

History in Limbo

The uproar over a former army chief’s unpublished memoir is less about one book and more about how a democracy negotiates the uneasy space between national security, political accountability, and historical truth. When fragments of a still-uncleared manuscript begin shaping parliamentary debate, the real story is not just what is written on those pages, but why those pages have become so sensitive in the first place.

At the heart of the controversy lies the memory of a crisis that still unsettles the public imagination: a high-altitude confrontation that cost lives and altered the strategic climate along a contested border.

Decisions taken ~ or deferred ~ during those weeks inevitably become part of the nation’s strategic folklore. It is precisely this grey zone, where military judgment meets political direction, that memoirs seek to illuminate and governments often prefer to keep shaded.

There is a legitimate argument for caution. Operational details, command procedures, and sensitive assessments cannot be treated like material for casual disclosure. No serious state can allow its security architecture to be reverse-engineered through personal recollections.

Clearance processes exist for a reason, and retired officers are not private citizens in quite the same way as retired teachers or diplomats. The uniform, even when folded away, leaves behind obligations.

Yet, prolonged silence and opaque delays create their own problems. When a manuscript lingers in limbo, it invites speculation, leaks, and selective quotation. Snippets then acquire a political life of their own, detached from context, sharpened into weapons for daily combat in Parliament. What should have been a sober debate about process and precedent becomes another shouting match, with rules and patriotism hurled at each other like slogans.

This is not healthy for civil-military relations or for democratic oversight. A republic does not honour its armed forces by turning every uncomfortable question into an act of disloyalty. Nor does it strengthen national security by pretending that strategic episodes can be sealed off from historical scrutiny forever. The public does not need theatrics; it needs clarity about how decisions are made when the stakes involve lives, territory, and long-term deterrence.

There is also a quieter issue here: who gets to write the first draft of history. If only officially curated versions are allowed to circulate, trust slowly erodes. If, on the other hand, personal accounts are published without restraint, institutions risk being weakened by careless disclosure. The answer lies in a transparent, time-bound, and credible review process ~ one that explains what must be withheld, what can be edited, and what can safely be shared.

Memoirs of soldiers are not gossip columns; they are part of a nation’s strategic memory. They help future leaders understand not just what happened, but how uncertainty, pressure, and ambiguity shape real decisions. Keeping such accounts permanently suspended between secrecy and scandal serves no one.

A confident democracy should be able to protect its security without fearing its own history ~ and should be mature enough to let that history be examined in full, not through leaked lines and political noise.

A Bad Call

The row over Peter Mandelson’s appointment as Britain’s ambassador to the United States has become more than a scandal about a man’s past. It has turned into a stress test of Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s judgement, his authority over the Labour Party, and his instinct for how much risk he can afford to normalise.

At one level, the controversy is brutally simple. Mr Mandelson’s long association with Jeffrey Epstein was not an obscure footnote.

It was a reputational hazard so obvious that it should have triggered the most unforgiving scrutiny. Mr Starmer has said he was misled about the depth of that relationship, while also acknowledging that he knew it continued after Epstein’s conviction. Those two claims sit uneasily together. Leaders are not only responsible for what they are told; they are responsible for what they choose to treat as adequate reassurance.

Vetting, in such cases, is not a ceremonial hurdle. It is where political judgement is supposed to assert itself. The question is not whether procedures were followed, but whether they were followed with the seriousness the situation demanded. When the stakes involve the credibility of the government abroad and trust at home, “we were assured” is not a defence. It is an admission that plausibility was mistaken for proof.

The drama in the House of Commons made the political cost visible. Mr Starmer entered the debate trying to control the terms of disclosure, only to be forced into a climbdown by anger from his own benches.

The fact that senior Labour figures helped drive that reversal matters. This was not just opposition theatre; it was an internal verdict that the Prime Minister had misjudged both the substance of the issue and the mood of the party.

Such moments linger. A prime minister can survive a bad appointment. What is harder to shake is the impression that authority had to be wrestled into the right position rather than exercised there from the start.

When backbenchers sense hesitation or defensiveness at the top, discipline weakens and every subsequent controversy becomes harder to contain.

The ongoing police investigation sets legal limits on what can be said or released, but it does not change the political reckoning. The core issue is not only what Mr Mandelson did, or did not do. It is why Mr Starmer’s government concluded that this appointment was worth the exposure it carried, and why it took a bruising Commons confrontation to reverse course on transparency.

For Labour, the episode arrives at an awkward time, when it wants to project competence and restore standards. Instead, it has offered a reminder that credibility is not built by process alone, and authority is not preserved by managing the optics of retreat. It is built by decisions that look cautious in advance ~ and firm when they turn out to be wrong.

Treading with caution

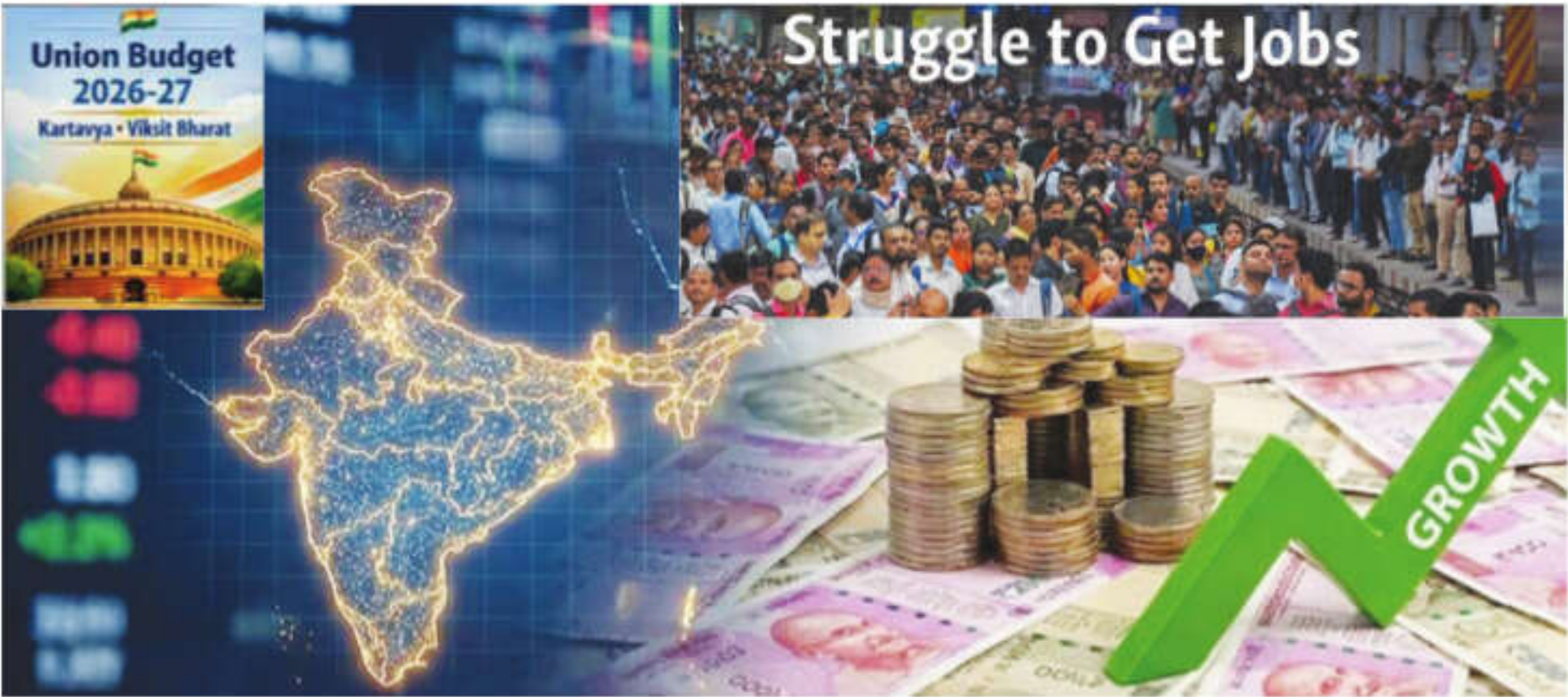
Although capacity building has been highlighted as one of the government’s ‘kartyavas’ to enhance the employability of youth and job seekers, the government’s track record in generating employment requires resurgence. Certain initiatives have been announced for the tourism, health, care giving and service sectors but the time has come to talk about the elephant in the room upfront and to initiate robust strategies towards employment generation

While announcing budgets each fiscal year, India has been experimenting on various growth models, some led by capex, others hoping to be triggered by enhanced domestic consumption. In the budget of 2022-23, the budget rode high on capex pushing growth and this author had discussed the role of investment for growth relying heavily on capital investment in infrastructure, on public sector investments and on the potency of the private sector acting as a catalyst via increased investments (*The Statesman*, 4 April 2022).

The budget of 2025-26, this author had analyzed, was largely a balancing act, wherein the government had placed increased faith in boosting domestic consumption through personal tax relief as well as in generating consumer demand by reducing the indirect tax burden of GST (*The Statesman*, 25 February 2025, and 31 October 2025).

In FY 2025-26, India’s growth strategy relied primarily on private consumption, which was pegged at 7 per cent, primarily boosted by rural demand. With the government front-loading capital expenditure, investment grew at the rate of 7.8 per cent. Manufacturing, mostly based on high value technical products, was more subdued, following at a rate of 7 per cent. But it was the services sector benefiting from growth in infrastructure, expanded warehousing and availability of strategic credit, that rose by 9.1 per cent, spearheading the India growth story.

Given this backdrop, the economy is expected to benefit from a diversified base of domestic consumption, the government-led thrust on capex, a burgeoning service sector and a supporting infrastructure-led ecosystem to provide stable ground for its projected growth in 2026-27. The challenges, however, are humongous. Geopolitical tensions, trade disruptions, global trade protectionism, flight of foreign capital, the sliding rupee that has fallen by over 5 per cent against the US dollar and a threatening tariff regime. There is also the need to confront domestic difficulties on account of weak urban



consumption, tardy private investment, low agricultural productivity, natural disasters, and the adverse fallout of climate change.

In 2026, the government has therefore adopted a cautionary approach thanks to the geopolitical headwinds and has presented a conservative budget based on the three “kartyavas” of sustainable economic growth, capacity-building and sabka sath, sabka vikas. Elaborating further, the Finance Minister has stated that these three pillars will expedite the reform momentum towards Viksit Bharat.

While the first “kartyava” was proposed to be achieved by enhancing productivity and competitiveness and building resilience to volatile global dynamics, the second “kartavya” relies on capacity building to fulfil aspirations and the third “kartavya” is proposed to be achieved by ensuring that every family has access to resources, amenities and opportunities for meaningful participation. The government continues to assert its ongoing thrust on structural reforms, a robust and resilient financial sector and cutting edge technologies including AI applications.

In the Budget of 2026-27, the government is estimated to spend 77 per cent more than the revised estimate of 2025-26, while receipts are projected to be 7.2 per cent higher than the revised estimate of 2025-26, predicting a nominal GDP growth of 10 per cent in 2026-27. Revenue deficit is targeted at 1.5 per cent of GDP, similar to that of 2025-26, while fiscal deficit, reduced from 4.4 per cent of 2025-26, is targeted to be at 4.3 per cent of the GDP.

Outstanding liabilities, which are projected as 55.6 per cent of the GDP, as compared to 56.1 per cent of GDP in 2025-26, are expected to fall to 50 per cent of GDP by March 31. Such fiscal rectitude is a reflection of a cautionary approach of balancing domestic growth while cushioning it from the volatility of the changing global economic order.

Tax revenue has been projected to rise modestly to 8 per cent of GDP, with the rationalization of GST in 2025 leading to a 2.62 per cent decline in the collection as

compared to the previous year. Hence the fiscal deficit will mostly have to be funded out of borrowings which are expected to rise by 3.6 per cent. The Government has also planned to raise gross borrowings which is estimated to rise by a whopping 17.7 per cent as well as to generate 23.4 per cent more in surplus of the RBI and PSUs.

In an attempt to further provide buffers against external headwinds, the Budget has highlighted the mandate of self-reliance, and in this process, a specific set of industries, spread over bio pharma, rare earths, electronics and semiconductors, have been earmarked for policy support with reliance on cutting edge technologies such as application of Artificial Intelligence. Infrastructure, which has been the government’s favourite vehicle for growth, has also been highlighted as a projector for growth by establishing dedicated freight corridors, operationalizing 20 national

waterways for the next five years, seven high speed rail corridors, mega textile parks as well as three chemical parks.

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In the context of taxes, there are no major announcements for the direct tax regime given the previous year’s rejig, except for certain procedural initiatives for updating returns and immunity from penalty in under-reporting income. There is, however,

some news for corporates in that the Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT) will be converted to a final tax with no further credit accumulation after April 1. The new Rule means that the companies will be able to draw on their existing credits and the set off for tax credit will be restricted to 25 per cent of the tax liability in the new regime.

Policy wise, the efforts are mostly confined to forming high level committees to work with state governments on regulations and compliance. Other policy initiatives are for comprehensive review of the banking sector, restructuring the Power Finance and the Rural Electrification Corporations and review of the Foreign Exchange Management Act. To ensure sustained energy transition efforts, a scheme for Carbon Capture Utilization and Storage will be set up. Basic customs duty will be exempt from goods required for nuclear projects, on capital goods required for lithium ion cells as well as critical minerals processing.

Another policy initiative declares that Coconut, Cashew and Coco promotion schemes will be set up and a multilingual AI tool has been proposed to integrate the agri-stack portal and the ICAR on agricultural practices. Towards export promotion, exporters of textile, footwear and leather, who have suffered in the tariff war and trade disruptions will get six extra months to complete exports using duty free inputs.

Additionally, duty exemption benefits for export production have been extended to shoe manufacturers. Exporters have also been allowed as a special measure to sell their products in domestic markets at concessional rates of duty.

This is therefore a reticent, conservative budget with no big bang announcements for investors, consumers and job seekers and contains no enticements for poll-going states. Discretion, they say, is the better part of valour. The budget of 2026-27 has accepted this philosophy in choosing the path of wisdom and caution, a path which the country needs to tread carefully against the changing global order and volatile geopolitical headwinds.

The Daily Star

A tough fiscal test awaits the next government

In the run-up to the national election, political parties in Bangladesh are making an array of commitments to voters, such as job creation for the youth, increased allocation for health and education, support for households, social protection, and price relief. These are attractive pledges at a time when citizens are facing prolonged economic hardship. However, in most cases, these pledges are not accompanied by detailed, fully costed fiscal plans explaining how they will be financed.

What will be the timeline for implementation? How much additional cost will be required? How much revenue will be forgone if various cuts are offered? What are the implications for the budget deficit and government debt? In the absence of detailed proposals within a concrete fiscal framework, these promises remain only broad economic aspirations. The lack of fiscal details is problematic

on several fronts. The elected government will face a mounting challenge to create fiscal space in an economy already stretched to its limits. Due to weak revenue mobilisation, rising public liabilities, and growing contingent obligations, the manoeuvring space has narrowed sharply. But the demands on public funds, from development spending and social protection to debt servicing and institutional reform, are high. How the next government manages this fiscal balancing act will largely determine the country’s economic trajectory in the post-election period.

At the heart of this challenge lies an alarmingly low tax-GDP ratio. Bangladesh’s tax effort has fallen to a historic low, placing it among the lowest performers globally. In FY2025, the tax-GDP ratio was 6.8 percent, down from 7.38 percent

in FY2024. During the first half (July-December) of FY2026, the National Board of Revenue recorded a shortfall of Tk 46,000 crore in revenue collection.

This reflects deep structural weaknesses in the revenue system. For over a decade, revenue targets have been repeatedly missed, undermining budget credibility. This has forced the government to rely on external and domestic borrowing. Therefore, fiscal policy has increasingly become reactive rather than strategic.

Expenditure pressures are set to intensify sharply in the coming years. The government faces a growing list of financial obligations that cannot be postponed further. The Bangladesh Power Development Board needs to clear unpaid bills amounting to more than Tk 20,000 crore, largely owed to power producers. The government has also committed to injecting Tk 20,000 crore into Sammilito Islami Bank as part

of its efforts to stabilise the banking sector. These fiscal burdens are likely to constrain the government’s policy choices.

Another challenge would be implementing the recommendations of the pay commission set up by the interim government. The proposal includes salary increases for government employees by 100 to 142 percent. While there is a legitimate case for adjusting wages after years of high inflation, the fiscal implications are substantial. Implementing these recommendations without adequate preparation could crowd out development expenditures and exacerbate fiscal deficits.

External vulnerabilities compound these domestic pressures. Although the foreign exchange reserves have recovered to \$28.68 billion as of January 29, 2026 from \$20.49 billion on July 31, 2024, they remain insufficient to comfortably meet rising import bills and external debt obligations.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

A balance

Sir, This refers to the article, “Realistic and achievable?” by Dilip Datta and Arpita Saha, published today. From one perspective, the continued reliance of the Government of India on borrowing can be defended as a pragmatic response to developmental and macroeconomic realities. As a growing economy with vast infrastructure needs and social obligations, India cannot depend solely on current revenues to finance long-term investments.

Borrowing, when directed toward capital expenditure such as roads, railways, digital infrastructure, and human capital, can generate future growth and higher revenues, thereby improving debt sustainability over time. In periods of economic slowdown or external shocks, fiscal deficits also play a counter-cyclical role by sustaining demand,

preventing deeper recessions, and protecting vulnerable sections of society. On the other hand, the argument against persistent fiscal and revenue deficits is compelling.

High revenue deficits suggest that borrowed funds are increasingly used for consumption and routine expenditure rather than productive investment. This weakens the quality of fiscal spending and places a long-term burden on public finances. Rising debt levels and interest servicing obligations reduce fiscal space, constrain developmental spending, and increase vulnerability to changes in interest rates and investor sentiment. Over time, excessive borrowing can crowd out private investment and undermine confidence in the government’s ability to manage its finances prudently.

Balancing these two positions, the issue is not borrowing per se but the manner and purpose for which it is used. Borrowing that supports growth-enhancing investment can

be fiscally justifiable, whereas borrowing driven by structural revenue weaknesses and expenditure rigidities poses serious risks. If left unchecked, such imbalances may fuel inflationary pressures and heighten fiscal fragility. Therefore, long-term fiscal sustainability demands reforms aimed at strengthening revenue mobilisation, rationalising subsidies, improving expenditure efficiency, and ensuring that deficits are aligned with productive and inclusive growth objectives.

Yours, etc., Narayanan Kizhumundayur, Thrissur, 6 February.

Well thought-out

Sir, This refers to the news report, “Chandrima tables interim Budget, proposes Rs. 4,06,084.17 crore for 2026-27”, published today in *The Statesman*. The interim Budget, which was tabled in the West Bengal Assembly yesterday is populist and has apparently

been prepared keeping in mind the upcoming State Assembly election. As reported, there will be an increase in the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme amount by Rs. 500 per month from February. There will also be a 4 per cent additional dearness allowance (DA) for state government employees, school and college teachers. Agricultural workers will get Rs. 4,000 annually payable in two installments.

The budgetary allocations are well thought out. I feel that the masterstroke by the Mamata Banerjee government in this year’s interim Budget is the introduction of a scheme for unemployed youths, between the ages 21 and 40, who have passed Madhyamik or equivalent examination. The scheme, called Banglar Yuba Sathi, will give the unemployed youths Rs. 1,500 per month till they get a job. As reported, it will be launched on 15 August.

Yours, etc., Anupam Neogi, Kolkata, 6 February.



Parade for a mature Republic

AMIT K PAUL

The Republic Day parade in India holds a venerable and distinguished tradition. When it started in 1950 one of its main objectives was to solemnly commemorate the inauguration of the Republic and, in the immediate aftermath of Independence, to powerfully project the foundational national concept of unity in diversity. Consequently, the occasion served not merely as a platform to honour the nation's martyrs, recognize acts of bravery, and showcase the military prowess of the nascent Republic, but equally as a celebration of its inherent cultural and regional diversity. To this end, the procession incorporated both the martial parade, comprising disciplined marching contingents from the armed forces and security agencies along with their equipment, and a significant cultural component through the inclusion of thematic tableaux representing various states and performances by artistes and school children

Over the years, the nature of the parade has demonstrably undergone substantial transformation. While positive changes aimed at improvement are welcome, the increasing trend to transform this national celebration into a spectacle designed primarily for mass entertainment is a cause for concern. There is no quarrel on the inclusion of elements that highlight the country's multifarious progress - be it in technological, defense, or cultural spheres in the celebration of the Republic but the question which begs consideration is whether all of it must necessarily be a part of the parade?

Is it appropriate or essential for professional soldiers of the nation's armed forces to engage in complex

acrobatic displays such as balancing precariously on motorcycles or revolving in 'formation' on fabricated contraptions attached to them? While such displays of skills may appeal to a certain section of the audience and be suitable in informal settings they appear profoundly discordant with the solemnity of the Republic Day parade, an event broadcast globally and watched by millions worldwide. Far from inspiring the intended sense of awe and military confidence, such theatrical performances by soldiers regrettably tends to generate widespread social media ridicule and memes, an outcome that is wholly counterproductive and easily avoidable.

Similarly, the necessity of presenting 'despatchers' in the manner that they were or the need of displaying animals utilized by the armed and security forces across the country, marching in stylized formations, is debatable. It is acknowledged that every global military force employs diverse resources and that its personnel possess a wide array of specialized skills but is the display of all these operational elements in the parade necessary?

To maintain the sanctity and dignity of the parade, and simultaneously ensure its relevance to the needs of a Republic that is now over 75 years old, a judicious balance must be struck between the military parade and the cultural components. This necessary segregation could be effectively achieved by detaching all cultural elements from the parade and designating a separate, dedicated national Cultural Celebration of the Republic. This event could be formally scheduled for January 27, hosted at a suitable venue such as the National Stadium and graced by the President, the Prime Minister, and other national dignitaries,

alongside the public. It would provide a fitting and focused platform to showcase the nation's cultural diversity, talent, and skills and can be executed on a much larger and grander scale. Consequently, the state tableaux, cultural performances, and all other non-military displays could take place on this day.

Furthermore, it would allow military personnel involved in these cultural presentations to perform without the constraints of uniform if their participation is necessary. This restructuring would achieve two key objectives: firstly, it would substantially reduce the excessive length of the parade on January 26; and secondly, it would create the vital opportunity to incorporate a greater number of marching contingents and display more sophisticated military equipment, thereby projecting a more substantive and contemporary image of the country's military strength.

The entirety of the Commemoration of the Republic could then formally and traditionally culminate on January 29 with the 'Beating the Retreat' ceremony. Historically, the 'retreat' bugle call was a time-honored military convention, marking the moment when fighting ceased, colours were lowered, and military forces withdrew from the battlefield to return to their respective barracks or stations. The 'Beating the Retreat' ceremony, therefore, signifies the official and ceremonial conclusion of the Republic Day events. It is a tradition which is meticulously performed to precise, martial marching beats, demanding and retaining a solemn, dignified, and disciplined character. It is crucial that the essential nature of this ceremony is not misunderstood or, worse, deliberately diluted.

While the exceptional musical talent and versatility of the armed



forces bands including their ability to flawlessly execute everything from classical compositions to contemporary, even Bollywood-inspired, numbers, is acknowledged, the 'Beating the Retreat' ceremony is fundamentally the wrong occasion for such a display. The very essence of the ceremony is discipline and military rigour. Soldiers march, execute intricate drill formations, and play on instruments to time-honored martial beats and ruffles. It is these rhythms which are the soundtrack of military life, and tunes which remind one of R D Burman or the drumming in of popular numbers like 'O Haseena Zulfon Wali' or 'My Name Is Lakhan.' To introduce such elements risks trivializing the event.

Furthermore, the personnel involved in the ceremony - the drummers and musicians - are military men and women executing a formal drill. They are not intended to perform the role of dholis at a Punjabi wedding, playing tunes to vigorously encourage the audience to join a spontaneous dance, nor are they the percussionists of a garba ceremony. While these forms of vibrant cultural display have their rightful place within the broader national celebrations, they too can be reserved for the Cultural Celebration

of the Republic. There is a genuine risk that in our zeal to project a modern, all-encompassing image of nationalism, we might inadvertently 'tinker' with the basic nature and fundamental purpose of this time-honored ceremony and reduce a military ritual into nothing more than a high-profile, public performance by the bands of the armed forces.

Today, we must introspect and ask ourselves: What should be the desired purpose of our National Commemorations? Do we seek a solemn and powerful Republic Day parade that unequivocally projects the nation's disciplined strengths, military might, and makes us proud of our armed forces and martial traditions along with a cultural display which puts every other ceremony to shame? Or, are we content to allow the function to devolve into a chaotic and contradictory mix of a school's annual day celebration, a cultural fair, a martial parade, and a circus, all awkwardly rolled into a single event which has something for everyone? And while we introspect on this can someone please stop the theatrics undertaken by the BSF at Attari?

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Beyond guides, tourism education needs reform

ALOK SHARMA AND JEET DOGRA

India's tourism sector is entering a pivotal moment. The recently presented Union Budget 2026-27 lays out an ambitious vision - from enhanced connectivity and cultural circuit development to job creation and workforce skilling. Yet, amid these welcome policy signals, one foundational issue remains conspicuously under addressed: the urgent need to modernise tourism education and human capital development to align with the sector's rapid transformation.

The Budget underscored tourism, transport, and skills development as central to national growth, setting the tone for an accelerated push to strengthen India's travel ecosystem. Notable announcements included plans to train 10,000 tourist guides to enhance on-ground visitor experiences and deliver higher service standards at key destinations. It also outlined wide-ranging tourism skilling initiatives, touching upon hospitality education, heritage and nature-based experiences, and digital documentation of cultural sites through a national destination knowledge grid. These reflect a promising policy orientation towards workforce readiness and cultural preservation.

Despite this focus, the structural disconnect between academic outputs and industry demand persists. Tourism today is vastly more complex than traditional hospitality and travel services. It

now includes digital engagement, sustainability governance, crisis management, destination branding, experience design, and community-inclusive development. According to UN Tourism (2023), nearly 75 per cent of emerging tourism jobs will require hybrid competencies that blend technology, sustainability awareness, and strategic thinking - skills rarely cultivated by legacy curricula.

Economically, the potential is immense. The World Travel and Tourism Council's India Economic Impact Report 2024 estimates that tourism contributes over 7 per cent of India's GDP and supports more than 43 million jobs. Yet, employers across the industry report a persistent skills mismatch - a gap between what graduates are trained for and what the workplace demands. This tension undermines service quality, restricts productivity gains, and limits India's capacity to compete on the global tourism stage.

Budget 2026's initiatives hint at the right direction but remain insufficient without systematic educational reform. For example, while training 10,000 guides will improve visitor engagement, India's broader workforce - from destination managers to digital marketing experts - still lacks access to integrated, industry-aligned, and practice-oriented education pathways. High-speed rail corridors and expanded waterways will physically connect destinations, but it is human capability that will ultimately determine whether these linkages

translate into quality tourism experiences.

A core reform priority must be industry-academia integration. Leading tourism economies globally embed apprenticeship models, co-designed curricula, extended field immersion, and destination-linked learning labs into their higher education systems. These models ensure that students graduate with real-world competencies and are ready to contribute effectively from day one.

Institutions such as Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITTM) are already aligned with this vision. Established under the Ministry of Tourism, IITTM serves as a national hub for tourism education, skills development, and applied research, with campuses across different regions. Strengthening its role, and replicating its best practices across state universities and national institutes, will be crucial for creating a continuum of quality tourism education that is both competitive and contextually relevant.

Sustainability also demands a central place in curricula. The OECD Tourism Trends and Policies Report 2023 highlights climate resilience, overtourism mitigation, and ecosystem stewardship as priority issues for global tourism. India's fragile Himalayan regions, congested spiritual circuits, and sensitive coastal ecosystems require tourism professionals trained in carrying-capacity assessment, responsible destination planning,



and community-centric engagement models. Without this expertise, tourism growth could come at the cost of environmental degradation and social discontent.

Digital transformation is another frontier. Technologies such as AI-based visitor analytics, smart destination platforms, immersive digital marketing, and heritage interpretation systems are rapidly shaping traveller decisions. The UN Tourism Digital Transformation Report 2022 emphasises that technological fluency is now essential for destination competitiveness. Incorporating digital tourism and data literacy into core curricula - rather than relegating them to optional electives - is imperative.

Effective reform will require coordinated governance. The Ministry of Tourism, higher education authorities, and the National Skill Development Corporation must collaborate to establish outcome-based education standards aligned with the National Skills Qualification Framework. This alignment can

elevate certification credibility, improve job market signalling, and ensure that graduate competencies match industry expectations.

India now stands at a strategic crossroads. Budget 2026's tourism measures are a positive starting point, but long-term success will depend on whether policy prioritises human capital with the same vigour as physical infrastructure. Roads, rail corridors, and seaplane connectivity can open up destinations - but it is skilled tourism professionals who will create memorable experiences, safeguard sustainability, and convert policy ambitions into lived reality.

Tourism education reform is not a peripheral policy add-on. It is strategic infrastructure. If India aspires to evolve from mass tourism to meaningful value creation globally, investing in intellectual capital must be at the heart of its growth agenda.

(The writers are, respectively, Director and Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Tourism & Travel Management, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India.)

NOW AND AGAIN

WINTER WINDS

SUDIPTA GHOSH

There is a particular kind of madness that overtakes the Indian soul when the temperature drops a few degrees. We call it "winter," though any Scotsman would call it a pleasant spring day. For us, it is a license to turn into absolute gluttons.

I have always maintained that the way to a man's heart - and his undoing - is through his gullet. In winter, this path is paved with peethas, payas, and mountains of sun-soaked vegetables. But the real "elixir of the gods" is not found in a bottle of Chivas; it is that earthen pot of raw date juice, stolen from the heights of a tree while the rest of the world is still snoring. My childhood friend, a fellow conspirator in mischief, would drag me out in the pre-dawn chill. That juice, cold as a mother-in-law's kiss and sweet as forbidden fruit, had an aroma that would make a teetotaler swear off water.

We would spend our afternoons on the rooftop, defying parental edicts on hygiene. There is no joy greater than sitting in the sun, ignoring the dust of a thousand passing vehicles, and devouring a bowl of khichuri with fried eggplant. My mother would scream about "deleterious effects," but what is life without a little stomach-ache?

However, the bill for such gluttony must always be paid. In winter, we avoid water as if it were poison and pile on woollens until we look like overstuffed bolsters. The result? A digestive rebellion. The "gastronomical delights" inevitably give way to "olfactory offences."

I remember the nights spent huddled under a single, gargantuan blanket with a dozen cousins. It was a minefield. Someone would invariably let fly a "silent but violent" one, leading to a chorus of accusations. But you could not hide the "siren." There was always one cousin - there's one in every family - whose bowels played a symphony of different musical notes, forcing him to flee to the icy loo before the sun was up, while the rest of us stayed snug in our "full-throated ease."

The climax of winter flatulence, however, is best experienced in a public bus. Picture it: the windows are jammed shut to keep out the "biting north wind," creating a vacuum of human breath and unwashed wool. Suddenly, the unmistakable, sulphurous stench of a rotten egg fills the cabin. It is a moment of pure, unadulterated democracy - everyone suffers equally.

In my day, we would hold our noses and curse the "unknown delinquent." But once, a wag in the crowd - a man after my own heart - raised his voice above the murmurs. "Why complain about this poor fellow's gas?" he quipped. "Does it stink any worse than the cesspool of our politics?"

A deafening silence followed. The bus load of passengers sat there, pondering the profound connection between a bad stomach and a bad state. And then, as if on cue, a long, whistling siren escaped from somewhere in the back - a gusty, flatulent "Amen" to the truth.

News Items

MOROCCAN WAR TETUAN BOMBARDED BY RIFFS

(*"Times" Special Service.*)
London, Feb.

The Times, Tangier correspondent states that the Riff artillery is again bombarding Tetuan, and has destroyed houses in the Jewish quarter, causing several casualties. The Riffs' guns are situated on the face of a precipice in the mountains opposite and high above the town, making attempts to dislodge them most difficult and costly. The Tetuan batteries and the air force are replying to the shell fire, but immediately each shot is fired the Riffs' guns are withdrawn into the recesses and caves in which they are kept concealed.

WIMBLEDON TENNIS INDIAN TEAM MAY BE SENT

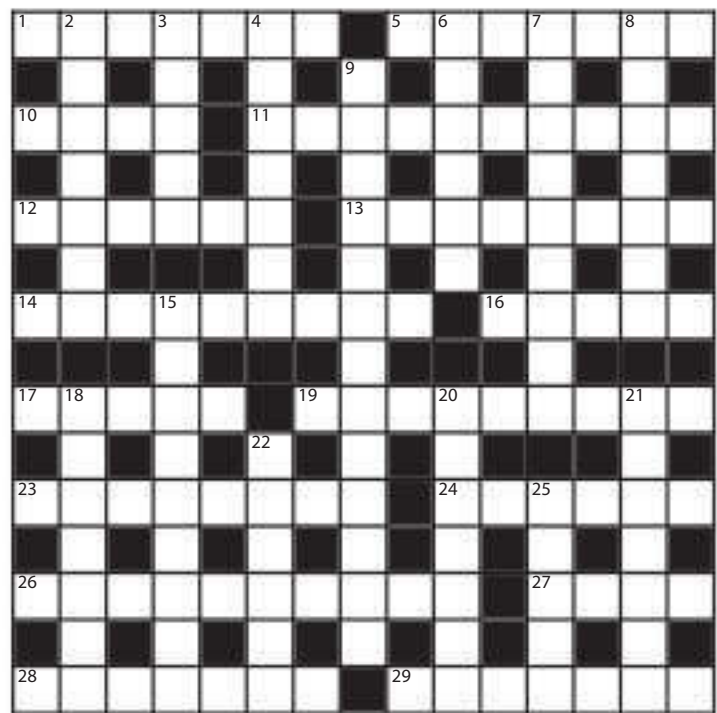
(*From Our Own Reporter.*)
Allahabad, Feb.

I have the authority of Mr. A. C. Gupta, one of the hony, secretaries of the Indian Lawn Tennis Association, for saying it is not unlikely that India will be represented at this year's Davis Cup competition. He is personally in favour of entering a team, even if it means that one or two of the younger players will have to be chosen. As he says it is to younger players that India will have to look to in the future and the experience gained will be very valuable. The present position is that a circular letter has been sent to all the members of the Council asking for their views. A final decision will be reached at the general meeting of the Association to be held in Lahore at the end of February. It is likely that the desire that India should be represented at Wimbledon at this her jubilee year when the best players from all over the world will be competing will probably influence a favourable decision.

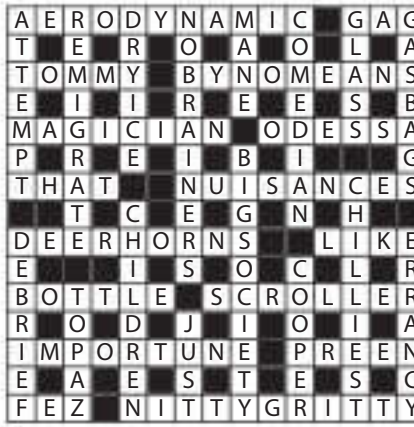
CAMPBELL HOSPITAL VISIT BY H. E. LORD LYTTON

His Excellency the Governor of Ben-gal accompanied by the Countess of Lytton visited the Campbell Hospital yesterday morning. The members of the Hospital Staff were presented to His Excellency, who with the Countess of Lytton inspected the various wards of the hospital accompanied by the Superintendent, Major W. L. Harnett, I.M.S.

Crossword | No. 293369



Last Sunday's Solution



ACROSS

1 Gymnast needs this money in the bank (7)

5 Decline what every player strives for (7)

10 Part of the Scillies, eastern half redeveloped (4)

11 Court investigation leader rejected for debate (2,8)

12 Useless way to carry goods I imported (2,4)

13 Ultimately fit and lithe, trained in Air Corps (8)

14 Boxer's cunning with rowers (9)

16 Some rubbing out needed in this game (5)

17 Comparatively adept sailor with large margins of error (5)

19 Button container that needs refilling regularly (6,3)

23 Old couple in Split, dancing perhaps (8)

24 Team in taxi missing reserves (6)

26 A blend of chats and spiel? (5,5)

27 A good service was one of her strengths (4)

28 Robin's mate defending small member of 24 before change in terminology (7)

29 Son joins keener member of 24 at the back (7)

DOWN

2 London 24 seen primarily in 3 on left (7)

3 Area near ground, or the ground itself (5)

4 Letter opposing drink (7)

6 Part of course inspires old character to develop choppers (6)

7 Location of member of 24's old theatre cutting (2,3,4)

8 Stealing possible contents of mound in Suffolk? (7)

9 Police aim to do this sport (6,7)

15 Ring users with radical compounds, about 50 (9)

18 A bit worried about old US lawman's CV? (7)

20 Display of slippers rocks head office in Cornwall? (3,4)

21 It's mean to state how old someone is (7)

22 Crossing line, a bear raised game (6)

25 Albatross beats this bird of prey (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



Carlos Alcaraz holds the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup at the Australian Open tennis championship, in Melbourne, Australia, earlier this week

Is Carlos Alcaraz really brilliant or just ‘lucky’?

RINGSIDE
VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

CARLOS ALCARAZ DENIED Novak Djokovic a record-breaking 25th Grand Slam singles title at the Australian Open, making history of his own by becoming the youngest man to win all four tennis Majors. The young Spaniard is clearly the best player of his generation. His close rival Jannik Sinner trails him in Grand Slam count and head-to-head meetings. He is a metronome in comparison, not quite possessing Alcaraz's x-factor and ability to produce something out of the blue at a big moment. However, something that Toni Nadal said in the aftermath of the events in Melbourne has made news. Toni — the uncle, guide, former coach and mentor of Rafael Nadal, the holder of 22 Grand Slam singles titles — felt Alcaraz was 'lucky' that "his opponents are of a lower calibre."

The 64-year-old was quick to add that it was not an attempt to belittle his younger compatriot, but an honest assessment.

"He [Alcaraz] has exceptional physical attributes, excellent technical skill," Toni said, but contrasted the present era with the one gone by, when his nephew was a member of the proverbial 'Big Three' in men's tennis.

"Before, when you went out to play against [Juan Martin] Del Potro, [Andy] Murray, or [Stan] Wawrinka, you knew you were going to suffer and that the match was going to be tough. If they had a great day, they could beat you," he told Spanish radio station Onda Cero.

However, during that era, only Murray and Wawrinka managed to win three Grand Slams each. Many talented players failed to get over the triple threat.

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga was one of the players to have fallen short as his career coincided with those of Djokovic, Nadal and Roger Federer. He defeated Nadal in the semifinals of the 2008 Australian Open, but fell to Djokovic in the title clash — the Serb's first Grand Slam title. At the 2010 Australian Open, he defeated Djokovic at the last-eight stage, only to fall to a rampant Federer in the next round. The Frenchman got the better of Federer in the quarterfinals of the 2011, but then came second-best to Djokovic. The moral of the story is: If one (of the Big Three) doesn't get you, another one invariably will. Tsonga, who retired in 2022, is well placed to compare what is often referred to as the 'golden era in men's tennis' and the current disposition.

"He [Alcaraz] is definitely a complete (player). Really. But is he stronger than these players (the Big 3) in any aspect? Physically? Mentally? We really don't have a clue," Tsonga was quoted as saying by Univers Tennis.

"I would have liked to see Alcaraz win Roland Garros, defeating Del Potro in the third round, Wawrinka fourth, Djokovic quarterfinal, Nadal semifinal, and Federer final."

Reflecting on the current landscape, the winner of 18 ATP singles titles — including two Masters 1000 events — said, "Today, they [Sinner and Alcaraz] are dominating like hell. But they are (the) only two in the field."

Looking back with fondness

But one can only beat the player on the other side of the net. Grand Slam tournaments, more often than not, bring the cream to the top at the business end. And there's a hint of nostalgia in claiming that things are not as good

as they used to be.

