

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Perilous fast track

Dallewal's extreme stand eclipsing big picture

THE life of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who is on a fast-unto-death, is precious — as rightly observed by the Supreme Court. So too are the lives of all protesters who are staying put at Shambhu and Khanauri borders in the bitter cold. And Dallewal himself has said that the lives of farmers pushed to the brink by flawed government policies are more valuable than his own. If every *kisan's* life really matters, why have things come to such a pass? And why has the time-tested path of dialogue been abandoned?

Unfortunately, it was only after the apex court's intervention that senior representatives of the Punjab and Central governments reached out to Dallewal. But it is unlikely that his extreme stand will force the Centre to accept farmers' key demands, including a legal guarantee of MSP for various crops. After all, over 700 of them had died during a year-long agitation before the Modi government finally repealed the three farm laws. Ironically, Dallewal's hunger strike and the efforts to dissuade him are eclipsing the big picture — the widespread agrarian distress fuelled by factors such as the debt burden, rising costs of farming and inadequate support for crop diversification.

The SC has urged farmers to adopt the Gandhian way of staging protests. The Mahatma considered fasting as a potent weapon in the Satyagraha armoury, but he made it clear that a Satyagrahi should do it only as the last resort — "when all other avenues of redress have been explored and have failed". Leaders of farm unions still have the option of pressing the Centre to return to the negotiating table. The marathon talks between Union ministers and farmers' representatives in February might not have produced a breakthrough, but that is no reason to snap lines of communication. A mutual dimb-down is a must to save farmers' lives as well as livelihood.

Modi-AKD meeting

India-Lanka cooperation rekindled

THE meeting between Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Disanayake (AKD) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on Monday marks a critical juncture in Indo-Lanka relations. As Sri Lanka rebuilds after years of economic and political turmoil, Disanayake's visit signifies Colombo's trust in India's partnership for its recovery. Notably, this is Disanayake's first international visit since assuming office in September. It underscores his priority to deepen bilateral ties with India and reaffirm Sri Lanka's commitment to a collaborative regional vision. President Disanayake's tribute to Mahatma Gandhi at Rajghat earlier in the day set the tone for the visit. Modi and AKD focused on deepening economic cooperation, exploring investment opportunities and bolstering regional security. It is a reflection of their shared aspirations for prosperity and stability in the Indian Ocean Region. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's earlier visit to Colombo underscored India's commitment to Sri Lanka's economic revival and laid the groundwork for this fruitful dialogue.

The island nation's significance as India's closest maritime neighbour ensures it occupies a central role in New Delhi's strategic outlook — from fostering trade to safeguarding regional security. Disanayake is known for his pragmatic leadership. Anchored in leftist ideology and focus on anti-corruption reforms, AKD's regime marks a move away from the dynastic politics that has long dominated Sri Lankan governance. It aligns well with Modi's own grassroots approach, offering opportunities for renewed cooperation, particularly in addressing economic rebuilding and ensuring regional stability.

The meeting underscored Delhi's support for Sri Lanka's economic recovery, recalling India's \$4-billion assistance during the 2022 crisis and its role in facilitating an IMF bailout. By advancing mutual interests and focusing on sustainable solutions, India and Sri Lanka are poised to forge new paths for cooperation in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 1924

Communalism and loyalty

THE Viceroy's reply to the Bombay non-Brahmin deputation last week throws interesting light upon the communal policy of the government. Both in Bombay and Madras, the political progress of the people is hampered by non-Brahmin separatism, encouraged by the government on the ostensible ground that non-Brahmin Hindus are backward in education and other respects. The Bombay non-Brahmins, in their address to His Excellency, had asked for a greater share of employment under the government and for a larger representation for themselves in public bodies than are accorded to them at present. The Viceroy asked them to utilise the opportunities given to them for education more largely than at present and added: "I have listened with great interest to your statement of the steps the leaders of our communities have taken to secure representation of the views of your people and to take a part in public affairs and a share in the new representative bodies. I heartily congratulate you upon the new spirit which animates you and the new aspirations which direct your actions. Your desire to take a larger part in public work in the presidency and activity to support the government in all measures for promotion of the welfare and prosperity of the people is worthy of the highest praise and you may count on my warm sympathy and interests in your progress in these directions." The reference made by His Excellency to the non-Brahmin "activity to support the government in all measures for the promotion of the welfare of the people" as being "worthy of the highest praise" and calculated to secure his "warm sympathy and interests" deserves to be properly examined and understood.

