which my friends and playmates did with ease. I didn't think much of it at the time, busy as I was, doing the things I liked, like swimming. On balance, I didn't pay much heed to my lack of it. But now it's being brought home to me with growing concern. Then recently, a friend, Uppi, introduced me to two simple exercises, which, with daily practice, would help me improve my sense of balance.

I've been doing them now for a couple of weeks and they do seem to help. If you too feel you have a balance problem, you can try them out.

jugularvein Stand upright, facing a firm surface, like a table top, place your feet in line so that the heel of the front foot is touching the toe of the back foot, and maintain this position for 20 seconds without holding onto the table.

Next, stand on one foot with the other foot slightly raised behind you for 20 seconds. Then, with all your weight on one leg, raise the other leg sideways by just a few inches. Repeat 20 times. With practice you'll be able to do these exercises and improve your balance.

Indeed, in a world that more and more is making everyday life a tightrope walk, between rightwing and leftwing ideology, between one credo and an opposing credo, one conviction and an adversarial belief, we all need to pay heed to how to keep our balance. Let's try and learn to do this and maintain our mental equipoise.

True In Bihar, True In India

Yes, dynasticism is a feature of India's elitist political class and politics. But it's subsumed in the larger story: power remains concentrated within narrow social, economic, and caste boundaries

Gilles Verniers

Dynasticism has long been a defining feature of Indian politics. What distinguishes India from most other democracies, however, is not merely the number of dynastic legislators but the extent to which entire political parties function as family-run enterprises. Few countries in the world host so many parties that operate as privately-owned, family-controlled organisations.

Bihar offers an illustrative case. RJD and LJP are both led by political families that have passed leadership roles across generations. In contrast, JDU, BJP and Congress are not family-controlled, yet they still field and elect a significant number of dynastic candidates.

A recent report in the *Indian Express* showed that 28% of members of the outgoing Bihar assembly belong to political families. The phenomenon cuts across party lines, but RJD stands out: 42% of its legislators are dynasts, the highest among all parties.

Political parties tend to nominate dynastic candidates for a simple reason: they often win. Dynastic politicians enjoy name recognition, local stature, access to resources, and influence over administrative networks. Those from historically powerful or landed families continue to draw authority from the social prestige attached to their lineage. Even BJP – which has made anti-dynasticism a key feature of its political rhetoric – routinely fields candidates who belong to established political families.

Dynasticism undermines democratic sensibilities because it is perceived as eroding the principle of equal opportunity in democracy. By privileging birth over merit, it creates an inherited elite in a system that is supposed to be open and competitive. Citizens are formally equal, but dynasticism introduces a de facto hierarchy, where family lineage determines access to political office. This runs counter to the democratic ideal that leadership should be chosen, not inherited.

While dynastic candidates are undoubtedly privileged, their advantage stems more from their embeddedness within broader elite social and economic networks than from their family name alone. Dynastic politicians also tend to belong to the wealthier segments of locally dominant groups, both of which are

deemed factors of winnability, leading to their nomination. There is no equal opportunity for family members of politicians coming from non-dominant groups.

Moreover, lineage does not guarantee success. Dynastic candidates still face competition, voter scrutiny, and electoral defeat. Analyses of dynasticism often overlook those who contest elections and lose, an important reminder that heritage may open doors but does not ensure survival in the rough terrain of Indian electoral politics.

I make a third objection, which argues that while dynasticism does symbolise a form of anti-democratic elitism, it may not be the most adequate measure of

In the outgoing Bihar assembly, there are only 60 MLAs who meet that criteria, out of 243. By my estimate, comparing their list with the list of dynasts established by the *Indian Express* investigation, only 10 of them belong to political families. This demonstrates that while dynastic candidates may have an edge in entering politics, they do not necessarily make long-lasting careers. It also shows that state power lies outside the hands of dynasts who, to be sure, do enjoy some degree of local power, as do other non-dynastic politicians.