Federer won his first cluster of Majors — before Nadal and Djokovic hit their prime — defeating players such as Mark Philippoussis, Fernando Gonzalez and Marcos Baghdatis, who never won a Grand Slam title. The likes of Nikolay Davidenko and David Nalbandian were two of the others who regularly used to make the last-four stage. Will it be fair to say that Federer was 'lucky' at that time? Had it not been for the Swiss maestro, these players would have been Grand Slam champions today.

Federer also beat Marat Safin, Lleyton Hewitt, Andy Roddick and Andre Agassi — all Major champions — during that time, and all of them conceded that they fell to a man who was playing tennis at another level.

At the turn of the century, Agassi and Pete Sampras were the reigning deities in tennis — the latter was considered the gold standard and finished with 14 Grand Slam titles, a mark that was considered, at that stage, tough to breach. Agassi had completed the career Grand Slam — something that hadn't been achieved by a male player for 30 years.

But the two Americans now seem out of GOAT (Greatest of all Time) debates, with the choice narrowed down to the Big Three.

If one goes a decade further back, it was Ivan Lendl, Stefan Edberg and Boris Becker who dominated the game. Even then there were some who longed for an earlier era. The 1990 Wimbledon final was a see-saw encounter with Edberg winning the first two sets, Becker the next two, before the Swede came through in the fifth. But it was considered a poor comparison to the final a decade earlier when Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe featured in the final, considered the greatest match till the one between Federer and Nadal in 2008 at SW19.

Past was better

The lament prevalent from the mid-1980s to the whole of 1990s was that tennis had become a power game, finesse and rallies had gone out, and the serve had become too much of a dominant factor.

In fact, the 1970s and early 80s played a big role in the worldwide popularity of tennis, when players were known not just for the skills they displayed, but for the characters they were. The Ice Borg, the volatile McEnroe, and the combative Jimmy Connors caught the public's imagination. Borg may not feature in many GOAT debates these days, but winning six French Open titles and five at Wimbledon — back-to-back on three occasions is something that hasn't been achieved since.

If the number of Majors is the only criterion for greatness, one has to consider that most top players from America and Europe used to often give the Australian Open a miss due to the long distance, lower prestige and it being scheduled around Christmas. Also, for a long period, three of the four Slams were played on grass, implying that the current generation have had to conquer different surfaces and conditions.

Comparing generations may be a favourite pastime for fans, but no one can do any better than beating the player one is confronted with. Winning a Grand Slam tournament invariably involves defeating seven players in best-of-five sets matches over a fortnight, during which conditions may change and one may not feel or play the best at all times.

Alcaraz, at 22 years of age, is already almost a third of his way to Djokovic's Grand Slam tally, and although there are no guarantees in top-level sport, his achievement should get its due credit.

ACROSS THE
AISLE

P Chidambaram

My charitable view is that the finance minister and the government do not care for the Economic Survey. The uncharitable view is they think we are inhabiting a planet that is not part of the solar system

AFTER BUDGET 2026-27 was presented on a Sunday, government spokespersons, editorial writers, commentators and journalists used the word 'cautious' and the phrase 'don't rock the boat' to describe the Budget. I suppose they followed an American colloquialism 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'.

Multiple challenges

The Economic Survey 2025-26 (ES) had identified the challenges facing the Indian economy. Among them are:

- The tariff war unleashed by President Trump. Although he announced that the tariff on Indian goods will be reduced from 50% to 18%, it appears that the reduction is conditional upon India 'dropping' the tariff on American goods to zero, removing non-tariff barriers, buying \$500 billion of American goods, and other conditions that India may find difficult to fulfill.
- Inflows of foreign direct investment "remain below their potential". Foreign portfolio investors are pulling out. Indian promoters, although cash-rich, are reluctant to invest. The consequence is that Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) is stuck at about 30% of GDP.
- The unsatisfactory *nominal* GDP growth: the methodology followed by the NSO and the doubts on the national accounts have cast a shadow on the *real* GDP growth rates. The nominal GDP is a better indicator. It has grown by 12%, 9.8% and 8% in the years 2023-24, 2024-25 and 2025-26 respectively. Growth is *losing* momentum.

INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

India's top export

The much-delayed Indo-US trade deal was finally announced last week. But the hyped clout of the Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) in the USA appears to have played little part in reaching the nebulous agreement. In fact, 2025 saw the unraveling of the smug assumption that India's most valuable export underpinning a special relationship with the USA are the PIOs, for whom Prime Minister Modi's rally at Madison Square Garden in 2014 and the Howdy Modi show of strength in Texas were organised. PIOs were once seen as America's model immigrants, with a mean household income even higher than the US average and a low crime rate. Indian Americans have headed corporate giants and donated millions to the Trump campaign. They have made a name for themselves in professions ranging from academia to technology, banking and medicine. They have even arrived in US politics, traditionally the preserve of those with well established roots in the country.



Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and other officials on Budget day

Survey useful, Budget lazy

- The grave unemployment situation. Youth unemployment rate was 15% in June 2025. Only 21.7% of the workforce are in regular, salaried employment. Lakhs of youth are unemployed. The numbers reveal a shift towards self-employment.
- No country has become a middle-income country without becoming a manufacturing power. India's manufacturing sector has contributed barely 15-16% of GDP in the last 10 years. Make in India, PLI and other schemes have failed to create jobs
- Fiscal consolidation is agonisingly slow: the fiscal deficit will move from 4.4% in 2025-26 to 4.3 % in 2026-27 and the revenue deficit will remain at 1.5% at this rate, it will take 12 years or more to reach the FRBM targets, and we will pay a heavy price.
- The tax gamble of 2025-26 has failed massively. The budget arithmetic was saved by the RBI which gave a generous dividend of approximately ₹304,000 crore in 2025-26. In the previous two years, it had given ₹210,874 crore and ₹268,590 crore. The highest RBI dividend received during the UPA government (2004-2014) was ₹52,679 crore in 2013-14.

FM ignored CEA

In Chapter 1 of the ES, the CEA advised "*caution*", but not pessimism". That tone continued throughout the report. In another chapter he advocated a *credible* glide-path of fiscal consolidation. The only place in which the CEA advocated a bold approach is on urban-

isation where he advised "stronger metropolitan governance, predictable enforcement, and a credible civic compact that aligns incentives between citizens and the state. Cities will also need to be empowered with better finances..."

The Finance Minister's response to her principal adviser was non-intellectual and evasive. In her 85-minute speech, she did not comment on the state of the Indian economy or President Trump's two-pronged assault on the world economy through tariffs and coercive transactional deals. Nor did she comment on the global churn or China's economic expansion or any other matter that informed persons would have expected in the Budget speech. My charitable view is that the Finance Minister and the government do not care for the economic survey. The uncharitable view is they think we are inhabiting a planet that is not part of the solar system.

I was shocked that the Finance Minister did not think it necessary to spell out the government's policies that will address concerns about slowing growth rate, poverty and growing inequality, stagnant investment, widespread unemployment, neglect of welfare, depreciation of the rupee, and the huge gaps between the demand and supply of infrastructure and essential services.

Failed accountant's test

Even by common accounting standards, the Finance Minister's record of financial management was poor. There were cruel expenditure cuts in the budget allocations in 2025-26 to ministries

of Rural Development, Urban Development, Education, Health and many others. Under Mr Shivraj Singh Chouhan's watch, agriculture and Rural Development suffered a cut of ₹60,052 crore. Jal Jeevan mission was allocated ₹67,000 crore but in the revised estimate it was found that only ₹17,000 crore had been spent. Capital expenditure fell from 3.2% of GDP in 2024-25 to 3.1% in 2025-26. Defence expenditure fell to a low of 1.6% of GDP (*11.4% of total expenditure*) and threatens to fall to 1.5% of GDP (*11.1% of total expenditure*) in 2026-27.

Knowledgeable experts have sharply criticised the Budget speech. Dr Surjit Bhalla ridiculed the self-congratulation about the 'fourth largest economy'. Dr C Rangarajan called out the slow pace of fiscal consolidation. Dr Ashok Gulati deplored the neglect of large parts of the farm sector. Professor Rohit Lamba (Cornell University) mocked the Budget as fit for an economy in search of a plan.

The Finance Minister threw schemes, programmes, missions, institutes, initiatives, Funds, Committees, etc at her listeners. I counted at least 24. they will soon find out that no money was allocated for many of these announcements!

The Budget was an exercise in intellectual laziness.

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an Indo-American trade deal. Vance, a product of the MAGA movement, is vulnerable because of his Hindu spouse and he even admitted that he hoped to persuade her to convert. Significantly, Usha did not even meet her relatives or visit her parents' home state during the Vances' brief trip to India. Dhillion in the Justice Department is known for her tough line in prosecuting student demonstrators on campuses and cracking down on universities' hiring practices. Kash Patel has enforced Trump's agenda vigorously, with special attention to MAGA's pet projects. S Paul Kapur contributed in formulating tough immigration-related policies.

When Modi visited the USA for a Quad summit in 2024, Democrat candidate Harris's office could not find an available time slot for meeting the Indian Prime Minister. Mamdani during his mayoral campaign declared that Modi was unwelcome in the USA. He even claimed flippantly that he doubted that after the 2002 riots there were any Muslims left in Gujarat. (In fact, the percentage population of Gujarati Muslims remains around eight per cent and their economic and education indicators are far higher than the average Indian Muslim.)

Recently, Nalin Haley, son of PIO Nikki Haley, a former US ambassador to the UN, declared on social media that India was run by a "cheap government" which sends "cheap labour" to the United States.



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

What India can expect from the US trade deal

The biggest gain is in terms of sentiment. The deal can serve as an insurance against any backtracking by the Trump administration, while keeping alive the prospects of further lowering of US tariffs on Indian exports. It can also help India become a part of US-led global value chains

Less than a week after the announcement of a trade deal in principle, India and the US have issued a joint statement that gives more details about what exactly has been agreed upon. Some details will require more clarification, and some items have been left for future negotiations. But here are the key takeaways from Saturday's announcements.

What has India given for the deal to happen?

Russian oil purchases are still a big no: 25% of the existing 50% US tariffs on India were on account of the latter's Russian oil purchase. It was both unfair and inconsistent. The former because the Joe Biden administration that preceded the current Donald Trump administration in the US was fine with India buying Russian crude to prevent an oil market disruption and the latter because bigger buyers of Russian oil such as China were not slapped with this tariff. India always had the option of declaring an end to Russian oil purchases and getting tariffs back to 25% from 50%. An executive

order signed by Trump on Saturday and issued with the joint statement makes it clear that the 25% additional tariffs are only being revoked because "India has committed to stop directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, has represented that it will purchase United States energy products from the United States, and has recently committed to a framework with the United States to expand defense cooperation over the next 10 years".

The statement further says that the US "shall monitor whether India resumes directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil" and any such finding can lead to "additional action", including reimposition of the 25% tariff. To be sure, India has maintained that its oil purchases are driven by "market considerations" rather than being wedded to an unmovable resolve to buy from Russia and these have anyway fallen sharply recently. JP Morgan's commodities team estimates that India's Russian oil purchases fell from 34% of total purchases in November to 20% in January. But Trump has prevailed on this front.

There is no blanket opening up of agriculture, but it is not insignificant either: India is not going to remove its tariff barriers in a blanket manner as far as farm and dairy products are concerned. These have always been considered a key livelihood concern rather than just a trade related matter by the Indian side in almost all trade negotiations. The joint statement mentions a "wide range" of agricultural products such as "dried distillers' grains (DDGs), red sorghum for animal feed, tree nuts, fresh and processed fruit, soybean oil, wine and spirits". These are not categories that will

potentially have a large impact on Indian farming, although some targeted headwinds might exist. Commitments such as in soybean, could also interfere with India's counter-cyclical policies to deal with domestic food inflation. To be sure, agriculture is not completely off the hook either. "India also agrees to address long-standing non-tariff barriers to the trade in US food and agricultural products," the joint statement says.

The US is targeting significantly higher overall exports to India than even a year ago: "India intends to purchase \$500 billion of US energy products, aircraft and aircraft parts, precious metals, technology products, and coking coal over the next five years," the joint statement says. This is significantly more promising from the US's perspective compared to the joint statement issued by Donald Trump and Narendra Modi after the latter's US visit on February 13, 2025, which had set a "bold new goal for bilateral trade — 'Mission 500' — aiming to more than double total bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030". To put the \$500 billion number in perspective, it equals India's total merchandise imports from the US between 2008-09 and 2024-25.

These points clearly indicate that the US has extracted significant concessions and commitments from India for the trade deal to materialise. This raises the question: What has India got in return?

The biggest win is in terms of sentiment: India stood to lose a lot beyond the 50% tariffs imposed by the Trump administration. The potential pain points included higher tariffs on some exempted exports such as (but not limited to) iPhones, harmful impact on trade in services, a hit to foreign portfolio investment — both in the equity and cur-



There is a promise that tariffs can go lower than 18% in the course of negotiations. This gives agency to India to try and improve the terms of the deal and not be wedded to it even if Trump kills it.

rency markets — and most importantly, haemorrhaging economic sentiment in the wake of the deal being delayed and overall Indo-US relations going south. The deal, notwithstanding the concessions India has had to make, will help on this front.

An insurance in case Trump reneges on the deal and the possibility of lower tariffs: "In the event of any changes to the agreed upon tariffs of either country, the United States and India agree that the other country may modify its commitments," the joint statement says. This would buy India some insurance from Trump reneging on the deal like he has, or threatened to do, with many countries.

Similarly, there is a promise that tariffs can go lower than 18% in the course of negotiations. This gives agency to India to try and improve the terms of the deal and not be wedded to it even if Trump kills it.

Lower tariffs than some competitors in labour-intensive sectors: 18% tariffs are bad compared to a world that has no tariffs. But what is more important is the fact that India is not the only country facing US tariffs now. It is here that 18% tariffs give India some comparative advantage over other compet-

ing countries in key export markets in the US. While calculating a weighted tariff rate requires more information than the joint statement gives, a JP Morgan note by Sajid Chinoy issued on February 5 suggests that India will have marginally lower tariffs than key competitors such as China, Vietnam and Bangladesh in sectors such as textiles, footwear, etc.

While a couple of percentage points of advantage in tariffs will not guarantee India finally breaks ground in labour-intensive exports, it can definitely be described as a necessary even if not a sufficient condition for such success. India is at least in the game even if it has to work hard for winning it. Higher tariffs would have killed India's chances.

India also stands to gain in potentially harvesting a larger part of US-led global value chain (GVC) opportunities: The US decision to remove earlier tariffs on India's aircraft component and automobile component exports, as well as the promise of "negotiated outcomes with respect to generic pharmaceuticals and ingredients" could give Indian industries a boost beyond the labour-intensive ones.

These gains will allow India to push the envelope on increasing its footprint in US-led GVCs with potential spillover effects for technological learnings.

These specific points aside, what is the larger takeaway from the trade deal for India?

Three things can be listed. One, Indo-US relations have now crossed the Rubicon of what analysts used to call "strategic altruism" on part of the US. Trump's US will insist on favours in return for giving them. Two, India's response to the trade deal should move beyond the politically correct dogma of reiterating things such as farmers' interests and do a hard-headed analysis of the larger costs in terms of energy security and defence spending, which is where the US might have extracted the largest concessions. And three, the deal, in its present form or what it takes later, will only be as good as India can make it through an overhaul of its domestic economy to align capital's priorities in line with pursuing the larger national interest and not short-term (often speculative) gains.

The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



The Shakespeare in our everyday speech

We all know who William Shakespeare was. Many of you have read some of his plays but very few are likely to be familiar with all 38. But how many people are aware of his incredible contribution to the English language? I doubt if we've really thought about this. But it's almost incalculable. By one count, he's contributed 1,700 words. You'll find that figure repeated in most studies of his impact on English.

For example, consider this and I bet you didn't know Shakespeare was responsible for these everyday words. Alligator (*Romeo and Juliet*); bedroom (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*); critic (*Love's Labour's Lost*); downstairs (*Henry IV Part I*); fashionable (*Troilus and Cressida*); gossip (*The Comedy of Errors*); lonely (*Coriolanus*); manager (*Love's Labour's Lost*); obscene (*Love's Labour's Lost*); puppy dog (*King John*); traditional (*Richard III*); jaded (*Henry VI Part 2*); eyeball (*Henry VI Part*

I). Inaudible (*All's Well That Ends Well*); questioning (*As You Like It*); skim milk (*Henry IV Part I*); kissing (*Love's Labour's Lost*); hurry (*The Comedy of Errors*); premeditated (*Henry IV Part I*); nervy (*Coriolanus*); rant (*Hamlet*).

But Shakespeare's genius wasn't limited to creating new words. He also artfully played around with many of the words that existed in his time. Nouns were turned into verbs, verbs into adjectives, and prefixes and suffixes were added to alter the meaning of others. So, for example, to elbow (*King Lear*), to champion (*King Lear*), to cow (*Henry V*), to stomach (*Henry V*) and to brain (*Cymbeline*) were coined by him. Uncomfortable, from *Romeo and Juliet*, is an example of a word he crafted by adding up to an older word. Its meaning is at once obvious. Today, we use these words all the time. Now you'll know their literary antecedence.

However, what's particularly striking

are the phrases he's contributed to the English language and which we use in our everyday speech. For instance, did you know that the following were the Bard's gift to the way we speak? I certainly did not.

We have seen better days (*As You Like It*); too much of a good thing (*As You Like It*); neither rhyme nor reason (*The Comedy of Errors*); I have not slept one wink (*Cymbeline*); cruel to be kind (*Hamlet*); own flesh and blood (*Hamlet*); A dish fit for the Gods (*Julius Caesar*); what's done is done (*Macbeth*); the be-all and the end-all (*Macbeth*); green-eyed monster (*Othello*); all that glitters isn't gold (*Merchant of Venice*); the world is my oyster (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*); break the ice (*Taming of the Shrew*); wild-geese chase (*Romeo and Juliet*); a tower of strength (*Richard III*); short shrift (*Richard III*); Catch a cold (*Cymbeline*); laughing stock (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*); for goodness' sake (*Henry VIII*); in my heart of hearts (*Hamlet*); wear my heart upon my sleeve (*Othello*); foregone conclusion (*Othello*).

If you think I have given you a lot of examples, the truth is I could have given you many, many more. Here are some that sound positively contemporaneous but they are, in fact, Shakespearean. Heart of gold; in a pickle; one fell swoop; melted into thin air; kill with kindness; eat me out of house and home; all the world's a stage; fool's paradise; not budge an inch; the game is up; lie low; naked truth, a sorry sight; method in the madness; seen better days; good riddance; love is blind; too

SHAKESPEARE'S IMPACT ON ENGLISH IS SO VAST AND WIDE THAT ALL OF US END UP QUOTING HIM, PROBABLY SEVERAL TIMES A DAY, WITHOUT REALISING IT. THIS ALSO MEANS THAT THE SIMPLEST OF THINGS WE SAY COULD ACTUALLY HAVE A RICH AND VAUNTED PAST

much of a good thing; the clothes make the man; brave new world.

There is one inescapable conclusion and I doubt if you'll disagree with it. Shakespeare's impact on English is so vast and wide that all of us end up quoting him, probably several times a day, without realising it. This also means that the simplest of things we say could actually have a rich and vaunted past.

Thank you, Shakespeare! Many of us are intimidated by your language, but when we realise that the words and phrases we daily use are derived from your plays perhaps that might change. That's why seeing them on stage is so different to studying them in school.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



Giving voice to sanitation advocacy through radio

The recent passing of Mark Tully, the legendary BBC broadcaster, brought into focus the importance of radio as a communication vehicle in a vast and diverse country like India. It is for this reason Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation (SMART)'s work on a project by the WASH-CCES team, supported by UNICEF, Delhi, that works across four states with 25 community radio stations to reinforce Swachh Bharat objectives becomes so relevant. An example from Jhabua reflects the power of community radio in remote areas.

When 25-year-old Santi Damor moved to Mohanpura, a village just seven km away from Jhabua town, after marriage, she expected rural life to be different. Born into the Bhil tribal community, she had studied up to college and she carried with her habits and ideas shaped by that education. But, in Mohanpura, she was struck by one reality above all: Despite having a toilet, no one in her new home used it. It had become a store-room, while the family used the fields for toilet purposes.

This unsettled her deeply. For Santi, the daily walk outside not only felt unsafe and uncomfortable, but also was a violation of her privacy. Yet, she also knew that changing her in-laws' age-old habits would not be easy. So, at first, she stayed silent. But she was not about to accept things as they were.

The turning point came when a team from Radio Tanya visited the village. The team met with the local women's self-help group (SHG), of which Santi was a new member. It spoke in plain, direct words about hygiene, women's dignity, and why toilets matter. Through narrowcasting, it explained how families could prevent 36 diseases. Sitting with other women from her community, Santi felt her hesitation turn into resolve. In the SHG that she had joined months after marriage, she found companionship with other women, many of whom also felt

uneasy about sanitation but had never voiced it. The message hit home for Santi. She remembered her children's constant illnesses in the past, the embarrassment of walking into the fields, and the toilet in her house that was gathering dust. That evening, she decided she could not wait any longer.

She told her husband firmly that the toilet must be repaired and used or else she would leave for her parents' home. Using both reason and threat, she was able to persuade him. Together, they cleared the stored items, fixed the broken pipes, and scrubbed the space until it was usable again. Within two days, the toilet was repaired. The entire family began using it. Her action did not stop at her doorstep.

When Santi shared her story at the next SHG meeting, eight families followed her lead. Toilets that had been ignored for years were cleaned and put back into use. Women spoke openly about how much safer they felt, and children were relieved that they no longer had to walk long distances. Soon after, another programme from Radio Tanya on waste management inspired the SHG to act again. Together, the women discussed the hazards of dumping garbage in open spaces. Under Santi's leadership, the SHG cleaned an old pit near the village school for waste collection. Plans were made to turn the collected waste into compost for farming, linking sanitation directly to livelihoods.

Today, sanitation in Mohanpura is closely tied to Santi's voice. The women's group now keeps hygiene on the agenda in every meeting and has resolved to monitor households regularly. This transformation brought about by the power of community radio has been replicated in other parts of the country to tackle various issues, including domestic violence. Today, Santi and the other women know that when new issues arise, they can seek help from the radio team.

The views expressed are personal

Seeing places anew, as a traveller of means

Did you visit a country as a tourist long ago and ticked it off your bucket list? Visit it again, because now it will be a different country. Not because it has changed or developed, but your new income strata will unlock a different experience at the same destination. It suddenly becomes a different city.

I visited Europe in my 20s, due to a concept invented by package-tour companies called the honeymoon — an extension of the usual punching-above-your-weight Olympics called the wedding festivities, where people take high-interest personal loans to feed their relatives three varieties of pasta at a Noida banquet hall. Evidently, I couldn't really afford the Euro trip, but I went with the same irrationality with which we booked a poolside wedding venue to please *foofajjis* (husbands of paternal aunts). Hence, I booked the cheapest possible return-flight tickets and hotel rooms. My partner was luckily from the same school of thought, and thus we kickedstarted our hunger games. My post-MBA salary hadn't seen many appraisal winters. So, we had to optimise.

An eight-hour flight later, we landed at the Schiphol International Airport (Amsterdam). As we waited in the serpentine immigration queue, we saw a couple with a baby skip the mile-long line and directly land at an immigration counter.

I looked at my wife, and she looked at me, and in that silent moment, we decided we love kids. An immigration queue is one of the best arguments against contraception.

Nevertheless, once we were out, we were hungry, but instead of heading to a cafe for our breakfast, we went to a supermarket. Cold panini sandwiches and free wifi — all of our subsequent tourism was chasing one of the two. Even if, by some chance, we sat down at a cafe table, we would read the menu as if it was printed in Arabic — left to right. Always the price first.

That's a great experience in itself. Adversity is the best ingredient of love.

But once you have graduated from that level, Paris will look and feel much different when you don't faint if you have to buy bottled water, if you can afford a taxi, and don't have to drag your luggage to the subway station that is a kilometre away. Taking a taxi is like entering a tin-house of a local you can interact with.

Public transport is great, but sometimes it's cold — you are a ghost in an alien city, occupying a seat, barely anyone acknowledging your presence. In a taxi, you are a guest, often welcomed by broken English and stories. You feel the road, its speedbumps and potholes. You can peek inside the vehicles parallel to you at traffic red lights. You are suddenly breath-



Paris will look and feel very different when you don't faint buying bottled water, and can afford a taxi and don't have to drag your luggage to the subway.

ing in sync with the city. Singapore looks different from the top of the Marina Bay Sands than when you look at it from the waterfront.

And that's true not just for travel, but also for books, movies, and experiences as well. The same art will show a new facet at a different life stage. Your lens keeps changing. People often go, "No doubt, it's a classic. But I have already seen this movie 10 years ago; let's watch something else."

It's a rookie mistake. Watch it again. Read that book again. Just becoming a parent resets your world-view. I realised after I became a parent, I could appreciate the emotions of an on-screen father more intimately, thereby accessing those emotional chords of the movie I was so far oblivious to. I could appreciate the tribulations of the Rajesh Khanna movie, *Anand*, after I saw someone in my family succumb to cancer at a young age. George Orwell's 1984 gets more relevant every

passing year of this de-globalised world.

The issue with socialist economies such as ours is that it turns us into hoarders. We are always in accumulation mode, not just hoarding money and resources, but also memories and experiences. A five-day itinerary of a typical Indian tourist might have 20 "things to cover", which exhausts them so much that they crave for another holiday just to recover from the previous. We just want to increase the count of the books we have read, movies we have seen, and fridge magnets from different countries on our fridge door. This race leaves little time to reflect. Never shy away from re-reading, re-watching, or just re-experiencing. Hence, it's okay if you stick two fridge magnets from the same country on your refrigerator.

Abhishek Asthana is a tech and media entrepreneur, and tweets as @gabbbarsingh. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

A maverick of Indian media

This is with reference to "Mark Tully: A child of India, voice of Indians" by Karan Thapar (February 1). Mark Tully's passing marks the end of an era in Indian journalism. He represented patience, depth and clarity. His credibility stemmed not from power or ideology, but from intellectual honesty and empathy.

Sanjay Chopra

Reform laws pertaining to acid attacks

This is with reference to "Corroding justice: Gaps in punishing acid violence" by Namita Bhandare (February 1). The laws pertaining to acid attacks should be made stringent, as they leave the victims with dismantled lives. The justice granted should include their financial stability to become self-reliant.

Abhilasha Gupta

II

The judicial lethargy and societal ostracism faced by acid attack survivors expose systemic apathy. Faster trials, stringent sentencing, regulated acid sales, and rehabilitation alone can restore justice and dignity.

Aditya Shekhar

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

From Itsy-Bitsy Polka Bikini to All Very '50s Sanskari: Rise of the (Western) Tradwife

The young are choosing being a 'traditional wife' as a way of life, romanticising it, in some kind of Edenic return to the kitchen garden, providing many a new way of making them feel seen

SUNDAY ROAST



RESHOM MAJUMDAR

London: There was a time when my mother covered her head with her pallu in the presence of her in-laws. She also had an MA degree and went to work. This was in the early '70s. I often wondered how she managed this with her Sadhana-like hairdo. To me, she was the traditional wife, maintaining home and hearth. The non-traditional part: going to work.

As years passed, the pallu slipped from her head, not as rebellion, but as if the very air in the city had changed. And by

the time I arrived at my in-laws some 25 years later, this wasn't even part of the stream of consciousness.

Women like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan didn't hate domestic work. They opposed the idea that being a housewife was the *only* or *proper* role for a woman. They critiqued the '50s-'60s 'feminine mystique,' in which women were told their lives should revolve around husband and children, and were stigmatised if they wanted careers or independence. Much before their time, Virginia Woolf had written *A Room of One's Own* in 1929.

So, imagine my slightly horrified amusement when 'tradwife' appeared to be one of the most googled terms, and a lifestyle choice. The young are choosing this as a way of life, romanticising it, in some kind of Edenic return to the kitchen garden.

An amalgam of the words 'traditional' and 'wife,' the tradwife tribe is made up of women who promote traditional gender roles, often on social media. They wear the kitchen and home manager



YOU CAME A LONG WAY, BABY, AND NOW YOU'RE BACK

role like a badge of honour, and their Instafeeds look straight out of a '50s American magazine, or a very beautifully kept Amish farm.

One remembers Phyllis Schlafly in the Reagan era for opposing the '70s Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), immortalised by Cate Blanchett in 2020 miniseries *Mrs America*. So, an antithesis to women's lib by women is not new.

Tradwife aesthetics have been associ-

ated with US far-right politics, particularly alt-right and alt-lite movements, advocating for gender roles in which the man holds social and political power, and women, for the most part, are confined to the home as wives and mothers. Researchers have identified differing political views among tradwives, ranging from conservatism to right-wing extremism.

Sometime in the 2020s, digital creators

Is this a way of repackaging nostalgia? Or a smart relaunch of a way of life?

like Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman, famous as *Ballerina Farm*, projected a vision of the near-perfect traditional mother — some on farms, while others in more urban settings. A woman-and-home magazine lifestyle cutting across nostalgic decades.

The idea of a tradwife has always been present in the West. It became a distinct subculture as many women started feeling unseen by the fourth wave of feminism, which mainly centres around awareness of sexual assault. The tradwife is all about glorifying the role of the mother. It has been done before, politically, including during the Third Reich.

#Tradwife is a social media phenomenon. Videos performing domestic labour, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, have gone viral. At the crux of it is the feeling that tradwife content made many people feel seen. Alena Kate Pettitt wrote about the woman at

home feeling undervalued. She rose to fame during a 2020 BBC interview where she expressed her desire to serve her husband. However, not much later, Pettitt would go on to admit that the concept went on to 'become its own monster'.

And yet, there's an irony. Many tradwife internet celebrities earn an income outside the home. In addition to running their influencer businesses on social media, they sell books, baked goods, clothing lines, and secure sponsorships.

Is this, then, a way of merely repackaging nostalgia? Is the trend regressive? Or a smart relaunch of a way of life? I would be tempted to live in acceptance of people's choices if the demand for tradwives were not on the rise, from men influenced by years of toxic masculinity, wallowing in Andrew Tate rhetoric.

Choice needs to be defended. But regression should be avoided at all costs. And may the wise know the difference.

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

18% Till I Die – Or, At Least Till Tonight

Will Crystal Meth Don stick to his tariff number? Your guess is as good as his

It's likely that by the time you're reading this, you won't be reading this at all. Instead, in this very space, you could be enjoying a well-done column served with mushroom sauce by my jolly good fellow columnist Ruchir Joshi on how good the chateaubriand of Olympia Bar and Restaurant in Calcutta once was.

But with the laws of quantum physics not supplanting Newton's when dealing with the medium of print, it may well be that the column you have indeed ended up reading has become as redundant as buying Russian oil on the cheap. With Crystal Meth Don around, you never know.

Last night, just after I had refilled my drinking horn with another round of Saturday night mead (down to 10% duty since the EU-India FTA), Don may have, unbeknownst to me, changed his mind about the contents of the 'framework' for an interim agreement regarding reciprocal and mutually beneficial trade' that was released by the White House early Saturday. By today morning, he may have jacked up the 18% tariff he brought down from 50% earlier — just because he can. But I'm hoping he went for another scenario that allows you to read this column without feeling cheated.

'Hey Jacuzzi!' — as he is said to call US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, their Piyush Goyal — 'I know the Indians fell for it... bringing tariffs down from 50% to 18%. Let's now do what you lawyers do best, Jacuzzi!'

'Get the framework' finalised pronto?'

'Heck no, Jac — stall! That's what you lawyers do best. Keep that 'framework' for an interim trade agreement' running, without anyone putting too much importance on the 'framework' and 'interim' bits.'

Last week, Modi had confirmed that the two amigos had talked, while Piyush Goel (our Jamieson Greer) confirmed — in a press conference, no less — that our



HE LIES IN THE DETAILS

Modi is bigger than their Modi. Glad that '18%' still holds — or having jumped off a parapet if it hasn't by Sunday morning — there is one thing that I have been looking around the proverbial room ever since Crystal Meth Don made his late Monday night announcement: how no one here has noticed that '18%' is still higher than 'below 10%'.

So why is everyone (except Naxals) going gaga about a deal that sounds suspiciously inspired by Bryan Adams' '18 Till I Die'? My imaginary Trump in his conversation to Jacuzzi is right to think of himself as genius salesman. It's the old Diwali Dhamaka trick: bump up the price of a petticoat that costs ₹150 to ₹500 around August. Then hike it up again to ₹1,000 around September. Then, around mid-October, a month before Diwali, bring the price down to ₹350. The headlines the next day: 'India Forces Petticoat Prices Down!'

It's the oldest gag in the book: make things worse, then make them just a bit better, and everyone will go bat-shit crazy with joy! It's straight out of the old Soviet toolkit: lower expectations, heighten the joy.

Before Trump's initial 25% tariff hike in August 2025, the average US customs duty on most Indian imports was around 2.8-3%, averaging well under 10% overall. So, Monday's 18% — and removal by presidential fiat of 25% Russian oil purchase 'tax' he had imposed by presidential fiat — seems a win-win: the US keeps tariffs on Indian imported goods higher than what it was a year ago, and India gets to tell itself it's got a great deal. Like I do when I buy a third plate of kababs — just because there's an offer of ₹50 off if you spend ₹200 more — that no one ends up having.

As a chap who doesn't want his newspaper column to be caught off-guard, I hope that the 'framework' for an interim trade agreement' holds, at least till tonight, and Crystal Meth Don didn't think last night at 2.45 a.m. IST that '18%' doesn't quite have the same Caesarian ring to it as '10%' or '60%'. Or, that Gol hasn't sent out a stinker late tonight about tariffs on US 'red sorghum for animal feed' imported by India being removed in the 'framework' for an interim trade agreement'. Please don't watch this space.

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Who Will Nobel This White House Fat Cat?

Top on the list of jobs for the chief of stuff — all kinds of stuff — of Mar-a-Lagoland's prez is getting a gong, any gong, for him

JUGULAR VEIN



JUG SURAIYA

At an urgently summoned press briefing, a White House spokesperson announced the appointment of a chief of *stuff* for the president. When asked by an inquisitive reporter as to why a chief of *stuff* was required when there was already a perfectly serviceable chief of staff to do presidential bidding, the spokesperson, who was, in fact, the recently appointed chief of *stuff*, replied that while the chief of staff was required to attend to all the routine matters of the White House, the chief of *stuff* would oversee all the non-routine stuff that the White House was increasingly getting up to.

On the top of the list of all the non-routine stuff was the prez's agenda of Nobelesse oblige.

When the same inquisitive reporter — 'The guy's a pain in the butt! Make sure he can't sneak into these briefings again!' — pointed out that the correct phrase was 'noblesse oblige,' the chief of *stuff* clarified that Nobelesse oblige was part of the stuff the prez did, and which involved the Nobel Prize.

For example, though the Nobel Prize for Peace Committee sitting in Norway — separate from the committee

for the other Nobels that sits in Sweden — in an obvious fit of senile dementia, had overlooked the prez for the peace prize and given it away to some Third World would-be illegal migrant called Machado, ignoring the fact that the prez had brokered peace in no less than eight conflicts — 'Yeah, count 'em, *eight* wars!' — the prez had in a spirit of Nobelesse oblige graciously accepted the prize from the original recipient, like a baton being passed on in a relay race.

However, to teach the Norwegian Nobel Committee a lesson for his having to get a second-hand prize, the prez wanted to take over Greenland — which he thought was Iceland, even though Greenland had nothing to do with Norway, but was an autonomous part of Denmark, which the prez seemed to confuse with Norway.

Nobelesse worked in mysterious ways its oblige to perform, the chief of *stuff* said, adding that the prez was throwing his hat in the ring for the No-

bel Prize for Economics, having engineered the so-called 'Mother of all deals,' the Indo-EU FTA of which he claimed to be the 'DADDY,' at the risk of making himself liable to a paternity suit.

The presidential Nobelesse was also up for obliging the Prize for Literature, having created the literary genre of MAGAcal Realism based on the impenetrable 'covfefe,' the enigma of which scholastic ingenuity had been at its wit's end to decipher. The prez had also been mooted the Nobel Chemistry Prize, based on the secret formula for the gel that gave his hair that signature Day-Glo Orangeade hue, but had got sidetracked by the Nobel Prize for Physiques, as his physique was in darn good shape.

Before the inquisitive reporter could jump in — 'Goddam pest!' — the chief of *stuff* hurriedly said that when he was told that the Nobel Prize was for physics, whatever *that* was, and not for physics, the prez said that he'd raise the matter with the Nobel committee to change that to 'physiques,' or else he would take over Sweden, or maybe Finland — or what about Botswana? — just to spite the Norwegians.

In the meantime, the chief of *stuff* announced that the prez had generously accepted the special award being presented to him by the International Animal Lovers Society for his recorded and well-documented — indeed, some might say overly well-documented — fondness for Felix Catus, the scientific term for what in colloquial usage is referred to as 'pussy'.

The chief of stuff clarified that Nobelesse oblige was part of the stuff the prez did

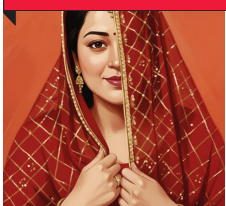


I'LL TAKE THAT, THANK YOU VERY MUCH

KYUNKI POSH SPICE BHI KABHI BAHU THI

The Beckhams vs Beckham war is giving Indian MIL sagas a run for their money

SEN & SENSIBILITY



RAJYASREE SEN

'Stop right now, thank you very much!' When I used to sing this line from the song, 'Stop' by the all-girl, neo-feminist group Spice Girls in the hoary '90s, I never imagined that some 25 years later, Posh Spice a.k.a. Victoria Beckham née Adams would be echoing those very words while transforming into the stereotypical mother-in-law, a role often pinned on the matriarch in Indian families.

Our media is flooded with inheritance dramas — from the Oberois to a saas suing her bahu in the Sunjay Kapur saga, bahu in the 'evil' daughter-in-law is after her money and has brainwashed her son. The Beckham feud could have come straight out of an Indian corporate family saga paneer. Turns out, they're People Like Us.

Brooklyn Beckham, eldest child of David and Victoria Beckham, and his wife, Nicola Peltz, are reportedly very upset with Mummy and Daddy Beckham. While Brooklyn doesn't do much beyond posting videos of himself cooking, and previously cosplaying as a photogra-

pher, Nicola is the daughter of an American billionaire who famously has a \$1 mn monthly allowance.

Over the last few months, though, we have learnt that there are no happy families in the world of the rich either. How? By the information that Brooklyn and his wife Nicola do not communicate with his parents. Why? No one knew. Until a couple of weeks back. We discovered that it's a case of 'Kyunki Posh Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi', after Brooklyn released a public statement explaining why his parents should only contact him through lawyers.

His public statement is full of pathos. He claims that his 'parents have been trying endlessly to ruin [his] relationship since before my wedding,' his mum didn't make Nicola's wedding dress till the last moment, his mother called him 'evil,' and 'my family told me that Nicola was 'not blood' and 'not family,' his 'wife has been consistently disrespected by my family,' wasn't invited to family engagements, and Posh refused to support Nicola's campaign to save displaced dogs during the LA fires.

Even my cold heart was stirred while reading this. David has since said that chil-

dren make mistakes, Victoria has kept, well, mum. Meanwhile, Brooklyn has posted a reel of his spaghetti bolognese. But he got the pasta shape wrong. Poor dear.

Most Indians will read the statement and wonder why Brooklyn's so upset. After all, this is kahaani ghar ghar ki. Par for the desi marriage course. Posh has a lot to learn from Indian mothers-in-law. They are far more subtle. They will serve their son the larger piece of fish. Cook only the food he prefers. Buy gifts for their son, but not their bahu. Set up a puja room in the son's bedroom, and every morning enter the son's bedroom at 6 am to pray. Offer to keep the bahu's jewellery in the locker and never give her the locker key. Definitely not include her in the will. Being an evil mum-in-law is an art form. After all, har saas bhi kabhi bahu thi, and one must do unto others as was done unto them.

Most Indian ma-jis must be reading the news and empathising with Victoria. Because raja beta Brooklyn has been brainwashed by his evil wife and her calculating family. Although in this case, the motives aren't clear, because the Peltzes are far richer than the Beckhams. My heart breaks more for Nicola's family, who have a son-in-law who doesn't work, has no real skillset to speak of, and who had to sign a prenup.