Crossing the line on the judicial front

Justice Yadav's controversial remarks have raised doubts about his objectivity



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

AN impeachment motion has been moved against Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav of the Allahabad High Court over his remarks at a recent event of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). There is no chance that the move will succeed because the ruling dispensation is against it. Indeed, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has strongly supported Justice Yadav.

There are reports that Justice Yadav has been asked by the Supreme Court Collegium to meet it. The latter has no legal authority to do so. Hence, he will be within the law to skip the meeting. However, if he does meet the Collegium, it can draw his attention to the Restatement of Values of Judicial Life, adopted by the Supreme Court in May 1997. It can advise him to observe them, but if he chooses to ignore them, it can really do nothing except recommend his transfer from the Allahabad HC. It is possible, though, that the government may not act on the recommendation.

Thus, as matters stand, Justice Yadav virtually enjoys immunity for his remarks at the VHP function. Yes, there is one step the HC Chief Justice can take. He can decide not to allot judicial work to the judge on the ground that the comments have made him unfit to adjudicate cases. But that will require a very courageous Chief Justice in our contentions times.

Paragraphs 8 and 9 of Restatement of Values of Judicial Life



BENCHMARK: The Restatement of Values of Judicial Life, adopted by the Supreme Court in 1997, is illustrative of what is expected of members of the higher judiciary. **AWI**

read: "A Judge shall not enter into public debate or express his views in public on political matters or on matters that are pending or are likely to arise for judicial determination. A Judge is expected to let his judgments speak for themselves. He shall not give interview to the media."

In the past, judges did not seek to attract attention either to themselves or their personal views on national affairs. They seldom gave lectures or participated in public functions. This was based on the sound principle that the public should have confidence that their decisions were based on the facts and the law and no other consideration. The cardinal and eternal essence of the dispensation of justice is that it must not only be done but also be manifestly done. Today, too, many judges of superior courts follow this principle and avoid the temptation of airing their views in public. However, if the feeling gains currency in the judiciary that there is nothing objectionable for judges to comment on issues such as the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) — a mat-

The cardinal and eternal essence of the dispensation of justice is that it must not only be done but also be manifestly done.

ter which may come up for adjudication — the present restraint exercised by most of the judges may get eroded to the detriment of the administration of justice in India. That will damage the national good.

Justice Yadav not only spoke on the UCC but also did so in terms of rank communalism. All through his address, he spoke as a Hindu and addressed Muslims as a separate community. This

violates the basic tenet of a judge: she/he will not distinguish between citizens on the grounds of religion either as individuals or as a group. It is particularly sad that Justice Yadav gave the go-by to the proud traditions of the Allahabad High Court, whose judges, even during the days of colonialism, strove to pursue the path of rectitude and reticence as well as fierce independence.

Justice Yadav may be suited for public life. He would have full freedom there to express his opinions, and if he is elected to a legislature, he can strive to ensure that these are converted into law. There is little doubt that political forces in the country that are supporting him may welcome him into their fold. They may find him an asset, for his VHP speech shows that he is a fluent public speaker who will be able to convey their beliefs succinctly to the public.

I hope readers will forgive me for striking a personal note. My family members had a century-long association with the Alla-

habad HC as lawyers and judges. I moved away to the field of diplomacy, but have vivid recollections of the principles followed by my father, who retired as Chief Justice of this court. He told me that a judge should not only speak through his judgments but also confine those judgments to the law and facts of the case. He should not make *obiter dicta*, let alone use judgments to lecture society or point to national infirmities. That was the duty of other organs of the state.