This list of long-serving politicians includes party leaders (and their relatives), wealthy individuals embedded in local or state-wide business networks, and some high-profile criminals, such as Pappu Yadav. Notably, 80% of these long-serving politicians (48) belong to upper castes or some dominant backward castes. Among them are only five SC MLAs, three Muslims, and three EBC MLAs.

A similar pattern emerges at the national level. In Lok Sabha, only 144 MPs have been elected more than twice. Of these, roughly half belong to upper or intermediary castes. Among the 31 OBC MPs in this group, 22 hail from dominant backward communities, typically from the elite segments of those groups. Representation among women and marginalised groups remains minimal: only 17 of these MPs are women, and just 26 have been elected from reserved constituencies.

Clearly, dynasticism is a feature of India's elitist political class and politics, but it is not its defining characteristic, nor its most important one. The deeper and more persistent issue is the elitism that underpins political recruitment. From the dominance of local elites in the Congress era to the ascendancy of new elites under BJP regime, political power in India has remained concentrated within narrow social, economic, and caste boundaries.

Dynasticism, then, should be understood as a symptom rather than the cause of elitism in Indian politics. It reflects how privilege reproduces itself within a system that is formally democratic but substantively hierarchical. The persistence of dynastic figures across parties – despite the rhetoric of merit and inclusion – reminds us that India's democracy remains socially narrow, even as it has become electorally vast.

The writer is a researcher at CERl, Sciences Po Paris. Views are personal

Why Mamdani's Win Isn't A Critique Of Capitalism

If NY is a city of immigrants, as he says, the reason is people came there because its many capitalist enterprises created opportunities. No one came to Big Apple looking for socialism. Plus, many of his promises simply don't meet the test of economic logic

Anupam Manur

Psephologists and political scientists are busy working out the determinant causes behind Zohran Mamdani's New York win. While they would disagree on the weights behind these factors, they would attribute the victory to some combination of promises on affordability, building an effective multiracial coalition, anti-establishment appeal, and an opposition to national (Trump) and international (Israel-Gaza) political developments.

A lot of media attention has focused on his campaign and how he has expertly navigated identity politics of the city. But his policy platform is of great interest. He is a self-avowed democratic socialist who has won the mayoral race in the Big Apple – the epitome of capitalist cities in the world, where the New York Stock Exchange and Wall Street find home. It is in this context that some commentators are calling his victory a referendum against free-market capitalism, a framing that is problematic on multiple counts.

Firstly, this is not the first time that New Yorkers have elected someone with such an agenda – Bill de Blasio, who was a mayor of New York from 2014 to 2021, focused on affordable housing, free universal pre-kindergarten education, progressive policing reforms, tenant protection and tackling income inequality, along with worker rights.

While he presents himself as a socialist democrat, Mamdani is not entirely advancing a socialist programme. His progressive platform focused on making the city more affordable through freezing rents, free bus service, universal childcare, increased minimum wages, state-run grocery stores among other ideas. Each one of these will be fraught with challenges for implementation.

● Affordable housing without genuinely increasing supply will lead to massive distortions. Just freezing

rents or some form of rent control will not solve the problem, but allowing private developers to build large buildings (a capitalist move) will be essential to ensure affordable housing.

● Mamdani has also promised free, fast and safe transportation. Unfortunately, this is an impossible dilemma. If the buses and subways are free, the transport companies will not have the required revenues to invest in speed improvements and free buses could also become mobile homeless shelters, which can decrease the safety for passengers. These are difficult trade-offs between price and speed and safety.



● Higher minimum wages, which are promised by Mamdani, will succeed in making items more expensive, as input costs go up.

● Higher corporate taxation, which is another one of Mamdani's campaign targets, can lead to companies shutting down or moving out of New York at the margin, which will reduce the number of jobs created in the city. His proposed tax rates will push New York's corporate tax rates from the 17th highest in the country to the highest, along with New Jersey. Again, public policy is all about trade-offs.