As per Indian tradition, Victoria should ideally throw Nicola out of the house. But the problem is that it's Nicola's house that Brooklyn lives in. The only solution is to either win her over by starting a Beckham-Peltz Save the Dogs Campaign. Or swing the other way and go the whole hog and cut Brooklyn out of the will.

I, for one, am highly entertained, relieved that there's something to read other than the actions of the Orange Man in the High Castle, and enjoying the celebrity sequel to *The Fall of the House of Windsor*, which starred Harry and Meghan in Season 1.

This could be straight out of an Indian corporate family saga paneer



BEND IT LIKE TULSI



retain more water in tissue and alter body measurements.

I have so many questions, but first... WHY?

Do you know what ski jumping is? In this, athletes ski down a steep ramp to build speed before launching themselves into the air. Competitions are judged on both distance and style. The sport places a premium on aerodynamics, making equipment regulations strict.

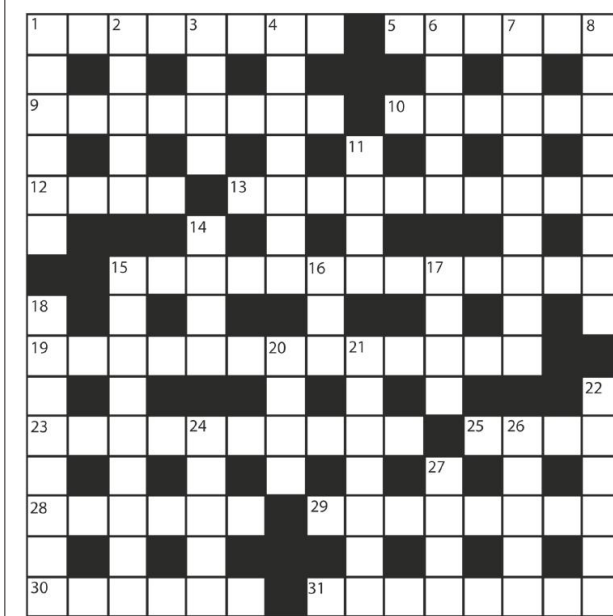
What about the said enhancements? Well, even a cm or two matters. So, jumpers are required to undergo full-body scans to ensure their suits are skintight and within strict rules. Any excess material is prohibited. Because looser suits can provide additional lift during flight. Bild claimed that some athletes tried this to secure a more forgiving suit fit.

But how much of an advantage are we talking about?

A slightly larger or looser suit could function like a sail, catching more air and allowing jumpers to fly further. Text: Team Sunday ET

ET Sunday Crossword

0154



ACROSS

- 1 Drain of energy, work distastefully, losing deals (8)
- 2 Clubs help Australia to withdraw many stars here (6)
- 3 Sanction a cricket ground burying odd bits of paper (8)
- 4 Basket-maker's extraordinary affair (6)
- 5 Thought about twice (4)
- 6 Country demonstrates fresh enthusiasm also (3, 7)
- 7 Hurtful charge embroils a court in dodgy dealings (5, 8)

DOWN

- 1 Main church contains
- 2 Republican rifle (6)
- 3 Higher university course meets resistance (5)
- 4 Attempt to besiege old (very old) Greek city (4)
- 5 Violent outburst an indicator of problem at seat (5, 2)
- 6 Part of tomahawk somewhere in Nebraska (5)
- 7 Price increase in trendy apartment I own (not wife) (9)
- 8 Boat supplier's name secured by creditor (8)
- 9 Emperor's final letter found in vehicle (4)
- 10 Wine container artist dropped — here? (4)
- 11 Notices new editor cut in 30 (9)
- 12 Standard role short of time (3)
- 13 Smart child, essentially nice (4)
- 14 Shut motorway with yellow line, starting at midnight tonight (8)
- 15 Players drink on motorway (4)
- 16 Natural response when e.g. Tate's heads demoted? (7)
- 17 Barristers are given them — see them on line (6)
- 18 Glossy publication that is circulating picture (5)
- 19 Try to get a lift in east Humber (5)
- 20 Shout 'Get right away from right!' (4)

- 21 Bawl
- 22 Briefs
- 23 Image
- 24 Thrumb
- 25 Tumb
- 26 Image
- 27 Thrumb
- 28 Briefs
- 29 Image
- 30 Thrumb
- 31 Image

Image: AI

Savita Bhabhi to bot: How AI erotica is rewriting desi desire

Fluent in Hinglish and steeped in hyperlocal charm, chatty virtual girlfriends are thriving in digital grey zones

Mohua.Das@timesofindia.com

Once upon a time, there was one Savita Bhabhi. A cheeky, sari-clad adult comic book aunty who arrived in India in the late 2000s, scandalised the internet and pulled over a million fans. She earned the dubious distinction of being the country's first porn star, without ever being real. Today, the bhabhi has a new avatar. She has shed her hand-drawn lines for hyper-real skin, voice and local slang. And now, she doesn't just pose. She talks. And does as told.

Social media feeds and niche websites are now teeming with her successors — desi virtual girlfriends and 'AI wives', neighbour aunts and office colleagues, shy brides and dominant older women — all available on demand, and some endlessly customisable. They speak in Hinglish and invite users into stories that don't end on the page. Because now the scene spills into a chat window where the user can step inside.

HOMELY BUT SEXY

Take Nandini AI Bhabhi, whose YouTube shorts promise "vibrant and relatable daily life" cooking home meals, and strolling through markets. Her appeal is homely. And unmistakably sexual. That, more than any algorithm, is what keeps the views ticking into thousands.

Scroll through Instagram long enough, and you see the pattern. Hyper-sexualised AI women appear in everyday Indian scenes — cooking, sweeping, teaching, standing in crowded canteens or in buses where they are often groped by men.

For many young Indians, the scenarios hit close to home in ways foreign fantasies rarely do. "For a young adult in Nagpur, Imphal or Surat who is queer, Dalit, disabled, or simply terrified of parents finding out they are even curious about sex, this can feel like a small but powerful crack in the wall," says Apurupa Vatsalya, gender justice lawyer-turned-sexuality educator. What matters, she adds, is access to stories that "sound like their lives" and in their languages.

Some desi AI erotica platforms let users build DIY companions from scratch where one can choose ethnicity, skin tone, hair-

style, even the scene itself. One moment you're chatting with Anita, a greying sustainable designer who invites you for a "walk" while posing nude behind a book, the next with Bella, an "obedient super-model" in black lace. Captions nudge viewers to "play" or "chat" with them.

It's discreet and personalised. No app. Sometimes no login. That discretion is also being quickly monetised. Beyond free teasers, creators offer paid subscriptions to private channels for exclusive images, videos or personalised interactions. Some also offer paid crash courses on prompts to coax sexier results.

Maya-Leela on Instagram, with 95,000-odd followers, looks like another AI siren drifting through the feed in blouseless saris and intimate angles that tease without tipping into the explicit. The person behind her doesn't fit the stereotype of a shadowy porn peddler. He's a male architect in Hyderabad who began tinkering with AI tools two years ago and insists this was never meant to be about sex. "The original project was an experiment in building a coherent digital persona," he says. "The idea was to create an artificial identity that could generate its own posts, engage audiences, and eventually market itself."

Getting noticed was the hard part. "So, erotic content became a deliberate strategy and fastest way to test whether a persona feels alive to people rather than abstract or gimmicky."

Hyper-realism, he says, demands a multi-stage grind. Concepts, multiple AI tools, prompt iterations, anatomy fixes, and frame-by-frame consistency. "A significant section of the audience doesn't realise she's AI generated," says Maya's creator. That uncertainty — is she real, is she not — keeps people watching. "Algorithms reward watch time and replays, and subtle erotic

tension performs extremely well on those metrics," he adds.

GREY ZONE WITH SHARP EDGES

Even the big players are inching in. OpenAI's move last Oct to "treat adult users like adults" opened the door to erotic text in ChatGPT for verified users, while visuals remain blocked. In India, that permission runs headlong into IT rules on obscenity, though AI-generated sexual content slips past moral and legal alarms.

Vatsalya points out that AI erotica appears to fill gaps left by India's sex education. In theory, AI characters could offer consent-centred alternatives and desires rarely acknowledged in mainstream porn. "For asexual or disabled people, AI erotica can offer space to explore desire without performance pressure."

But the promise comes with limits. "The model still learns from a messy internet," warns Vatsalya, and can reproduce "violent, racist and misogynist porn tropes". AI erotica, she says, can "fill the gap in representation but also pour more poison into the well if not ethically filtered".

Scale only amplifies that danger: A survey by Japan's The Yomiuri Shimbun, using Similarweb data, found India ranked second globally, with 24.57 million visits to sexually explicit deepfake websites between Dec 2023 and Nov 2024. In Jan this year, a Bengaluru techie reportedly lost Rs 1.5 lakh after an 'AI girlfriend' interaction escalated into sextortion. Meanwhile, nudify bots continue to circulate.

Vatsalya worries that AI erotica could become a shortcut course in intimacy. "If machines simulate infinite creativity and instant arousal, real partners might begin to feel disappointing because they cannot perform at the level of something that never gets tired or confused." Still, she doesn't dismiss the medium outright. Used consciously, she sees AI erotica as a "rehearsal space" where nobody's forcing it and a partner listens.

In the end, AI erotica may be less about sex than about what Vatsalya calls the "loneliness economy, with machines stepping in where real communities feel unsafe or exhausting". But what it eventually becomes might depend less on the prompts, and more on the hands writing it.

“If machines simulate infinite creativity and instant arousal, real partners might begin to feel disappointing because they cannot perform at the level of something that never gets tired or confused

Apurupa Vatsalya, GENDER JUSTICE LAWYER-TURNED-SEXUALITY EDUCATOR



Budgets, billionaires and the art of a bargain

8am I have an investment meeting this afternoon, and I find myself standing in front of the cupboard as though it is about to conduct the meeting on my behalf. My first choice is an orange jumpsuit that, in the wrong light, makes me resemble a prison inmate from an American series. I put it back immediately. My usual uniform of jeans and a denim shirt feels inadequate. Steve Jobs could wear the same black turtleneck every day and be called a genius. If a woman repeats clothes, she is frumpy. I try on a Gucci monogrammed blazer. I look less like an entrepreneur and more like I need a baggage tag. If I am going to resemble a suitcase, at least the initials should be mine. Though Ginkle Ghan-na does have a nice ring to it.

9.30am As I go through my accountant's emails, I feel almost nostalgic for the days when Bill Gates was trending because of Excel and not Epstein. For a second, I consider boycotting Microsoft. Then I continue typing this very thought in Word. Human beings have always chosen convenience over morality. Morality is important. Word underlines 'importanter' in red. If only it could flag questionable billionaires with their questionable English skills as seen in all the Epstein emails.

10am The Budget was announced this week. If it hadn't been, life would have gone on pretty much as usual unless you were either a broker trading futures, or someone importing nuclear reactor equipment. In the first case, you would drown your sorrows in a gin and tonic. In the second, you would celebrate with one. Either way, your drink has become more expensive.

10.30am Looking for an in-depth analysis of the Budget, I am instead inundated with reports about our finance minister's saree. Financial papers run headlines like 'Nine Budgets. Nine Sarees.' Then there is 'Sitharaman's Budget Day sarees over the years' and 'Finance Minister steals the show in a magenta Kanjeevaram'.

She has called out the gender bias herself, pointing out that nobody asks a male politician what he plans to wear. It is hard to imagine a journalist going up to Arun Jaitley and asking, 'Sir, will you be announcing the Budget in sombre black or cheerful khaki?' As she says, it isn't malice, just conditioning. Men present policies. Women, apparently, present pallus.

1pm I scroll through my phone during lunch break, and I see clips of 'The Devil Wears Prada'. It reminds me of the time Prada launched \$1,200 Kolhapuris. Underterred by the backlash, they have now introduced a Chai perfume. At this rate, the devil will show up in a gamcha next, marketed as a 'checkered, distressed handwoven towel scarf'.

4pm After spending the last hour overdressed and overprepared for an underwhelming meeting, I try to divert my mind with the news. I soon realise that while saris may become talking points, it's underwear that can topple politicians. A Kerala MLA and former transport minister, Antony Raju, was recently convicted in a two-decade-old evidence-tampering case. It dates back to his days as a lawyer when, to help a client escape a drug charge, he allegedly altered the underwear produced in court to look too small to hide drugs. 'Hon-e-y, I Shrink the Underwear' sounds like a Malayalam movie waiting to be made. A short film, of course.

5pm I call a banker friend to figure out what to do with my investments, which have been parked in arbitrage for months. He says that while the Sensex is cheering the India-US trade deal, the details of the agreement remain unclear. He jokes that it sounds

Mrs. Funnybones



TWINKLE KHANNA

like we have succeeded at what we Indians do best: getting good bargains, whether it is at the veggie wala, in marriage alliances or global trade.

'Okay, 600 billion in imports and 30% tariffs.' 'Arrey make it 500 billion and 12% and I will throw in duty cuts on nuts. Plus, some scooters.'

'What?'

'Yaar, tell me openly, you want fridge instead? Washing machine? Don't feel shy.'

'25%. And add a few planes.'

'Chalo ok for planes, but we make a round figure for tariffs. 18%. My numerologist said it's a lucky number.'

'Done.'

Curiously, nobody reports what the politicians were wearing during the trade negotiations. I assume that Trump was in Prada.

Illustration by Chad Crowe (USA)



I feel almost nostalgic for the days when Bill Gates was trending because of Excel and not Epstein. For a second, I consider boycotting Microsoft. Then I type this very thought in Word. It underlines 'importanter' in red. If only it could flag questionable billionaires

7pm There is a ring ceremony in my building, and I have fifteen minutes to get ready. A man can wear a kurta-pyjama to Parliament, to a wedding, or to sleep. We don't have that freedom. A woman's clothes are a public statement of her competence.

In the West, Angela Merkel, Hillary Clinton and Margaret Thatcher solved the problem with power suits. But they didn't have our inheritance of silk and handloom, our six yards of history. After seeing images of Sitharaman's magenta sari all day, I reach for a Kanjeevaram too. As I drape the silk, I think about the multiple roles of women's clothing. Across ministries, boardrooms and homes, they do the work of armour, ornament, comfort and confidence. I plect and tuck the sari and secure it with pins. People will notice the colour of our pallus, not how we women hold the fabric of our country together, without any safety pins.

Flex to fresco, hand-painted ads are making a comeback

To cut through digital clutter, brands are courting street artists and swapping billboards for murals that invite people to pause and pose

Joeanna.Fernandes@timesofindia.com

For four years, Dharmendra brought traffic to a crawl on Chapel Road in Mumbai's Bandra area. The narrow lane lost its breadth around the stretch that housed the actor, as day-trippers stopped for selfies with his double-storey mural as Veeru from Sholay.

Last Sept, Dharmendra left the building and, in his place, came a hand-painted beauty ad. Traffic still slows down, but a different dynamic now drives the desire to be pictured with the wall.

The hand-painted ad mural is an old kid in new threads. Once a staple of Indian streetscaping — from cinema hoardings to soap ads on village walls — it was steadily pushed out in the 20th century by flex banners and digital bill-

“The nascent ad-mural market offers employment opportunities for a growing cohort of street artists, still regarded as vendors or 'wall dogs'. We want a seat at the table because we come with artistic, street and organisational intelligence

Karthik SS, VISUAL ARTIST

boards that were quicker, cheaper and easier to replicate at scale. Now, amid visual clutter and digital fatigue, ad murals are making a comeback as a subtle blend of art and advertising.

"Murals are a long-term brand-building investment," says a spokesperson at Tira Beauty, the company that commissioned the Chapel Road mural. "Murals feel less like advertising, and become part of the neighbourhood that people pause for, photograph, and interact with organically." The Chapel Road painting was their first large-scale mural activation; the company plans to commission more work in other cities in 2026.

The modern ad-mural is not merely another form of outdoor advertisement. It's a cleverly staged encounter that offers brands a more intimate way to engage than the visual tedium of flex and LED.

"Villages and small towns still have painted ads. And because they're hand-painted, the idea must be simple, the design uncompliat-



BIG SCREEN: Sarathi Studios in Hyderabad was the canvas for a Money Heist promo

ed," says Rahul daCunha, managing director of daCunha Communications, the agency behind Amul's long-running campaign that works by this very principle.

Traditionally, the product, logo and brand colours take precedence. "It's the product shot up front and its promise spelled out clearly that builds familiarity and a sense of omnipresence," says Abhijit Avasthi, founder at Sideways Consulting, an interdisciplinary creative collective. The new crop of murals, he adds, is more artistic and less heavy on branding, offering artists a broad canvas for creative expression.

Vishnu Ambat was given such a canvas on Chapel Road. "The brief was that the mural should be rooted in Mumbai but reflect the brand's Brazilian energy," says Ambat, a mechanical engineer-turned-graffiti artist from Bengaluru, whose collective Kalakarah Murals and Graffiti executed the project in ten days. "They sent me pictures of the wall and showed me the neighbourhood on video calls," says

Ambat, who adopted the visual vocabulary of the area to make the mural stand out with a mosaic of warm yellows and tangerines.

Creative freedom is extended or held back depending on the brand. OTTs, for instance, asked Siddhesh Sapte to stick to their brief. "For the promo of Gadar 2, Zee 5 wanted to go back to the handpainted film posters of the past, but in a way that was big and out of the box," says the graffiti artist, whose 120-ft mural in Andheri East was a straight-up portrait of Deol's Tara Singh, machismo and righteousness rippling through all 12 floors of his frame.

Sapte, who goes by the street name NME, has made spray painted ad-murals for an ice-cream brand in Ahmedabad, and OTT shows and films in Hyderabad and Mumbai. "In Mumbai, Prime Video wanted people to engage with the mural on social media, so they ran a campaign that asked them to take selfies with the painting in the background and post them on Instagram for free tickets and a chance to



Usha Kadam

A beauty ad on an old Bandra house in Mumbai

meet the actor." They had to discontinue the offer because the crowds caused a traffic jam.

For some brands, production is equal to the image. "It becomes part of brand activation," says A-Kill, a graffiti artist from Chennai, whose artwork for a motorbike brand was part of "a big event that included bike stunts and live music". "You can do a lot with murals, such as alter the image with UV lights and bring it to life with augmented reality and projection mapping," he says.

The beauty brand in Bandra invited influencers to paint parts of the mural for content they could amplify on their handles. "The project was challenging," admits Ambat, because passersby and influencers "lent a hand" and "the scaffolding had to be erected close to the wall to avoid traffic disruption."

Karthik SS of 108 Collective — a country-wide community of street artists — is now driving negotiations for fair compensation and physical and financial protection, including permits, protective gear and insurance cover as the sector begins to scale up.

Karthik adds that the nascent ad-mural market offers employment opportunities for a growing cohort of street artists still regarded as vendors or 'wall dogs'. "We want a seat at the table because we come with artistic, street and organisational intelligence," Karthik maintains.

On the street, art must often negotiate with economics. Ranjeet Dahiya, founder of the Bollywood Art Project that makes street art of actors and canvases of cottage walls, knows this well. It was his Veeru that made way for a body cream. "The owners of the house called to say they'd been offered a substantial rental for use of their exterior wall, and would it be okay if my mural was painted over?" Dahiya recounts (The Wagheas, one of the two owners of the house, said each had signed a six-month lease at a monthly rent of Rs 50,000). "I encouraged them to go ahead with the deal, for I've also earned from commercial mural work."

INQUIZITIVE

by JOY BHATTACHARJYA

1 In 1947, the Indian Army changed its uniform colours to olive green. For what specific reason did they change colours, and what was the original colour?

2 Which rock icon wrote the song 'Streets of Minneapolis' on the killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by ICE officials in this US state?

3 Which South Indian superstar's breakthrough hit was 'KhaiDi' in 1983? He also appeared in the Hindi films 'Pratibandh' and 'Aaj Ka Goonda Raj', remakes of his films 'Angarakshak' and 'Gang Leader', respectively.

4 Naga Viper, Carolina Reaper and Trinidad Moruga Scorpion are all regarded as averaging over 2 million SHU and among the most potent of their type in the world. What does SHU measure?

5 For what specific reason did the custom of 'toasting' each other by clinking glasses become popular in the Middle Ages?



6 The following cities are famous for what type of cultural extravaganza — Venice, Rio, New Orleans, Barranquilla, Santa Cruz de Tenerife and Goa?

7 What connects Indian cricketers Lala Amarnath, Sunil Gavaskar, Roger Binny and Iftikar Ali Khan Pataudi?

8 Which five-letter word describes a traditional form of Asian poetry, consisting of three unrhymed lines with five, seven and five syllables, respectively?

9 If the Boeing 727 was known as the Triple Deuce, the 747 as the Jumbo, the 777 as the Worldliner, what is the name given to the Boeing 787?



10 Which popular media channel gets its name from a slang word in the Hindi heartland that combines the Hindi word for a rustic or simple boy with the English word for "the best"?

ANSWERS

1 | It moved to olive green enemies. While clinking both would pour a little of Army, which continued to use khaki, the colour of famous camivals **9** | All feature world-famous camivals **7** | All of them had sons who also played international cricket **8** | Haiku **6** | Dances for Scooville **10** | Laliantop, from 'Lalant' and 'top' **5** | Fear of poisoning by Heat Units

4 | The nohness of chillis, Chiranjeevi **3** | Chiranjeevi **2** | Bruce Springsteen **7** | All of them had sons who also played international cricket **8** | Haiku **6** | Dances for Scooville **10** | Laliantop, from 'Lalant' and 'top' **5** | Fear of poisoning by Heat Units



A new show stresses the importance of printmaking in the age of AI

ARTS PAGE 3

The Sunday Tribune

SPECTRUM



Pen portraits of individuality by the trailblazing Mahadevi Varma

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 8 FEBRUARY 2026

No telling of Bhagat Singh is complete without his closest comrade — Sukhdev. Preserving his birthplace in Ludhiana is not an act of piety, but of historical honesty

Sukhdev & the house we nearly lost

HARISH JAIN

As a society — and as a nation — we have never been particularly good at preserving the memory of our icons. Their words fade, their homes crumble, their sites disappear, and into that vacuum we pour mythology. This failure cannot be blamed entirely on colonial rule. While British indifference and hostility account for many losses during the freedom struggle, what explanation do we offer for our negligence after Independence?

Punjab, more than any other region, produced martyrs who quite literally kissed the noose. We recite their names with pride, but what have we preserved of their lives — of the spaces they inhabited, the rooms where they were born, the lanes they walked in? Beyond a handful of exceptions, the answer is painfully little.

We speak of Kartar Singh Sarabha, Madan Lal Dhillon, Amir Chand, Avadh Bihari, Bhai Bal Mukund, Kanshi Ram, Dr Mathura Singh, Babu Harnam Singh, Khushi Ram — and then, inevitably, Bhagat Singh. His ancestral house has been preserved; a museum stands in his name; a memorial exists at Hussainiwalla, where the ashes of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev were secretly disposed of by the colonial state. Yet history is not sustained by a single monument. It survives through a network of places that together narrate a life. And no telling of Bhagat Singh is complete without his closest comrade and friend — Sukhdev.

Sukhdev was born on May 15, 1907, in Naughara Mohalla, in the old city of Ludhiana. The *mohalla* derived its name from nine houses built in a cluster by Thapar families near the city's commercial hub. Over time, many members of these families migrated to the canal colonies, particularly to Lyallpur (now in Pakistan), following economic opportunity. Lala Chint Ram, a cousin of Sukhdev's father Ram Lal, established a business there and called Ram Lal to join him. Together, they set up a commissioning agency in the grain market.

Tragedy struck early. Ram Lal died in 1910. Sukhdev's younger brother, Mathra Das, was born three months later. Sukhdev was raised by his *Tayaji*, Lala Chint Ram, alongside his cousins — Parkash Chand, Gauran Devi, Krishna, Jaidev, and Krishan Lal.

Among them, it was Gauran Devi, older than Sukhdev, who virtually brought him up.

Despite this rooted family history, Sukhdev's birthplace slipped into neglect — so complete that it required a public interest litigation to rescue it from oblivion. In 2007, advocate HC Arora filed a PIL in the Punjab and Haryana High Court seeking protection of Sukhdev's ancestral house. He was moved by an article titled '*Sukhdev's house picture of neglect*' published in *The Tribune's Spectrum* (March 18, 2007), and supported his petition with earlier *Tribune* reports from 2000 and 2006.

The petition also noted that the Shaheed Sukhdev Yadgar Committee, Ludhiana, had placed a statue of the martyr outside the house and reconstructed its front portion, thereby saving it from collapse.

Before following the legal trail further, it is necessary to recall who Sukhdev was — not in legend, but in the words of those who condemned him. Justice GC Hilton, who pronounced the sentence of death, described Sukhdev as a central figure of the revolutionary movement in Punjab.

According to the tribunal, Sukhdev recruited members between 1927 and 1928, served on the Central Committee, headed the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association in Punjab, and was privy to plans ranging from the Punjab National Bank raid to the assassination of JP Saunders. He participated in bomb-making at Agra and Lahore and was fully aware of the decision regarding the Assembly bomb.

The judgment stated without ambiguity that Sukhdev was "the brain of the conspiracy", while Bhagat Singh was "his right arm". His guilt, the court said, was no less than Bhagat Singh's — and for that reason, he too was sentenced to be hanged by the neck till death. One may contest the legality of the tribunal and reject its political premise. Yet, even hostile testimony converges with what comrades later affirmed: Sukhdev was the organisational lynchpin of the movement in Punjab.

He did not merely recruit; he sustained. Housing, clothing, food, travel, books, bomb-making material — he arranged everything, often with no money in hand. His cousin Gauran Devi later recalled, with affection and bewilderment, that he was perpetually short of funds, never embarrassed to ask for help, and constant-



The article published in these columns on March 18, 2007 — '*Sukhdev's house picture of neglect*' — that led to filing of a public interest litigation seeking protection of Sukhdev's ancestral house.

Sukhdev did not leave behind grand declarations or manifestos; he left behind structures, friendships, and decisions whose consequences outgrew their authors. It is perhaps for this reason that his memory, like his house, remained tucked away in a narrow lane — difficult to reach and easier to forget

ly collecting clothes for "friends" who had already used up the last lot. He borrowed from many — Lala Lajpat Rai, Bhai Parmanand, and others — because the organisation had to function. Sukhdev himself later explained that the group deliberately avoided dacoities, choosing instead riskier political actions. After the Saunders assassination, he noted candidly, the problem of funds largely disappeared.

What distinguished him most was his indifference to personal comfort. Revolutionary Shiv Verma remembered that Sukhdev clothed others before himself. A fellow prisoner in Lahore Central Jail recalled his laughter, warmth, and delight in feeding and clothing comrades while remaining personally indifferent to hardship.

Organisation, however, was not his only trait. He was also impulsive, even whimsical. Once, fearing that the tattoos on his arm — his name and *Om* — could endanger the group, he applied nitric acid to burn them away, badly injuring himself. Asked why he had done something so reckless, he replied that he wanted to test the threshold of his capacity to bear pain. On another occasion, he drank half a bottle of brandy simply to understand why people liked it so much. Intensity, stubbornness, humour, generosity — these contradictions made him human.

In 1922, Sukhdev passed matriculation from SD High School, Lyallpur, and enrolled at National College, Lahore, against his guardian's wishes. There he met Bhagat Singh, Yashpal, and Bhagwati Charan Vohra. It was here that the friendship between Sukhdev and Bhagat Singh was forged. They read deeply — history, literature, political thought, economics — and argued endlessly. Shiv Verma later wrote that apart from Bhagat Singh, no one had studied socialism more seriously than Sukhdev. While Bhagat Singh and Vohra shaped ideology and articulation, the arduous and unglamorous task of building and running the organisation fell largely on Sukhdev.

It was also Sukhdev who exercised one of the most consequential judgments in the movement's history. Bhagat Singh was not the first choice for the Assembly action. It was Sukhdev who insisted that he be sent. He understood, with exceptional clarity, that the bomb itself was not the climax; the courtroom would be. The act was meant to open a space for argument, not destruction, and for that trial of words, reason, and moral authority, Sukhdev believed only Bhagat Singh was fully equipped.

In urging his closest friend toward an action that could end only in imprisonment or death, he made a decision that reshaped the movement's public meaning — and, in time, the course of history.

Returning to the PIL, the Punjab government, in its affidavit, admitted the historical facts and stated that the house had been declared a protected monument under the Punjab Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1964. The court, noting that the purpose of the writ had been served, disposed of the petition on July 17, 2007.

Yet crucial questions went unasked. Who were the "relatives" allegedly opposing the protection mentioned in the State affidavit and recorded in the judgment? Sukhdev and Mathra Das were Ram Lal's only sons. Mathra Das, who later settled in Hapur, died issueless, though he and his wife had adopted a daughter. There is no record of her ever being contacted. Nor were the descendants of Lala Chint Ram or brother Baliram — many of whom were traceable — consulted.

Matters grew murkier. In May 2008, *The Tribune* reported that the house had finally been notified as protected, but that the Shaheed Sukhdev Thapar Memorial Trust objected, claiming it had vacated the tenant and spent money on restoration. The trust's president expressed anger at the government's move, even though he did not legally own the property.

Initially, only the ground floor of the three-storey house — the two small rooms and narrow passage where Sukhdev was born — was protected. The structure, built of small bricks with thick walls and a wooden roof, stood firm but remained vulnerable to weather and neglect. Full protection came only in November 2014, when the entire building was notified as a protected monument.

Even now, preservation without access remains largely symbolic. Naughara Mohalla lies deep within the congested old city. For years, a proposal to acquire a narrow strip of land to create access from Chaura Bazaar remained trapped in administrative limbo. Only in 2021 did the process finally move forward. After surveys, objections, and a writ petition dismissed on merit, compensation has at last been paid. Demolition — and access — now appear imminent.

The question, however, will always remain: do we act while memory still breathes, or do we become wise only after time and neglect have taken their toll? Sukhdev's birthplace survives — not because we were vigilant, but because someone intervened in time.

The story of this house is not merely about bricks and notifications. It is about how close we came to losing a crucial chapter of our revolutionary past — and how easily we might still lose others.

What the story of Sukhdev's birthplace ultimately exposes is not merely administrative delay or legal confusion, but a deeper cultural failing: our inability to recognise political labour unless it announces itself through spectacle. Sukhdev did not leave behind grand declarations or manifestos bearing his name; he left behind networks, structures, friendships, and decisions whose consequences outgrew their authors. It is perhaps for this reason that his memory, like his house, remained tucked away in a narrow lane — difficult to reach and easier to forget.

Preserving such spaces is not an act of piety, but of historical honesty: an acknowledgement that revolutions are sustained not only by those who speak most memorably, but also by those who organise, endure, and disappear into the work itself.

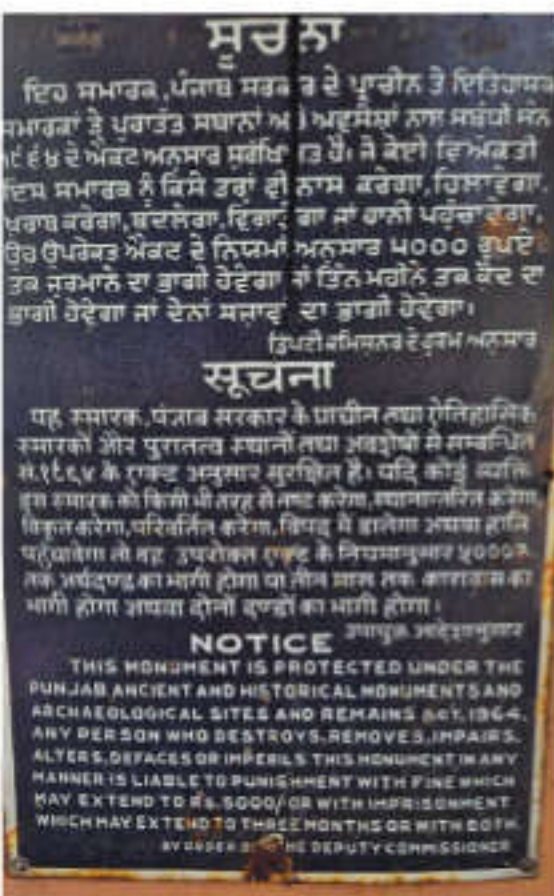
— *The writer is an author and publisher*



A room in the martyr's house in Naughara Mohalla, with his portrait and that of his mother, Ralli Devi.



A statue of Sukhdev in the courtyard of the house in Naughara Mohalla, Ludhiana.



A plaque inside the house bearing the information that it is a protected site.

Sounds real cool



GAGANDEEP ARORA

HEADPHONES have officially graduated from being simple music devices to full-blown lifestyle gear. From office calls and gym playlists to late-night web series sessions and gaming battles, they're now as constant as our smartphones. As listening habits evolve, so does the headphone market in India. Budget models are still flying off shelves, but premium headphones are slowly stealing the spotlight, thanks to better tech, cooler designs and the rise of immersive audio features. In short, people want more than just volume. They want vibes.



From premium noise cancellers to budget champs, new-generation headphones redefine how people listen, work, travel, stream daily

And let's be honest, headphones are no longer just accessories. They're a part of your identity. Your commute companion. Your gym partner. Your late-night Netflix soulmate. Here's a list of the six top headphones available right now that prove audio in 2026 is not just about hearing, it's about experiencing...

APPLE AIRPODS MAX 2 ECOSYSTEM FLEX

If you're deep inside Apple's ecosystem, Apple still offers the smoothest premium headphone experience. **What you get:** Seamless switching between Apple devices, spatial audio with head tracking, premium build and consistent ANC (active noise cancellation) performance. **Standout move:** The integration. Calls, music and movies, everything syncs effortlessly like it's choreographed. **Price:** Around ₹59,900. **Best for:** Apple loyalists, luxury audio fans.

SONY WH-1000XM6 NOISE-CANCELLING KING

From Sony, the XM series has been dominating the ANC game for years, and XM6 keeps that legacy alive. **What you get:** Next-gen adaptive noise cancellation, improved voice-call clarity, multipoint bluetooth, smarter sound tuning and a foldable design that's finally travel-friendly. **Standout move:** The ANC feels borderline

magical. Traffic noise fades, office chatter disappears and suddenly your playlist feels like it's playing inside a private studio. **Price:** ₹37,000-₹40,000 (approx). **Best for:** Frequent travellers, work-from-anywhere pros and silence lovers.

BOSE QUIETCOMFORT ULTRA SILENCE WITH A SOFT TOUCH

When it comes to peaceful listening, Bose still sets the benchmark. **What you get:** Industry-leading ANC, spatial audio support, ultra-soft ear cushions and clean sound tuning. **Standout move:** Comfort meets calm. You can wear these for hours and forget they're even on your head. **Price:** Around ₹35,900. **Best for:** Long flights, work sessions and serious focus mode.

MARSHALL MONITOR 3 ROCK CONCERT ENERGY

Straight out of the rock hall of fame, Marshall blends attitude with audio engineering. **What you get:** Active noise cancellation, solid battery life, tactile control knobs and a sound profile that's bold and energetic. **Standout move:** The design game is elite. These don't just give premium vibes, they are stage-ready. **Price:** Around ₹29,999. **Best for:** Music lovers who want both style and sonic punch.

JBL TUNE 780NC THE ALL-ROUNDER

From JBL, the Tune series brings premium tricks to the mid-range crowd. **What you get:** Adaptive noise cancelling, JBL pure bass sound, lightweight foldable design, up to 70 hours of battery life (with ANC off) and fast charging that saves you when you forget to plug in overnight. **Standout move:** The battery life is a flex. It keeps going for days, not hours. Perfect for people who hate carrying chargers everywhere. **Price:** Around ₹7,999-₹9,000. **Best for:** Students, office commuters and binge listeners who want a long battery life with reliable sound performance.

BOAT ROCKERZ 650 PRO BUDGET PLAYER

From homegrown favourite boAt, the Rockerz 650 Pro pushes affordable headphones into a slightly more serious audio territory. **What you get:** Hybrid active noise cancellation, large dynamic drivers, bluetooth connectivity, fast charging support and a battery life that comfortably handles full workdays and weekend binge sessions. **Standout move:** ANC at this price point. It's rare to see noise cancellation trickle down into the budget category this effectively. **Price:** Around ₹2,500-₹3,000. **Best for:** Students, daily commuters and value hunters who want modern features without paying premium-brand prices.

NEW TECH SET TO DAZZLE

At CES 2026, newcomer TDM (Tomorrow Doesn't Matter) emerged as an interesting new player with Neo, hybrid headphones featuring a flexible headband that twists into a portable Bluetooth speaker; combining personal listening and party-ready playback in one futuristic design. Stay tuned.

The Buddhist complex unearthed in Kashmir reveals a multipolar civilisation shaped by monks, artisans, traders, and various belief systems

KANWAL SINGH

WHEN archaeologists recently began unearthing the remains of a large Buddhist complex at Zehnpora in Baramulla, in north Kashmir, the discovery did more than adding a new site to India's archaeological map. It quietly unsettled a set of modern assumptions about the region's past. Beneath layers of soil lay evidence of a civilisation shaped not by singular faiths or closed identities, but by exchange, dialogue, movement and coexistence.

The Zehnpora excavation, announced in 2025, is among the most significant archaeological finds in Jammu and Kashmir in recent decades. Preliminary evidence suggests the complex dates back to the Kushan period, between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, a time when Buddhism flourished across large swathes of Central and South Asia. Archaeologists have identified the remains of a large stupa, structural foundations, pottery, copper artefacts and other relics that point to a well-organised monastic settlement. Modern techniques such as drone mapping and ground-penetrating radar are being used to trace the site's full extent.

What makes Zehnpora especially important is not only its scale but what it implies. This was no isolated shrine tucked away in a remote valley. The material culture suggests an active node within wider Buddhist networks that linked Kashmir to Gandhara and Central Asia.

Zehnpora also invites us to look again at older, better-known sites that have long hinted at Kashmir's plural past. One of the most striking is the Harwan monastery, located on the slopes of the Zabarwan range near Srinagar. Discovered in the late 19th century and excavated more systematically in the early and mid-20th century, Harwan remains one of the earliest and most significant Buddhist sites in the Valley.

Dating from roughly the 4th to 7th centuries CE, Harwan reveals a complex architectural history. Its most remarkable feature is a large apsidal temple surrounded by courtyards paved with decorated terracotta tiles. These tiles, depicting human figures, animals and abstract designs, stand apart from the stone-based sculptural traditions associated with Gandhara. Instead, they reflect a distinct local artistic idiom — one that absorbed external influences while retaining its own vocabulary.

Historians have long associated Harwan with the Buddhist council believed to have been convened under Emperor Kanishka I, the Kushan ruler whose patronage helped Buddhism spread across Eurasia.

Together, Zehnpora and Harwan illustrate how Buddhism in Kashmir was neither marginal nor transient. It interacted with local traditions, producing hybrid artistic and intellectual forms. The terracotta tiles preserved today in museums



Echoes of a shared past



in Jammu and elsewhere bear traces of Hellenistic and Central Asian aesthetics, pointing to Kashmir's participation in long-distance cultural exchange rather than passive reception.

This layered history is not confined to the Valley alone. Further south, in Akhnoor on the banks of the Chenab river, another set of sites expands the picture. At Ambaran lies one of the oldest Bud-

dhist monastic complexes in the Jammu region. Archaeological evidence indicates continuous activity here from at least the 2nd century BC through the 7th century CE, spanning pre-Kushan, Kushan and post-Kushan phases.

Excavations at Ambaran have revealed the brick foundations of a large stupa with a distinctive spoked-wheel design, monastery walls, votive stupas, terracotta figures, pottery and coins issued by Kushan rulers such as Kanishka and Huvishka. The site confirms that Buddhism was not limited to isolated pockets, but was firmly rooted across the broader region of present-day Jammu and Kashmir for centuries.

A few kilometres away stands the Sui Simbli temple, a very different but equally revealing site. Dating largely to the 18th and 19th centuries, the temple is known for its mural paintings that depict an extraordinary range of religious figures. Alongside scenes from Hindu epics and Vaishnava tradition appear portraits of Sikh Gurus and the Bhakti saint Kabir.