These views are no longer in vogue. But Justice Yadav's speech should lead all thinking Indians to ponder on what the public should expect of a judge. I will venture to suggest that brilliance or larger-than-life qualities are not needed in a judge. What is required is that she/he apply the law fairly and fearlessly without prejudice to anyone. Justice Yadav's speech has raised doubts about his objectivity, a basic judicial quality. By creating an unmistakable impression of 'us' versus 'they' — and clearly indicating who fall in these categories — the remarks have cast a cloud over his outlook as a judge.

Values and conduct in all areas of India's public life have changed in more than seven decades since Independence. This is the natural process of things. The cultural practices of various institutions have also changed, and some need to be done away with consciously. There is no reason why judges of superior courts allow themselves to be addressed as "their lordships". However, fundamental principles relating to institutions do not admit any change. Justice Yadav breached them in his address at the VHP event. He should, therefore, resign.

It is tragic that every issue concerning propriety has become a plaything between the government and the Opposition in India. Justice Yadav's speech, a matter of judicial propriety, has also met that fate.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The judiciary must strive to maintain the confidence of the public in the established courts. — Fali S Nariman

When art thrives despite adversity

SRIPRIYA SATISH

I recently read American author Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. Keller (1880-1968) continues to be an inspiration to countless people around the world as she had carved a niche for herself in the literary sphere despite being blind and deaf. She was also mute initially; later, with the help of her private teacher, Anne Sullivan, she learned to communicate verbally.

Her amazing story brought back memories of a man whom I encountered on the premises of a hotel in Mysuru. At first, I did not even notice his presence. However, the moment guests left or entered the hotel, I heard a melodious tune.

When I heard the tune of my favourite Hindi song, I was compelled to find out who was playing it. There he was, oblivious of his surroundings, enjoying the music that he was playing at the place allotted to him behind the security desk. It was a pleasure listening to the tune being rendered perfectly. The placid smile on his face made the guests take a close look at the musician.

I saw that he was using an instrument made with a coconut shell with a string tied to a bamboo stick. It seemed as if he was not playing the music for money but for his own satisfaction. I was astounded by the fact that such soulful music was coming from an ordinary-looking instrument.

My family was in a rush whenever we left the hotel to visit local tourist spots. So, I did not get a chance to speak with him. But his soulful tunes kept ringing in my ears. I decided to know more about him before checking out.

We stayed there for two days. On the eve of our departure, while my husband was completing the checkout formalities, my daughter and I searched for the mysterious figure. But he was nowhere to be seen. Members of the security staff told us that it was his day off. They added that he was mute and blind. He had been with the hotel from the outset, although he was not an employee. We also came to know that he took delight in performing magic tricks for children.

We left the place with a heavy heart but on an upbeat note, realising that creativity transcends sensory limitations. The man was a living example of how art and ingenuity flourish despite adversity.

Keller put it aptly, "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ONOE is not practical

Apropos of 'One poll logjam'; the BJP's renewed push for 'one nation, one election' (ONOE) is understandable: it continues to be the predominant political party in the country despite significant gains made by the Congress in this year's Lok Sabha elections. The saffron party stands to benefit the most if voters exercise their franchise once in five years rather than every two years or so. Clubbing national and state polls will be an injustice to the interests of the state. The idea has low practicality as the terms of state Assemblies would need to be reduced or extended. It will be impossible to bring all political parties on board.