Finally, the framing of Mamdani's win as socialism

vs capitalism is problematic as it conflates capitalism with plutocracy. His campaign and win reflect broad dissatisfaction with the concentration of wealth and political power among elites, which is the defining feature of plutocracy, rather than a wholesale rejection of free-market capitalism itself. Most New Yorkers, including its large immigrant population, benefit from the economic opportunities that the city's relative open markets have provided.

NYC population is roughly 40% immigrants and Mamdani's support was especially strong in precincts with a high proportion of immigrants, though exact data is not available. The turnout of immigrant voters itself increased by about 40% compared to the previous primary. In his victory speech Mamdani said, "New York will remain a city of immigrants, a city built by immigrants, powered by immigrants and as of tonight, led by an immigrant."

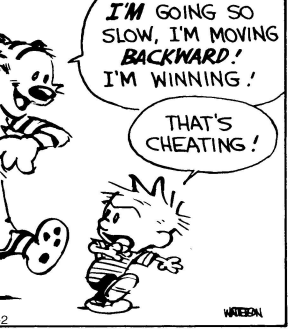
Though there are many reasons for immigration, the search for opportunity is the most common reason and that opportunity is offered by the thriving markets of the Big Apple. Scores of people do not migrate to US and NYC in search of socialism. Many had run away from socialism.

People move to US for the promise of economic advancement enabled by a relatively open labour market, meritocratic business environment and entrepreneurship opportunities, all afforded by the relatively free-market system prevailing in the city. Demands for better living conditions and affordability of basic necessities should not be mistaken as an attack on markets. In fact, the solution might lie in greater private participation in markets, like allowing private builders to increase housing supply.

Thus, while there might be many legitimate reasons for Mamdani's victory, framing this as a triumph over free market capitalism is terribly misguided. The large and thriving immigrant population will not be keen on kicking the ladder that got them to the top.

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Calvin & Hobbes



Brain's Layers: Unpacking Rage And A Quantum Future

Shantanu Nagarkatti

In theatre of the mind, where impulse clashes with intellect, a mid-20th-century theory endures like a stubborn stage set: the Triune Brain. Coined by neuroscientist Paul D MacLean, the term 'Triune Brain' envisions the human brain as an evolutionary penthouse suite, with three strata stacked precariously atop one another: Though modern neuroscience dismisses its tidy hierarchy – revealing a far more interwoven organ – the model thrives in popular psychology, offering a compelling parable for our primal furies. It illuminates why a fleeting slight can escalate into outright violence, and what a radical technological intervention might mean for taming the beast within.

At the foundation lurks the reptilian brain, a vestige of our saurian forebears, hardwired for survival in a world of predators and scarcities. This basal ganglion, as MacLean termed it, governs the raw imperatives: fight or flight, hunger or haste. Confronted by peril – real or imagined, from a snarled traffic jam to a

colleague's barbed remark – it unleashes a torrent of adrenaline and cortisol. The body readies for war: pulse quickens, muscles coil, reason recedes. In this mode, aggression is not malice but machinery, an automatic discharge.

Layered above this subterranean bunker sits the limbic system, the mammalian midbrain, a cauldron of emotion and memory. Here, the reptile's blunt alarm gains nuance – and peril. Fear transmutes into fury; a perceived trespass evokes not just retaliation but resentment, laced with recollections of past wounds. Jealousy simmers into sabotage, grief into grudge. As Daniel Goleman elucidated in *Emotional Intelligence*, this is the realm of 'hijacking', where affective floods overwhelm the circuits of calm. Violence, in this schema, is rarely cold calculation but hot inheritance, the limbic legacy of tribal bonds and betrayals.

Crowning the edifice is the neocortex, humanity's crowning glory: the seat of

language, foresight, and fellow feeling. It murmurs of mediation, of counting to 10 or seeking common ground. Yet in crisis, the lower tiers revolt. Hormonal havoc shorts the synaptic switchboard, consigning the sage to silence. The result? An epidemic of regrettable rages – domestic tempests, boardroom broadsides, even societal spasms. Popular remedies abound – mindfulness to muzzle the reptile, cognitive therapy to temper tides of feeling, habit to hoist the neocortex aloft.