These murals are not anomalies. They reflect a lived culture in which sacred spaces were often shared and religious boundaries remained porous.

Seen together, the Buddhist sites of Zehnpora, Harwan and Ambaran, and the later murals of Sui Simbli, tell a consistent story. Across centuries, this region functioned as a crossroads of belief systems — Buddhist, Shaivite, Vaishnavite, Bhakti, Sikh and later Islamic traditions intersected, influenced one another and coexisted in ways that resist tidy categorisation. Preserving this heritage, however, remains an urgent challenge.

Many sites are under-studied and poorly interpreted for the public. Murals such as those at Sui Simbli are vulnerable to neglect and decay. Without sustained archaeological care and thoughtful conservation, these fragile witnesses to a shared past risk being lost.

The discoveries at Zehnpora and the re-examination of older sites do not merely add new chapters to the region's past. They compel us to rethink how histories are told — and to recognise that pluralism here is not a modern aspiration, but an ancient inheritance.

—The writer is a freelancer contributor

Above: The Ambaran Buddhist site in Akhnoor. Below (top) frescoes at Sui Simbli temple, and the archaeological remains at Harwan near Srinagar. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

CAPTION CONTEST 1548

HIMANSHU MAHAJAN



Entries are invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. The caption should only be in English, witty and not exceeding 10 words, and reach Spectrum, The Tribune, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday. The best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹250, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo won't be accepted. Online subscribers may attach an e-paper clipping at captionpics@tribunemail.com or a scanned copy of the e-paper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number, along with your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1547



SPECTRUM FEBRUARY 1 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Upwardly mobile — Mannat Shergill, Mohali

Wheels on heels — Sanjeev Trikhia via epaper, Fatehabad

'Cyclo-gical' disorder — Rajiv Arora via epaper, Mumbai

Manual mode — Neeraj Sabharwal, Chandigarh

It's great to reciprocate — Sandeep Daniel, Shimla

Good old shakarkandi reimagined



PUSHPESH PANT

IF there be paradise on earth, it's here, it's here! The famous lines in Persian — 'Gar Firdaus bar roo-e zamin ast...' — have been appropriated by many places, from the Diwan-i-khas in Red Fort to the beautiful gardens in the Vale. But for us, nothing fits the eulogy more aptly than an *al fresco* lunch, savoured lovingly and leisurely, soaking in the winter sun at Olive Restaurant and Bar in Mehrauli — the brain-child of restaurateur AD Singh. Years have rolled by, but the bliss hasn't faded. A recent meal there stirred happy memories. There was a surfeit of riches — starters that were gluttonously devoured and desserts to die for, like the pistachio *baklava*.

To begin with, Chef Pranav surprised us with a wonderful European take on 'shakarkand aur kamrah ki chaat', a seasonal

SHAKARKAND CHAAT WITH EUROPEAN TWIST



ISTOCK

INGREDIENTS

Sweet potatoes (medium)	3
Avocado (medium, scoop out the flesh and mash)	1
Ricotta/feta cheese (crumbled)	50 gm
Hummus	2 tbsp
Olive oil	2 tbsp
Paprika/chilli flakes	1 tsp
Black peppercorns (coarsely ground fresh)	1 tsp
Garlic powder	1/2 tsp
Salt	To taste
Leh berry/Seabuckthorn juice (or any souring agent of choice)	1 tsp

delight in many cities and towns in North India that he and Chef Dhruv have created for Epicurean palates.

What came on the plate was a flaky, multi-layered cube with a

METHOD
■ Peel and cut 2-3 medium sweet potatoes into 1-2 inch cubes or rounds for bite-sized pieces.
■ Toss with 1-2 tbsp olive oil, salt, pepper, garlic powder, paprika.
■ Preheat air fryer to 400°F, then arrange the cubes in a single layer in the basket to avoid overcrowding.
■ Air fry for 12 minutes, shaking the basket well or flipping halfway to ensure that the cubes are evenly cooked and acquire a crispy exterior.
■ Slice the cubes into three even layers. Place on each layer some avocado mash, cheese or hummus to make a multi-tier mini-sandwich.
■ Top it with juice of your choice right before popping it into the mouth.

pleasantly charred exterior, a sour tang with a tantalising after-taste that didn't rely on the plebeian black rock salt. After all, there is a difference between slumming-splurging on the

streets and fine dining.

What we feasted on can't be easily replicated at home. The ambience, the excellence of service and the alchemy that surpasses magic — a blend of top quality ingredients and chefs who improvise like maestros in the realm of music and painting.

However, we firmly believe that the reach of home cooks should always exceed their grasp. Focus on the quality of ingredients, make the most of labour-saving equipment at home, don't shy away from premium packaged products or readily available hummus, cheeses, balsamic vinegar, sun-dried tomatoes and relishes, and you can hardly go wrong.

The recipe we share with our readers isn't purloined from the Olive repertoire and doesn't claim to be based on field-work research to mesmerise the gourmet with a jaded palate. It aspires to be a lyrical farewell to a particularly chilly winter, penned by someone who loves *shakarkandi* in all its forms — 'kosher *kheer*' traditionally prepared on days of ritual fasting and *vegan kebabs*.

You may drizzle the *tikka* lookalike with honey-mustard dressing, or even good old bottled *kasundi*. Sometimes, the short-cuts are as rewarding as the long and scenic route.

—The writer is a food historian



Moment of truth

‘Tumhari Auqaat Kya Hai, Piyush Mishra’ is a memoir that doesn’t soften the edges

POULOMI DAS

TUMHARI *Auqaat Kya Hai, Piyush Mishra* is not a memoir in the conventional sense. It refuses chronology, civility, and the reassuring arc of redemption that celebrity autobiographies so often offer. Instead, actor, playwright, poet, music director, lyricist, singer, and screenwriter Piyush Mishra gives us a text that feels scorched, written as if it had to be torn out of the body rather than calmly recalled. This is not the story of how an artist made it. It is the story of how one barely survived himself.

Translated into English by Shilpi A Singh, the memoir’s title announces a reckoning. It may sound, at first glance, like an accusation thrown at the world or the cultural machinery that shaped Mishra’s career. But in an interview, the 63-year-old Mishra redirects the question inward. “The question in the title is something I ask myself,” he says. “Who were you 40 or 50 years ago? Who are you now? And in the distance between those two points — what have you lost, and what have you gained?” The provocation, then, is deeply personal. “It’s not an accusation. It’s more about self-reflection,” he admits.

Mishra’s life, as the book makes clear, has never moved in straight lines. *‘Tumhari Auqaat Kya Hai, Piyush Mishra’* traces his life from a turbulent childhood in Gwalior, growing up in a joint family thick with conflict, affection, resentment, and silence. These early chapters are marked by emotional injury and the slow accumulation of fear as both constraint



The sections on Delhi — especially Piyush Mishra’s years at the National School of Drama — are among the book’s most alive. PHOTOS COURTESY: HARPERCOLLINS



and inheritance. It is here that Mishra introduces the most radical device of the book: the decision to narrate his life through an alter ego, Santap Trivedi, also called Hamlet, a name that signals the text’s existential temperament. Like Shakespeare’s prince, Santap is paralysed by thought, undone by self-awareness, and constantly interrogating his own worth.

The sections on Delhi — especially Mishra’s years at the National School of Drama — are among the book’s most alive. He writes of theatre not as vocation but as possession. These were years of intensity and acclaim, where he was ‘king’ of a small, rarefied world and deeply resistant to leaving it for Mumbai. His engagement with *‘Hamlet’* — on stage and in spirit — runs parallel to his own psychological unravelling, art and identity collapsing into one another.

Its tonal volatility is equally compelling. Mishra moves effortlessly between dark

humour and lyrical rage, often within the same paragraph. One moment he is skewering the hypocrisy of artistic circles drunk on their own righteousness; the next, he is dismantling himself with almost frightening precision. He writes about alcoholism with stark honesty, without making excuses for himself or turning regret into performance. Alcohol corrodes everything — relationships, work, self-respect — until the question embedded in the title becomes unavoidable. What are you worth when your talent can no longer save you from yourself? These pages are uncomfortable, repetitive, and exhausting in the way addiction itself is. That is precisely their power.

Mishra, who wrote much of the memoir during the pandemic years, admits that he never paused to consider whether he was revealing too much. “I had written the first 50 pages in first person. I was writing that way because the book was meant to

be an autobiography.” But 50 pages in, the approach started to ring false and he remembers not enjoying the process at all, “All I was seeing on the page were declarations of I, me, and myself.”

That discomfort pushed him to change course: he decided to write the book in third person, introducing an alter ego to create distance. The shift, paradoxically, allowed him to be more ruthless with the truth. The impulse behind this unsparing honesty, Mishra explains, was his unease with being idolised. “An entire generation had started worshipping me like God. But I am a person who has lived a flawed life. And if I don’t confront that, there is little difference between a god and a clown.”

Stylistically, the prose carries the imprint of Mishra’s work as a lyricist and playwright. Sentences surge and collapse. Images arrive bruised and burning. Mishra uses words the way he has always used songs and monologues: to wound complacency, including his own.

A significant achievement of the English edition lies in Singh’s translation, which manages to retain the abrasiveness, lyricism, and emotional eccentricity of Mishra’s Hindi prose.

In turn, what gives the book its unsettling power is its refusal of nostalgia. Mishra offers no soft-focus memories, no heroic framing of struggle, no triumphal accounting of success. Pain is pain. Failure is failure. And talent, Mishra seems to argue, is often just another burden.

Yet after a year spent interrogating his life and conscience, one certainty emerges. Writing, Mishra realises, has never been a burden. “It is duty for me,” he says, a calling that persists not despite the wreckage, but because of it.

— *The writer is a freelance journalist*

India through ornaments

THE Amrapali Collection is a window into India’s once-thriving tradition of pastoral jewellery. An essential chapter in the global story of folk and tribal ornamentation, this trove of history has now found form in the book *‘Silver & Gold: Visions of Arcadia’* by jewellery historian Usha R Balakrishnan.

The genesis of the collection lies in a sultry May day in 1980 when a bare-foot couple came visiting the jewellery house of Rajiv Arora and Rajesh Ajmera. Their bulky *potli* harboured silver and gold jewellery with gemstones glistening from amidst them. This bounty sent the then young history students on a path of collecting.

Their passion took them from pawn shops to village gold and silversmiths, from craftspeople to village elders. They bought from dealers, bid at auctions, even scoured flea markets abroad.

Four decades on, it is an extensive collection, offering a glimpse into a rich, eclectic past and a craftsmanship that was raw and earthy even



Peacock feathers for Lord Krishna.

The Amrapali Collection captures the pastoral jewellery traditions in all their raw beauty and cultural depth



when intricate. The collection showcases the extraordinary mastery of silversmiths and goldsmiths who created these pieces. Head ornaments, earrings, necklaces, torques, upper arm bracelets, cuff bangles, anklets and nose ornaments — the list is long and exhilarating.

The book features 800 richly photographed ornaments, complemented with essays by Balakrishnan, India’s foremost jewellery historian, who places these jewels in their lived/living histories. She presents them in their milieu, tells their stories and grants them a new lease of life.

She writes of nomadic and pastoral communities who once moved freely across the Indian subcontinent, travelling by moonlight and taking refuge from the blazing sun in oases of greenery. The forms of sand dunes, the rise and fall of mountains and hills, the flowing streams and rivers, all find a presence in their ornaments, she notes.

As one goes through the book, one is struck by similarities between designs from different regions. Balakrishnan explains that their extreme portability ensured that ethnic groups carried their traditional ornaments across vast geographical expanses, transferring designs and techniques in the process. Sometimes the nomads pawned them when in dire need away from home and at times bought jewels from local craftsmen when they had surplus funds. This explains why pieces like the *chandrahaar* (neckpiece) appear in both Himachal and Gujarat, and the *gokhru* (earring) in Himachal and Rajasthan.

The earthiness of folk and tribal jewellery is often dismissed as “crude and common”, but you have to see these images to believe the craft these artisans held in their hands. Balakrishnan says there are very few collections of Indian folk and ethnic jewellery in the world. Among the most significant are Colette and Jean-Pierre Ghysels and Mis Collections in Belgium, the Rene Van der Starr Collection in the Netherlands, and in the US — the Ronald and Maxine Linde Collection and the Barbara and David Kipper Collection. The Amrapali Collection is an important one in this light.

This collector’s edition moves jewellery out of the museum and into lived experience, articulating it “as visual language, social identity and cosmology, rather than an archival object”. — *Sarika Sharma*



SILVER & GOLD: VISIONS OF ARCADIA Mapin Publishing.



Bracelet. Tamil Nadu, 1850-1880. Silver ‘swami’ work; (above) Pipla. Himachal Pradesh, 19th-20th century. Silver.

A new show stresses the importance of printmaking in the age of AI



The exhibition brings together 156 prints by 80 artists. PHOTOS COURTESY: DHOOMIMAL GALLERY

SARIKA SHARMA

THE show *‘Print Age: Printmaking in the Age of AI’* hits the nail right on the head. As the world grapples with the scope and limitations of artificial intelligence, curator Johnny ML probes why the handmade print continues to offer something that newer image-making technologies cannot. In doing so, he also brings the spotlight back on printmaking, often considered a second cousin to painting and drawing, or as Johnny reminds, a “much maligned monster”.

Printmaking is one of the earliest forms of popular art. Created by transferring ink from prepared surface such as wood or metal on to paper or fabric, it facilitates making multiple copies of a single work. Through its journey across the centuries, it has been pulled down by purists who question the originality of a print, as also those who like art to be exclusive.

As more and more people are turning artists courtesy websites, apps, and tools, a slow and steady rise is once again being seen in printmaking. Tired of fast, artificial images, artists and aficionados are increasingly drawn to the hands-on and experimental qualities of printmaking.

The idea of *‘Print Age’* was sown during one such conversation Johnny ML had with a few artists early last year. Soon, Uday Jain of Dhoomimal Art Gallery in New Delhi came on board to host the show, and Johnny began travelling to different parts of India, bringing together works from the collections of Ravin Garudiya, Hitesh Rana,

Artificial vs aesthetic



Works by artists Eugene de Sala (L) and Nicholas Roerich at Dhoomimal Gallery.

Dhoomimal, and a few other private collectors, besides prints from artists such as Dushyant Patel and Rajesh Makwana.

Johnny says printmaking has remained marginal in the mainstream art discourse as people felt it was all about making multiple prints without any adherence to the idea of the original. “So, even while it was constantly practised, its acceptance as a highly dignified art form was slightly low in the eyes of the public and certain art lovers. But people who knew its worth never hesitated to collect prints,” he says.

In his curatorial note, he points out how during the boom of the new millennium, printmaking was pushed far behind other forms of art. In the meantime, some were silently buying graphic prints. The market boom helped many young printmakers experiment with ambitious sizes that previous generations had failed to even attempt, resulting in large-scale woodcuts.

“Besides, the auction scene was creating a new interest among art collectors by introducing high-quality graphic print works of masters from all over the world. This facilitated a global market for printmaking art; if you want to collect a master like Picasso, you just need to go to any auction house where one is up for bidding. This global currency of printmaking and print art, including signed works by artists or artists’ estates, as well as unsigned limited and unlimited editions of serigraphs, has created a new scenario for printmaking art,” he writes.

As digital reproduction and AI pose newer challenges, Johnny feels that despite all the radical innovations, AI has not become an agent in itself, as “it has not become a thinking tool yet”... “So long as human agency thrives, the human touch in creative forms is going to remain. Even if in the near future AI becomes a self-thinking tool, I am sure the inherent tendency of humans to

trace their roots would eventually make them turn to man-made art or humane art.”

The exhibition brings together 156 prints by 80 artists. International artists include Picasso and Marc Chagall. Big Indian names like Zarina Hashmi and Anupam Sud share space with newer artists. And that, Johnny insists, is the curatorial premise of the show: how art collectors have looked at printmaking as a collectible art form. “Collectors are driven by different logic, especially when it comes to printmaking. Some take it as an entry-level collectible. But for many others, it is a parallel narrative. For some, it is like a jigsaw; they always want to fill in the gaps in their collection.”

With conceptual and performance art dominating art events, what kind of space does printmaking find itself in today? Contrary to all expectations, Johnny says youngsters are turning en masse to printmaking. “It is an intriguing and challenging medium. You may be a good painter, but you have to reorganise yourself when you approach printmaking. It involves a lot of technicalities and external chemical and physical agencies. It is like creating music out of an ensemble of orchestras. The availability of printing machines, such as etching and lithography presses, has made printmaking more accessible. Young artists are setting up studios complete with a printmaking press. All over the world, there is a revival of printmaking as a retro art form. There is a special charm to it. You look around and see more than three printmaking shows currently on in Delhi itself.”

Who said printmaking was a lost art?

— *On view till March 14*

BOOKS

Capturing the shadows of wounded lives

VN Rai

THERE are 18 memoirs in ‘Portraits from Memory’, drawing from their “wounded lives”, as Mahadevi Varma would like to identify her protagonists, combining her two books of pen portraits published in 1941 and 1943.

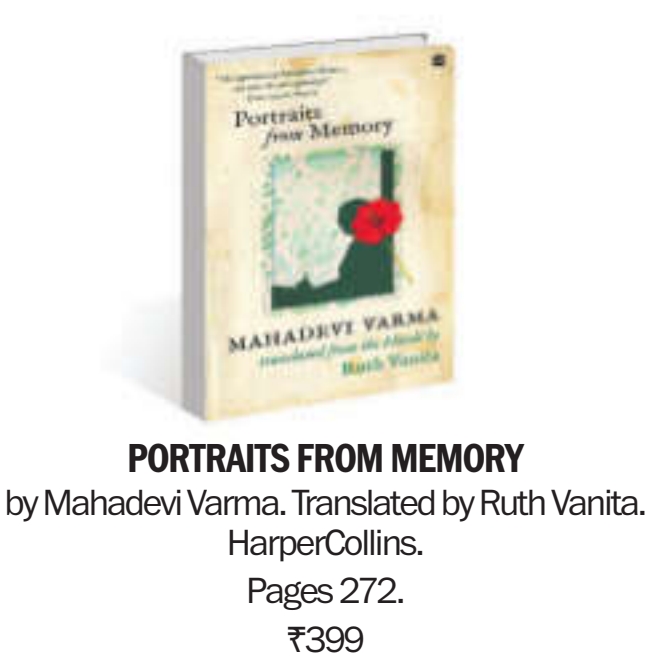
These are essentially characters portraying her own life’s reflections, triggered by their fettered status of extreme marginalisation, socially and economically, in a stagnant patriarchal society. She has boldly built up the uniqueness of each of the 18 individuals right in the beginning of the narratives, either through an assertive conversation or a compelling situation, describing very vividly their physical features and social traits, thus keeping them in the centre of the stories all along.

Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987) was a trail-blazer Hindi poet, educator and social reformer. She received higher education in Hindi, Sanskrit and English, defying societal norms. She was married, but maintained independence, focusing on career and social causes.

Mahadevi served first as the principal of Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth, set up by philanthropist businessman Sangam Lal Gupta, for a number of years before becoming the Vice-Chancellor of the institute. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan (1988) posthumously, Jnanpith Award (1982) and Sahitya Akademi fellowship (1979). She was a prominent literary figure associated with the *Chhayavaad* movement, which translates into “shadowism”, that emerged in the early 20th century.

Chhayavaad was a product of the political times, and Mahadevi introduced a rebellious feminine voice to it, with deep emotional sensitivity hitherto unknown in the world of Hindi poetry. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi’s national movement, her writings navigated colonial, feudal and patriarchal spaces most deftly.

Her prose is less talked about, but the present collection is a testimony to her commitment to extend the boundaries of literature beyond any impression of shadow boxing, and at times into the theatre of the rich-poor class divide as well. It should be conceded though that she has raised, within the ecosystem of oppressive stereo-



PORTRAITS FROM MEMORY
by Mahadevi Varma. Translated by Ruth Vanita.
HarperCollins.
Pages 272.
₹399

A follower of Gandhi’s national movement, Mahadevi Varma’s writings navigated colonial, feudal and patriarchal spaces

types, more questions than answers.

In the translator’s introduction, Ruth Vanita has elaborated: “Nor is Mahadevi a typical ‘activist’. She helps out when she does not wish to overthrow the existing order, nor does she try to change the lives of all those she encounters. Her typical response is to become a client for workers in the trade they pursue; for example, she buys vegetables from Alopi, cloth from the Chinese vendor, and employs Bhatkin even though she hates her cooking. Only on rare occasions does she go out of her way to find work for someone, as in the case of Gheesa’s mother and the nameless unwed mother. The sex-worker’s daughter realises that the work Mahadevi gives her is in the nature of charity, so she quits.”

Kudos to the learned translator for bringing this iconic Hindi literature masterpiece to English readers.

The translation has beautifully captured the essence and emotional depth of the original work, and the nuances have been preserved with great care. The footnotes are a treasure, and I’m sure this book will spark a new appreciation for Hindi literature among English readers.

ture among English readers.

Mahadevi Varma’s forte lies in her portrayal of the strong expressions of individuality that she discovered in her chosen characters? Even a dumb single mother, Gungia, stays true to the image of eternally vibrant parental love in the face of open betrayal by the foster son. Little Gheesa’s loyalty to his *Guruji*’s demands for personal hygiene in Mahadevi’s makeshift Jhunsi village school is nothing less than of epic proportion: “When Gheesa, having bathed, stood before me like an offender, wrapped in the wet towel and a half-soaked *kurta*, not only my eyes but every part of me grew moist. At that moment I understood how Dronacharya had got his Bhil pupil to cut off his thumb.”

On the back cover of the book, Sara Rai is spot-on, “One gets glimpses, too, of Mahadevi’s own unusual life as a single woman who, in the early 20th century, lived and travelled by herself, forging relationships across class, gender, age, nationality, occupation, and species.”

— **The reviewer is an author and former IPS officer**

Textures of world in poetry

SUPRIYA KAUR DHALIWAL

TWO new poetry collections — Sonnet Mondal’s ‘Clamour for a Handful of Rice’ and Aranya’s ‘The Map is Not the Territory’ — insist that meaning emerges from lived, embodied realities rather than ideological distance.

Neither poet allows suffering or experience to become abstract. Mondal grounds large-scale injustice in images of the body, appetite, ritual and loss; Aranya anchors political and cultural complexity in the sensuous particulars of sound, taste, colour and place.

In different ways, both collections demonstrate a commitment to poetry as a mode of ethical attention — a means of staying with the textures of the world rather than smoothing them into concepts.

Mondal’s poems are often driven by a stark moral urgency.

Hunger, war and political deceit recur not as distant headlines but as conditions that press upon everyday life. The domestic and the geopolitical collapse into one another: the ‘billboard foods’ become works of fiction; ‘the temple of your body/reeks of gunpowder and grief’; the cows tear ‘their last grass of the day’; and hope becomes ‘a bullet-cracked mirror’.

These poems demand an uncomfortable proximity to suffering, asking what it means to bear witness when injustice has become routine.

Aranya’s approach invites the reader to register the multilingual pulse of metropolitan India. These poems are deeply attentive to soundscapes and atmospheres: the hubbub of streets, the discipline of classical music, the quiet order of libraries, the exuberance of youth subcultures. This multiplicity is held together by a tonal assurance that allows the poems to move fluidly across registers, often looking for companions in authorship — from Nainsukh to Leonard Cohen.

There are many love poems in Aranya’s book, but one of the most striking is ‘all night the crickets write their love notes in braille’. Here, love is not confined to the human alone; the poetic voice moves seamlessly between the human and the more-than-human. ‘Because the body has rivers, and in each unstopped/torrent, tiny fishes learn the smell of water,’ he writes, collapsing desire, ecology and embodiment into a single lyric gesture. Sensory richness becomes a way of thinking about connection — between bodies, species, and landscapes — rather than a retreat from political or ecological concern.

Mondal’s urgency, on the other hand, is often sombre. In ‘Today a Missile Struck the Head of Buddha’, he writes: ‘Today a missile is stuck in the head of Buddha./Where will the birds sit now?//Today the rice bowls are filled with bullet shells./How would you teach hunger to value our gods?’ The poem stages a devastating collision between the sacred, the domestic and the violent, exposing the fragility of moral frameworks in the face of militarised reality. Where Aranya’s poems often open outward into multiplicity, Mondal’s narrow their focus, sharpening attention on moments of rupture and moral failure.

Despite these tonal differences, a shared philosophical undercurrent runs through both collections: an awareness that language is inadequate yet necessary. Mondal’s poems repeatedly gesture towards what cannot be fully articulated — the scale of hunger, violence and ethical collapse — while Aranya’s very title foregrounds the gap between representation and reality. The map, these poems remind us, can never fully contain the territory it describes. Yet both poets continue to write, aware of the limits of language.

Neither collection offers easy closure or redemptive comfort. Mondal’s poems remain morally restless, often ending in unresolved tension; Aranya’s resist neat mapping or synthesis, favouring openness and uncertainty. This refusal of consolation is radical and part of their yearning.

Both books trust the reader to sit with complexity rather than resolve it, to remain attentive to the world as it is: insistently alive yet fractured, sensuous and unjust.

— **The reviewer is a poet**

MONICA SABHARWAL

CASTE not only erupts in acts of violence, it also endures through the routine exclusions, asserting its presence in the mundane — thus strengthening its grasp in people’s lives. The metaphor ‘shackled’ in Sushila Takbhaur’s ‘My Shackled Life’, a Dalit woman’s autobiography, therefore becomes deeper than physical.

This is a story of a woman bound in the shackles of caste and patriarchy, and turns ordinary experiences of exclusion into a powerful account of social inequality. She does not speak of dramatic acts of rebellion or romanticising suffering. It unsettles the reader with its ordinariness and perpetuity.

The book refuses to cohere with the dominant literary conventions of introspective individualism, narrative closure and redemptive self-fashioning. Instead, Sushila Takbhaur reasserts Dalit autobiography as a collective, ethical and political act.

The narrative is largely chronological and dispersed in episodes. One may find a sense of repetition that mirrors the persistence of the structures of caste and patriarchy. This seems like a literary strategy — the text does not escalate, as it insists on these structures as an ordinary ongoing condition rather than an exceptional experience.

In the first half, Sushila recounts her early years through the lives of her paternal grandmother and mother, signalling that this book is as much about inherited memory as personal experience. Family thus becomes a crucial site of learning where these women appear as significant figures — not as heroic rebels, but as women whose labour and restraint shape Sushila’s consciousness.

There is a constant presence and mention of the community at large; how deprivation, humiliation and superstitions constitute their ontological reality and how it is being passed on to the younger generations. Among this, Sushila grows up as a docile and fearful but determined woman, whose real journey begins after she is married to a man much older to her.

While caste marks the boundaries of

Sushila’s world, it is gender that governs its most intimate injuries. She recounts her life with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law as one marked by dehumanisation, while her husband’s conduct often intensified this cruelty, breaking not only her resolve but, at times, her body. Yet, the narrative is not configured by moral simplification. It was her husband who supported her education, facilitating her entry into the progressive intellectual circles of Nagpur.

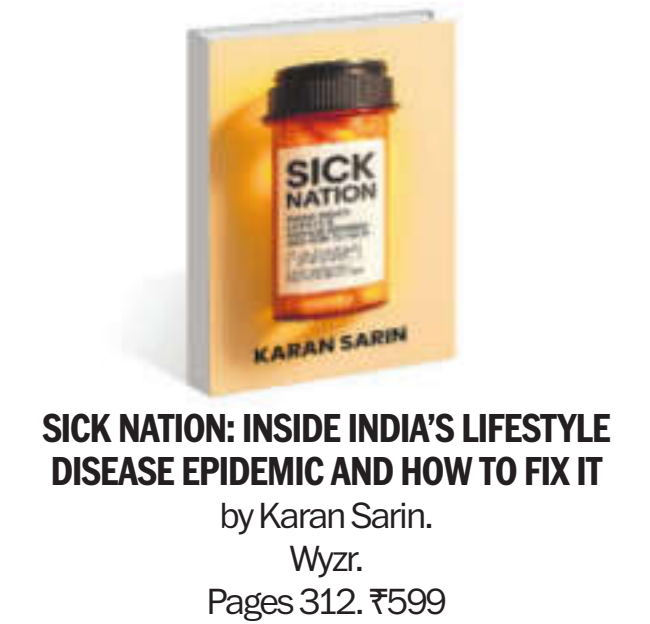
Sushila’s PhD was not a result of institutional ease but of personal resolve. She pursued it while managing work full-time, caring for her children, and carrying the weight of household responsibilities.

Having taught at a school and later in college, and moving from one house to another, Sushila achieves mobility but caste occupies every space she inhabits. At a time when caste is often assumed irrelevant in urban spaces, ‘My Shackled Life’ serves as a reminder that inclusion does not guarantee equality and belonging.

The English translation retains the simplicity of the text. While some of the cultural and linguistic specificity of the original language is inevitably softened, the steadiness of her voice and the gravity of her experiences remain firmly in place.

The shackles in ‘My Shackled Life’ are never fully removed and the autobiography does not pretend otherwise. What lends force to the text is the refusal to bow down to the systems of oppression and demanding the same accountability of the reader as well.

— **The reviewer teaches at Punjabi University**



SICK NATION: INSIDE INDIA’S LIFESTYLE DISEASE EPIDEMIC AND HOW TO FIX IT
by Karan Sarin.
Wyzr.
Pages 312. ₹599

ed with caution. Differential diagnosis and clinical management are complex processes and differences in training, such as a short-term metabolic health coaching programme versus 10-plus years of medicine/endocrinology education, represent distinct, potentially complementary, forms of expertise.

The book’s narrative, when sticking to fundamentals, is persuasive; prioritising lifestyle optimisation aligns closely with long-standing medical/public health advice. Much of the dietary advice mirrors the

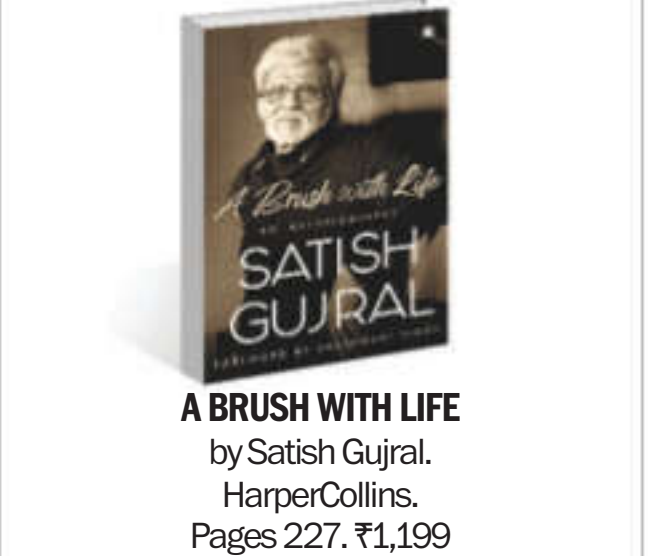
principles of the extensively studied Mediterranean diet, shown to be associated with cardiovascular and metabolic benefits. However, this evidence was generated from long-duration observations of large populations.

The book advocates reducing carbohydrates, which is a sound advice in general. In India though, where carbohydrates provide over 62 per cent of total energy intake for many, largely through affordable staples such as rice and wheat, it is a bit complicated.

Evidence-based culturally grounded alternatives already exist. Cereal-pulse combinations such as rice and *dal* in approximately a 3:1 ratio provide complete amino acid profiles while remaining affordable. Traditional preparation methods, including fermentation, sprouting, and cooking-cooling starches, can lower glycaemic index and improve nutrient bioavailability without increasing cost.

This brings us to the book’s most consequential limitation in my opinion. Although the author briefly critiques “clever food industry marketing”, the analysis stops short of addressing details — the broader system, aggressive corporate advertising,

Born in 1915 out of a dream of creating a homegrown, sex-positive conversation, the portal Agents of Ishq became an unexpected phenomenon combining *desi* slang and sensuality. The project had people from across the country sharing their most intimate stories that defied taboos and shimmered with humour and heart. This anthology brings together some of these stories.



A BRUSH WITH LIFE
by Satish Gujral.
HarperCollins.
Pages 227. ₹1,199

First published in 1997, ‘A Brush with Life’ remains a lucid and unsparing account of artist Satish Gujral’s journey through loss, conviction and renewal. One of India’s most original modern artists — a painter, sculptor, muralist, architect, and writer — he lost his hearing as a child but that became the source of a lifelong search for meaning. The memoir has been reissued to mark his birth centenary.

— **The reviewer is Head, Department of Pharmacology, PGJ**

Why study of lifestyle diseases must factor in the hard realities

SAMIR MALHOTRA

EVERY day one watches the queues outside hospitals for free food grow longer. Men, women and children wait patiently for a meal, perhaps their only assured calories of the day. Contrast this with the food advice that includes almonds, Greek yoghurt, fish, protein shakes, extra virgin olive oil. It is from within these perspectives that we need to approach ‘Sick Nation: Inside India’s Lifestyle Disease Epidemic and How to Fix It’.

In a country facing some of the world’s highest burden of non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, fatty liver, and related metabolic disorders, insulin resistance (IR) is an important, often under-recognised, contributor to this epidemic, which makes the book undeniably relevant.

The author’s emphasis on early, preventive awareness rather than late-stage disease management is commendable, even if prevention has been a core concern of public health medicine for centuries. The tone, anecdotes and phrases such as “Today, we

exist in perpetual feast mode” make complex ideas accessible to a lay audience.

However, when ‘Sick Nation’ describes itself as a scientific investigation, we need to be careful. Scientific inquiry follows a defined path: hypothesis formulation, systematic data collection, ethical approval, peer review, and reproducibility. What is presented instead is a blend of personal experimentation and “experiments” conducted on volunteers, the latter being particularly concerning as there is no clear mention of ethical oversight, informed consent, or review.

The book draws attention to IR as a unifying metabolic disturbance that cuts across multiple non-communicable diseases, which is highly pertinent in an Indian context, though some caution is warranted. Scientific literature emphasises that IR is multifactorial, shaped by genetics, early-life nutrition, socioeconomic conditions, physical activity, inflammation, pollution, etc. Therefore, while important, positioning IR as a singular enemy risks oversimplification.

While the author’s accent on metabolic dysfunction is important, the claims that it is overlooked by specialists but identified by alternative practitioners, should be interpreted

REFLECTIONS

Unstoppable administrator



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

TO judge people after they are no more is fraught with dangers of excesses and over-indulgence. Yet I must — not judge but record my impressions of Inderjit Singh Bindra. The news of his passing stirred memories, and how the inter-play of power, politics and sports shapes the future course of events.

My initiation into sports journalism as a naive, idealistic 24-year-old coincided with his negotiating the Indian cricket board’s complex hierarchy with skilful brashness that stumped seasoned administrators. That he was to play a pivotal role in navigating India’s rise in a White-dominated sport was to come much later, not before he had set his own house in order and challenged the West-South control over cricket’s decision-making in India.

The late Seventies to the early Nineties in Punjab was a turbulent time. Terrorism was planting its insidious roots, people lived in fear of violence and death, while politics was mired in confusion, cunningness, deception and survival games.

Miraculously, cricket remained largely unaffected and even flourished. A callow youth like me, fresh from university, was suddenly pitchforked into this adult world full of deceitful intrigues, trying to make sense of people with an unbridled ambition to succeed. Even men who believed that all actions must have an ethical framework were stumbling, unsure of when and which move to make to stand steadfast.

Bindra had taken charge of the Punjab Cricket Association at a relatively young age of 40. The strapping suave, urbane, English-speaking Sikh had made a name for himself as the Deputy Commissioner of Punjab’s Patiala district. His cleanliness drive of the congested lanes in the

city had ingratiated him with the middle classes. He had an air of decisiveness about him, which would not tolerate dissent and “fools” easily.

He began his career as an IPS officer before qualifying for the IAS to become a true-bred bureaucrat, and held many important positions in Punjab’s bureaucracy.

For us, Chandigarh journalists, he held a cherished place in our hearts, especially when he would host the press corps for a sumptuous meal and the best of drinks. Ah! For a connoisseur and a gourmet, it won’t be misplaced to quote Wordsworth: “*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.*”

While the world around us appeared a dangerous place, cricket flourished in splendid isolation. The man with meticulous taste and a desire to see Punjab cricket find a more acceptable place in Indian sports was unstoppable. When

IPL founder Lalit Modi was introduced, against all opposition, to the Indian board by IS Bindra

Mohinder Amarnath was dropped from the Indian team and called the selectors a “bunch of jokers”, Bindra lashed out at the board. He accused them of bias against the North players and challenged them to have a match between North Zone and the Rest of India.

His outspokenness wasn’t limited to words; he aspired big and was willing to take chances. He knew the art of wooing the best brains in cricket, listen to what they had to say and implement many suggestions which threatened the status quo. His burning desire to see Punjab become a powerhouse of cricket turned him to seek the legendary Bishan Singh Bedi’s help. Bedi, with the specific mandate of complete control over all matters cricketing, guided Punjab to its first Ranji Trophy win in 1992-93.

Bindra understood the value of international

media and was in touch with some of the most influential cricket writers worldwide when India was trying to spread its wings in the International Cricket Council (ICC). While Jagmohan Dalmiya may have been rightly credited with masterminding India’s chess-like moves to gain control of the ICC, it was Bindra’s negotiating skills and understanding the “market value” of cricket that checkmated the White dominance.

Bindra was one of the key men, along with NKP Salve and Dalmiya, who helped India become the first nation after England to host the World Cup in 1987. Even more significant was his role post-liberalisation in breaking Doordarshan’s monopoly over the live telecast of matches. More than Dalmiya’s shrewd calculations, it were his Punjabi roots and bravado that brought Pakistan firmly to India’s side as the neighbours — Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka — hosted the 1996 World Cup. India was now unstoppable.

The market, propelled by the middle class benefitting from economic growth, was the driver that placed India at the helm of world cricket.

Somewhere in this journey of Indian dominance which made Dalmiya the face of international cricket administration, Bindra felt slighted. He may not have been wrong to believe that he more than anyone else deserved to be the ICC president. He distanced himself from Dalmiya and became his strident critic, shaking the Indian board’s power equations.

Even when Bindra’s influence was waning, his marketing acumen remained sharp as ever. People forget that the Indian Premier League (IPL) founder, Lalit Modi, was introduced, against all opposition, to the Indian board by Bindra. He made Modi vice-president of the Punjab Cricket Association in 2004 and four years later, Modi launched the IPL.

In his later years, deteriorating health reduced him to become a mute spectator, unable to taste the fruits of the revolutionary seeds he had helped plant in Indian cricket’s fertile soil. For a world which loves pithy one-liners, it may not be wrong to say that IS Bindra shaped the cricketing destiny of a nation always in a flux.

— *The writer is the author of ‘Not Quite Cricket’ and ‘Not Just Cricket’*

Himachal’s buses and the driving force



RAAJA BHASIN

THIS was to be a good commercial assignment. Something that would keep the wallet warm for a while. A coffee table book was being planned for an organisation that had crossed a major milestone. The brief was spelt out in the first salvo: “You are a professional and know what to do. All I’m concerned with is that my boss should like it and be happy.” Nice and simple. Except that it wasn’t.

A few months of work went down the drain and the wallet remained miserably unfed as both the boss and the commissioning person moved on to other (and better?) things. In a manner of speaking this was just as well, as the moment all this work wound its way to the rubbish bin, something else came along.

Within of course and outside the state too, there are two things that are instantly recognisable as Himachali. The first being the distinctive round ‘pillbox’ caps of the state. A political inflection has been given to them by the colour of the velvet band that decorates them. This, one surmises, is only because the leader of a political party favoured a particular colour, so needless to say, the other party had to drape itself with another. Meanwhile, for persons non-political, fashionable and for those who couldn’t care less, this has led to a host of other designs and myriad colours adorning these caps.

The second instantly recognisable ‘Himachali thing’ are the Himachal Roadways buses that ply on numerous routes across North India. You’ll find them on both highways and on narrow roads. At about this time of the year in 2024, I was commissioned by the Himachal Road Transport Corporation (HRTC) to put together a coffee table book to mark its golden jubilee.