SS PAUL, NADIA (WB)

Take voters' opinion

Reference to 'One poll logjam'; given the current animosity between the Union Government and the Opposition, the ONOE idea is bound to trigger a confrontation that will serve no useful purpose. The Centre must explain why it is in a hurry to bring about this electoral reform. Which state government would be willing to take the risk of having its term end midway if the ONOE is introduced? The sad part is that nobody is asking the voters their opinion on the issue.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Zakir Hussain's legacy

The death of legendary tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain is a huge loss to both Indian and global music. At 73, he has left behind a legacy that will continue to inspire generations. Trained by his father, Ustad Alla Rakha, Zakir's musical journey began at a young age. He popularised Indian classical music globally, blending it with fusion genres and collaborating with legends like Pt Ravi Shankar. His emotional performances, which touched hearts worldwide, were recognised with prestigious awards such as Padma Vibhushan. His quote, "The beat of the tabla is my breath", epitomised his lifelong dedication to music, making him an iconic figure.

RK JAIN, BARWANI (MP)

Diversify energy mix in HP

Refer to 'Running dry'; Himachal Pradesh heavily relies on hydropower, which is now vulnerable to changing weather patterns and

water availability. Enhancing energy efficiency through technological advancements and demand management can reduce consumption pressures. Strengthening the grid infrastructure, adopting micro-hydel projects for localised energy generation and encouraging community-based renewable initiatives are crucial. Policy reforms, public-private partnerships and investments in energy storage solutions can ensure long-term sustainability. By focusing on resilient and diversified energy strategies, Himachal Pradesh can secure its energy future while maintaining environmental balance.

SIKANDAR BANSAL, SHIMLA

Rebuild grassroots strength

Refer to 'INDIA bloc totters as Congress faces isolation'; the bloc, formed to counter the BJP, faces turbulence as the Congress is struggling to secure strong alliances. Several regional parties in the bloc, such as the TMC, AAP, RJD and the Samajwadi Party, are dominant in their respective states, where the Congress is often on a weak footing. This weakness creates a dilemma: while these parties benefit from the Congress' national presence, they view it as a competitor in their regions. The Congress' inability to excel in direct battles against the BJP, especially in Hindi heartland states, raises questions about its leadership within the bloc. Without clear coordination and strategic seat-sharing, INDIA risks becoming fragmented. For the bloc to succeed, the Congress must rebuild its grassroots strength while adopting a pragmatic approach to alliance-building, focusing on taking allies along rather than competing with them.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

Enforce stringent rape laws

Twelve years have passed since a young physiotherapist was murdered after being raped inside a bus. Rape victims must learn to face and survive the consequent ordeal with confidence and avail judicial aid. Stringent initiatives and laws should be enforced for the safety of women, such as round-the-clock police patrolling in isolated places, besides ensuring a faster trial and strict punishment to the perpetrators.

ARVIND SHARMA, BY MAIL

Illegal migrants are alibi for electoral gains



KISHALAY BHATTACHARJEE
DEAN, JINDAL SCHOOL OF
JOURNALISM & COMMUNICATION

THE term 'Bangladeshis' in India has infiltrated our lexicon as "illegal" human beings. They have also become the most acceptable alibis for the political class to extract political mileage and distract unfavourable attention.

The recent case in point is Delhi's Lieutenant-Governor VK Saxena, who announced a two-month special drive to identify and act against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in the national capital. The Delhi police has started raids in slums across Kalindi Kunj, Shaheen Bagh and Jamia Nagar, where Rohingya refugees were provided land to set up camps.

Many in India like to believe that Rohingyas are Bangladeshis despite sufficient knowledge that the ethnicity is among the most persecuted groups of Myanmar.

It may not be a coincidence that this development came hours after the BJP demanded a CBI investigation into the alleged illegal settlement of Rohingyas in Jammu and

Kashmir. Chief Minister of the state Omar Abdullah has said the refugees should be deported, if at all, but they could not be made to starve and he would not let them die in the cold.

Yet, I will not be surprised if this campaign to identify Bangladeshi "infiltrators" picks steam across other states. Let us not forget that we are upon another season of elections and, this time, for the national capital.

Many would have forgotten that in mid-1992, Delhi had launched Operation Pushback to deport Bangladeshis. That was under the Congress government, which was responding to a belligerent Sangh Parivar dramatically heightening its pitch around unauthorised immigration. Assam had already scripted the threat of a silent demographic invasion by these impoverished, desperate, pitiable neighbours who were being pushed into India to seize Hindu territory.