Enter the quantum frontier: Google's Willow chip, unveiled in 2024 and refined through 2025, a wafer-thin marvel – scarcely larger than a chocolate square – that solves riddles in minutes that would daunt supercomputers for septillions of years. Scaled to neural implantation, this hypothetical 'Nexus' prosthesis would nestle in the neocortex, bestowing exaflop acuity: predictive analytics for peril, simulated serenity amid storms.

The boon is tantalising. Augmented, the

upper brain could pre-empt pandemonium – forecasting flare-ups, conjuring countermeasures, downloading doses of detachment. Aggression might atrophy, violence yields to virtual vetoes. Corporate sages already salivate: an executive override for the executive suite.

Yet the Triune spectre looms. The reptilian root runs deep, its reflexes relativistic – faster than qubits can query. A visceral jolt could outpace the implant, hormones hurling the house into havoc while the chip chronicles the coup. Limbic laments might rebel against algorithmic austerity, fostering furtive frustrations or fabricated fears. As in a 'Black Mirror' reverie, enhancement invites estrangement: a savant's shell encasing a snarling soul.

In this neural triptych, progress is provisional. The chip may exalt the attic, but harmony demands holism – bridging basements with breathwork, lest our supercharged selves succumb to the savage below. In an era of exponential minds, the oldest riddle persists: Can we truly outthink our origins?



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touching the toe of the back foot, and maintain this position for 20 seconds without holding onto the table.

Next, stand on one foot with the other foot slightly raised behind you for 20 seconds. Then, with all your weight on one leg, raise the other leg sideways by just a few inches. Repeat 20 times. With practice you'll be able to do these exercises and improve your balance.

Indeed, in a world that more and more is making everyday life a tightrope walk, between rightwing and leftwing ideology, between one credo and an opposing credo, one conviction and an adversarial belief, we all need to pay heed to how to keep our balance. Let's try and learn to do this and maintain our mental equipoise.

Sacredspace



All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it.

Henry D Thoreau

Hapless citizens, helpless Governments

In recent months, a series of fatal incidents across Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma, and Sri Lanka has exposed the fragility of their transportation systems. Overcrowded buses tumbling off narrow mountain roads, trains derailing due to outdated tracks, and air mishaps blamed on technical negligence have become grimly routine



PRASHANT TEWARI

Transportation is the lifeline of any nation, facilitating economic growth, social interaction, and national integration. From bustling highways to vital railway networks and expanding aviation routes, the efficiency and safety of transport systems determine a country's progress and global competitiveness. However, across much of Southeast Asia, this lifeline is fraying. The region has witnessed an alarming rise in man-made transportation accidents on roads, rails, and in the air and water, underscoring deep-rooted systemic failures. Despite repeated warnings from experts and recurring tragedies, safety remains a neglected priority. The real crisis lies not merely in poor infrastructure, but in governance deficits, corruption, and a culture of complacency that have made such disasters almost predictable.

Current Situation

India, with one of the world's largest road networks, records the highest number of road fatalities globally: a tragic distinction that reflects the dire state of safety enforcement. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, poorly maintained public buses and lax driving standards contribute to frequent road tragedies. In Nepal, a combination of treacherous terrain and vehicle overloading continues to claim lives. Even air safety, which demands the highest precision, has been compromised by negligence and inadequate oversight.

What ties these incidents together is not just infrastructural decay but institutional corruption.

Funds earmarked for road repairs, rail modernisation, and aviation safety audits are too often siphoned off by corrupt officials or misused due to poor planning. Substandard materials are used in construction projects, safety inspections are perfunctory or skipped altogether, and regulations exist more on paper than in practice.

At the state level, the rot runs deep. Many regional governments lack the political will or administrative capacity to enforce safety standards. The issuance of driving licences, for instance, is notoriously casual. In several countries, licences can be



HUMAN LIFE, AND INDEED ALL LIVING LIFE, MUST BE TREATED AS SACRED BY THOSE IN POWER

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obtained without proper training or testing, sometimes through bribery or political influence. This results in untrained, reckless drivers operating vehicles on already hazardous roads—a recipe for tragedy.