As happens in assignments of this nature, one sometimes ends up learning more than what one may impart. Or expect. However, unlike many other similar assignments, where one is handed a task and often enough is expected to bumble one’s way through, here the head of the organisation and many others who were a part of this remained completely involved in the process. The word I should use is ‘proactive’.

The result was that one had far greater access to the material one wanted or may even have missed, and the working remained smooth. Along the way, putting together the pages, one grew to admire the men, and now women, who work in adverse conditions and often enough hazard both life and limb on treacherous routes and in dangerous situations.

On the times that one walked across to the roadways’ office, for reasons unknown, a dog who lived en route would accompany me and wait on the slope and then, walk back with me for some distance. One doesn’t quite know if he was an unofficial-guardian or appointed-greeter of the transport

office — but he was there every time one went. Expectedly, he’d stop some distance away from the racing traffic on the highway, wag his tail and then park himself in a sunny spot.

If one was more superstitious than one is, one could almost consider that canine as a harbinger of good things. That dog, like most, seemed to have an individual character. As I was told: “Vehicles too have individual character. Ask any HRTC driver and he will tell you which six-wheeled princess takes well to the roads, which queen throws tantrums and has emotional breakdowns, and which king should be retired.”

Today, for many of us, aspirations have gone far beyond a bus ride and the time when the fare between

JAI KUMAR



Navigating the inhospitable terrain, the drivers and conductors are heroes of sorts

Ramayana in Thailand & Cambodia

THE Thai and Cambodian *Ramayanas* developed between the medieval and early modern periods as court-centred narratives shaped by performance, visual art, and Buddhist ethics. Though they share a common source, they reinterpret the story through parallel but contrasting treatments of kingship, heroes, villains, and moral order.

In Thailand, the *Ramayana* appears as the *Ramakien*, with versions circulating from the 14th century during the Ayutthaya period and reaching a classical form in the late 18th century under King Rama I. Rama is presented primarily as a king rather than an ascetic. His authority flows from royal power, military success, and court ritual. Forest exile and renunciation are reduced, while palace politics, warfare, and diplomacy dominate the narrative. Divinity is present but subdued, secondary to kingship.

In Cambodia, the *Ramayana* takes the form of the *Reamker*, whose earliest visual and narrative evidence dates to the Angkor period between the 9th and 13th centuries, with later literary and performance versions continuing into the 16th to 18th centuries. Here kingship is framed through Buddhist ethics. Power is legitimate only when aligned with *karma*, compassion, and moral restraint. Victory is meaningful not merely as conquest but as ethical resolution.

In the Thai tradition, Hanuman is transformed into a trickster hero who is clever, flirtatious, and adventurous. He is not celibate. One of the most distinctive Thai episodes is the sto-



ry of Supanna Matcha, the mermaid daughter of Ravana, who tries to sabotage Rama’s bridge by throwing stones into the sea. Hanuman confronts her, romance follows, and their union symbolically reconciles land and sea powers, reflecting Thailand’s maritime imagination.

In the Cambodian tradition, Hanuman is disciplined and restrained. Erotic adventures are minimal or absent. He embodies loyal service, self-control, and moral discipline, closer to Buddhist monastic ideals. His heroism lies in obedience and ethical conduct rather than clever transgression.

In Thailand, Ravana, known as Thotsakan, is portrayed as a cultured and refined ruler. He possesses courtly manners, family attachments, and artistic taste. His death is prolonged through multiple dramatic encounters designed for visual spectacle. The *Ramakien* is insepara-

ble from *khon*-masked dance and from large mural cycles, especially those created in the late 18th and early 19th centuries at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Episodes are chosen for visual balance and theatrical rhythm rather than narrative completeness.

In Cambodia, Ravana appears as a tragic ruler whose downfall results from accumulated moral failure. His defeat is framed less as divine punishment and more as *karmic* consequence. Family relations, regret, and ethical collapse receive narrative emphasis, reinforcing Buddhist moral causality.

In the Thai *Ramakien*, Sita’s role is present but relatively restrained compared to Hanuman and Rama. The narrative energy is invested in spectacle, warfare, and courtly drama, suited to performance and mural narration.

In the Cambodian *Reamker*, Sita’s suffering, patience, and emotional endurance are expanded in detail. Her trials are ethical and psychological rather than purely ritual tests of chastity. The story becomes a meditation on the human cost of power and war, especially for women.

In Thailand, the *Ramayana* functions as court theatre and royal imagery. In Cambodia, it functions as moral instruction carved into temple walls, most famously at Angkor Wat built in the early 12th century. Together, these traditions show how the *Ramayana* became a flexible medieval and early modern framework for imagining power, ethics, and order across Southeast Asia.

— *The writer is an acclaimed mythologist*

Barbernama of the training academy

PADAM PARKASH BHOJVAID

REGIMENTAL services are less occupations than rehearsed rituals of order. Their academies breathe the starch and brass, lingering echoes of a colonial cadence that never entirely faded. Discipline there is not merely enforced; it is staged — in polished shoes, measured steps, and the precise length of a young officer’s hair. Some traditions endure because they serve a purpose; others remain like heirlooms no one remembers choosing.

Among these survivals stands the government-appointed barber, his scissors as permanent a presence as the parade ground bugle. The logic was once imperial. Cropped hair was the Empire’s quiet grammar of conformity, a subtle trimming of individuality into obedience. Even today, probationers of the IPS, IFS, NDA and IMA bow to the ritual snip, as though hair itself might harbour dissent. Yet within this choreography of authority exists a small republic of conversation — the barber’s chair — where hierarchy loosens, observation sharpens into insight.

It was in this unlikely sanctuary at the Indian Forest College, Dehradun, that I first encountered Radhey Sham in 1983. Our meetings would stretch across three decades: first when I was a raw probationer, later as a mid-career officer, and finally as Director of the Forest Research Institute. His scissors hardly changed, but the meanings I discovered in that chair deepened with time.

Radhey Sham carried within him the long inheritance of the Indian barber. In villages and towns, barbers have never been mere tradesmen. They stand at life’s thresholds — shaving heads in mourning, preparing grooms for ceremony, absorbing whispers of family feuds and festive plans alike.

Their profession trains them to listen, to observe, to remember. They become archivists of human nature, their knowledge gathered not from books but from faces, pauses, and the cadence of everyday speech.

Radhey Sham brought that ancient attentiveness into the modern institution. As a probationer, I entered his narrow kingdom of mirrors and combs with nervous curiosity. The buzzing clipper in his hand felt almost ceremonial, and we recruits submitted like

initiates. He issued instructions with mock gravity — chin higher, shoulders square — yet ruled with humour rather than severity. His remarks, lightly ironic, carried lessons disguised as jokes. Between strokes of the comb, he mapped the invisible geography of academy life: the overzealous rule-keeper, the quiet rebel, the homesick boy learning to wear a uniform. In his chair, discipline softened into something almost humane.

When I returned years later, both of us had aged a little — my hairline receding, his laughter mellowing into reflective silence. The talk grew richer, less about youthful mischief and more about the curious theatre of institutional life.

With the patience of a natural historian, he

The profession trains the barber to listen, observe, remember, becoming an archivist of human nature

described the Academy’s ever-changing cast: officers devoted to single malts or silent morning walks, misers who guarded coins like secrets, flamboyant dressers who turned corridors into runways. Files recorded achievements, Radhey Sham preserved character. What lingered most was the breadth of his awareness.

Without formal education to claim, he navigated conversations on service politics, shifting norms, and the slow erosion of certain old virtues. He knew instinctively when to embellish a tale and when to let silence carry its own weight. Like many Indians whose wisdom grows outside classrooms, he had mastered the art of listening until understanding ripened on its own.

By the time I became Director, Radhey Sham had altered his manner with almost poetic precision. The easy familiarity of earlier years gave way to a courteous distance. He would call ahead: “*Namaskar*; Sir. May I take an appointment?” His conversation became measured, elliptical, almost diplomatic. Gone were the playful disclosures; in their place came observations offered gently, as though testing the air before releasing a

thought. His comb seemed to listen as much as it groomed, his scissors moving through silences like punctuation marks.

To probationers he had been a companion, to officers a chronicler, to directors a diplomat — each role adopted without pretence, each adjustment made with quiet dignity.

My encounters with Radhey Sham were never truly about hair. They traced the arc of my own journey — the rough edges of youth, the layered compromises of middle age, the careful restraint demanded by authority.

Barbers, after all, are guardians of transitions. They stand close enough to hear confessions yet distant enough to keep them safe. Radhey Sham demonstrated that education is not confined to degrees, that wisdom often gathers in those who watch institutions from just outside their formal gates.

Hair grows back, files fade, reputations rise and fall. But the soft, fleeting snip of steel lingers — a reminder that even within the most regimented worlds, understanding is shaped as much by listening hands as by commanding voices.

— *The writer is a retired Indian Forest Service officer*

LONG, HARD TREK

The Union Budget has given the much-needed impetus to the adventure tourism sector but the journey ahead remains arduous — demanding a balance between growth, safety and ecological restraint



Trekkers atop Kedarkantha Peak, a premier winter trekking destination in Uttarakhand. ISTOCK

SEEMA SACHDEVA

A JEET BAJAJ'S phone has been ringing non-stop since he returned last week from Africa, where he was once again scaling Mt Kilimanjaro. The calls were not merely to congratulate Bajaj, who as vice-chairman of the Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism and Hospitality was part of the delegation that had briefed Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman ahead of the Union Budget. These reflected the excitement over her announcement of promoting ecologically sustainable trails and adventure tourism in the Budget speech.

Allocating ₹2,438 crore to the tourism sector, though a dip from ₹2,541 crore in the previous fiscal, Sitharaman emphasised on developing eco-sustainable mountain trails in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, along with lesser-known landscapes like Araku valley in the Eastern Ghats and Podhigai Malai in the Western Ghats. Positioning tourism as a driver for generating jobs and regional growth, she announced initiatives like upskilling 10,000 guides across 20 iconic tourist sites through a pilot scheme in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Management.

For Bajaj, who heads the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India, this recognition is a major morale-booster. "It was heartening to see tourism emerge as a focus area," says the Padma Shri awardee, adding that the step could be a game-changer for the industry.

Globally, adventure tourism is already a \$683 billion industry. According to the Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024 report, published by the World Economic Forum, India is ranked 39 among 119 countries. As per the India Tourism Data Compendium 2024, in global tourism, the country accounts for 1.45 per cent of the total international arrivals and 2.1 per cent of world-wide tourism receipts. India is being viewed as an emerging adventure hub with the Himalayas, Western Ghats, and coastal regions offering trekking, river rafting, paragliding, and scuba diving experiences, it said.

Two days after the budget, Uttarakhand opened 83 major Himalayan peaks, including Nanda Devi, for trekking and mountaineering expeditions. The state government also waived off expedition-related charges such as peak fees, camping fees, environment fees.

REGULATING THE SECTOR

According to Bajaj, the country's natural heritage ranks among the world's best and adventure tourism can be a powerful tool to integrate India's far-flung regions into the economic mainstream, and allow the benefits to percolate to remote local communities. "The focus on adventure tourism will also help regulate the sector in the long term," he feels. "The idea is to use existing trails, signpost them, set up homestays and support local people along the way," he says. "We will keep to wilderness areas as much as possible. Locals



BASE CAMP OF STOK KANGRI IN LADAKH WHERE TREKKING HAD TO BE BANNED DUE TO OVERTOURISM. PHOTO COURTESY: PARTH JOSHI

will be the custodians of the trails. The critical thing for adventure tourism is the need to ingrain the 'leave no trace' ethos. As operators, we have to leave our beautiful wilderness areas cleaner than we find them."

Equally critical is the free, prior, and informed consent of local communities, particularly forest dwellers and pastoralists, before any decision is taken to expand trails, suggests Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, founder of the Nature Conservancy Alliance in Jammu and Kashmir.

For nomadic communities such as the Bakarwals and Gujjars, expanding trekking routes often disrupts migration corridors, grazing lands and restricts forest access. "While a few may gain short-term income, the long-term costs — livelihood insecurity, cultural erosion, and ecological loss — are borne by many. Given that 80-90 per cent of the region's economy depends on agriculture, horticulture, and pastoralism, undermining water and rangeland security in the name of tourism is deeply misguided," says Dr Rasool.

COST TO ENVIRONMENT

Any proposal for new or expanded trails must begin with the acknowledgment that mountain ecosystems are already overstressed, warn environment experts.

Mountaineer and climate professional Parth Joshi says sustainable trail planning must begin with scientific carrying-capacity assessments, seasonal limits, and route diversification. "Unchecked growth backfires, and infrastructure-focused tourism development that ignores ecological thresholds can quickly become self-defeating," he points out. Sharing a recent example of Stok Kangri, a popular trekking peak in Ladakh, where local communities and tour operators attributed depleting water quality

and receding glaciers to overtourism and were forced to put a ban on trekking, Joshi says, "Across several popular trails in the Himalayan region, rapid trail popularity and increase in tourism numbers have often outpaced planning for waste, water, safety and local capacity."

Rather than chasing large tourist numbers, planners should prioritise quality of experience and safety, ensuring trails regenerate ecologically and remain viable for local livelihoods over the long term, urges Joshi. "The goal should not be to maximise access everywhere, but to protect ecological integrity while sustaining tourism-based livelihoods."

"There must be mandatory cumulative environmental impact assessments, not fragmented, project-wise clearances, besides glacier- and watershed-level studies, climate vulnerability assessments and scientifically enforced carrying-capacity limits," says Dr Rasool. Without adequate safeguards, the term 'ecologically sustainable' remains rhetorical rather than real, he points out.

Existing treks such as Kashmir Great Lakes and Tarsar-Marsar are already showing visible ecological stress with piles of plastic accumulation, human waste near alpine lakes, and contamination of freshwater sources, says Dr Rasool. "Mountains do not have the capacity to absorb or process such waste. Increased footfall from new trails will inevitably magnify pollution, degrade fragile water bodies, and threaten downstream drinking water systems. This is no longer a tourism issue; it is a water security and public health concern."

The most pressing environmental issues caused by the current mountaineering tourism in India, Joshi argues, are "unmanaged solid and human waste, contamination of high-altitude water sources, soil erosion,

degradation of glaciers, and growing disturbance to wildlife". These impacts, he says, are magnified by short operating seasons and increasing climate volatility, which compress tourist activity into narrow windows, accelerating ecological stress. "The Everest region offers a cautionary tale. Decades of climbing have left thousands of tonnes of waste, prompting repeated clean-up drives and strict regulations, including a steep rise in climbing fees, yet the damage continues unabated. In India, similar pressures are visible along heavily crowded Himalayan routes such as the Gangotri-Gaumukh corridor, where high footfall has strained waste management systems and fragile alpine ecosystems."

NEED FOR 'BETTER CONNECTIVITY'

What is lacking is not attractions, but accessibility, says Kullu-based Chandan Sharma, who runs trekking company UpNorth. "The idea of developing trekking and hiking trails may sound progressive, but it misses a far more fundamental requirement — basic infrastructure. We are losing foreign tourists not because our destinations are unattractive, but because reaching them is difficult, time-consuming, and often exhausting."

The need of the hour is the development of highways, regional airports, and reliable approach roads to these remote and scenic locations, he says.

"Comfortable, safe, and efficient connectivity is what truly encourages international tourists to visit and return. If India wants to compete globally in tourism, infrastructure must come before promotion," says Sharma.

SAFETY CONCERNS

Incidents like the death of nine trekkers from Karnataka in a blizzard during the Sahastra Tal trek in Uttarakhand in June 2024 and a British hiker sustaining fatal rib injuries after a fall during his descent on the Dhauladhar trail from Dharamkot to Triund in Himachal Pradesh in February 2025 highlight risks posed by unpredictable weather, unregulated trails and inadequate preparedness.

Emergency response needs to evolve from reactive, event-driven rescues to institutionalised preparedness, says Joshi. "Equally important is clear coordination and accountability. Rescue protocols must have defined roles for civil authorities, local administrations, tour operators and private rescue providers, rather than relying disproportionately on the armed forces or ad-hoc responses by the disaster management authorities."

Acknowledging the need to develop adventure sports in a safety-conscious manner, Bajaj says the association has drawn up safety protocols, and is working with state governments and ministries on a national framework.

As India charts its next steps on the adventure tourism trail, Dr Rasool offers a cautionary note, "There can be no economy without water, no tourism on degraded mountains, and no development that sacrifices future generations for short-term gains."

Now, ensure schools follow the SC order on sanitary pads & toilets

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

BY declaring menstrual health as a constitutional right guaranteed under Article 21 and directing all schools to mandatorily provide free, biodegradable sanitary napkins and gender-segregated, functional toilets, the Supreme Court has truly triggered a reform in the country's education system. A reform that promises to not only improve the health and well-being of adolescent school-going girls, but also put a stop to menstruation-related absenteeism and check the dropout rate.

In fact, the Supreme Court's landmark judgment (*Dr Jaya Thakur vs Government of India*), delivered on January 30, goes well beyond schools and paves the way for alleviating 'menstrual poverty' in the society and upholding the right of women to health, privacy and dignity. By bringing menstrual health under the ambit of Right to Life guaranteed under the Constitution, the order makes it obligatory on the part of employers to ensure availability of free sanitary pads and hygienically maintained toilets for women workers. It also makes it

mandatory for the government to enforce this constitutional right of women.

The apex court's verdict, warning both private and government schools of stringent consequences for non-compliance, also underscores once again what the courts have said many times in the past — that the duty of schools does not end with imparting education. It extends to ensuring the safety, security, dignity, privacy and well-being of students.

Given the importance of the order, parents' associations should become proactive and force schools — both private and government — to implement the directives fully. They should also haul up schools which do not comply with the order within three months for contempt or willful disobedience of the court's directions.

Non-adherence to the order would not only mean violation of the constitutional rights of the students, but also contravention of human rights.

This order, in fact, complements several earlier orders of the Supreme Court on pupils' safety and well-being. While some of them have come in response to public interest litigations filed by individuals or

The apex court's directions will improve well-being of girls, check absenteeism and dropout rate

NGOs following a major tragedy, some have been taken up by the court suo motu.

In 1997, the Supreme Court took suo motu notice of a major school bus tragedy in Delhi caused by gross overloading and over-speeding, resulting in the death of 30 children. The guidelines issued in 1997 and 1998 by the apex court on safe transportation of children (*MC Mehta vs Union of India*) have now been incorporated under the Motor Vehicles Rules by all the states and UTs.

On April 13, 2009, the Supreme Court directed states and UTs to ensure that all schools comply strictly with the National Building Code of India, 2005, particularly Part IV on Fire and Life Safety, aimed at fire prevention, protection and safe evacuation. The court verdict was in response to a public interest litigation seeking fire safety norms in schools, following the dev-

astating Kumbakonam school fire in Tamil Nadu that killed 90 children.

"Educating a child requires more than a teacher and a blackboard, or a classroom and a book. The Right to Education requires that a child studies in a quality school, and a quality school certainly should pose no threat to a child's safety," the court observed in its judgment (*Avimash Mehrotra vs Union of India*).

On September 24, 2024, in response to a writ petition filed by the Bachpan Bachao Andolan, the Supreme Court directed all states and UTs to adopt the Guidelines on School Safety and Security, framed by the Department of Education, Government of India, in 2021 and ensure conformity by all schools. If strictly adhered to, these guidelines will prevent physical, mental and sexual abuse of children and ensure their complete safety and security while at school as well as during travel on school buses.

The guidelines also hold the school managements fully accountable for lapses. The guidelines have their origin in the brutal murder of a seven-year-old student at Ryan International School in Gurugram in 2017 and the subsequent directions from

the Supreme Court to the Union government to formulate compressive guidelines on the responsibilities of schools vis-a-vis child safety. On July 25, 2025, the Supreme Court declared mental health as an integral component of Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution and issued detailed guidelines aimed at preventing suicides in educational institutions.

The guidelines must be implemented by all educational institutions, including coaching centres, the court said (*Sukdeb Saha vs The State of Andhra Pradesh*).

These are all extremely important orders meant to protect students but given the track record of educational institutions in respect of compliance, parents need to be extremely vigilant. If there is no parents' association in the school in which your child studies, make sure that there is one, by bringing together parents.

The school management has an obligation to not only impart quality education, but also ensure a healthy, secure and safe environment for students. Their failure to do so has led to many tragedies. Let us make every effort to prevent these.

— *The writer is a consumer affairs expert*

Russia and US nuclear treaty ends, will the arms race intensify?

On Thursday, the last remaining nuclear arms control treaty between Russia and the United States expired. The treaty, signed in 2010 by then-US President Barack Obama and Russian representative Dmitry Medvedev, committed both countries to limiting their destructive nuclear capabilities. It restricted both sides from possessing more than 700 missiles and bombers and more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads. The treaty was originally set to expire in 2021 but was extended for another five years. Despite this extension, the treaty expired on February 5th. This marks the first time in the last half-century that all limits on the two largest nuclear arsenals have been removed.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed grave concern over this development. He urged both Russia and the United States to renew the agreement. Russia expressed regret over the treaty's expiration and stated that it would act responsibly after the lifting of restrictions on the deployment of the world's deadliest weapons. However, the Kremlin spokesperson clearly stated that the next steps would largely depend on future developments. While Russia pledged to uphold its responsibility towards global values, the Russian Foreign Ministry also stated that they are no longer bound by any obligations and are free to take the next step.

This is a matter of grave concern because the US and Russia possess 87 percent of the world's nuclear weapons. Now that both countries are free from the nuclear treaty and are also in opposing camps, an arms race to build and accumulate weapons is likely to begin. This would place the world on the brink of a nuclear catastrophe that could erupt at any moment. On the other hand, the US has reacted with an attitude of indifference. It was also indicated that discussions on renewing the nuclear treaty would be considered after a meeting between senior Russian and American military officials in Abu Dhabi regarding Ukraine. This means the world is teetering on the brink of disaster; yet these proponents of nuclear weapons want to come to the negotiating table only after asserting their own egos. The Kremlin stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin had discussed the potential collapse of this agreement with Chinese President Xi Jinping the previous day, Wednesday. There is no doubt that the breakdown of the Russia-US nuclear treaty at this time is a tragic development. If an arms race begins between these two powerful nations, new markets for weapons sales will be sought. If wars remain unresolved and some power-hungry leader, driven by ego, uses these weapons, the world will face devastation even before the possibility of a third world war. This treaty was called the New START treaty. Clearly, it needs to be restarted, and therefore, understanding the gravity of the situation, this nuclear treaty should be renewed. Russian President Putin says that if the US also agrees, they are ready to abide by the treaty's limits for another year. It would be best if both powerful nations renewed the treaty, committing to not using nuclear weapons for all the years to come.

-Abhishek Vij

Winning the lottery is not without its dangers

Lottery winners consider themselves very lucky. Nowadays, lotteries offer prizes worth crores of rupees. Lottery winners believe they have acquired immense wealth by simply buying a ticket for a few rupees. Undoubtedly, the joy of a lottery winner knows no bounds. They feel that without any hard work, they have been blessed with wealth, and their life will now become golden. But in Punjab, and in other states where the allure of lotteries attracts ordinary people, the greed of criminal elements is also becoming increasingly evident. They are threatening these winners with death for ransom. Many bumper lottery draws are held in Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan. If an ordinary person wins the lottery, enemies quickly emerge. For example, in November 2025, a vegetable vendor from Jaipur won a 11 crore rupee lottery in Punjab, and in December 2025, a laborer couple in Faridkot won a 1.5 crore rupee lottery. But as soon as the lottery winners' identities were revealed, they started receiving threats. A time comes when the congratulations from neighbors fade, but threatening calls demanding ransom begin. Such incidents occur when the lottery results are advertised on social media, or when data is leaked, or when information is leaked locally and reaches criminals and con artists.

Then, lottery winners have no choice but to hide their identity and go underground. Now, lottery winners are even afraid to collect their winnings. Previously, lottery winners happily contacted the seller after their ticket number was announced, but now the situation is such that lottery winners avoid revealing their mobile number and home address. Many winners send a relative or trusted person to the prize distribution ceremony instead of going themselves. Punjab DGP Gaurav Yadav says that if anyone receives threats, the matter will be investigated. In most cases, relatives are found to be involved in such acts. Lottery winners are advised not to panic over threats, but to inform the police, who will provide them with security. They should not try to settle the matter privately with those making the threats.

India-EU FTA: Creating world's largest free trade area



Rajesh Agrawal
Secretary, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry

India has shared a rich trading relationship with Europe that dates back to 250 BC, even predating the Silk Road. For most part of the next 2000 years, Indian muslins, cotton, handicrafts, spices, emeralds and gems had become the most coveted merchandise in international trade, a bulk of which made their way to Europe. In return, gold and silver poured into India to pay for these fabulous commodities. The Indo- Europe trade achieved great scale and proportions in its halcyon days. The efforts to cement this relationship through a comprehensive free trade agreement started in 2007. The negotiations had to be abandoned in 2013 due to serious differences in positions on both sides on multiple issues. The negotiations started afresh in 2022 and despite the enormity and complexity of the challenges could be completed only due to the strong commitment and visionary leadership of the two leaders. Importantly, the trade agreement that both sides have negotiated is a reaffirmation of the rules-based trading relationship in an increasingly fragile global economic order. The agreement is historic not merely because of the breadth and depth of the topics and disciplines; the agreement is historic because both sides had to reach a common ground on issues that were at the same time hard and difficult.

Most consequential trade agreement: The India- EU free trade agreement is perhaps the most consequential trade agreement

concluded in recent times. It could create one of the largest free trade areas in the world comprising almost 2 billion people and 28 countries that represent 25 percent of the global GDP. In addition, the agreement is modern and novel in its treatment of issues and concerns. The agreement has up-to-date and substantive disciplines as well as procedural provisions for deepening trade relationship. The agreement establishes a new template for addressing market access and regulatory barriers both on goods and services, which reinforces traditional disciplines with innovative elements. For example, the Rules of Origin chapter ensures that only products with substantial processing or production in the partner countries are granted country of origin; this is achieved through detailed and intricate product specific rules that seek to align with existing and newer supply chains. In addition, the agreement replicates intellectual property protections with an added focus on promoting transfer of technology and information flows.

Market openings in goods and services: The critical focus of the

The efforts to cement this relationship through a comprehensive free trade agreement started in 2007. The negotiations had to be abandoned in 2013 due to serious differences in positions on both sides on multiple issues.

agreement is opening up their vast and expansive markets to each other. The agreement offers

market access for more than 99 percent of India's export trade by value of which at least 90 percent of India's exports will receive immediate duty elimination upon entry into force of the agreement. Notably, the labour intensive items such as textiles and clothing, leather, gems and jewellery, wood and wooden crafts, and marine products will receive early gains. It will also enable industries such as chemicals, electronics, agri-processing industries, and minerals to diversify their exports in the vibrant EU common market. While India has allowed market access for EU's automobiles, this has been done in a phased and calibrated manner through tariff quotas. Likewise, India's concessions on EU's wine seeks to protect the interests of the domestic industry, while encouraging competition in higher price segments. Services trade offers significant potential in India- EU trade relationship. India has received commitments from the EU across 144 services sectors under the agreement, which is unprecedented. In addition, the chapter on mobility ensures that temporary entry and stay of professionals and contractual service suppliers will be smoother and more assured, implying that India's talented service professionals can establish their presence in the EU market. The annex on Financial Services provides for greater engagement between India and EU on electronic payment systems, including leveraging India's technological expertise in digital payment systems such as the UPI. The agreement also provides the possibility for the practitioners of AYUSH and Traditional Medicine to provide their services in the EU with greater certainty.

Enhancing freer and fairer trade: The free trade agreement seeks to enhance freer, fairer and mutually beneficial relationship between the two large markets. The trade and sustainable development chapter sets a new model of cooperation in relation to sustainability concerns. The chapter holistically integrates

the objective of sustainable development in their trade relationship, without seeking to harmonise the labour or environment standards of the Parties. The thrust of the engagement is on policy dialogue, technical assistance and mobilization of financial tools and resources. Both sides have also negotiated mechanisms such as the rapid reaction mechanism, non-violation complaints and standalone annexes that could address their specific concerns with respect to certain policy measures or product specific measures.

The real challenge was in achieving the high ambition on market opening without compromising the concerns and sensitivities of some of the key stakeholders, for example, the dairy and agricultural sector. The income and livelihood concerns of the small and marginal farmers and certain industry segments were uppermost in our minds. To be fair, the EU also demonstrated the much needed flexibility in this regard.

Complementing India's FTA strategy: In an era of supply chain disruptions, the India - EU free trade agreement will complement the gains from the India - UK FTA, EFTA and other comprehensive trade agreements. Since 2021, India has concluded 9 comprehensive trade agreements and is holding negotiations to complete several key economic partnership agreements in the next few months. The conclusion of the India- EU trade agreement will serve as a catalyst for hastening India's newer economic and trade engagements. The India -EU free trade agreement is a major step in achieving expanded market access, closer economic integration and achieving strategic autonomy and resilience, especially in an uncertain and volatile global economy. As economic historians note, economic prosperity can best be achieved when nations trade based on fair, rule-based and predictable legal frameworks and institutions. The India- EU free trade agreement seeks to uphold this time-tested principle.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Success is not built overnight; it is shaped by patience, discipline, and belief in the process.
-A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

Why simple hobbies are making a comeback



In a world driven by productivity and constant engagement, simple hobbies are regaining popularity. Activities such as gardening, sketching, cooking, journaling, and knitting are being rediscovered for their calming and rewarding nature. These hobbies offer a break from screens and deadlines. Unlike goal-oriented tasks, they allow individuals to engage without pressure. The process matters more than the outcome, making them ideal for stress relief. Many people find comfort in routines that involve creating something tangible. Growing plants, baking bread, or painting provides a sense of accomplishment that digital interactions often lack. These activities also encourage patience and focus. Simple hobbies are accessible and adaptable. They do not require advanced skills or expensive tools. This accessibility makes them appealing across age groups. For older individuals, hobbies provide structure and engagement, while younger people see them as creative outlets. The return to simple hobbies reflects a broader desire for balance. As life becomes increasingly fast-paced, these activities offer moments of calm and self-expression. They remind people that joy can be found in small, intentional acts.

Why morning walks still matter in a digital age

In an era dominated by screens, notifications, and fast-paced routines, the simple habit of a morning walk often feels outdated. Yet, this quiet ritual continues to hold relevance, not just for physical health but also for mental clarity and emotional balance. Across cities and small towns alike, people who begin their day with a walk often describe it as a grounding experience that sets the tone for the hours ahead. Morning walks offer a rare pause before daily responsibilities take over. The early hours usually come with cleaner air, less noise, and a slower rhythm that allows individuals to connect with their surroundings. Whether it is a park, a roadside lane, or a quiet village path, walking in the morning encourages awareness—of breath, movement, and environment. From a health perspective, walking is one of the most accessible forms of exercise. It does not require special equipment, training, or financial investment. Regular walking improves cardiovascular health, supports joint mobility, and helps regulate metabolism. Unlike high-intensity workouts that may discourage beginners, walking allows people of all ages to maintain consistency without physical strain. Mental health benefits are equally significant. Studies have shown that light physical activity can reduce stress and anxiety levels. Morning walks, in particular, help regulate sleep cycles by exposing the body to natural light early in the day. This exposure supports better sleep quality at night and improves



overall mood. Many walkers also report that their best ideas or solutions emerge during these quiet moments of movement. The social dimension of morning walks is often overlooked. In many communities, walking groups have become informal spaces for interaction. Neighbours exchange greetings, share updates, or simply enjoy companionship without the pressure of structured social settings. These brief interactions contribute to a sense of belonging, especially for older adults or people living alone. Despite these benefits, modern lifestyles pose challenges. Long working hours, late-night screen use, and urban congestion often push mornings into rushed routines. However, even short walks—15 to 20 minutes—can make a noticeable difference. The key lies in consistency rather than duration. In a digital age where productivity is often measured by speed and output, morning walks serve as a reminder that slowing down can be productive too. They encourage mindfulness, health, and connection, all through a habit that has existed long before fitness trends and wearable technology.

Trade, on India’s Terms: What the Interim US Deal Really Delivers

When India and the United States announced an interim trade agreement on February 7, 2026, it did not arrive with the drama of a full-fledged free trade pact. Nor did it promise sweeping market openings or headline-grabbing concessions. Instead, it did something far more important-and far more difficult in today's fractured global trade environment: it stabilised a worsening situation, protected domestic interests, and secured meaningful relief for Indian exporters without compromising national priorities. This agreement comes after nearly a year of trade uncertainty that began in August 2025, when a combination of reciprocal tariffs and Russia-related charges pushed duties on several Indian exports beyond 50 per cent. For exporters, particularly MSMEs clustered in coastal belts and industrial hubs, the impact was severe-orders were stalled, margins collapsed, and job security came under strain. The interim deal brings immediate relief by bringing the overall tariff burden down to 18 per cent, a move that restores competitiveness almost overnight. For Indian exporters,

this is not a symbolic win-it is a practical one. Industries across agriculture, seafood, rice, processed foods, textiles, gems and jewellery, pharmaceuticals, footwear, leather, metals, and engineering goods are once again able to compete in one of India's most important export markets. More than \$30 billion worth of exports that were at risk

More than \$30 billion worth of exports that were at risk are now safeguarded, especially in labour-intensive sectors that directly support employment rather than just balance sheets.

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rather than just balance sheets. The impact is particularly visible in textiles and apparel. With tariffs on textiles slashed from 59 per cent to 18 per cent, Tamil Nadu is expected to reclaim nearly 20 per cent of its lost US market share, providing employment stability to an estimated 75 lakh workers. The reduction in duties on knitted apparel-from 63.9 per cent to 18 per cent-directly narrows Vietnam's cost advantage, benefiting clusters in Tiruppur and Ludhiana. Similarly, the cut in tariffs on woven apparel from 60 per cent to 18 per cent weakens Bangladesh's competitiveness, offering a fresh lease of life to textile units in Gujarat and Delhi. Yet, what makes this agreement politically and eco-

nomically significant is not just what India gained-but what it refused to give away. Agriculture, dairy, fisheries, and allied sectors remain fully protected. Despite sustained pressure from the US for wider access to Indian markets for products such as legumes, sugar, dairy, and horticulture, India held firm. The government's position was clear: unrestricted access would hurt small farmers and compromise food security. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it explicit that farmer welfare was non-negotiable, and the final framework reflects that resolve. The agreement carefully navigates agriculture, traditionally the most sensitive area in trade negotiations. It preserves

roughly \$6.2 billion in agricultural trade between the two countries-a balance that clearly favours India-while helping revive sectors such as seafood, which had seen sharp declines due to tariff shocks. Coastal livelihoods, particularly dependent on marine exports, stand to benefit as confidence and order flows return. Other sectors such as rice, spices, honey, dairy products, and processed foods are also poised for gradual recovery. On the US side, tariff reductions apply only to select goods that do not compete with Indian staples. Lower duties on items such as animal feed inputs help livestock producers without opening the floodgates for sensitive imports. Crucially, the dairy sector remains entirely shielded. There is no risk of market flooding, and India continues to hold its position as a net agricultural exporter in the bilateral relationship. US agricultural exports to India, at around \$2.25 billion, remain well below India's agricultural exports to the US, which stand at about \$6.2 billion. Much of the criticism around the deal hinges on semantics-particularly the distinction between phrases like "intends to" and "commits to." But this is diplomacy, not deception. Claims that India conceded too much for

too little do not stand up to scrutiny. The country secured substantial tariff relief for its industrial and labour-intensive exports while insulating its most vulnerable sectors from new risks. This was negotiation with dignity, not deference. Importantly, this is not being sold as a final settlement. The interim framework is best understood as a stabilising bridge-one that reverses tariff damage, restores access to the US market, and buys time and space for a broader agreement on India's terms. Alongside trade agreements with the EU and the UK, it also helps India diversify export destinations and reduce overdependence on any single market. In a global trade environment marked by coercion, protectionism, and sudden shocks, India's approach stands out for its balance. There is no reason for panic-and equally, no need for exaggerated celebration. What this deal demonstrates is a confident, strategic negotiating posture rooted in national interest. It protects jobs, supports exporters, safeguards farmers, and keeps strategic autonomy intact. In trade diplomacy, holding the line is often harder than crossing it. This agreement shows that India did exactly that-and emerged stronger for it.

Soul replaces old bodies



K SIVA PRASAD
Retired senior IAS officer in the Punjab Government.

One of the most profound teachings of the Bhagavad Gita is its explanation of the soul (atma) and its relationship with the physical body. In a few verses, Lord Krishna dismantles humanity's deepest fear—death—by reframing it not as an end, but as a transition. According to Krishna, the soul neither kills nor is killed. It is unborn, eternal, changeless, and ancient. Only ignorance makes one believe otherwise. In Chapter 2, Verse 13, Krishna explains that just as the embodied soul passes through childhood, youth, and old age within the same body, it similarly passes into another body at death. This transition, he emphasises, should not bewilder the wise. Later, in verses 19 and 20, he reiterates that the soul does not perish when the body perishes. Instead, it discards old bodies the way a person discards worn-out garments and puts on new ones. This metaphor of changing clothes is not merely poetic; it is deeply philosophical and surprisingly compatible with modern scientific principles. When examined through the lens of

science—particularly the law of conservation of energy—the Gita's teachings gain a new clarity. The law of conservation of energy states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only be transformed from one form to another. If, for the sake of understanding, we equate atma with energy—not as a literal equation but as a conceptual parallel—Krishna's words become strikingly lucid. Energy persists even when its form changes. A thermal power station converts heat energy into electricity. A bulb converts electrical energy into light. The bulb itself has a limited lifespan, but electricity does not end when the bulb fuses; it simply flows elsewhere or is used in another device. The body, in this analogy, is like the bulb—temporary, functional, and finite. The soul, like electricity, continues uninterrupted. From the manifested point of view—that is, the physical world we perceive—death appears final. We see bodies decay, breath stop, and movement cease. Based on these observations, we infer that death is inevitable and universal. Our fear of death is born from this inference. We see others die and assume the same fate awaits us. Yet, interestingly, no one ever experiences their own death. Death is always witnessed externally, never internally. Human life, therefore, revolves around a paradox: we fear an event we have never experienced and can never consciously experience. This fear shapes our desires, anxieties, attachments,

and ambitions. From the unmanifested perspective of the atma, however, death is not a reality at all—it is an illusion. The soul does not undergo destruction; only the body does. Just as worn-out clothes are discarded when they can no longer serve their purpose, the physical body is relinquished when it is no longer capable of fulfilling its functions. The soul, unaffected by age, disease, or decay, simply moves on. This understanding radically shifts how we perceive life and loss. Death is not an annihilation but a transformation. It is not a collapse into nothingness but a movement into another state of existence. Fear arises only when we identify ourselves solely with the body and forget the continuity of the soul. Krishna's teaching does not deny grief or emotional pain; rather, it asks us to place them in a broader framework of truth. Loss hurts because of attachment, but wisdom lies in recognizing that what truly is—the atma—cannot be lost. By bridging ancient spiritual insight with modern scientific understanding, we find that the Gita is not in conflict with reason but resonates with it. The soul's journey mirrors the fundamental laws of the universe: continuity amid change, permanence beneath transformation. In this light, death loses its terror. It becomes not an ending, but a quiet changing of clothes—a pause between roles in the long, uninterrupted journey of existence.

The enduring importance of handwritten notes in a digital world

Despite the dominance of digital tools, handwritten notes continue to hold an important place in education, work, and personal life. From classrooms to meeting rooms, writing by hand persists as a practice valued for its cognitive and emotional benefits. Handwriting engages the brain differently from typing. When people write by hand, they process information more actively, deciding what to include and how to phrase it. This process improves comprehension and memory retention. Students who take handwritten notes often recall information better than those who rely solely on digital devices. In professional settings, handwritten notes encourage focus. Writing during meetings reduces the temptation to multitask, which is common when using laptops or phones. Notes taken by hand tend to capture key ideas rather than verbatim content, making them more useful for later review. There is also a personal connection associated with handwriting. Journals, letters, and diaries carry emotional weight that digital text often lacks. The act of writing slows down thoughts, allowing people to reflect more deeply. Many individuals use handwritten journaling as a tool for mindfulness and stress relief. Handwritten notes are particularly valuable for creative thinking. Sketching ideas, drawing diagrams, or writing freely on paper allows for flexibility that structured digital formats may limit. Writers, designers, and planners often prefer notebooks for brainstorming because of this freedom.