The template of Bangladeshi-phobia was a well-established eastern propaganda that the Sangh appropriated in its entirety. It was, however, willing to exclude the Hindu Bangladeshis as refugees who were escaping persecution. The same lens wouldn't apply to Rohingyas at a later stage.

Around the same time, the Sangh launched the slogan, 'Infiltrators Quit India', and forced the Congress to act



DRIVE AGAINST 'ILLEGALS': The Delhi police has started raids in slums in the national capital where Rohingya refugees were provided land to set up camps. REUTERS

against whom it considered infiltrators, setting the stage for an event that would change the political landscape of the country forever. By December, the crescendo had reached Ayodhya, resulting in the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

The presence of illegal migrants from the neighbouring countries is not an unfamiliar piece of data. It is also well known that during the Congress regime, politicians have reportedly used these settlers as "vote banks". But there is no evidence yet or corroboration of the claim that millions of infiltrators have arrived to take over parts of this country.

Instigated by the Sangh's

While the detection and detention mechanism fits the concept of the process is the punishment, the mosque surveys claiming buried temples aim to set right 'historical wrongs'

growing voice against the infiltrators, the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao rolled out an action plan against the Bangladeshis to counter the jingoism. It only added fuel to the propaganda. In September 1992, a group of 132 persons was identified as infiltrators and removed from the Seemapuri area of east Delhi.

It is well known that all efforts by the government to arrest infiltration through the porous borders have proven ineffective. However, the build-up of such a campaign has been highly beneficial politically. The 1992 campaign, finally, provided the Sangh political legitimacy and made xenophobia and

anti-Muslim rhetoric acceptable in public life.

The current campaign launched by the bureaucratic arm of the BJP in Delhi has raised the suspicion of the beginning of a nationwide 'identification' drive that could serve as a precursor of another round of the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Though Assam provides the case study that the NRC is a wasteful exercise in detection, it has proven to be a worthwhile weapon to intimidate and harass Muslims. Manipulated by political parties, the acute fear of being rendered into a non-citizen has repeatedly triggered ethnonational projects across decades.

In the politics of the Hindu right, the framing of migrants threatening the security of Hindu-India has become synonymous with Muslims in general.

The ongoing exercise is already on the lines of the NRC verification, something that Uttar Pradesh had initiated in 2019. The chorus then had gained momentum, with other states chiming in and Karnataka even constructing a detention centre.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, known for his anti-Muslim vocabulary, has floated the idea of a nationwide NRC in his recent election campaign in Jharkhand.

Given India's poor neighbourhood policy that stood exposed after the fall of Dha-

ka this year, such rhetoric is bound to further deteriorate relations between the two countries, which are always on the edge with the NRC.

It will be interesting to see how this is going to play out with another Islamophobic campaign gaining ground: the claim of temples under mosques.

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 mandates that the nature of all places of worship, except the one in Ayodhya that was then under litigation, shall be maintained as it was on August 15, 1947.

While one hoped the Ayodhya judgement would have closed this matter, more such suits have been filed in Varanasi and, more recently in Sambhal, where trial courts hastily ordered surveys of the mosques, resulting in a clash that killed four people.

This could well be a convergence of two distinctive sets of xenophobic projects that will set off a chain of low-intensity anti-Muslim campaigns working simultaneously, while stepping up the ante wherever political machinations are due.

While the detection and detention mechanism fits the concept of 'the process is the punishment', the mosque surveys claiming buried temples aim to set right 'historical wrongs', thus perpetrating the narrative of revenge against invaders who have looted the glorious past.

What porn has to do with the post-Nirbhaya world



ARCHANA R SINGH
PROFESSOR, PANJAB
UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH

ON December 16, 2012, the brutal gang-rape of a young physiotherapy student on a moving bus in Delhi became the turning point for India. The girl died, and the tragedy sparked protests and demands for justice, pushing for better legal protection for women.