Moreover, there is little to no culture of periodic vehicle inspection. Buses, trucks, and private vehicles continue to ply despite being mechanically unfit, emitting toxic fumes and posing constant danger to commuters. Corrupt local officials often overlook such violations in exchange for small bribes, perpetuating a cycle where accountability is absent and public safety is compromised.

The consequences of such governance

failures are devastating. Every day, citizens across the region risk their lives merely by commuting.

Road fatalities rob families of their breadwinners; rail and air disasters inflict collective trauma that scars entire communities. The loss is not merely statistical but deeply human: children orphaned, parents grieving, families shattered by entirely preventable tragedies.

The economic cost is equally severe. Repeated accidents deter investment, disrupt trade, and drain public resources on rescue operations and compensation. Yet, beyond economics, the larger tragedy lies in the erosion of public trust.

When citizens realise that their lives are endangered not by fate but by the corruption and indifference of those meant to protect them, faith in institutions collapses.

Call to Action

Governments across Southeast Asia must recognise that transportation safety is not a luxury; it is a fundamental right of every citizen. The first step towards reform lies in tackling corruption head-on.

Transparency in infrastructure spending must be made non-negotiable. Every rupee or taka allocated for road safety, railway upgrades, or aviation oversight must be accounted for and subject to public scrutiny.

FIRST Column

Second, state governments must institutionalise rigorous and periodic inspections of vehicles, tracks, and aircraft. Independent safety commissions—insulated from political influence—should be empowered to enforce compliance and penalise violators.

Third, the process of issuing driving licences must be overhauled. Stringent testing standards, computerised assessments, and continuous driver education should replace the current system that too often rewards bribery and negligence. Road safety education, starting from schools, can help cultivate a culture of responsibility and awareness that endures over generations.

Finally, civil society and the media must play a proactive role in demanding accountability. Each preventable death on the road or in the air must be treated not as an isolated incident, but as evidence of systemic failure that demands redress.

Transportation should connect lives, not end them. The tragic frequency of man-made transportation disasters in Southeast Asia is a stark reminder that progress without integrity is hollow. Unless corruption is rooted out, regulations are enforced, and human life is valued above political expediency, the region will continue to pay a heavy price in blood and broken trust.

Governance, after all, is not measured by how quickly roads are built or airports inaugurated, but by how safely and honestly citizens are allowed to travel upon them.

Human life, and indeed all living life, must be treated as sacred by those in power. There has to be a limit to the suffering a society can endure before its conscience revolts. Yet, indifference has become our silent companion; we mourn briefly for the dead and then move on, believing tragedy belongs to someone else.

But fate has a cruel way of closing distances: it is someone else's loss today, it could be your loved one tomorrow. Those who sit in positions of authority must remember that no shield of privilege can protect them forever from the pain they choose to ignore.

When a life is lost to negligence, it is not just an accident; it is a moral failure of the entire system, a wound that bleeds into the collective soul of a nation.

Rethinking modern technology: When progress defies nature and dharma



ATUL SEHGAL

The technologies of modern times are full of gleam and glitter. They are declared to be the products of painstaking and pathbreaking research. They are touted to be the result of great discoveries of the scientific principles operating in the vast universe and revolutionary inventions based thereon. They are hailed as the harbingers of great beneficial changes in the lives of billions of humans inhabiting this planet Earth.

They are supposedly stated to be instruments of further economic development and growth of the 193 nations holding a population of 8 billion human beings in the world. But what if I were to tell you that most of the so-called modern technologies are crude, cruel, and inferior? What if I were to call them technologies based on incomplete or even, in some cases, incorrect understanding of material nature? What if we were told that almost all modern technologies in various domains of human endeavour are environment-polluting and nature-unfriendly? Furthermore, how will you take the insinuation that most of the above technologies are also devoid of human values?