In education, handwriting plays a foundational role in learning. Early writing skills support reading development and motor coordination. Even as tablets and smart boards enter classrooms, many educators continue to emphasize handwriting for its long-term benefits. The resurgence of stationery products highlights renewed interest in writing by hand. Notebooks, planners, and pens have become lifestyle items, reflecting a desire for tangible experiences. This trend suggests that people are seeking balance between digital efficiency and physical engagement. Handwritten notes may not replace digital tools, but they complement them. In a fast-paced digital world, writing by hand offers a moment of pause, clarity, and intention. It remains a simple yet powerful practice that continues to prove its relevance.

The growing appeal of local travel over long vacations

Travel preferences have been quietly shifting in recent years. Instead of long, expensive vacations planned months in advance, many people are now opting for shorter trips closer to home. This trend toward local travel reflects changing priorities around time, cost, and experience. Local travel allows individuals to explore nearby towns, natural spots, and cultural landmarks that often go unnoticed. Weekend trips to hill areas, lakes, heritage sites, or rural

homestays have become increasingly popular. These journeys require less planning and offer flexibility, making them easier to fit into busy schedules. One of the main reasons behind this shift is affordability. Long-distance travel often involves high transportation and accommodation costs. In contrast, nearby destinations reduce expenses while still providing a break from routine. For families, local travel offers a practical way to spend quality time together without financial strain. Another factor is the



desire for meaningful experiences. Local travel encourages deeper engagement with places rather than rushed sightseeing. Travelers often spend more time

interacting with residents, trying regional food, and understanding local traditions. These experiences tend to feel more personal and memorable.

Environmental awareness also plays a role. Shorter journeys typically result in lower carbon emissions compared to long-haul travel. Many travelers

now prefer options that align with sustainable practices, such as using public transport, staying in locally run accommodations, or supporting small businesses. Technology has further enabled this trend. Online maps, travel blogs, and booking platforms make it easier to discover nearby destinations. Social media has also highlighted lesser-known places, inspiring people to explore beyond popular tourist circuits. Local travel does not mean compromising on relaxation or enjoy-

ment. A change in scenery, even for a short duration, can refresh the mind. Whether it is a quiet stay in nature or a cultural visit to a historic town, these trips provide the mental reset that people often seek from longer vacations. As travel habits continue to evolve, local tourism is likely to remain significant. It offers balance—between rest and routine, exploration and familiarity. Sometimes, the most rewarding journeys are not the farthest ones, but those closest to home.

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Edit J&K Budget Demystified

Understanding our economy, resources, and the path ahead



Analysis

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The Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir Mr Omar Abdullah presented his second budget in the Legislative Assembly on Friday, revealing a delicate balancing act between ambition and constraint. Framed under the structural limitations of a Union Territory, heavy dependence on central transfers, and rising expectations from a population seeking jobs, stability, and dignity, the budget's significance lies not in its size, but in what it tells citizens about the health of J&K's resources, government priorities, and the realistic path toward economic self-reliance in the short, medium, and long term.

At first glance, the overall budget signals continuity rather than disruption. Growth projections are maintained, capital expenditure is protected, and welfare measures expanded. Yet, much of the expenditure continues to be absorbed by committed liabilities—salaries, pensions, and debt servicing—leaving a smaller share for fresh development initiatives. In simple terms, a large part of the government's income is already “spoken for” before new projects are even considered.

A fundamental reality shaping this budget is J&K's weak own-revenue base. The Union Territory generates only about a quarter of its total expenditure through taxes and non-tax revenues, relying on central assistance and borrowings for the rest. This structural dependence is not easily reversible and constrains fiscal flexibility. While the budget speech emphasizes fiscal discipline, in practice the government's maneuvering room is limited, which in turn influences which schemes can be implemented and how.

The widening fiscal deficit is another signal worth noting. Borrowings are necessary for growth if they fund productive assets, but in J&K, a significant portion of debt covers routine expenditure rather than growth-enhancing invest-

ments. Rising debt servicing costs further squeeze future budgets, constraining new development spending and putting long-term sustainability at risk.

Adding another layer of complexity, a substantial portion of development expenditure is tied to Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS). While these schemes ensure funding and national alignment, they limit local flexibility. Allocations, guidelines, beneficiary criteria, and timelines are largely pre-determined by the Centre. Whether for rural employment, health, education, nutrition, or urban development, the UT often functions as an implementing agency rather than a policy-maker. This reduces room for locally tailored solutions or innovation.

In agriculture and allied sectors, the budget recognizes their central role in J&K's long-term sustainability and social stability. Measures such as crop insurance, improved irrigation, post-harvest storage, horticulture support, livestock development, and diversification into medicinal and aromatic plants aim to stabilize farmer incomes and reduce risk. Yet, the true potential lies in transformational initiatives like the Holistic Agriculture Development Programme (HADP), which, if monitored rigorously at the top level, could reshape the rural economy. HADP envisions turning common farmers into agripreneurs, following global best practices seen in Australia and Europe, where dairy, sheep, and poultry enterprises operate professionally with strict biosecurity measures. In this model, farmers become independent “kings” of their enterprises, commanding control over production, quality, and market positioning.

The medium- and long-term promise of this approach is substantial. Horticulture experiments abroad, such as in New Zealand, show yields increasing from 10–15 MT per hectare to 120 MT per hectare with modern practices, technology, and integrated farm management. Success could elevate farmers' lifestyles, allowing them to generate substantial income while operating professionally run farms. Beyond production, agri-processing and branding are critical. Currently, products like “Kashmiri chili” are sourced from other states, weakening the brand's association with the region. HADP, paired with processing infrastructure, can ensure that local produce is processed and marketed under authentic Kashmiri branding with GI tagging, adding value, creating employment, and establishing the agriculture

sector as a driver of wealth, entrepreneurship, and national recognition.

Manufacturing, often called the missing pillar of J&K's economy, has survived some of the toughest times, but capacities have eroded—not due to inefficiency, but circumstances beyond local entrepreneurs' control. Units have faced cumulative disruptions over years, from security challenges to policy uncertainties, without meaningful compensation. While the post-COVID-19 package offered nationwide interest subvention and account restructuring, J&K's MSMEs remained largely unsupported for the losses and disruptions they have endured over the past three decades. Post-2016, protections such as tax exemptions and purchase preferences for local manufacturers were gradually withdrawn, while all new policies didn't differentiate between local and outside suppliers and investors. Marketing support for local units disappeared, leaving many idle for six years, turning them sick while goods and services continued to be procured externally, eroding local production and entrepreneurial confidence.

“

The direction is broadly correct, the resolve is visible, but the road to genuine self-reliance will be long, requiring patience, discipline, and sustained policy coherence beyond annual budget announcements.

The budget, however, signals a positive step with proposed amendments to the Industrial Policy 2021–30, currently under review after sustained advocacy by industrial chambers. Yet, J&K requires a long-term, sustainable industrial policy that guarantees purchase preference for local manufacturers, promotes exports, reduces unnecessary procedural compliances, and creates an enabling ecosystem for entrepreneurs. This is particularly vital in the context of India's “Make in India” initiative, which cannot succeed unless states develop regional variants—“Make in J&K”—linking policy, production, and market access to local strengths.

The budget highlights the New Central Sector Scheme (NCSS) for J&K, with a total allocation of Rs 28,400 crore. So far, only Rs 840 crore of incentives have

been approved, and reports suggest the scheme is effectively exhausted because incentives are tied to enterprises registered on paper rather than those with projects implemented on the ground. If a special scheme is announced by the Government of India for the benefit of J&K as a whole, its impact cannot be concentrated in a few pockets, as this would create gross inequality in access to opportunities. The UT government must therefore ensure that the benefits of such policies are distributed evenly across all districts, in line with the Centre's objective of inclusive development. Additionally, the government should press the Centre for a First-In-First-Out (FIFO) mechanism, so that operational enterprises across the region can access support under this scheme immediately, rather than remaining unsupported.

In the medium term, revitalized manufacturing tied to local strengths—agro-processing, handicrafts, wool, and mineral based products—can generate employment and value addition. Over the long term, transformation requires more than budget allocations including regulatory stability, infrastructure development and modernization, marketing support, and sustained private investment. Without these, manufacturing risk remaining underdeveloped, limiting J&K's contribution to regional and national industrial ambitions. While the budget signals intent, translating policy into productive capacity and entrepreneurial confidence remains a key challenge.

The services sector, including IT, IT-enabled services, education, healthcare, and emerging fields like biotechnology, is positioned as a future growth engine. Budget allocations for digital infrastructure, skill development, and innovation hubs signal an intent to integrate J&K into the national and global services economy. These sectors are less geographically constrained and can absorb educated youth if the ecosystem matures. Success will depend on execution, private participation, and the ability to retain talent locally.

Tourism occupies a unique place in the budget. It is both an economic opportunity and vulnerability. Investments in infrastructure, promotion, and visitor facilities aim to sustain tourist flows and ensure benefits reach communities across regions. In the short term, tourism provides livelihoods to thousands of households. In the medium term, diversification into eco-tourism, cultural circuits, and off-season activities can stabilize incomes. Over the long term, sustainabil-

ity is critical: over-dependence on tourism without environmental safeguards and complementary economic diversification could expose J&K to climate events, security challenges, or global downturns. The budget signals awareness, but meaningful implementation will determine outcomes.

Social welfare commitments—covering education, energy, transport, and support for vulnerable groups—reflect the government's focus on social stability. These measures ease the cost of living and improve access to basic services. Yet, expanding welfare without parallel growth in productive employment deepens fiscal stress, highlighting the tension between the moral imperative of welfare and the economic necessity of restraint.

Viewed through a planning lens, the budget's short-term strategy emphasizes stabilization—supporting households, farmers, and key sectors while sustaining spending momentum. The medium-term approach aims to build capacity through infrastructure, skills, and sectoral diversification. The long-term aspiration is economic self-reliance, reduced dependence on central transfers, and a shift toward higher-value activities. Transitioning from aspiration to achievement, however, is constrained by fiscal realities, the institutional limits of UT status, and structural economic weaknesses.

Ultimately, the budget tells a story of intent constrained by structure. The government demonstrates resolve to invest, protect the vulnerable, and signal growth orientation, even at the cost of a higher fiscal deficit. Rising borrowings narrow future choices and increase dependence on the Centre. Centrally Sponsored Schemes, while beneficial, limit local innovation. Self-reliance in agriculture, manufacturing, and services is clearly articulated as a goal, but realizing it will require reforms, private investment, and institutional strengthening far beyond a single budget.

For the common citizen, the message is candid. The budget does not promise miracles. It seeks to manage risks, build gradually, and keep the economy moving forward within tight constraints. The direction is broadly correct, the resolve is visible, but the road to genuine self-reliance will be long, requiring patience, discipline, and sustained policy coherence beyond annual budget announcements.

Shakeel Qalander, prominent business leader and a civil society animator

House in Jammu, Home in Kashmir

We live in a house here. Our home is in Kashmir

FREEZE FRAME

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I went to Jammu this early winter. Not as a visitor. Not as a traveller. But as someone returning to a memory. We met our old Pandit family friends. The moment the door opened, their faces changed. There was excitement, yes. But more than that, there was recognition. A kind of recognition that doesn't need explanation. They greeted warmly as if time had folded in on itself. As if years had not gone by. As if geography had been a misunderstanding.

One of them smiled and said, “It feels like we are living our golden days again.” Another corrected him gently. “Not living,” he said. “Breathing.”

That word stayed with me. They spoke of Kashmir not as a place. But as a sort of rhythm. Of waking up to familiar sounds. Of seasons that arrived softly, not violently. Of neighbours who did not need invitations. Of lives that were not merely shared, but intertwined. Not just living together, they said. But actually breathing together.

They have their own house in Jammu. They have lived there for more than thirty years now. They have built lives, routines, resilience. Yet one sentence returned again and again. “We live in a house here. Our home is in Kashmir.”

That evening, they cooked. Not for formality. For remembrance. *Nadur te daal. Gogji te maaz. Haakh te chaman.* The food carried stories. The smells carried childhood. Each dish was

a sentence from a language spoken without words. We ate slowly. We listened more than we spoke. Somewhere between the first and the last bite, something softened in the room. The past did not feel heavy. It felt close.

Later, I returned to Jammu again. This time for an official assignment. And this time, we met other Pandit brethren. Their stories were different. They spoke of extreme weather. Of summers that burned instead of warming. Of winters that were dry and harsh in their own way. Of bodies that never adjusted. Of health that weakened quietly. Of ageing accelerated by unfamiliar skies.

They spoke of loss, not dramatically. Loss had settled into them like dust. They spoke of hardship without bitterness. Of starting over without complaint. Of children who adapted faster than parents. Of elders who carried silence like a second spine.

And as they spoke, narrating anecdotes, something became painfully clear. There is no single story of suffering. There are many. Those who left did not leave lightly. They carried grief into new walls, new streets, new climates. They learned survival where belonging once came naturally.

And those who stayed back did not stay untouched. They carried a different loss. Young lives disappeared too soon. Mothers buried sons, not dreams. Childhoods were shortened, laughter sprouted guardedly and fear became part of growing up. They too lost neighbours, rhythms and shared laughter. They lived among absences that were never filled. Homes changed shape on both sides. Life went

on. But something vital was broken, quietly, inside homes and hearts. In Jammu, many houses stood complete, yet missing something unnamed. The suffering was different. But the ache was familiar. It is tempting but senseless to measure pain. To compare losses. To ask who suffered more. That question leads absolutely nowhere.

What remains is this: people on both sides learned how to live without what once made life whole. The Pandit friends in Jammu spoke of return, not as a plan, but as a feeling. A return that happens in memory, in food, in language, in sudden tears triggered by a familiar phrase.

And those who stayed back talked of coexistence not as an ideal, but as something once lived; easily, naturally, without effort.

No one spoke of blame. No one used sharp words. Only small, truthful sentences. We lost something precious. We all did. Not land. Not property. We lost a way of being together.

And perhaps the deepest tragedy is not displacement or endurance, but the quiet normalisation of loss. The way people learned to carry it without asking questions. Without seeking answers. Without hoping for reparation. From both sides.

Yet even now, when old friends meet, something remarkable happens. Laughter returns briefly. Food tastes fuller. Stories flow without caution. For a few hours, people breathe together again.

That tells us something important. That what was lost was not erased. It was carried. By those who left. And by those who stayed. Silently. Genuinely. Humanly.

Roads, Regions and the Weight of Geography

Connectivity in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh has never been merely logistical



Column Series

Dr S Bashir Ahmad Veeri
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I was scheduled to present a paper in New Zealand on 3–4 February titled “Statistical and Numerical Models for Landslide Susceptibility along the National Highway in Jammu & Kashmir, India, and Its Political and Economic Impacts.” Owing to the ongoing Budget Session, I was unable to travel despite all arrangements being in place. The present series of articles distills the core technical analysis and abstract of that work into accessible write-ups aimed at informing the public and guiding planners and technocrats on the vulnerability, socio-political consequences, and mitigation of recurrent landslides that frequently disrupt this critical corridor.

Connectivity has always carried a political meaning in Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. Roads here were not simply instruments of movement; they were markers of access, authority and reassurance. From the earliest cart tracks to modern highways, the region's transport history reflects the tension between geography and governance, between terrain and political imagination.

Historically, Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh evolved as geographically and politically distinct regions. Jammu's relatively stable terrain allowed earlier road penetration during the Dogra period, facilitating administrative consolidation and trade. Kashmir Valley, despite its

centrality, remained seasonally vulnerable, dependent on passes that closed for months. Ladakh, perched on the trans-Himalayan plateau, remained the most isolated—linked tenuously through routes that were functional only in limited windows. These inherited distinctions did not disappear with modern state-building; they were merely overlaid with new administrative frameworks. The construction of the Banihal Cart Road in the early twentieth century marked a turning point for the Valley, reducing—but not eliminating—its dependence on weather-bound routes. Post-Independence, the Jammu–Srinagar highway became the Valley's primary lifeline, investing the road with symbolic and material significance. Any disruption quickly translated into economic stress, administrative anxiety and political unease. The Srinagar–Leh axis, meanwhile, remained an even more fragile corridor, open for barely half the year and exposed to extreme climatic volatility.

These inherited distinctions continue to shape contemporary political anxieties, particularly when recurrent connectivity failures revive older questions of regional neglect, administrative distance and uneven development. Roads thus function as reminders of historical hierarchies that infrastructure alone has never fully resolved.

From an engineering and environmental standpoint, road development in this region has always confronted the limits imposed by a young Himalayan geology. Most routes cut across unstable lithological formations where slope equilibrium is delicately balanced. Studies using slope-stability models indicate that increased pore-water pressure—caused by rainfall, snowmelt or subsurface seepage—sig-

nificantly reduces shear strength in exposed slopes. Where drainage is inadequate and cut slopes remain unsupported, even moderate precipitation can trigger landslides. In such settings, roads do not merely traverse fragile terrain; they actively reconfigure it.

Hydrological factors play a decisive role along both the Jammu–Srinagar and Srinagar–Leh routes. Changing precipitation patterns, rapid snowmelt and blocked natural drainage channels have intensified slope saturation. Scientific assessments using rainfall-threshold models increasingly point to a narrowing margin of safety, where disruption becomes not exceptional but expected. This makes connectivity less a matter of emergency response and more a question of long-term planning.

Yet the political discourse around roads often remains reactive. Closures are treated as episodic failures rather than structural outcomes of terrain, climate and design choices. Temporary fixes restore traffic, but rarely address the cumulative stresses embedded in the landscape. Over time, this cycle erodes public confidence, reinforcing perceptions that connectivity remains provisional rather than assured.

A sustainable response lies in acknowledging geography as a governing variable, not an inconvenience. Preventive slope management, scientific drainage design and region-specific engineering standards must move from advisory documents to operational priorities. In a region where roads shape economic rhythms and political mood alike, reliability is not a luxury—it is a condition of stability.

Dr S Bashir Ahmad Veeri is a serving legislator from Bijbehara and contributes occasionally to GK Op-ed pages in larger public interest.

ILLUSIONS
AND
DELUSIONS



TCA Ranganathan
The former chairman of the Export Import Bank of India is a banker with a theory of everything
✉ @tcartca

Taxpayer and the missing trust: Can fairer rules help?

The Finance Minister's lament in her Budget speech that India has too few taxpayers highlights a deeper truth about State capacity. In a country of 1.4 billion, only 8.09 crore income tax returns were filed in FY 2023-24 – just 6.7% of the population. Of these, nearly 4.9 crore reported zero taxable income. Even among filers, most do not pay. It is tempting to conclude that Indians simply dislike paying tax. But the problem is not only behavioural. It is structural and equally about what the system quietly permits.

India's labour market remains dominated by informality. Millions earn low, irregular or seasonal incomes in agriculture, construction, small trade, and services. These are hard to measure and tax. As a result, the net tilts towards those easiest to see: salaried employees. Tax deducted at source leaves them no choice. In practice, India's income tax becomes a tax

on visibility. The other half of the story is more uncomfortable: multiple tax shelters shrink the effective base even among those who can pay. This is why the Finance Minister's lament can sound unfair to honest taxpayers. Many citizens do not object to paying taxes; they object to being the ones with the fewest escape routes.

Take a common example. A car purchased in the name of a company is claimed as a business asset, with depreciation, fuel, repairs, and insurance written off. Yet it is used as the family car. Compare this with a salaried taxpayer buying a car from post-tax income, with no deductions. The same consumption attracts very different burdens. This pattern extends to travel, gadgets, mobile bills, and restaurant spending – all routed through business accounts under weak rules and weaker enforcement. Over time, it creates a two-tier

culture: one in which tax is deducted automatically, and another in which tax is shaped by accounting creativity.

Family-run businesses split income among relatives to stay in lower tax brackets. Presumptive taxation, designed to simplify compliance, is often misused by enterprises that are no longer small. And, most politically sensitive of all, agricultural income remains outside the tax net. Even if justified for small farmers, the exemption creates space for high-income individuals to avoid scrutiny. Together, these practices erode credibility. In taxation, credibility is not a side issue; it is the foundation.

To its credit, the government has expanded the tax net. The CBDT reported that the number of taxpayers rose to 10.4 crore in 2023-24 from 5.7 crore in 2014-15. Technology, pre-filled returns, and easier filing helped.

But the deeper question is whether this expansion feels fair. If filings rise but shelters remain open, trust will not keep pace. The easy temptation is to squeeze the visible base further – lower thresholds, reduce deductions, extract more from the salaried middle class. It is administratively simple but economically and politically unwise. It weakens consumption, deepens resentment, and pushes the system towards a narrow, high-pressure model.

A better approach is fairness-enhancing reform. The government should simply disallow personal-type expenses such as car running costs, restaurant bills, and gadgets like cell phones, when claimed as business deductions. Closing this loophole would immediately make the system feel fairer to salaried taxpayers who have no such escape routes. Another step towards fairness would be to adopt a common tax calculation format for firms, partnerships

and companies. Today, the differences in rules allow scope for arbitrage and creative accounting. A uniform format would reduce loopholes, simplify compliance, and reassure taxpayers that the system does not privilege one type of entity over another.

Enforcement must also be less discretionary and more predictable. Fear of scrutiny discourages formalisation among small businesses. India's taxpayer base will expand meaningfully only when formal jobs expand across a wider spread-out geography.

The Finance Minister is right to worry about India's small number of taxpayers. But the way forward is not to scold citizens into compliance. It is to build a system where the burden is evenly shared, shelters are harder to exploit, and honest taxpayers feel the rules apply to everyone. A tax system cannot demand trust; it must earn it.

KNOWN UNKNOWN

A Republic in conversation

I was honoured to be the chief guest at this year's Republic Day celebrations in my residential community. Speaking to neighbours, families, and children on that morning prompted a deceptively simple question: What is India? Is India land? Or is it a feeling? Is it memory and story, sacrifice and identity? History? Or language? Is India its gods? It is all of that. And it is its people.

India, as a Republic, is best understood as a conversation across generations. Even within many Indian families, different conversational strands coexist. There are those who questioned society through ideas and words, and those who built, administered, and maintained the everyday machinery that allowed society to function. Reformers and practitioners. Thinkers and doers.

In my family, that duality was visible. On one side were writers and social reformers who believed that reason and questioning were essential to progress. My great-grandfather, Tripuraneni Ramaswamy, wrote poetry when India was not free. His words were not decorative. They were meant to instil resolve. In one poem, he wrote that a young person who has girded himself never turns back, and one who has given his word never runs away. These lines predate the Constitution, yet speak the same ethical language of responsibility and commitment.

Writing before and after independence, my grandfather, Tripuraneni Gopichand, spoke about those without a voice, social misfits, and the economically left behind. He questioned, through his characters and psychoanalytical narratives, what is it that constitutes progress and inclusion. On the other side of my family were engineers, family-trained civil contractors, and administrators who collected taxes and kept accounts. Their contribution was quieter and less visible, but no less important. They built roads, houses, canals, and institutions that outlasted them. Together, these strands reflect an essential aspect of India. The Republic has been shaped as much by those who asked uncomfortable questions as by those who ensured daily life did not collapse.

Religion, borders, migration, ancestry, and tribes together complicate the idea of India in productive ways. India is one of the few societies where almost every major religion has lived side by side for centuries, making faith a source of meaning and moral order as well as contestation. The Republic neither erased religion nor elevated one above the other, choosing instead a demanding balance between freedom of belief and the primacy of citizenship, a balance that requires constant restraint and renewal.

India's political borders, shaped by colonial administration and the trauma of Partition, sit uneasily against far older civilisational flows in which languages, cuisines, customs, pilgrimages, and kinship networks crossed frontiers with ease. Migration has been a constant, long preceding passports and visas, and remains a powerful driver of economic and social change. Even contemporary debates on ancestry and genetics, framed through ANI and ASI populations, point not to purity but to repeated migrations and admixtures, reminding us that India was shaped by encounter and assimilation rather than a single origin story. Tribal communities deepen this understanding, many predating classical civilisations and carrying distinct relationships with land, language, and belief. Independent India's journey shows how these complexities have been managed, sometimes well and sometimes imperfectly.

It is worth renewing the Republic's conversation in practical ways – mentoring a teenager, building local capability through startups and skills, or amplifying voices otherwise unheard. Citizenship, after all, is where belonging meets duty.

For many Indians, belonging has always been layered. My country is where my tribe is, and my country is also where my duty calls. India has endured because it has made space for both: rootedness and obligation, identity and responsibility, belonging and service. India is a plurality, undefined. Let us keep it that way.



Gopichand Katragadda
The former CTO of Tata Group and founder of AI company Myelin Foundry is driven to peel off known facts to discover unknown layers
✉ @Gkatragadda



THIS AND THAT

A sweet turn in diabetes treatment

Something significant has changed in the way the medical establishment looks at diabetes. For long described as a chronic, progressive disease with complications affecting all aspects of life, diabetes is now seen as a condition that can be reversed.

On diagnosis, patients used to get some medication, and dire predictions about what could lie in store down the years. Some of the bleakness is now being dispelled by newly introduced treatment protocols. Doctors are still wary of the term 'cure', but they are talking about remission, a state where blood glucose returns to normal levels without medication. The focus has shifted to lifestyle – diet, sleep, and exercise. You can imagine what a game-changer this is – at least when it comes to how diabetics imagine their future years. They are being offered a way out of a life sentence. Behave, and you will be let off based on your good conduct!

It is jokingly said that two kinds of medicine are common in India – herbal and verbal. As one who has heard the most outlandish solutions to diabetes, I can tell you they raise hopes quickly and crash them equally quickly. And we have no dearth of snake oil salesmen when it comes to problems that conventional medicine has no answers for.

Around 2004, I began to scour the Net for medical literature on diabetes, and continued my search for at least five years. I was looking for wisdom that was derived from experience and not textbooks. Among the many things that came my way, the story of Dr Richard Bernstein (1934-2025) caught my attention the most.

An engineer by training, Bernstein was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in the 1940s, when he was a child. Despite

following his doctors' instructions diligently, his condition deteriorated, and he was plagued by complications like neuropathy. Frustrated, he took matters into his own hands in the 1960s. At a time when home glucose monitoring wasn't available to patients – glucometers were hospital tools only – he leveraged his wife's position as a physician to procure one.

He began meticulously testing his blood sugar responses to different foods, discovering that carbohydrates spiked his levels dramatically while proteins and fats provided stability. He mapped his findings on a graph. Much to everyone's surprise, he started getting better. He thought he had stumbled on a new way to treat diabetes and wrote an article about his self-experimentation. No medical journal was willing to publish it.

SR Ramakrishna
often sees high art in kitsch and vice versa



They said he was not qualified – he held no degree in medicine.

When he was 45, he quit engineering and signed up for medical school. He became an MD. He was simultaneously working on a low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet that normalised blood sugars and reversed many complications. Empowered by his results and his medical degrees, he started treating diabetics.

Emphasising strict dietary control over reliance on pills and insulin injections, he achieved considerable success in his practice. He summed up his findings in his book, *Diabetes Solution*, first published in 1997 and updated since, challenging mainstream advice, and

arguing that diabetics could achieve near-normal blood sugars through diet alone or with minimal medicines.

It took some decades for Bernstein's philosophy to permeate mainstream methods. His advice is easier for meat eaters to follow. Vegetarian diets are rich in carbohydrates from grains. But with some tweaks, vegetarians have also been able to try his method.

In more recent years, I have explored structured diabetes remission programmes, which align with Bernstein's focus on diet but incorporate support with the help of apps and AI tools. These programmes emphasise carbohydrate restriction, meal planning, and tracking. They provide nutrition coaching, occasional doctor consultations, and monitoring tools.

A breakthrough came in 1921 when Canadian researchers Dr Frederick Banting and Charles Best discovered how insulin could be used to treat diabetics. Over the decades, we have heard of radical treatments in the making, but few have come into clinical practice. The recent advent of drugs like Ozempic and Mounjaro has generated much excitement, but it is still too early to say whether they will make a big impact in India, described as the world's diabetes capital.

Remission isn't guaranteed, and a relapse can occur with any deviation from the diet, but the silver lining motivates action. The perception began changing in 2009 with a formal definition of remission by a consensus group. In 2021, the American Diabetes Association refined it further, defining remission as an HbA1c of under 6.5% sustained for at least three months off glucose-lowering medications. This evolution has brought optimism. As for the healing, well, work on it!

SANS THE SACRED

Epic grudges, deadly brawls

I recently read about a man who was killed in Delhi, allegedly over a fight about who would pay for chicken at a party, and it got me thinking about how party brawls can prove quite fatal. A case in point – the Yadavas in the *Mahabharata*.

Everyone interested in the *Mahabharata* knows about how the young son of Arjuna, Abhimanyu, was killed by multiple warriors fighting against him, when he had no chariot and his bowstring was cut off from the back. And the killing of Drona, after Yudhishtira lied to him that his son Ashvatthama was dead, is well known too. But there was another killing that not only made ripples in the *Mahabharata* war but had deadly consequences decades after the incident.

Satyaki, a Yadava warrior and Arjuna's disciple in archery, was a powerful presence in the Pandava army. Bhurishravas was a Kuru prince, the son of Somadatta, who fought on the Kaurava side. The two never missed an occasion to attack each other during the *Mahabharata* war because of a long-standing conflict between their families. Bhurishravas's father and Satyaki's grandfather had once fought a battle over Devaki, who later became Krishna's mother. Ultimately, Satyaki's grandfather, who had fought on behalf of Vasudeva (who later became Krishna's father), triumphed. But Somadatta was angry at how he was kicked, and his hair was pulled in the fight. He performed penance to Shiva to obtain a son who would avenge the insult he suffered. This bad blood between the two families continued even after Devaki was married, Krishna was born, grew up, and served as Arjuna's charioteer in the war!

In the war, an exhausted Satyaki, who had been battling against Drona all day, was challenged by an enthusiastic Bhurishravas and could not refuse. Bhurishravas overpowered Satyaki and dragged him by the hair and kicked him in battle – thereby avenging the insult done to his father several decades ago. Meanwhile, Krishna informed Arjuna that Satyaki was being dragged around, unconscious, and right before Bhurishravas could cut off Satyaki's head, Arjuna shot an arrow from a distance that lopped off Bhurishravas's arm.

Bhurishravas was stunned and let go of Satyaki. Then, he began to rebuke Arjuna for breaking the rules of the battle by attacking an opponent who was not engaged in battle with him without warning. Before Arjuna even replied, Bhurishravas decided that he was done with battle and renounced the world, preparing to give up his body. At this point, Satyaki regained consciousness and retaliated by decapitating Bhurishravas, while he was lost in meditation. Satyaki's actions were criticised by warriors on both sides of the battle, but he justified himself by claiming that he was only avenging the insult that was meted out to him by kicking him while he was unconscious.

The battle continued and ended. Bhurishravas was dead, but Kritavarma, a fellow Yadava who fought on the side of the Kauravas, survived along with Satyaki. Several decades later, when the Yadavas were at a drinking party, Satyaki brought up some wrongdoings of Kritavarma from decades ago. Kritavarma, of course, lost no opportunity in reminding Satyaki that he was no paragon of virtue himself. After all, he had cut off the head of Bhurishravas when the latter was unarmed and had even renounced the world. When Satyaki picked up some grass to strike Kritavarma with, it turned into a missile in his hands, thanks to a sage's curse. The fight that so began ended with all the Yadavas killing each other.

Now, what are we supposed to take from all this? Perhaps the lesson is simple. If politics turns into a highlight reel of old grudges, everyone loses.



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CULTURE AND COSMOS

The Valentine's Day illusion: What couples get wrong about love



Shaifali Sandhya
is an international psychologist, former professor, and writer on culture, cosmopolitanism, and global affairs

As roses flood markets on Valentine's Day, divorce and separation petitions rise. Behind the roses, quirky reckonings unfold at home. If you could choose again, I ask a couple: what would you want in a partner?

In their mid-30s, they've been together for two decades. They move between Bengaluru and Silicon Valley, work demanding jobs, and raise toddlers. Like them, many couples I work with are facing unsettling questions at a time when love is renegotiated, marketed, and made more spectacular. *Why doesn't this feel nourishing anymore? Should I stay or leave? Why is my partner distant?* Their uncertainty reflects wider shifts in how love is imagined and lived.

Today, love marketed by billionaires and influencers is increasingly commodified. The pickup line – "May I meet you?" – suggests billionaire Bill Ackman can solve for both romance and declining birth rates. Find yourself somebody who loves you with an intensity, says US Vice President J D Vance, as the devotion Democrats feel towards undocumented immigrants. "Never question me," snarls the drunken, male

protagonist of a new Bollywood blockbuster to his partner, if you want a happy married life. On-line, viral memes – ghosting, monkey-branching, throning, wokeshing – urge, "Don't let a man love you quietly." Love must be spectacular.

Against this cultural din, where love is loud yet mysterious, their answers feel radical in their simplicity. "Someone who doesn't make me feel unseen," the wife says. "Someone who listens, and actually hears me." The husband adds, "Someone I can trust, who supports my growth and well-being."

What they describe isn't uncommon; it's simply overshadowed. As love becomes spectacle, intimacy rooted in responsiveness often vanishes. Relationships rarely collapse from lovelessness; they collapse because love is mistaken for intensity rather than the daily act of showing up, again and again. Cultural fantasies of a perfect romance magnify unmet expectations, exposing preexisting fractures. Strained couples are nearly five times more likely to separate around symbolic celebrations such as Valentine's Day when scrutiny intensifies.

This is not an argument against romance or celebration. To be fair, spectacle is not the problem. Novel gestures can revive connection and reawaken attention. But without consistent care, spectacle substitutes for real connection.

For many couples, loneliness is not a failure of intention but of capacity. Care becomes difficult when political and economic instability drains the attention and emotional bandwidth that intimacy requires. In early 2026, major technology companies announced thousands of layoffs amid restructuring and shifting AI investment. US immigration uncertainty has further destabilised Indian households, triggering sudden returns from the US, income volatility, and identity disruption.

Divorce rates have climbed or plateaued at historically high levels. In Bengaluru, the risk of divorce is highest during the early to mid years of marriage – approximately between years 3 and 7 – with a secondary increase around years 10 to 15. In Karnataka, the number of divorce petitions increased by a factor of three between

2020 and 2022. These numbers reflect not sudden failure, but years of unattended erosion.

These patterns are not random. In my 2020 book on building love and intimacy, I describe three forces that undermine relationships in India. First, interference from joint-family dynamics, even when not living with them, can divide couples. Second, gendered invisible labour, particularly cognitive and emotional workloads, leaves one partner overextended. Third, technology, while sustaining connection across borders, can also fragment attention through constant, unexamined use.

The good news is that erosion happens slowly, and so does repair. Repair begins in the smallest units of daily life. Intimacy grows through small acts of kindness – what clinicians call *responsiveness*. These gestures deepen emotional attunement and foster safety. In many Indian homes, it's common for a husband to walk ahead of his wife or start eating before she does. This isn't just a traditional practice; it can reflect a deeper issue of emotional inequality in the relationship. Intentional gestures, however, send a wordless

message: *we are together; you matter*.

Five clinically grounded practices can rebuild care: First, the 20-second reunion. When your partner enters a room, pause for a full 20 seconds. Make eye contact. Offer a touch. Second, practice specific gratitude – not a vague "thanks for everything" but one precise acknowledgment. Third, when family opinions intrude, respond as a unit. Statements like "We'll talk it over and decide together" publicly signal solidarity. Fourth, rotate responsibility for communicating with extended family so emotional labour does not pool with one partner. A five-minute check-in after family interactions can prevent resentments from hardening. Fifth, make invisible labour visible. Designate weekly chores and shared responsibilities. Instead of waiting to be reminded, do one thing daily that you know your partner worries about.

Roses are red, violets are blue, and love shines true. Let's be honest, romance matters. But it survives only when attention and presence are reliably offered. When love feels lonely, it is because one has been mistaken for the other.



Media attention is not only the enemy of scholarship, but it is also the enemy of moral integrity

André Bételle

newindianexpress.com

MISSING ENGINES: NO 4 ECONOMY LACKS GLOBAL GIANTS

THE many alcoves of social media are crucibles or live labs, microcosms of angst and hope. The centrifuge propels binary voices—tirades against triumphalism. Sceptics rage about the K-shaped economy and the rah-rah brigade races to script and cast the next *Dhurandar*.

The announcement of the trade pact with the US weaved through familiar social smog and bureaucratic fog. The issuance of the joint statement fanned pre-conceived notions of surrender and conquest. Hyperbole defines the geometry of geopolitics. What the White House called a trade deal is effectively a ‘framework for an interim agreement’. Weird as it sounds, it is just that. An agreement to talk, agree to agree again.

The pact lifts uncertainty, trims tariff from 50 percent to 18 percent and soothes sentiments. Yes, the US gets access to agri-markets, but it is an evolving story, as is the saga on non-tariff barriers. The next rounds afford space to push for lower tariffs and exemptions. Much depends on how the US Supreme Court rules, and how the post-ruling framework is cast. This could take weeks, months. This strategic time-out is an opportunity for India to assess the realities.

India is an outlier among outliers. It has vaulted from the 10th largest economy to the fourth largest in the world in just over a decade. It has evaded the law of necessary and sufficient conditions. It is the only economy to reach the status of the ‘fourth largest economy’ without the power of global brands.

History provides some reference for appreciation. West Germany’s economic miracle, *wirtschaftswunder*, enabled its rise as the fourth largest economy in 1960. When it crossed the milestone, Mercedes was launching its sixth sedan and VW Beetles were the rage alongside Porsches. Siemens, BASF and Bosch dominated world markets in power, chemicals and engineering. The banks Deutsche, Commerz and Dresdner funded Germany’s expansion.

Japan built its domination around three Cs—cars, coolers and colour TV to be the No 4 economy. Sony had

set up shop in America, launched Trinitron, CV2000 video cassette recorders and was a global consumer giant. Toyota, once a textile giant known as Toyoda Automatic Loom Works, deployed its TQM programme to create history. Its Cruisers, Coronas and Corollas captured market share. Seiko was a popular timekeeper, Nikon and Canon ended Leica’s supremacy. Fuji, Sumitomo and Mitsubishi banks funded the march of the brands.

China emerged as the fourth largest economy in 2005. Listing on *Fortune 500* signifies size and success. In 2005, China had 16 companies on the global list, while India only had four PSUs and Reliance. Lenovo, originally Legend, bought over IBMs personal computing division to emerge as a global brand. Haier, once a refrigerator company, had billboards in Tokyo, offices in New York and a presence in 100 countries. China’s expansion into the world markets was spearheaded by ICBC, the world’s largest bank since 2012, Bank of China and China Construction Bank.

Indian companies—Tatas, Mahindra, TCS, Infosys, Bajaj, Asian Paints—do have a footprint in global markets. However, India punches way below its weight in value, volumes and market share. Indians are justifiably proud of the IT prowess and nearly \$300 billion of exports. That said, none of the IT giants have a marquee brand or product. Yes, Indian IT runs global corps. Reality check: there are 34 tech companies on the *Fortune 500* and none of them is Indian.

In 2025, the top company of the fourth largest economy makes an appearance on the *Fortune 500* at No 84. There are nine in all—five public sector units, Reliance Industries, HDFC, ICICI and Tata Motors. South Korea, with a fraction of India’s land and population, and a GDP under \$2 trillion, boasts of brands such as Samsung, LG, Hyundai, Kia and 14 companies on the *Fortune 500*. Japan, overtaken by India in GDP, has 38 entities on the list. Germany, the third largest economy at over \$5.3 trillion, has 30. And China, now the second largest economy at \$20 trillion, has 124 entries with three in the top 10.

It has been argued that Indian companies are focused on the opportunities in the domestic market. That is true, but does not quite explain the lack of Indian global giants. Theory says the ability to build scale at home enables expansion abroad. That hasn’t quite played out for India. The system struggles to leverage success stories. It is moot why Isro or National Payments Corporation, global in scale and competency, are not listed and/or are expanding into global markets like a SpaceX or a PayPal.

Brands are built on ideas and technology, and demand investment in research. Korea spends 4.6 percent of GDP on R&D, Japan 3.4 percent, Germany 3.13 percent and China 2.5 percent. India spends 0.7 percent. This is reflected in the number of patents registered. The friction in the system—regulatory cholesterol, judicial delays, opportunistic taxation and lack of credit—is not to be removed just as economic goals, but as existential imperatives.

The global economy is at a confluence of disruptions. Sustainability demands rejigging business models. India is at an inflection point and the trade deals promise a path for expansion. Its need to embrace global opportunities and competition will be challenging, and calls for a dialogue—not the 11/10 post-budget kind—between the State and the private sector. The road to Viksit Bharat cannot be paved by domestic consumption alone. It demands bold policy pivots to foster global giants.

WHAT’S IN THE INDIA-US DEAL?



POWER & POLITICS

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IN the blaze of diplomatic theatre that gripped New Delhi and Washington, the India-US trade agreement was unveiled as a geopolitical spectacle destined to reshape global commerce. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi projected unstoppable momentum, promising the demolition of punitive barriers and an era of cascading prosperity across the Indo-Pacific. The imagery was potent and cleverly choreographed. Two nationalist leaders announced a bilateral pact through social media posts to unlock hundreds of billions of dollars in trade.

Yet, this triumphalist narrative concealed a murkier reality. Its bold declarations were masked by institutional ambiguity, where tariff reductions were announced but not legislated. Its supposed market openings remained theatrical projections rather than negotiated facts. The truth lies not in sweeping rhetoric of limitless access, but in the grinding bureaucratic calibration that must still unfold to prevent this moment from dissolving into diplomatic mirage. Even a belated joint statement on the deal raised more questions than the answers it was expected to deliver.

The American narrative was audacious. Trump declared that punitive tariffs ratcheted to roughly 50 percent amid disputes over India’s Russian oil purchases would be slashed to an 18 percent ceiling. In exchange, he claimed India had committed to eliminating tariffs on American goods and services entirely. He majestically announced that India would grant unfettered access for US agricultural products and move im-

mediately from Russian oil toward US and Venezuelan supplies. India would also purchase over \$500 billion in American products in the coming years.

His postulation, reinforced by the White House and the US secretary of agriculture, painted India as capitulating to American commercial might, transforming its trade surplus into a tributary flow of US exports. It was a narrative designed for domestic consumption, promising to rectify a goods trade deficit that had swollen to approximately \$53.5 billion in 2025.

The Indian response systematically deflated this hyperbole. Modi welcomed the agreement as a pathway to new opportunities. But he conspicuously avoided endorsing Trump’s specific claims regarding oil embargoes, agricultural access, or blanket tariff abolition. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal acknowledged only a tentative understanding on the reciprocal 18 percent tariff ceiling and expressed willingness to increase imports of American energy and technologies over the next decade. However, he differed with the emphatic caveat that India’s vulnerable farm sector and sensitive industries would remain shielded.

The institutional reality further exposed the gap between announcement and implementation. Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal conceded that no formal, legally binding document existed yet to codify the understanding, pointing to structural hurdles that make sudden tariff transformations impossible in the Indian system. Unlike the US executive, which wields tariff authority with sweeping discretion, any permanent reduction in Indian import duties requires navigation through labyrinthine legal processes, including WTO notifications and adherence to most-favoured-nation principles.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, when pressed in Washington, diplomatically deflected specific questions back to the commerce ministry. What was celebrated as a historic deal

was, in fact, a preliminary framework—a political commitment to de-escalate tariff hostilities rather than a finalised architecture of a bilateral trade edifice.

Nowhere does the chasm between American claims and Indian reality yawn wider than in energy security. Trump’s categorical assertion that Modi had agreed to terminate Russian oil imports and reorient supply chains toward American and Venezuelan sources was echoed by senior US officials speaking of rerouted shipping lanes. Yet, Indian officials maintained with quiet firmness that energy procurement decisions would continue to be governed by the immutable calculus of price, supply reliability and strategic diversification, and not by diplomatic pressure from any capital. Russian diplomats confirmed receiving no formal notification from New Delhi regarding cessation of crude purchases. In practice, India has adjusted the proportion of Russian crude in its import basket, responding to shifting market conditions and sanctions-induced discounts.

Similarly, the agricultural dimension exerts more in aspiration than accomplished fact. The American projections imagined transformative penetration of India’s agricultural defences, promising American farmers access to a consumer market of nearly 1.4 billion people and generating billions in new exports across commodities ranging from almonds to dairy. This illusory construct ignored the political economy of rural India, where agriculture sustains hundreds of millions and foreign encroachment triggers volatile backlash. The notion of India unilaterally eliminating duties on all American agricultural goods, a central plank of Trump’s announcement, found no resonance in official Indian communications.

The political choreography reveals divergent national imperatives. For Modi, the deal provides an optic of strength. He was projected as leader who forced an American president to

roll back punitive tariffs while extracting praise for India’s strategic importance. Ruling party circles celebrated this as vindication of ‘huglomacy’, that blend of personal warmth and firm negotiation skills which Modi possesses.

Yet, this celebrity chorus faces opposition from leaders like Rahul Gandhi who decry the agreement as strategic surrender masquerading as victory. They have demanded parliamentary scrutiny of the full text, warning against mortgaging agricultural and energy security for flattering optics and eroding the Atmanirbhar Bharat ethos. Despite these political crosswinds, Indian equity markets responded with cautious optimism, driving the Sensex and Nifty upwards on expectations that stabilised tariff regimes would benefit exports.

Ultimately, this agreement stands as testament to the Trumpian method of international deal making: deploy tariffs as instruments of coercion, announce breakthroughs through spectacular media events and delegate complex legal codification to subsequent bureaucratic sessions. Whether this would yield substantive restructuring of India-US trade or merely a temporary détente would depend on arduous negotiations still to come. The potential exists for genuine stabilisation. An 18 percent tariff ceiling could inject predictability into a relationship historically plagued by volatility. Even structured energy cooperation might support India’s diversification without rupturing strategic autonomy. Realising this potential demands both nations to move beyond the performative phase towards meticulous legal drafting, transparent ratification and systematic protection of vulnerable domestic constituencies.

The deal blazoned with such fanfare is neither the miracle of unrestricted commerce Trump proclaims, nor the catastrophe of capitulation Indian opposition figures fear. Rather, it’s a fragile opening gambit in a longer contest to balance economic integration with sovereign resilience. Whether it becomes the foundation of a transformed bilateral association between two equals or dissolves into footnotes of diplomatic history will be determined not by the enthusiasm of this moment, but by the painstaking integrity of the implementation that would follow.



SOURAV ROY

SUPPORT FOR ATHLETES’ SECOND INNINGS



OPINION

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WITH prodigies like Vaibhav Sooryavanshi and D Gukesh redefining the limits of achievement, the sporting world is witnessing a new wave of teenage brilliance. However, these success stories are rare, with barely 1 percent of those who try to pursue sport as a career becoming successful.

Considering that most young athletes compromise on their academic learning to prioritise a potential career in sport, it is of paramount importance to question the economic cost of the trade-off. With a career spanning at the most to 40 years, many national and state-level athletes struggle to establish a career outside sports, compelled to take up modest jobs through sports quotas, sometimes even taking up menial jobs as drivers or construction workers.

With expensive coaching, equipment and apparel needs, parents spend a fortune to support their children dreaming of a sports career. Budding athletes enrol in schools and colleges where financial assistance is rare.

The bigger, hidden cost for athletes, however, is that of the second innings—of transitioning into another career subsequent to their sporting life. There is a stark absence of a supportive ecosystem for Indian athletes, unlike countries like Canada, which has the Game Plan programme to support athletes in developing skills for other careers, or the UK’s Life after Professional Sports.

India’s sports ministry launched RE-SBT or Retired Sportsperson Empowerment Training programme in 2024 with the goal of making former athletes more employable, a commendable initiative and an important first move. It aims to support retired athletes in the age category of 20-50 who have participated in or won medals at international, national and state-level events through a self-paced learning portal along with on-the-ground training and internship.

There is ample research demonstrating the positive impact of engaging in any type of physical sport. There is also evidence that enhanced participation in sports improves pro-social behaviour and reduces crime among young men. It can act as a powerful catalyst for economic growth, contributing to a healthier society. As per the National Sports

Development Code of India, 2011, sport is a public good and sport development a public function at the national policy level, to be treated at par with public health and public education. However, unlike education or health, sport is popularly viewed as an entertainment—making it exclusive and a career in it accessible mostly to the rich, ignoring the potential spillover societal benefits. India spends a meagre 0.06 percent of the total government expenditure on sports, much lower than many other, far smaller countries.

Sooryavanshi’s is a rare success in a country where barely one in a hundred who pursue sports as a profession make it. Institutional mechanisms must be created for aspirants to have other options if they don’t succeed and after their playing careers end

Beyond prestige, sports can act as a driver of economic growth when developed strategically and efficiently. Revenue during the construction of sports stadiums flows in many directions. Five stadiums owned by the Sports Authority of India generated revenues of ₹218 crore in 2023-24, while its equipment

support division procured goods and services worth ₹38.8 crore.

But while a significant share of the budgetary funds allocated to the department of sports in 2023-24 was directed towards developing sports infrastructure and supporting young athletes, only 0.2 percent was allocated as pension for meritorious sportspersons.

For athletes, a dual career is not just desirable, but essential. Student athletes suffer academically owing to long absences away from the university and lack of flexible course options. Universities ‘support’ their high-performing athletes by ‘giving’ them attendance or being lenient in assessment. This is not at all sufficient in supporting athletes.

If pursuing a sport is viewed as a plausible career option, with structured fall-back plans and income security, more people are likely to invest their time and resources in training. This, in turn, has the potential to expand the talent pool, leading to greater success.

It is a pitiable that the 117-strong Indian contingent for the Paris Olympics won just six medals. It is thus the need of the sporting hour to create mechanisms that encourage people to invest in sports, because a well-supported sporting ecosystem is not just a community or social obligation, but also a strategic economic investment.

(Views are personal)

With inputs from Aishwarya Ganesh, research scholar

QUOTE CORNER

The only thing all sides are asking for is consistency. Bangladesh, Pakistan and India must be treated the same. Yes, Indian fans may say, ‘Cry more, we have the money.’ But with power comes responsibility. Constantly sidelining Bangladesh or Pakistan diminishes their cricket. That’s why the great India-Pakistan or India-Bangladesh games have become increasingly one-sided.

Nasser Hussain, former England captain who was born in Chennai

It cannot be said that the legislative intent was to use this stringent law to persecute young adults involved in consensual, albeit socially unaccepted, relationships.

Justice Anil Kumar Upmanu of the Rajasthan High Court on POCSO Act

If Jeff Bezos could afford to spend \$75 million on the *Melania* movie and \$500 million for a yacht to sail off to his \$95 million wedding, please don’t tell me he needed to fire the *Washington Post* staff. Democracy dies in oligarchy.

Bernie Sanders, US senator, on mass lay-offs at the 148-year-old paper

MAILBAG WRITE TO

Manipur’s choice

Ref: *Tentative steps out of Manipur’s war on quicksand* (Feb 7). As pointed out, president’s rule in Manipur was not good for resolving the conflict. The new government, with seven more cabinet seats left to be announced, reflects a fine ethnic and political balance. Conflicts have again erupted on the demand for a separate administrative unit for the Kuki-Zos. What has been done so far are tentative arrangements for coexistence. The people of Manipur have to choose between peace and conflict.

D Sethuraman, email

Inflation balance

Ref: *RBI needs to ensure lending rates remain in range next fiscal* (Feb 7). The RBI can proactively ensure liquidity support within a reasonable range. But managing inflation is also in the scope of the government and producers. Efficient logistics and distribution as well as supply-demand balancing

are pivotal to control inflation, too.

Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Compensate fully

Ref: *RBI will pay up to ₹25,000 to digital fraud victims* (Feb 7). The RBI’s decision to compensate up to 70 percent and to share the remaining equally between customers and banks is a welcome relief. However, full compensation must be assured when money is transferred from genuine accounts to mule accounts, something that exposes a serious failure in banks’ onboarding, monitoring and transaction control. Honest customers should not bear the cost of institutional lapses.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Vaibhav’s glory

Ref: *Vaibhav gives English lessons* (Feb 7). Kudos to the India Under-19 team for winning the World Cup. Sooryavanshi has already shown his credentials across T20 and youth international formats. He also smashed 101 off 38 deliveries in IPL for the Rajasthan Royals. The young prodigy has a vast repertoire

of shots and is destined for even greater achievements in the years to come.

S Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

Mature teenager

Ref: *Ayush praises team, Vaibhav* (Feb 7). At an age when most kids are left wide-eyed by the sheer size of a cricket ground, this 14-year-old stunned the world with sheer audacity—clearing the boundary rope 30 times at the final in Harare. Vaibhav Sooryavanshi captivated everyone not only with his explosive century but also with his remarkable maturity and leadership. His dedication of the Player of the Match award to the support staff acknowledged their hard work and guidance.

A P Thiruvadi, Chennai

Pakistan instability

Ref: *Suicide blast at Shiite mosque* (Feb 7). The blast highlighting Pakistan’s deepening security crisis. The attack, linked to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, signalled the group’s defiance of the State’s hardline approach and exposed serious intelligence

failures. For India, the incident underscores the continuing regional instability and persistent threat of cross-border extremism.

R S Narula, Patiala

Confusing calls

Ref: *‘Can’t compel woman to complete pregnancy’* (Feb 6). It is conscience-stirring to know that the Supreme Court has allowed termination of a 30-week pregnancy for a 17-year-old. We have mothers aborting unwanted fetuses and getting prosecuted for it. Morally, there’s little difference between the two. The court should be more consistent.

Geetha B K, Kannur

Vijay’s setback

Ref: *Madras HC dismisses Vijay’s plea against I-T penalty* (Feb 6). The high court’s refusal is a great setback for Vijay. He has to set his house in order before making tall claims about corruption, misrule, deterioration of governance and changing the system. Example is better than precept.

R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

When progress steals the ‘kick’ from life

VANAM JWALA
NARASIMHA RAO

THE other day, while travelling to my native village, something quietly unsettling happened. I have known that route since childhood, not just the main road but every deviation, every banyan and neem tree, along the route and every shortcut connecting at least fifty surrounding villages. I was born there, grew up there, and spent the better part of my youth navigating those paths long before signboards existed.

Yet this time, urged enthusiastically by my children, I switched on Google Maps for the driver. As the blue arrow obediently guided us turn by turn, efficiency replaced memory. Certainly replaced curiosity. But the kick of the good old days was missing.

I felt a gentle sadness realizing that we no longer have opportunities to ask directions from a village passer-by holding a hand-rolled cigar and his waistcloth hitched up in typical rural style. The brief conversation with a stranger who becomes a guide correcting human doubt was absent. That small thrill of being lost and found again by people, not by pixels—small dots of light on a phone, was missing. Well, it was not just about the road but about life itself.

That small surrender, choosing certainty over experience, convenience over engagement, felt harmless, even sensible. Yet it reflected something much larger than a navigation choice. It captured the spirit of our times—a steady movement away from effort, involvement, and human exchange toward seamless efficiency. What was gained in speed quietly replaced the kick and the lived satisfaction that

once accompanied. Earlier, progress meant effort and tomorrow it could result in complete absence of human involvement.

When we imagine ‘The future maddeningly advanced world,’ we must pause and ask, where is the high, the thrill, the struggle, and the satisfaction, that once defined living!

For instance, consider the humble car. Its earliest avatar demanded intimacy between man and machine. A peculiar Z-shaped iron rod had to be inserted and rotated with force. One wrong move and the engine could kick back, injuring the driver. It was risky, noisy, physical, but alive. Then came self-starts and before we knew automatic transmission had arrived. Today, cars park themselves, correct the driver, and drive without anyone. We call this evolution, but something disappeared. Yes, the kick is missing.

There was a time when cricket matches stretched across five days, players wore whites, and patience was as important as power. The umpire stood as the final authority where human judgment was final. The subsequent ODIs and T20s gave birth to third umpires, replays, ball-tracking and edge detection. What next? And the kick is missing.

From childbirth to death, life itself is mechanical. Food arrives at the door with a click. Milk no longer knows the cow. Curd is cultured in factories. Every provision we require comes packed, sealed, barcoded, sanitized. Choice exists in abundance, yet involvement is absent.

Medicines are prescribed by algorithms. The doctor by search engines. The hospital by online opinions. Google is the new multi-specialist and ChatGPT the ultimate consultant. It

Progress may be unstoppable. But meaning, if guarded carefully, still is not. Whom do we blame? The scientist who invented? The engineer who refined? The market that demanded convenience? The youth who adapted quickly? Or ourselves, who welcomed ease without asking its price? There is no single culprit and so, none can be blamed. Change did not arrive as an intruder, but it arrived as an invitation. We accepted it gratefully.

seldom goes wrong. Everything is available, yet nothing is earned. And the kick is missing.

Once, we touched the cloth, held it against the light, imagined it becoming part of our daily life. We walked to the familiar tailor, who knew our posture, habits, and even temperament. The first fitting, the second adjustment, the final satisfaction, and that was the kick. Today, the tailor is almost extinct. We are expected to settle for ‘ready-mades’ that fit no one perfectly. The barber has been replaced by apps.

Reading has followed the same path. Books once had weight, smell, margin notes, damaged pages that marked not just chapters but moments in life. We returned to passages and rediscovered ourselves. Today, everything is searchable. Kindle remembers for us, Google summarizes for us, and ChatGPT writes for us. We no longer linger with ideas. Knowledge is instant, but wisdom slow, repetitive, reflective,

and endangered. Handwriting required thought and revealed mood. Pauses meant something. Letters vanished. Receiving a letter was an event. Now messages arrive instantly, carelessly, and disappear just as fast.

Music, too, has changed. There was a time when we waited for a song on the radio, adjusted the antenna, sat still, listened fully. The wait sharpened the pleasure. Now music plays endlessly in the background, unheard, and unfelt. Even memory has been outsourced. We no longer remember phone numbers, birthdays, routes, or recipes. Forgetting is no longer human, it is mechanical. All these changes point to one truth that life has not become easier but solvent. The question is: How can we live meaningfully in a world rushing ahead, when our wisdom belongs to a slower rhythm?

The answer is not resistance, but selective slowing to restore the kick of yore. For the young speed is excitement. For the old depth



is joy. Society must respect both.

Late life does not need acceleration but meaning. It needs spaces where experience is valued over efficiency, and where the kick comes not from novelty but from recognition. Progress should add years to life, and life to years. And that life, often, moves best at a human pace. To me at 78 years of age, optimism is no longer noisy.

Technology will not reverse. The world will not unlearn speed. The kick in many areas of life, may never fully come back. Yet surrender is not wisdom either. There remains a narrow but vital space where choice still survives. We may not decide the direction of the world, but we can decide the distance we keep from it. We can step back without stepping away and participate without dissolving.

We sit with crossed fingers, not in fear, but in fragile faith. Progress may be unstoppable. But meaning, if guarded carefully, still is

The untold story of AP’s failing village secretariats

FROM DOORSTEP REVOLUTION TO GROUND-LEVEL COLLAPSE



The People’s Pulse research team conducted an extensive ground-level survey across Andhra Pradesh, covering villages and wards from Ichchapuram in the north to Tada in the south, to assess the functioning of the village-ward secretariat system. The findings, drawn from direct interactions with staff, officials, elected representatives, and citizens, form the basis of this analysis.

In the summer of 2019, when the village-ward secretariat system (VWSS) was launched on Gandhi Jayanti, the promise was nothing short of transformative. Rooted in Gandhi’s enduring vision of Gram Swaraj—self-reliant, self-governing villages as the soul of India’s democracy—the initiative sought to shatter decades of centralised, top-down administration. By placing multi-departmental staff and community volunteers at every doorstep, it aimed to deliver welfare schemes in a transparent manner, resolve grievances swiftly

and make governance truly accountable to gram sabhas and elected panchayati raj representatives. For millions in rural and urban Andhra Pradesh, especially the poor, landless, and marginalised, this was not just an administrative reform but a pledge of dignity, inclusion, and justice.

The original blueprint was comprehensive and well-intentioned. Inspired partly by Kerala’s panchayati raj model, it envisioned 14 functionalities per secretariat—including a school headmaster and multipurpose development officer—though eventually limited to eleven. Volunteers, who were paid a modest monthly honorarium of Rs 5,000, acted as the vital bridge: delivering pensions in cash to homes, collecting applications, raising awareness about schemes, and maintaining close rapport with families. Funds from central schemes like the 14th Finance Commission grants and MGNREGA were earmarked for infrastructure, while panchayati raj Institutions were to gain control over the 29 functions listed in the Constitution’s Eleventh Schedule.

Departments ranging from revenue to agriculture, and animal husbandry to health were to operate under PRI oversight, with gram sabhas serving as the supreme decision-making forums.

Approximately, six years later, this ambitious framework stands at a critical crossroads. Our field survey, conducted from December 2025 to January 2026, reveals a system that has drifted far from its foundational



goals.

What began with immense public hope has steadily eroded into inefficiency, disillusionment, and operational paralysis.

Decentralisation has remained largely superficial. Secretariats frequently function as parallel structures to panchayati raj Institutions, marginalizing elected sarpanches and ward members. Political leaders across parties express growing apathy, feeling sidelined in a system where they lack direct supervisory authority. Mayors, municipal chairpersons, and village sarpanches often ask: Where do we fit in this system? Government orders mandating secretariat staff attendance at gram sabhas and involvement in annual and five-year development plans are rarely followed in practice, leaving elected representatives disconnected from implementation.

The human cost is stark. With over 1.10 lakh employees post-regularisation, many holding master’s degrees in social work or

even PhDs feel profoundly underutilized. Assigned to mismatched duties such as photographing school toilets or geo-tagging wine shops, they describe themselves as being treated like subordinates rather than skilled professionals. The abrupt abolition of the volunteer system in 2024 shifted critical responsibilities—doorstep pension delivery, data collection, scheme awareness—onto an already overburdened staff. Weekly workloads routinely exceed 48 hours, compounded by facial recognition attendance glitches in remote areas that trigger fears of salary deductions. Endless surveys—United Family Card updates, biometric verifications, eKYC, family migration tracking, all consume time and energy, leaving core services neglected. We have many overseers but no real guides, staff confident, pointing to harassment from line officers and political interference that further erodes autonomy.

This relentless pressure

has triggered a mental health crisis. Around 10 suicides or sudden deaths among secretariat employees in 2025 have been linked to depression, insomnia and chronic stress. Women police assistants demand structured roles, exemption from night duties, and promotion channels to junior assistant pay scales. Surveyors seek modern equipment to perform tasks effectively. Engineering assistants juggle multiple departments, facing suspensions and memos for quality lapses. Welfare secretaries, with expertise in scheme design and gap-filling, are diverted to unrelated surveys, delaying genuine welfare delivery.

Citizens suffer the most visible consequences. The promised 72-hour resolution timeline has become aspirational at best. Secretariats increasingly resemble mere application-collection points rather than problem-solving hubs. Rural residents report persistent delays in getting certificates, land surveys, subsidies and scheme benefits, forcing them to escalate grievances to district collectorates or the Chief Minister’s Praja Darbar.

benefits, forcing them to escalate grievances to district collectorates or the Chief Minister’s Praja Darbar.

In tribal agency areas like Peddalabudu village—adopted by Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu—irregular staff attendance, unused infrastructure (including a Rs 15-lakh library lies idle), and poor connectivity compound the sense of abandonment. The volunteer gap is acutely felt—pensions once delivered at home now require arduous office visits, eroding public trust and convenience.

Financially, the system has become a white elephant. Annual expenditures on salaries, allowances, and maintenance run into thousands of crores, yet measurable outcomes remain disappointing. Rationalization efforts—categorizing panchayats by population—are progressing, but surplus staff, such as excess surveyors, need thoughtful redeployment. Skill audits to map qualifications against vacancies in departments like PWD, revenue or social welfare, coupled with targeted training for role transitions, offer a viable path forward without resorting to layoffs or voluntary retirement schemes.

The drift stems from foundational weaknesses: absence of pilot testing, inadequate coordination mechanisms, and reactive post-2024 changes without holistic alternatives.

Our recommendations call for urgent, depoliticized action. Form a high-level committee, chaired by a retired chief secretary, with all-party, employee union, and civil society representation to deliver a time-bound report.

Integrate secretariats fully with panchayati raj institutions for joint accountability to gram sabhas. Adopt an integrated survey approach using OTP-verified family data to reduce redundancy. Appoint dedicated education assistants for school oversight. Provide uniform office infrastructure with basic amenities. Customize

setups in tribal areas. Revive limited, neutrally recruited volunteers. Rationalise staffing through population-based clusters and redeploy surpluses inter-departmentally.

Address employee demands, including flexible hours, confidential mental health counselling, promotion channels, updated equipment, and safety protocols.

Revitalizing this system is not merely an administrative necessity—it is essential for the State’s rural economy and social justice. By embracing evidence-based, inclusive reforms, the state can reclaim Gram Swaraj’s promise of empowered villages, transparent welfare, and dignified lives for every citizen.

As Gandhi reminded us, true independence begins at the grassroots. It is time Andhra Pradesh recommits to that enduring vision.

(The writer is a political analyst and Director of People’s Pulse Research Organisation)

DECCAN
Chronicle

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Shashi Warriar

Off the beaten track

Just blame it all
on the Chinese!

Murthy turned up on my doorstep one evening with a skinny young man in tow and a bottle in his hand. “My nephew Shanker,” he said, pointing at the youngster. “He’s a new engineer — graduated in September — and he’s joining Microsoft in Hyderabad next month. I’m taking him around to show him how to drink responsibly.”

Shanker seemed in his early twenties, with thick spectacles, wild hair, and a hunted look in his eyes with which I could sympathise. Prita came along then, and I could see that she, too, recognised that look in Shanker’s eyes. We led them in, concentrating on making Shanker feel at home — Murthy could make himself at home anywhere. But Shanker, instead of responding, just sank into a sofa and into himself, busying himself twiddling his thumbs. I gave up, served him his drink and turned to the others.

Murthy brought up the topic of President Trump and his Gaza Peace Board and whether India should join. I didn’t have an opinion, but Prita thought that India shouldn’t get into it. “Why not?” asked Murthy.

“Going by the charter,” replied Prita, not mincing her words, “you’d have to be really dumb to get into it. Paying Trump a billion dollars for the privilege of watching him spend all that money on making more out of Gaza than Palestinians ever did? No way.”

“We’ve got a year in which to think of paying Trump,” replied Murthy, “and it might be worthwhile having someone — a ministry of external affairs person — to take notes at meetings, just in case Trump blabs, as he’s been doing all along.”

“It’s a complete waste of time,” said Prita. “Not worth having even a clerk attend the meeting, because Trump will spread his opinions on Truth Social the morning after.”

“Of course he’ll scatter his views immediately after,” said Murthy, “but he’s going to downplay everyone else at the meetings. That’s what we need to know: how do others respond to Trump’s moves?”

“Trump’ll get rid of anyone who differs with him,” said Prita. “He withdrew the invitation to Canada after Carney’s speech at Davos. Do you seriously think the Pakistanis or Israelis or Tony Blair will contradict Trump?”

“Let’s wait to see how Russia and China respond,” said Murthy. “There’s no hurry to decide.”

At this point I noticed a gleam in Shanker’s eye that hadn’t been there before. “What do you say?” I asked him.

He coughed nervously and straightened up and stopped twiddling his thumbs. “Like Uncle,” he said, “I think we should send someone.”

“Why?” asked Prita, somewhat gently, remembering his social ineptitude.

“Because we can learn a lot,” he replied, “no matter what.”

“What do you mean?” asked Prita.

“Send in someone with a laptop loaded with an AI bot to record what Trump says,” replied Shanker, “and to put it together with everything else he’s ever said, and analyze it.”

“How will that help?” asked Prita.

“In many ways,” replied Shanker, growing more confident with each word. “One, it can create clips that’ll represent Trump in whatever way we like — as a dictator, an idiot, a far-sighted strategist, a madman, whatever. Two, an AI bot can edit clips that show him contradicting everything he puts out on Truth Social. Three, it can give us insights on what he really wants to do.”

“Why do we need an AI bot to do that?” asked Prita.

“Speed,” replied Shanker. “We can have all this stuff ready within minutes of his saying something, or putting it out on social media. And we won’t even have to fake anything. AI will do the slicing and splicing, so there won’t be a shred of evidence that we’ve faked anything. If the government puts its mind to it, we can reduce him to a laughing stock every time he says anything on social media. We can flood the media with material — edited, not faked — that’ll put his constituency against him. We can block him.”

“Why do we need to attend the Board’s meetings for that?” asked Prita. “There’s already lots of data on stupid or greedy or warlike things he’s said.”

“Yes,” said Shanker, “but the Board is a place where he’s going to make sure he’s got only yes men, so the chances are he’ll likely get even more outrageous there. More inflammatory material, cheap.”

I sat up straight. Behind that bookish exterior lurked an online gladiator. “Why haven’t we already done all this?” asked Prita. “I’m sure we’ve had the AI tools for some time now.”

I noticed Murthy glaring. Shanker sank back into the sofa and polished off his drink. That burst of confidence when he’d spoken about AI was gone, thanks to “Uncle” Murthy.

“His glass is empty,” Prita whispered, nudging me. “Give him a refill. He’s earned it!”

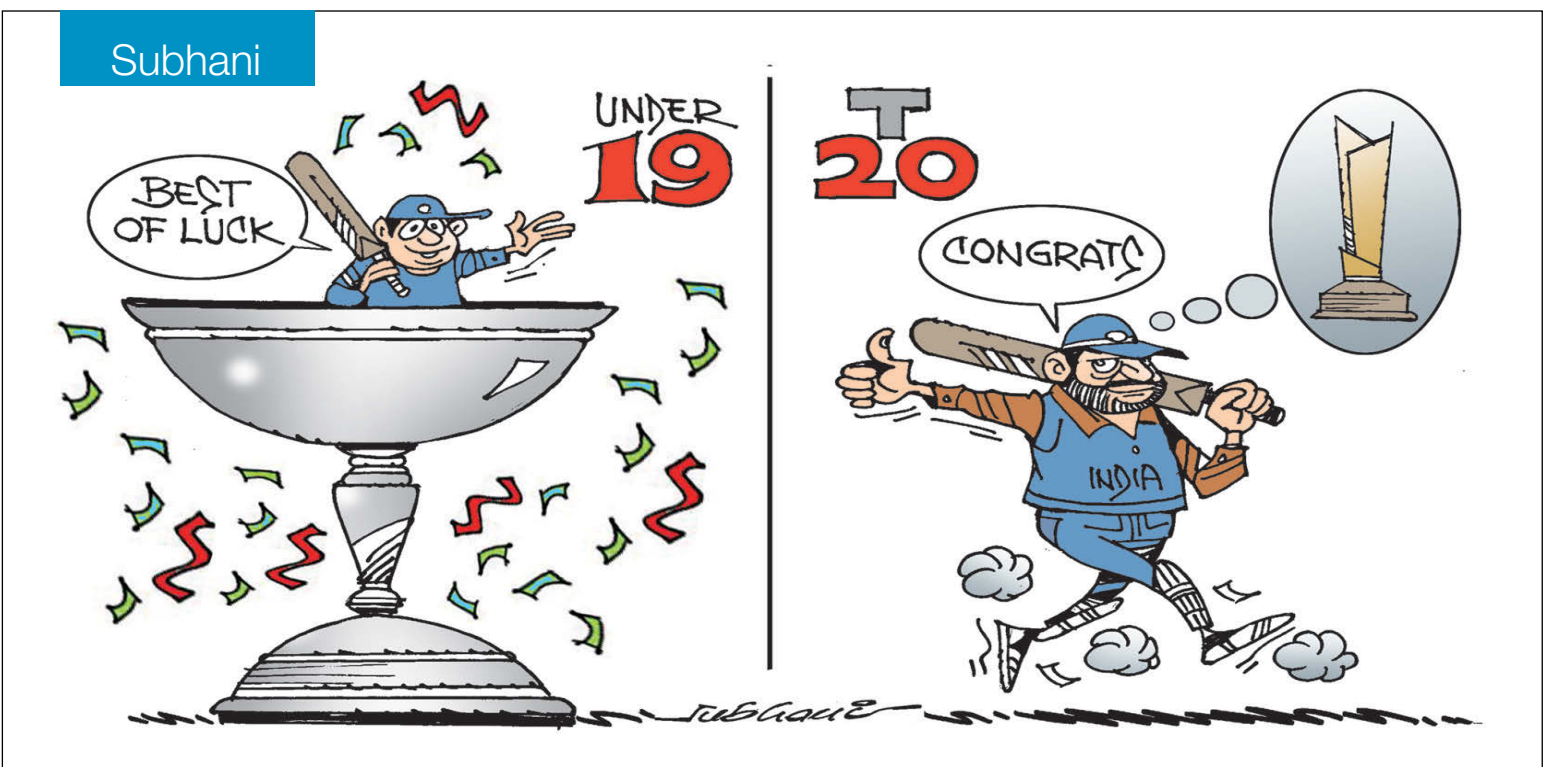
I agreed, and poured him a large one despite a glare from Murthy. We waited for Shanker to take a few sips before Prita stepped in again. “I’m sure you have some ideas on why we haven’t already done it,” she said. “Tell us!”

The confidence seemed to return. “If we do it to Trump,” he said, “Trump’s people will retaliate even harder. And it’ll spread. Everyone will start doing it, and it’ll get real ugly real soon.”

“So, you’re saying we can’t do it!” said Prita.

“Oh, yes, we can!” said Shanker, polishing off his second and holding the glass out for more. “Xi Jinping and gang don’t bother with their public image. Trump can’t hit back at them because their Internet is so tightly controlled. So just fake it to look like the Chinese did it!”

Shashi Warriar is an author and a columnist



The profound challenges
the Budget ignored fully



Manish Tewari

State of the Union

The Union Budget for 2026-27 arrives as a testament to an economy running on fumes. It is the budget of an era of diminished expectations, where the nominal GDP growth, the true lifeblood of government revenue and private sector pricing power, has reduced from 14 per cent and 20 per cent during 2004-05 and 2008-09, respectively, to a pedestrian eight per cent during 2026-27. This precipitous decline is not a cyclical trough but a structural plateau. The Budget’s response to this is not a bold corrective but a weary accommodation to this slower, humbler reality.

Beneath the veneer of moderate fiscal consolidation, where the deficit is projected at 4.3 per cent of GDP, lies an alarming and unsustainable reality. The government’s total liabilities, which stood at ₹56.51 lakh crore in 2013-14, are projected to balloon to ₹214.8 lakh crore by 2026-27. Servicing this mountain requires interest payments of ₹14.04 lakh crore (9.7 per cent increase from the last Budget), consuming 20 paise of every rupee spent. To contextualise this calamity, the fiscal deficit itself is projected at approximately ₹17 lakh crore. This means a colossal portion of our fresh borrowing is not financing development, but is merely being recycled to service past debts and crowd out private investments in search of capital from the market.

The government’s celebrated pivot from revenue expenditure (down from 81 per cent of total outlay in 2020-21 to 72 pc) towards capital expenditure (up to 23 pc) is another positive narrative on paper that collapses under the weight of this interest burden. This capex push, reaching ₹12.2 lakh crore, was ostensibly

designed to crowd in private investment, a strategy that has failed.

Private corporate investment remains moribund despite generous corporate tax cuts, production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes, and GST reductions aimed at spurring consumption. The reason is that Private Final Consumption Expenditure has stagnated, actually falling from 57.1 per cent of GDP in 2013-14 to 56.3 per cent in 2025-26. With household budgets squeezed by high inflation and low wage growth, and unemployment curiously highest among the educated youth, the demand signal for private sector capex never materialised. The government’s supply-side bet was placed on a demand base that simply did not exist.

This fundamental demand weakness is the toxin coursing through the budget’s veins, manifesting in expenditures cuts dressed as fiscal prudence. The government met its current year’s deficit target of 4.4 pc not through revenue outperformance but through a draconian suppression of spending. Tax buoyancy has plummeted to a worrying 0.6, against an assumption of 1.1, meaning revenue grows at only 60 per cent the rate of nominal GDP. Gross tax revenue growth assumed at 13 per cent came in at a mere three per cent; income tax growth projected at 17 pc limped in at six per cent.

This fiscal straitjacket directly manifests in the government’s retreat from critical social and economic expenditures. The outlay for the Jal Jeevan Mission was revised down by over 70 per cent (from ₹67,000 crore to ₹17,000 crore); PM Awas Yojana (Urban) by nearly two-thirds; and the Urban Challenge Fund by 90 per cent. The budget for labour, employment and skill development was more than halved mid-year, plummet-

Its microscopic interventions cannot mask its macroscopic failures. The investment rate (Gross Capital Formation) remains stuck at a mere 33 per cent of GDP for 2026-27, down by more than five percentage points since 2012-13.

ing from ₹32,496 crore to ₹12,759 crore, a devastating statistic for a nation in the throes of jobless growth.

The proposed restorations for next year are a cynical, confidence-eroding pantomime, creating a Potemkin village of allocations that bear no relation to actual expenditure. This cycle reveals a government skilled at announcement but bankrupt in execution.

Faced with the failure of its consumption-boosting gambits, the budget for 2026-27 retreats into a supply-side shell, its ambitions scaled down to pointed interventions.

Its central, silent gamble is an unprecedented, stealthy liberalisation of the Customs tariff regime. The government has proposed a series of duty reductions and exemptions on electronics components, semiconductors, medical devices, aviation parts and clean energy inputs. This is not random tinkering; it is a deliberate concession to long-standing US trade demands, as a pre-requisite to the trade agreement itself, designed to signal compliance and goodwill rather than safeguard domestic interests or negotiate compensatory access. This sequencing has rendered the entire arrangement structurally skewed, anti-farmer, anti-MSME, and fiscally costly, that exposes domestic manufacturers to asymmetric competition without reciprocal benefits. Far from strengthening India’s production base, the administration’s strategy appears oriented towards managing optics in Washington at the expense of the Indian fisc, agriculture, industry, and livelihoods.

The Budget’s microscopic interventions cannot mask

its macroscopic failures. The investment rate (Gross Capital Formation) remains stuck at a mere 33 per cent of GDP for 2026-27, down by more than five percentage points since 2012-13. Exports as a percentage of GDP have shrunk from 24.9 per cent in 2013-14 to an estimated 21.5 per cent now. Gross Domestic Savings have stagnated around 30 per cent, failing to breach past peaks. These are the core symptoms of an economy struggling to transition to a more productive, globally competitive, and investment-driven model.

The vision of a “Viksit Bharat” powered by cutting-edge technology is betrayed by the comparative paucity of commitment: While China dedicates \$40 billion to semiconductors and \$56 billion in state funding for AI, India’s corresponding figures are a tentative \$4.5 billion and a paltry \$1.2 billion over five years, reliant on foreign capital.

The finance minister’s speech, in a telling evasion, speaks around the problem-mentioning skills, startups, and manufacturing — but never directly confronts it. The data is devastating.

The Budget is a document of managed decline, where the nominal growth assumption of 10 per cent for next year is itself an admission of a slower new normal, likely fuelled more by inflation than real expansion. It is the Budget of a government that has, through a series of shocks such as demonetisation and a complex GST, broken the virtuous cycle of broad-based demand, job creation and private investment.

The Union Budget 2026-27 will be remembered not for what it achieved, but for the profound challenges it chose to ignore. It is a calculated murmur of an administration navigating the constraints of a weakened mandate and a weakened economy, its ambitions downsized to fit the diminished horizons it now accepts as India’s fate.

Manish Tewari is a third-term Lok Sabha MP and former Union minister. Twitter handle @ManishTewari.

LETTERS

PM’S TIPS TO STUDENTS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s advice that students should not feel examination as a burden could not have come at a better time. Also, he has exhorted students to focus not only on marks, but also on improving life. I, a teacher, feel that it’s the parents who are obsessed more with marks and not students. It is important that students perform to their potential and parents understand that. Also, they (parents) must not compare their children’s grades with others. Comparisons impede progress. Children will not be hooked to internet or social media, if parents lead by example.