They are, unfortunately. We have to go to the fundamentals of material nature. We have to go to the original, timeless knowledge base provided in the Vedic scriptures by the omniscient, divine creator of the universe. All humans are His creation, and He handed down to the earliest humans at the dawn of creation, more than 1.96 billion years ago, all knowledge in coded and cryptic form. That fundamental knowledge is embodied in the universal, timeless, and cosmic scriptures called the Vedas.

It stands to reason that the master and creator of the universe knows best how humans created by Him should live and behave—what type of technologies they should develop and use for preserving peace, stability, and health. He provided to humans a set of coded principles or values called Dharma for assiduous adherence by humans. Dharma is the code of righteous living and includes, in its broad ambit, pure, unsullied, true knowledge which even covers all sciences and technologies. Let us see how today's technologies are harsh on all the primordial elements of Mother



Nature called out in Vedic scientific literature—air, earth, fire, water, and ether.

Today's surface transport vehicles are air-polluting and earth (soil)-polluting. These include automobiles and aeroplanes. Many parts and components of these vehicles, including electric batteries, are bio non-degradable after use. All modes of electricity generation—coal or diesel-based thermal, hydropower, nuclear power, and even solar and wind power—are not without well-known deleterious effects on the environment. Solar panels are largely bio non-degradable after a lifespan run of 25 years. Wind power turbines pose hazards to birds.

Chemical process industries are heavily air-polluting. Petroleum and petrochemical industries are both earth-polluting and air-polluting. Oil-digging and extraction activities create big holes below the earth which, apart from upsetting the proportion of natural substances underground, disturb the disposition of the earth's tectonic plates.

The baneful effects of the release of factory pollutants, even after treatment by chemicals, into rivers and seas contaminate natural water bodies, thus adversely affecting aquatic flora and fauna.

Continuous use of chemical fertilisers and genetically modified seeds is leading to erosion of soil fertility and undermining the intrinsic, natural quality and flavour of cereals, fruits, and vegetables.

Ether, the other prime element of Mother Nature, is being heavily defiled by electromagnetic radiation in the form of microwaves emanating from mobile telephony towers and other wireless communication equipment. This important aspect needs more elaboration. The microwaves are not low-frequency waves; they have a high frequency, falling between radio waves and infrared on the electromagnetic spectrum. They are of a frequency higher

than radio waves but lower compared to visible light. Microwaves have frequencies from approximately 300 MHz to 300 GHz and are used for applications like radar, cell phones, and cooking.

The content of microwaves in natural background radiation is being increased by extensive generation of microwave energy for these applications. This is disturbing the natural proportion of microwaves in the ethereal space and hence polluting it.

And global warming is eloquently exhibiting that our fancied technologies are vitiating the subtle primeval element of fire (Agni) of Mother Nature. The most recent technological wonders are computer hardware, computer software, and artificial intelligence.

These are primarily intended for increasing gross economic output or replacement of humans by machines or computing algorithms. This is going to exploit more and more of natural materials, including rare earth metals, and leave post-usage residual substances that are only partially recyclable, and their recycling processes are also environment-degrading.

We now come to human values that are supposed to go with technologies and their usage. A Vedic derivative text—Maha Upanishad—carries the message that the world is one family and all humans are connected through fraternal bonds, being children of the one creator.

This divine message indirectly conveys that humans, cutting across nations and continents, should treat other humans as members of one global family and design institutions, systems, and even technologies and technology-based processes accordingly.

Further, moderation (non-greed), compassion, honesty, and truthfulness are values that must be adhered to in both development and usage of technological implements. They should be conducive to equitable wealth creation and distribution. Simply stated, our technologies should not only be environment-friendly but also aligned with eternally relevant, divine human values. Our scientists, engineers, and, most of all, political leaders should become alive to the above stark truths and take corrective action before it is too late.

Let us not wait to face the powerful, retributive fury of Mother Nature, some of the milder symptoms of which are already being seen in the form of climate change, flooding of cities, cracking of roads, melting of snow peaks, violent landslides, and crumbling hillsides.