S.Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

FURORE IN HOUSE

To blame the Lok Sabha Speaker that he has been unable to control proceedings by using his considerable powers is not fair. Had he used his powers, called the Marshals and evicted the noisy MPs who had disrupted the House proceedings the LOP would have cried hoarse that ‘democracy is dead and buried by the Speaker’. When the Opposition parties are determined to stall the proceedings even Speaker can do nothing except adjourn the House. And they may not heed your sane advice ‘shed hate’. It is unfortunate that most of the MPs are afflicted with the disease called ‘hatred’. If they create a ruckus and disrupt the House proceedings, suspend them for the entire session, depriving them of their perks and perquisites.

A.Seshagiri Rao
Chennai

U19 WORLD CUP

Kudos to the India Under-19 team, which won the 2026 World Cup beating England. Thanks to an iconic knock from Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, India posted a mammoth score of 411runs in 50 overs. Sooryavanshi smashed 175 from 80 balls, which included 15 fours and 15 sixes, putting India firmly on course for a massive score. England could not contain the flow of runs from the blade of the swashbuckling southpaw. The young prodigy has a vast repertoire of shots, and he showcased his batting exploits time and again. The latest triumph only strengthens India’s legacy in the u19 World Cup, which has produced different winning teams. Many players from the u19 squad have made it to the Indian team. The day is not far off for Sooryavanshi.

S.Sankaranarayanan
Chennai

Mail your letters to
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Anita Anand

As billionaires are
rising, govts busy
defending wealth,
eroding freedom

Money. We all want and need it. But how much do we need? How much is enough, and what does it mean when some have exorbitant wealth while others have practically nothing?

Let’s look at the richest. They are called billionaires, or persons whose net worth is at least one billion units of a given currency, typically US dollars. As of March 2025, there are 3,028 billionaires worldwide, with a combined wealth of over \$16.1 trillion, up by nearly \$2 trillion from 2024. I can’t even think or count that far.

The 2025 Oxfam America report, “Unequal: The Rise of a New American Oligarchy and the Agenda We Need”, notes that the number of billionaires has surpassed 3,000 for the first time and that billionaire wealth is now higher than at any point in history. Meanwhile, one in four people globally faces hunger.

Oxfam is a British-founded confederation of 21 independent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focuses on alleviating global poverty. Founded in 1942 and led by Oxfam International, it operates in 79 countries and has 21 members in the Oxfam Confederation across Australia, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North and Latin

America and the Caribbean.

The report says that over the decades, billionaire fortunes have grown at a rate three times faster than the average annual rate over the previous five years. Since Donald Trump’s election as US President (for the second time) in November 2024, billionaire fortunes have grown at a rate three times faster than the average annual rate over the previous five years.

While US billionaires have seen the sharpest growth in their fortunes, billionaires elsewhere in the world have also seen double-digit increases. The actions of the Trump presidency, including championing deregulation and undermining agreements to raise corporate taxation, have benefited the world’s richest.

What about Indian billionaires? As of 2025, Forbes reported that India had 284 billionaires, making it the third-largest country by billionaire count, after the United States and China. Mukesh Ambani, chairman and the largest shareholder of Reliance Industries, has been the richest Indian for 14 consecutive years and is currently the world’s 10th-richest person.

Why do we need to worry about the growing number of billionaires? As the report says, while acquiring an enormous yacht or

luxury homes around the world is a personal choice, excessive consumption can be criticised for the carbon emissions associated with it, especially in a deeply unequal world, where the majority have very little. Many reject this criticism, describing it as the politics of envy.

Beyond envy, and more worrying, billionaires are using their wealth to buy politicians, influence governments, own newspapers or social media platforms or out-lawyer any opposition to ensure impunity from justice.

“Such power gives billionaires a grasp over all our futures, undermining political freedom and eroding the rights of the many,” says the report. While these phenomena are not new globally, events in the United States in 2025 perhaps made this unreasonably clear: across countries, the super-rich have accumulated more wealth than could ever be spent and have also used it to secure political power to shape the rules that define our economies and govern nations.

At the same time, globally, there is erosion and rollback of the civil and political rights of the majority and minorities, suppression of protests, and silencing of dissent. A century ago, US Supreme Court Jus-

tice Louis Brandeis said: “We must make our choice. Either we can have extreme wealth in the hands of the few, or we can have democracy. We cannot have both.”

The report points out that it’s about choices. Governments are choosing to defend wealth over freedom. “In sharp contrast, those economically with the least wealth are becoming politically poor, with their voices silenced in the face of growing authoritarianism and the suppression of hard-won rights and freedoms.”

Can reforms curb the growing power of billionaires and countries to radically reduce economic inequality? The report suggests they can, by curbing the political influence of the super-rich, effectively taxing them to reduce their economic power and, through this, their political power; regulating lobbying and revolving doors; banning campaign financing by the rich; legislating to ensure media independence; regulating media companies to increase algorithmic transparency; and protecting freedom of speech while preventing harmful content, especially hate speech.

But since the super-rich are in power, initiating and implementing these reforms might be a challenge. In the meantime, can citizens like you and me ask ourselves what

wealth means to us, how we generate it, and how we use it? Can we consider living and consuming a little lower down the consumption chain? How many houses do we need? How many vacations? Is our money used wisely? Can we share our incomes with the less fortunate?

Can we create opportunities to improve their lives? Before the age of the Internet, people could only dream of what wealth could buy. Now, it’s in our face. Through entertainment streaming on our TV sets, smartphones, and watches, the lives of the rich and famous come right into our homes, our hands, and our eyes. The possibility of endless wealth, homes, and travel to distant places seems exotic but doable. Lavish spending on social functions, personal goods, and services is within reach.

The question to ask ourselves is: do I need it, can I live without it, and do I have a better use for the money? Am I avoiding paying taxes so my wealth can multiply legally or illegally? While we wait for reforms, are our personal choices and those of our governments defending wealth while eroding freedom?

The writer is a development and communications consultant

FAQ

How is India tackling mental health crisis?

What has the Budget allocated for mental health institutions? Will it be enough to tackle an emergency?

Bindu Shajan Perappadan

The story so far:
Last month, the Economic Survey flagged the alarming rise of digital addiction and screen-related mental health problems, particularly among children and adolescents. On February 1, the Budget announced measures to strengthen mental health infrastructure. Key highlights include the proposed establishment of a second National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) in north India and the upgradation of premier institutions in Ranchi and Tezpur to improve regional access.

What is India’s mental health burden?
According to experts, India is facing a mental health emergency. It accounts for nearly one-third of the world’s suicides, depression and addiction cases. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among Indians aged 15-29, data from the National Crime Records Bureau and the Sample Registration System under the Ministry of Home Affairs show. According to the WHO, between 2012 and 2030, the economic loss due to mental health conditions in India is estimated to be \$1.03 trillion. Around 70% to 92% of people with mental disorders do not receive proper treatment due to lack of awareness, stigma, and shortage of professionals. According to the Indian Journal of Psychiatry, India has 0.75 psychiatrists per 1,00,000 people, whereas the WHO recommends at least three per 1,00,000. While health spends may have increased since FY2014-15, specific allocations for mental health services have historically been small, around 1% of the total health budget.

The need of the hour is affordable access, continuity of care, and timely treatment, which remain elusive

Does India have enough hospitals?
To cater to the growing need for quality mental health services, the Central government has integrated mental health services in Ayushman Bharat calling them Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs). Under Ayushman Bharat, the government has upgraded more than 1.73 lakh sub-health centres and primary health centres to Ayushman Arogya Mandirs. Also, mental health services have been added in the package of services under comprehensive primary health care provided at these centres. Over the past two years, the government has also expanded its manpower base, sanctioning over 20 centres of excellence to train more postgraduate students in mental health and provide advanced treatment. In all, 47 PG departments on mental health have been established.

Moreover, Tele MANAS (Tele Mental Health Assistance and Networking Across States) is a 24x7, free initiative in India providing mental health support via toll-free helplines 14416 or 1-800-891-4416. Launched on October 10, 2022, it features 53 operational cells across 36 States/UTs, supported by 23 specialised mentoring institutes.

Where is the shortfall?
Over the past five years, India’s mental health allocation has increased from ₹683 crore in 2020-21 to about ₹1,898 crore in 2024-25. While this rise is often cited as progress, it remains shockingly low in context, says Neha Kirpal, co-founder of Amaha and founding cohort member of the India Mental Health Alliance (IMHA), a network of stakeholders working on mental health issues. She adds that the budget allocation is less than 2% of the total health budget, which itself accounts for only around 2% of the national GDP. This underinvestment is stark when weighed against impact. Explaining why targeted allocation to grassroots mental health programmes is a must, she notes that even in this Budget a significant share of allocations continue to flow toward tertiary institutions such as NIMHANS and new centres of excellence. “This alone cannot mainstream mental healthcare in a country of India’s scale,” she explains. The other issue is about the utilisation of funds. Experts point out that funds allocated may be low, but even these are not completely utilised at the national level. Health experts argue that for funds to be better utilised, India’s budgetary allocations for mental health must support community-based, early-intervention models.

What is the way ahead?
The need of the hour is affordable access, continuity of care, and timely treatment, which remain elusive, leading to preventable loss of life and years lived with disability. “Our focus remains on specialist-led, tertiary care, which takes a curative rather than preventive approach. Our response capacity is severely limited. There is a huge shortage of trained mental health professionals to deal with mental illness. This has led to a 95% gap in access to mental health care,” says Ms. Kirpal.

Meanwhile, the Health Ministry says it is laying emphasis on a “whole-of-community” approach, integrating mental well-being into school curricula, and strengthening workplace policies to address stress and burnout.

Why has AYUSH got a major push in Budget?

What are the proposals to make AYUSH more widely accessible? Which are some of the key institutes and autonomous bodies under the AYUSH sector? How has the free trade agreement with the European Union opened the door for AYUSH in European markets?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:
On February 1, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman proposed a slew of resources for AYUSH in the 2026-27 Union Budget. A week earlier, India’s new Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the European Union opened the door for Indian doctors and products to enter the European market more easily.

What has AYUSH received in the Budget?
In the 2026-27 Budget, its total allocation reached ₹4,408 crore, up from ₹3,992 crore in 2025-26 and ₹2,122 crore in 2020-21. Ms. Sitharaman also announced plans to set up three new All-India Institutes of Ayurveda intended to be the gold standard for traditional medicine, similar to how AIIMS works for allopathic medicine. These institutes will treat patients, conduct high-level research, and teach. The Budget also pitched for funds to upgrade the WHO Global Traditional Medicine Centre in Jamnagar, with the aim of India leading the way in setting standards for how traditional medicine should be practised and documented worldwide. The budget for the National AYUSH Mission has been hiked by 66% to ₹1,300 crore, to modernise local AYUSH hospitals and dispensaries, to place AYUSH clinics inside existing modern hospitals, and to upgrade existing centres to focus on preventive health. The Budget also provides funds to upgrade AYUSH pharmacies and drug-testing laboratories. The government is also introducing a multilingual AI assistant named Bharat-VISTAAR, designed to give farmers who grow medicinal plants real-time advice on



Massive boost: Plants and pulses used in Ayurveda displayed during the AYUSH Habba in Mangaluru on January 31. H.S. MANJUNATH

The presence of heavy metals such as lead and mercury in certain AYUSH products is a major worry

growing herbs of better quality, current market prices, and certifying crops for export.

What does the India-EU FTA do for AYUSH?
In the past, Indian Ayurvedic doctors have had a hard time working in Europe because their degrees weren’t recognised. But under the FTA, in EU countries that don’t specifically regulate traditional medicine, Indian AYUSH practitioners can provide their services using qualifications obtained in India. The deal also gives Indian companies a legal guarantee to open wellness centres, Ayurvedic clinics, etc. across the bloc’s 27 countries without them having to worry that the laws will suddenly change and shut them down. Third, India and the EU will work together to recognise (some of) each other’s lab results and safety certifications. As a result, a particular Ayurvedic supplement tested in an Indian lab will likely be accepted by European customs. Finally, the FTA recognises India’s Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, a database of formulations, thus preventing companies from wrongly claiming ownership of traditional Indian remedies.

What resources does AYUSH have?
India’s AYUSH sector has a network of hospitals, research councils, and regulatory frameworks. In 2024-25, the government’s support for the AYUSH Ministry was designed to integrate traditional medicine into the broader national healthcare landscape. The primary vehicle was the National AYUSH Mission and co-location the primary policy (that is, placing AYUSH facilities within existing primary and community health centres and district hospitals).

The sector has several ‘Institutes of National Importance’ and autonomous bodies, including an All-India Institute of Ayurveda in New Delhi and the National Institute of Homoeopathy in Kolkata. Other specialised institutions provide training and care in Siddha, Unani, Yoga, and naturopathy. The government also manages several research councils, such as the Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences. The National Commission for Indian System of Medicine and the National Commission for Homoeopathy have to ensure medical education remains affordable and reliable. The Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine and Homoeopathy sets the official standards for all Indian AYUSH drugs. The National Medicinal Plants Board worked with 32 State boards to encourage the cultivation of high-quality herbs for both domestic use and export. The ‘AYURGYAN’ scheme promotes education while ‘Ayurswasthaya Yojana’ focuses on using traditional medicine to meet

community health goals.

Is AYUSH treatment scientific?
Critics led by the Indian Medical Association (IMA) have argued that traditional systems like Ayurveda often lack the rigorous, empirical evidence required to meet the thresholds of modern medicine. Allopathic drugs must clear randomised controlled trials that test their safety and efficacy. Many AYUSH treatments, however, are based on ancient texts and observational history, and either haven’t been tested or their specifics remain unverifiable. The presence of heavy metals such as lead and mercury in certain AYUSH products has been a major concern. Health advisories from Australia, the U.S., and New Zealand have highlighted cases of lead poisoning linked to imported Ayurvedic products. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of AYUSH has been “mixopathy”, the state-sanctioned blurring of lines between traditional and modern medical practice. In 2020, the Central Council of Indian Medicine authorised postgraduate Ayurveda students to be trained in 58 surgical procedures, including general surgery. The IMA called this “legalised quackery”, arguing that surgery is a complex discipline requiring deep knowledge of anatomy, anaesthesia, and perioperative care that AYUSH curricula don’t sufficiently cover. The controversy intensified in 2025 when the Andhra Pradesh government allowed Ayurveda exponents to perform these surgeries independently, leading to nationwide protests and legal challenges currently pending before the Supreme Court. Friction also persists over the practice of AYUSH doctors prescribing allopathic medicines like antibiotics or steroids. Some States have issued executive orders allowing this to plug the doctor shortage in rural areas but the medical community has warned that it could lead to irrational drug use and worsen antibiotic resistance.

What do the resources mean for AYUSH?
A smattering of independent estimates suggests that the AYUSH sector will be worth \$26.5 billion (₹2.3 lakh crore) in 2026, with startups and MSMEs accounting for 80%. The new plans are in line with the government’s attempts to turn AYUSH from a domestic, welfare-adjacent public health programme to a regulated industry and source of economic growth. The proposed All-India Institutes are modelled on AIIMS and, together with plans to upgrade testing facilities and pharmacies, signal efforts to recast parts of traditional medicine as being scientific rather than based on lineage or experiences.

That said, while global markets may reward standardisation, they will also raise expectations of evidence and accountability at home. In this sense the government’s AYUSH push may also subject the sector to a level of scrutiny and institutional discipline that India itself has only partially enforced thus far.

Why is Dreamliner’s fuel system under watch?

What happened on a recent Air India flight? Why are certain fuel control switches malfunctioning? Weren't precautionary checks undertaken after the Ahmedabad mishap in June last year? What is the risk it poses to the engine when switches are faulty?

Murali N. Krishnaswamy

The story so far:
On February 1, 2026, an Air India flight (AI 132) scheduled from London Heathrow to Bengaluru was preparing for departure when the crew reported that one of the two fuel control switches on the Boeing 787-8 had moved to ‘Cutoff’. The incident came under intense scrutiny as the fuel switches and their functioning are a key part of the ongoing investigation into the June 12, 2025 crash of Air India flight 171 (Ahmedabad-London Gatwick), also a Boeing 787-8.

What happened next?
As the left fuel control switch “slipped from Run to Cutoff”, the crew is said to have checked the switches by touching them. It was only in the third attempt that the switch remained in the ‘Run’ position. The crew decided to continue with the flight – a distance of about 8,000-plus kilometres – with no further incident.

How was the incident reported?
The Safety Matters Foundation, a non-profit and independent aviation safety think tank in India, put out a note that called for a “transparent

Boeing says it is in touch with Air India and supports their review of the incident

investigation after this new fuel system incident”. It said that the incident was “alarming as it mirrors a known risk previously identified by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration”. It highlighted how, “in 2018, the FAA had issued a Safety Alert For Operators SAIB NM-18-33, warning that certain fuel control switches, including those on Boeing 787s, could malfunction in this exact manner, increasing the risk of accidental engine shutdown.” The Foundation said that “the incident was troubling as the airline had said that it had conducted precautionary checks across its 787 fleet and found no issues”. India’s regulator, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), came into the picture after the incident was reported. In a note titled, “Rejoinder on News Item relating to purported malfunction of Fuel Cut Off Switch on M/s Air India Boeing B787-8 aircraft”, the DGCA gave a detailed, technical account of the incident: “...the switch did not remain positively latched in the ‘Run’ position when light vertical pressure was applied but latched correctly in ‘Run’ and was stable during the third attempt.” The note also said that the crew had “physically verified that the switch was fully and positively latched in the ‘Run’ position”, adding that “no abnormal engine parameters, cautions, warnings, or related system messages were observed during engine start or at any time thereafter”. The note went on to say that “the operating crew member was briefed on the observation, unnecessary contact with the switch was avoided, and engine indications and alerting systems were closely monitored during the full flight”.

The crew reported the incident in the pilot defect report after which the airline reached out to the manufacturer, Boeing, for guidance. The DGCA note also said that Boeing had recommended checks on the switches. The airline’s engineering department found both switches to be functioning satisfactorily. The DGCA said that the inspections were done in the presence of DGCA officers, and Air India was advised to “circulate the Boeing recommended procedure for the operation of Fuel Cut Off switch to its crew members”.

The aircraft was initially grounded in

Bengaluru but was cleared for operations later. It left for Delhi on February 5.

What have the other responses been?
In response to a query by *The Hindu*, a statement by an Air India spokesperson said, “Following the DGCA closure on the matter, Air India will be following its safety investigation protocol and take appropriate action. We will fully adhere to the regulator’s guidance to circulate OEM [original equipment manufacturer]-recommended operating procedures for the operation of the FCS [fuel control switch] to all crew members.” The airline is said to have inspected its Boeing 787 fleet once again. It operates 26 Boeing 787-8s and seven 787-9s (the newest jet was inducted in January 2026). IndiGo too has six leased Boeing 787-9s (from Norse Atlantic Airways). Boeing, in a statement to *The Hindu*, said, “We are in contact with Air India and are supporting their review of this matter.” In response to an e-mail/telephonic call by *The Hindu*, a spokesperson for the Air Accidents Investigation Branch-U.K., said: “We are aware of reports in the media about an event on a flight between London Heathrow and Bangalore on 2 February. We are engaged with the UK Regulatory Authority who we understand is working to establish the facts.”

In a comment to *The Hindu* on fuel switches, Professor David Cirulli, UAS Department of Flight, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Asia Academics, Worldwide Campus, said that “aircraft flight decks have evolved over many years of operational experiences with a focus on safety. The industry thrives on creating the best and safest means of transportation”. He pointed out that one item of focus is the human factor. “This study and area of expertise covers a broad range of items, but one in particular is the human-to-machine interface. Fuel flow to the engines is a safety critical issue. Inadvertent engagement or disengagement are both drastically important for numerous reasons. Overtime, the industry – both regulatory and operational safety – recognised the necessity to ensure that inadvertent operations do not occur. It is for this reason that these switches require multiple movements (pull/twist) with a locking mechanism to reach the engaged or disengaged states. The fundamental designs of these switches remain the same over most aircraft and fleets, with solid operational performance. The reliability of the system, for this reason, is very high,” he said.

Survey useful, Budget lazy



ACROSS THE AISLE

BY P CHIDAMBARAM

AFTER BUDGET 2026-27 was presented on a Sunday, government spokespersons, editorial writers, commentators and journalists used the word 'cautious' and the phrase 'don't rock the boat' to describe the Budget. I suppose they followed an American colloquialism 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'.

Multiple Challenges

The Economic Survey 2025-26 (ES) had identified the challenges facing the Indian economy. Among them are:

- The tariff war unleashed by President Trump. Although he announced that the tariff on Indian goods will be reduced from 50% to 18%, it appears that the reduction is conditional upon India 'dropping' the tariff on American goods to zero, removing non-tariff barriers, buying USD 500 billion of American goods, and other conditions that India may find difficult to fulfill.

- Inflows of foreign direct investment "remain below their potential". Foreign portfolio investors are pulling out. Indian promoters, although cash-rich, are reluc-

tant to invest. The consequence is that Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) is stuck at about 30% of GDP.

- The unsatisfactory *nominal* GDP growth: the methodology followed by the NSO and the doubts on the national accounts have cast a shadow on the *real* GDP growth rates. The nominal GDP is a better indicator. It has grown by 12%, 9.8% and 8% in the years 2023-24, 2024-25 and 2025-26 respectively. Growth is *losing* momentum.

- The grave unemployment situation. Youth unemployment rate was 15% in June 2025. Only 21.7% of the workforce are in regular, salaried employment. Lakhs of youth are unemployed. The numbers reveal a shift towards self-employment.

- No country has become a middle-income country without becoming a manufacturing power. India's manufacturing sector has contributed barely 15-16% of GDP in the last 10 years. Make in India, PLI and other schemes have failed to create jobs.

- Fiscal consolidation is agonisingly slow: the fiscal deficit will move from 4.4% in 2025-26 to 4.3% in 2026-27 and the revenue deficit will remain at 1.5%. At this rate, it will take 12 years or more to reach the FRBM targets, and we will pay a heavy price.

- The tax gamble of 2025-26 has failed massively. The budget arithmetic was saved by the RBI which gave a generous dividend of approximately Rs 304,000 crore in 2025-26. In the previous two years, it had given Rs 210,874 crore and Rs 268,590 crore. The highest RBI dividend received during the UPA government (2004-2014) was Rs 52,679 crore in 2013-14.

My charitable view is that the Finance Minister and the government do not care for the Economic Survey. The uncharitable view is they think we are inhabiting a planet that is not part of the solar system

FM Ignored CEA

In Chapter 1 of the ES, the CEA advised "caution, but not pessimism". That tone continued throughout the report. In another chapter he advocated a *credible* glide-path of fiscal consolidation. The only place in which the CEA advocated a bold approach is on urbanisation where he advised "stronger metropolitan governance, predictable enforcement, and a credible civic compact that aligns incentives between citizens and the state. Cities will also need to be empowered with better finances..."

The Finance Minister's response to her principal adviser was non-intellectual and evasive. In her 85-minute speech, she did not comment on the state of the Indian economy or President Trump's two-pronged assault on the world economy through tariffs and coercive transactional deals. Nor did she comment on the global churn or China's economic expansion or any other matter that informed persons would have expected in the Budget speech. My charitable view is that the Finance Minister and the government do not care for the Economic Survey. The uncharitable view is they think we are inhabiting a planet that is not part of the solar system.

I was shocked that the Finance Minister did not think it necessary to spell out the government's policies that will address concerns about slowing growth rate, poverty and growing inequality, stagnant investment, widespread unemployment, neglect of welfare, depreciation of the rupee, and the huge gaps between the demand and supply of infrastructure and essential services.

Failed Accountant's Test

Even by common accounting standards, the Finance Minister's record of financial management was poor. There were cruel expenditure cuts in the budget allocations in 2025-26 to ministries of Rural Development, Urban Development, Education, Health and many others. Under Mr Shivraj Singh Chouhan's watch, Agriculture and Rural Development suffered a cut of Rs 60,052 crore. Jal Jeevan mission was allocated Rs 67,000 crore but in the revised estimate it was found that only Rs Rs 17,000 crore had been spent. Capital expenditure fell from 3.2% of GDP in 2024-25 to 3.1% in 2025-26. Defence expenditure fell to a low of 1.6% of GDP (11.4% of total expenditure) and threatens to fall to 1.5% of GDP (11.1% of total expenditure) in 2026-27.

Knowledgeable experts have sharply criticised the Budget speech. Dr Surjit Bhalla ridiculed the self-congratulation about the 'fourth largest economy'. Dr C Rangarajan called out the slow pace of fiscal consolidation. Dr Ashok Gulati deplored the neglect of large parts of the farm sector. Professor Rohit Lamba (Cornell University) mocked the Budget as fit for an economy in search of a plan.

The Finance Minister threw schemes, programmes, missions, institutes, initiatives, Funds, Committees, etc at her listeners. I counted at least 24. They will soon find out that no money was allocated for many of these announcements!

The Budget was an exercise in intellectual laziness.

Entitlement defeats valid opposition



FIFTH COLUMN

BY TAVLEEN SINGH

WHEN YOU are the great-grandson of a prime minister, the grandson of a prime minister, the son of a prime minister and a de facto prime minister, it must be hard to accept being just Leader of the Opposition. And this after failing to get enough seats in two general elections to occupy this relatively humble post. So, I understand Rahul Gandhi's loathing of the usurper who has deprived him of what he seems to have grown up believing was his inheritance. It does not help his case to sound sulky and petulant about this. Why does he not understand yet that when he insults Narendra Modi, he also insults the Prime Minister?

What shocked me most of the many things that he said last week outside Parliament House was that the Prime Minister was 'compromised' and this is why he had been forced into the trade deal with the United States. This is not the sort of thing that can be said without proof. But Rahul Gandhi is so obsessed with damaging the Prime Minister personally that he reduces every political point he wants to make to a personal attack on Modi. He has also deluded himself into believing that the only reason that Modi remains popular is because of an 'image' created at the expense of many crore rupees. He ignores the reality that Modi has won two general elections with a full majority and a third one with a reduced majority. An *India Today* poll says that his popularity has increased since the last Lok Sabha election and that if an election were held today, he would win back a full majority.

The heir to our most powerful political dynasty for his part has lost so many elections that it is hard to keep count. The Congress Party has never once done a real analysis of why it has been reduced to almost becoming a regional party, so its deluded prince continues to live in his delusions of 'vote chori' and Indian democracy having died. This could be the reason why whenever there is a session of Parliament, he and his gang of obedient MPs spend more time protesting in the gardens of Parliament House than inside the House. When asked about this, Rahul Gandhi always says that he is not allowed to speak inside the Lok Sabha so is forced to adopt street fighting tactics.

Personally, I believe that this time it would have been wise for the Speaker to allow him to speak. Denying him permission has resulted in all of India discovering now what the former army chief has written in his book. In the few words that the Congress Party's heir apparent managed to say in the Lok Sabha he made clear that his intention was to destroy the image of the Prime Minister. He wanted to prove that he was no nationalist and that he had failed to lead when leadership was most needed during the border clash with China in Ladakh. Good luck with that but what did this worthy exercise have to do with the President's speech? This was the subject being discussed that day.

Now some free advice for the Gandhi family. Please, please allow Parliament to function so that you can raise the issues you consider important inside the House instead of in its compound. Sonia Gandhi and her daughter raised the excellent issue of Delhi's polluted air while chatting to television reporters last week but outside the House. Sonia said children were suffering and so were people like her who had asthma. Why did she not demand a debate on this subject in the Rajya Sabha that day? It was functioning well enough for the Prime Minister to give his response to the debate. He was not allowed to speak in the Lok Sabha because, as Priyanka explained, if the Leader of the Opposition is not allowed to speak, the prime minister would not be allowed to speak either.

By the time the Gandhi family were done with their theatrics, there was no time left to discuss what seems to be a good trade deal with the United States. India stood its ground against the bullying strategy used by Donald Trump. Our Prime Minister deserves full credit for the dignified tactics he used to achieve what, in the circumstances, are some major concessions. But for a member of the Dynasty to admit this would amount to conceding that Narendra Modi has done a fairly good job and this is something they cannot do because their sense of entitlement prevents them.

It also prevents them from seeing that one reason why Modi won the first time was because India wanted a real leader to take charge instead of an imperious royal family that had become drunk on its power and privileges. If Modi has remained prime minister for more than twelve years it is because ordinary Indians have seen their lives improve. The welfare schemes that he initiated have made it easier to live in rural India than it was before.

Millions of Indians who lived in extreme poverty now live better and with a degree of hope that their lives will continue to get better. As someone who remembers well those decades of socialist feudalism when Rahul Gandhi's family were prime ministers, believe me when I tell you that those were truly bleak times for most Indians.

A chief minister without a House seat: How SC settled the law



INSIDE TRACK

BY COOMI KAPOOR

INDIA'S TOP EXPORT

THE MUCH-delayed Indo-US trade deal was finally announced last week. But the hyped clout of the Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) in the USA appears to have played little part in reaching the nebulous agreement. In fact, 2025 saw the unraveling of the smug assumption that India's most valuable export underpinning a special relationship with the USA are the PIOs, for whom Prime Minister Modi's rally at Madison Square Garden in 2014 and the Howdy Modi show of strength in Texas were organised.

PIOs were once seen as America's model immigrants, with a mean household income even higher than the US average and a low crime rate. Indian Americans have headed corporate giants and donated millions to the Trump campaign. They have made a name for themselves in professions ranging from academia to technology, banking and medicine. They have even arrived in US politics, traditionally the preserve of those with well established roots in the country. Kamala Harris was the Democrats' candidate for President in 2024. New York's newly elected mayor Zohran Mamdani's bloodlines are Indian, even if he opts to play up his African background. The Indian connection even extends to Vice President J D Vance's household — his wife Usha's parents migrated from Andhra Pradesh. The number of PIOs embedded in the Trump administration is an eye-opener.

TRUMP'S PIO ARMY

Kashyap (Kash) Patel is FBI chief, Sriram Krishnan is Senior White House Policy Advisor on Artificial Intelligence, Kush Desai is Deputy Press Secretary at the White House, S Paul Kapur is Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. Harmeet Dhillon is the US Assistant Attorney General. With such powerful well-wishers, the Trump administration's step motherly treatment of India, lumping us with Myanmar and Syria for tariffs, was puzzling. But lately, a sneaking suspicion has dawned that the PIOs in the Trump administration, far from being India's backers, were working against our interests to demonstrate their loyalty to Trump. The imperative to adopt an anti-India line was pressure from Trump's powerful MAGA supporters who have targeted the Indian immigrant as the villain in depriving white Americans of jobs. Online abuse against Indians on social media have ballooned, with Indians accused of visa scamming and grabbing positions which should rightfully belong to the native-born American. The MAGA lobby complains that Indians have manipulated American laws so as to bring to the USA not just their kith but even village kin. A disproportionately high number of Indian students study at American universities. (In 2025, the number of Indians seeking college admission fell by some 70 per cent.) After a Sikh truck caused a major accident on a Florida highway last year, there was a flood of abusive messages on social media, not just against all Sikh freight drivers, but even Raj Subramaniam, CEO of FedEx.

Evangelical Christians, who form the backbone of MAGA, complain against recent Indian arrivals altering the character of picturesque Norman Rockwell-style neighbourhoods with their noisy exuberant celebration of festivals, smelly cuisine and other idiosyncrasies. A 90-foot statue of Hanuman in Texas caused much angst among locals.

PIO TROJAN HORSES

Trump's PIO cohort seems to believe in the old Hindi proverb that the newest convert is keenest to prove his loyalty. Recently, Republican Senator Ted Cruz in a leaked telephone call named Vance as one of the key White House men resisting an Indo-American trade deal. Vance, a product of the MAGA movement, is vulnerable because of his Hindu spouse and he even admitted that he hoped to persuade her to convert. Significantly, Usha did not even meet her relatives or visit her parents' home state during the Vances' brief trip to India. Dhillon in the Justice Department is known for her tough line in prosecuting student demonstrators on campuses and cracking down on universities' hiring practices. Kash Patel has enforced Trump's agenda vigorously, with special attention to MAGA's pet projects. S Paul Kapur contributed in formulating tough immigration-related policies.

When Modi visited the USA for a Quad summit in 2024, Democrat candidate Harris's office could not find an available time slot for meeting the Indian Prime Minister. Mamdani during his mayoral campaign declared that Modi was unwelcome in the USA. He even claimed flippantly that he doubted that after the 2002 riots there were any Muslims left in Gujarat. (In fact, the percentage population of Gujarati Muslims remains around eight per cent and their economic and education indicators are far higher than the average Indian Muslim.) Recently, Nalin Haley, son of PIO Nikki Haley, a former US ambassador to the UN, declared on social media that India was run by a "cheap government" which sends "cheap labour" to the United States.



HISTORY HEADLINE

BY SHYAMLAL YADAV

LAST WEEK, a Wardha-based lawyer, Harshvardhan Shobha Babarao Godghate, wrote to Maharashtra Governor Acharya Devvrat, questioning the legality of NCP leader Sunetra Pawar taking oath as Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister since she is neither an elected Member of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly (MLA) nor a Member of the Legislative Council (MLC). She was not even a Cabinet minister when the oath was administered to her, he wrote.

This discomfort with unelected executives has a long history in India, shaped by the political instability of the late 1960s. However, the legal question was settled long ago — first by Article 164(4) of the Constitution, which permits such appointments for a limited period, and later by a 1971 Supreme Court verdict that upheld the appointment of a Uttar Pradesh chief minister on this basis.

Article 164(4) of the Constitution, allows a person to be appointed as a minister for up to six months without being a member of the legislature, provided they secure membership within that period.

But it wasn't until the late 1960s — a period marked by a weakening of the Congress and the resultant fractured mandates — that Article 164(4) was tested in political practice, first in Bihar and then in Uttar Pradesh, before the Supreme Court stepped in to settle the legal position.

After the 1967 elections, Bihar produced its first non-Congress government under the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD), a loose coalition of socialists, Jana Sangh members, and other anti-Congress forces. Mahamaya Prasad Sinha, an MLA of the Jan Kranti Dal, became the Chief Minister. But amid disagreements within and a split in the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), the SVD government



(Left to right) In January 1968, Satish Prasad Singh stayed CM of Bihar for five days before making way for BP Mandal. ARCHIVE

fell, with Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal, a prominent OBC leader, who had formed a separate Shoshit Dal, forming the government with Congress support.

The SVD split forced CM Sinha to resign in January 1968 and the Congress backed Mandal for the CM post. However, there was a hurdle: Mandal was not a member of either House of the Bihar legislature. Aided by the Congress, an ingenious workaround was arrived at.

On January 28, 1968, Mandal's associate Satish Prasad Singh, then 37, was sworn in as Chief Minister. Singh, who had been elected from Parbatta Assembly seat on an SSP ticket in 1967, thus became Bihar's first OBC Chief Minister. However, two days later, the new CM facilitated Mandal to be nominated to the Legislative Council, after which he resigned. Singh was therefore CM for a deliberately short stint of five days.

Given that Article 164(4) was already in place, there was no bar, at least in constitutional terms, on Mandal taking over as CM, but the provision had never been tested. At least not until a few years later, in Uttar Pradesh.

By 1969-70, a weakened Congress had split into the Congress (O) and Indira Gandhi's Congress (R). In UP, Charan Singh's Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) government, formed with Indira Gandhi's Congress (R) support, collapsed when BKD MPs voted against her privy purses abolition Bill in Parliament. Charan Singh resigned on October 1, 1970, and President's Rule was imposed.

When President's Rule was lifted, a new coalition with BKD, Jana Sangh, Congress (O) and other smaller groups took shape. On October 18, 1970, Tribhuvan Narain Singh, a Rajya Sabha member from the Congress (O), was sworn in as UP's sixth Chief Minister.

But the government was visibly fragile, and the Congress (R) snapped at its heels. Narain Dutt Tiwari of the Congress (R) led the attack, questioning Singh's legitimacy as House leader. Speaker A R Kher ruled in Singh's favour the next day. Outside the Assembly, Har Sharan Verma, a Lucknow resident, petitioned the Allahabad High Court on November 4, 1970, arguing Singh's appointment violated constitutional provisions since he was neither an MLA nor an MLC. However, the High Court dismissed his plea, prompting Verma to move the Supreme Court.

On March 16, 1971, the Supreme Court relied on Article 164(4) and ruled that a person can be appointed Chief Minister without being an MLA or MLC; that Article 164(4) applies to Chief Ministers; and that such an appointment is valid for up to six months.

The judgment was a victory for Singh, but it didn't help him stay on in the chair for long.

In early 1971, to comply with Article 164(4), Singh contested the bypoll from Manirampur Assembly (now renamed as Gorakhpur Urban) seat, but lost, making his resignation imminent.

Days later, on March 30, 1971, when the UP Assembly was discussing the Motion of Thanks on the Governor's address, his government lost the mandate on amendments moved by N D Tiwari. Singh resigned and returned to Rajya Sabha, whose membership he had retained.

Singh's case, thus, paved the way for several other CMs to take oath without being members of either Houses of the state legislature.

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The perils of a family fallout



ON THE LOOSE

BY LEHER KALA

THE VERY public Beckhams' feud has turned the world's attention towards a conundrum that applies to everybody. As adults must we dutifully suffer the difficult, obligatory relationships thrust on us by fate till (ugh) death relieves us, or do we have the right to cast off toxic relatives, prioritising our own sanity? Chances are, our opinions on this are shaped by our backgrounds. In India, parents enjoy godly status but that's not to say there are fewer disgruntled adult children here. Just, that in the most peculiar and specifically Indian mindset, we've learnt to accept that pain is in our destiny. Like one must grin and bear traffic jams, a bad boss, power cuts and garbage strewn roads, so must one endure family, however irritating they may be.

The long overdue mental health revolution that happened during Covid — when we had too many hours to navel gaze and introspect on the state of our lives — is that "boundaries" and "trauma" became buzzwords and therapy became trendy. Somewhere, the idea gained traction that "I" comes first at all cost, so much so that people view the severing of family ties as a justifiable move towards personal growth. The culture supports this. On one of her shows, Oprah congratulated people who had gone no contact with their families. No doubt, there are many cases of violence and neglect where cutting off a parent might be necessary, but more often, it's parental stupidity, of interference and lecturing that maddens an overly sensitive generation into complete withdrawal. Psych speak is everywhere so we've all learnt (superficially) to identify "narcissism" and "emotionally immature" people. That we see ghosting people as the best solution smacks of a vengeful kind of maliciousness — you did this and that to me, so I have a right to kick you out, no explanation required.

Is anyone actually happier after creating such a profound disruption for hitherto loved ones? Blinded by anger and embarking

on some (righteous) warpath doesn't exactly make for contentment for the disruptor either. A state of nothingness may provide temporary relief but grievances don't automatically vanish. Frustratingly, they continue to occupy headspace for all involved. Havingsaid that, one can't help but feel some sympathy for Brooklyn Beckham whose emotional injuries it seems, date back to toddlerhood. His infant pictures were sold to *OK!* magazine and on one occasion, when he was hanging with a girlfriend at 16, the paparazzi, allegedly informed by his mother, showed up. When he's finally taken a stand, Brooklyn must politely endure conservative commentators like Piers Morgan refer, predictably and witheringly, to the curse of the proverbial silver spoon, as if having wealthy and famous parents doesn't entitle someone to have any feelings at all.

Most of us slog in the real world without a safety net. And so quite naturally believe that someone lucky enough to carve a career off the residual fame of a surname shouldn't

be complaining. Or trashing his parents. Fine, the relentless public glare is exhausting but what about the fantastic financial benefits? The thing is when a family functions as a commercially viable private limited corporation, there's always a risk that new mergers and acquisitions won't work out. Fissures in families, rich or poor, stem largely from the same issues; people feel misunderstood, sometimes the effect of divorces lingers on. The belief that a sibling received preferential treatment is particularly common. All valid grouses indeed, as long as one also accepts what we in 2026 call harmful behaviour, a lot of older people simply don't get it. Probably, because they tolerated far worse from their parents. *Psychology Today* wasn't available for free on the Internet to explore our hurts, ad nauseam. Rebelling against the conventional wisdom of keeping up appearances as a way to assuage our wounds, creates other (unpleasant) ripples, too.

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