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SURYA SARATHI RAY

The Rajasthan government has chalked out a long-term plan to transform the state from a resource-driven economy to a \$4.3 trillion innovation-led powerhouse by 2047. According to the recently unveiled Developed Rajasthan @2047 vision document, the state, currently the seventh-largest economy with a Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of approximately \$197 billion, aims to increase the GSDP to \$350 billion by 2028-29 and, by 2047, reach an ambitious \$4.3 trillion.

The vision document has identified five sectors—manufacturing, renewable energy, mining, tourism, and services—to drive the economy forward. Aware that achieving the target will not be easy and will require a mix of industrial diversification, private investment, technology adoption, and policy reforms, the state has prioritised plans to create jobs, empower small businesses, and modernise industries. It proposes to turn the state into one of India's most investment-friendly destinations.

The vision document emphasises that “economic progress must reach people,” signifying that growth would not be limited to big cities—rural clusters, small towns, and border districts will also become engines of opportunity. Rajasthan's economic blueprint puts technology and sustainability at its core. The government aims to make the state a hub for digital innovation and green manufacturing. From solar energy to hydrogen projects, renewable power will be the backbone of Rajasthan's future economy.

Rajasthan is already India's largest producer of cement, zinc, marble, and solar power. It now wants to move beyond raw production to value-added industries. MSMEs remain central to the plan and will be strengthened with easier financing, skill support, and e-market access. Technology and sustainability will be at the core of the transition.

In its efforts to ensure the ease of doing business, the state government is keen on simplifying clearances, digitising compliance, and reducing red tape.

The vision document predicts that by 2047, Rajasthan's young workforce will be among the most skilled in India. Training centres and industry-linked courses will prepare young people for modern sectors, including robotics, data analytics, clean technology, and digital marketing. Rajasthan is quietly scripting one of India's most remarkable green transformations. Under the

leadership of Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma, the state is positioning itself as the country's renewable energy capital—where solar fields stretch across the horizon and windmills turn the desert breeze into power. Special mention is deserved for the state's clean energy front.

With more than 300 days of sunshine each year and vast stretches of land ideal for clean energy projects, Rajasthan has a natural advantage. A shift is taking place—from being a producer of energy to building a green economy, where factories, farms, and cities all run on sustainable power. Guided by the Viksit Rajasthan @2047 roadmap, the Chief Minister aims to make Rajasthan a hub for solar, wind, and green hydrogen.

The plan focuses on expanding renewable energy capacity, encouraging private investment, and linking clean power to job creation and industrial development. From the blazing sun of the Thar to the corridors of Jaipur, Rajasthan's renewable revolution is gathering pace—turning sunlight into strength and vision into reality. While solar parks are already lighting up homes across Bikaner, Jaisalmer, and Barmer, wind projects are also being scaled up in western districts, with hybrid systems combining both sources to ensure round-the-clock supply. By 2047, more than 70 per cent of the state's electricity is expected to come from renewables. The Bhajan Lal Sharma government is also steering Rajasthan towards the next frontier—green hydrogen.

With pilot projects underway in Jodhpur and Barmer, the state plans to produce clean hydrogen fuel using renewable electricity. Partnerships with private companies and global investors are in motion, positioning Rajasthan as a potential exporter of green fuels in the coming decade. By 2047, Rajasthan envisions itself not just as an energy supplier but as a model of sustainable living. The vision is to combine ecological balance with economic expansion—ensuring that development never comes at the cost of nature. Another defining feature of Sharma's plan is its emphasis on inclusivity.

The renewable energy push is reaching villages, where locals are being trained to manage small solar parks and microgrids. Women's cooperatives are adopting solar-powered equipment for irrigation and food processing. By 2047, Rajasthan aims to be not only a supplier of clean energy but also a model for how development and ecology can coexist. Under Bhajan Lal Sharma's leadership, the desert state is showing that sustainability is not a slogan—it is a strategy for growth.

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