Named 'Nirbhaya', her death shook the country's conscience. The tragedy forced policymakers to confront the inadequacies in laws addressing sexual violence. Long-debated reforms were, finally, prioritised as the case became the catalyst for overhauling legal frameworks to ensure better protection, justice and accountability for crimes against women.

Following the Nirbhaya tragedy, the Indian government passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013, expanding the definition of sexual violence to include stalking, voyeurism and acid attacks. It also increased the penalty for rape, including life imprisonment and death

penalty for repeat offenders. Fast-track courts were introduced and an amendment in the 2015 Juvenile Justice Act allowed minors aged 16-18 committing heinous crimes to be tried as adults. A Nirbhaya Fund was created for the implementation of initiatives aimed at enhancing the safety and security of women, such as installing CCTVs at public places.

The 2017 Unnau rape case and the 2018 Kathua rape and murder case demonstrated the potential of fast-track courts to lead to convictions. But the 2020 Hathras gang-rape revealed that challenges still persisted in achieving impartial justice.

Today, 12 years after the Nirbhaya case, despite various legal reforms, women face persistent sexual violence. In August this year, a doctor was raped and killed at a hospital in Kolkata, while a seven-month-old girl was brutally raped earlier this month, again in Kolkata. This tragic reality signals a profound societal failure.

It is not easy to pinpoint any particular reason behind the continued sexual crimes against women and even babies. A complex interplay of social, cultural, economic and systemic factors is behind it—from the deep-rooted patriarchy perpetuating harmful gender norms to devaluing women as subordinates to men; from the lack of open conversations about healthy sexual relationships to the



UNSAFE: The 2012 Nirbhaya case sparked protests and demand for justice, pushing for better legal protection for women. TRIBUNE PHOTO

absence of comprehensive sex education; from delayed investigations, low conviction rates and insensitive handling of cases to under-reporting of such cases due to social stigma; from substance abuse to rapid urbanisation, migration and weakening of community ties; from social isolation and anonymity in urban settings to unemployment and economic inequalities. All these factors can create frustration and aggression, sometimes leading to acts of sexual violence.

Another contributing factor is the rapid digitisation and low-cost or free accessibility of pornographic material. A study published in the *Indian Journal of Public Health* points out that India, with 12 per cent of the websites devoted to pornography, ranks third in porn consumption globally. Excessive consumption of porn has become a pressing

Pornography can foster unhealthy attitudes that can escalate into sexual frustration and violence. Addressing this requires urgent government action.

public health concern, with research pointing to its correlation with sexual crimes.

A study by the UK Government's Equality Office in 2020 found that though harmful attitudes toward women are influenced by multiple factors, a key reason was pornography. Many researchers consider it to be a significant contributor to harmful sexual beliefs and behaviours in high-risk individuals.

Understanding this relationship requires the examination of pornography consumption. Viewing too much pornographic content leads to desensitisation. It makes the content mundane and commonplace, leading to increased exposure time and a quest for more hardcore content. It also leads to a detachment from reality and lack of differentiation between the real and the virtual.

Whether pornographic con-

tent affects sexual aggression has been debated for decades. Since complex multiple factors contribute to deviant behaviour, blaming pornography alone oversimplifies the issue and diverts attention from the systemic causes. However, one certainly cannot ignore pornography as a key factor.

Research on rape culture has focused on understanding the acquisition of attitudes, behaviours and norms associated with violence against women. While many of these factors are more influential than pornography, it is often pornography's interaction with these factors and their exacerbation that heightens its impact. Certain types of pornography, particularly those depicting violence or non-consensual acts, may normalise aggression and perpetuate misogynistic views.

Frequent consumption of such material can desensitise viewers to violence and blur the understanding of consent in a relationship. For individuals with a predisposition towards violent or harmful behaviour, pornography can act as a trigger, reinforcing these tendencies. Exposure to pornography that objectifies women can increase the acceptance of rape myths and play a significant role in shaping attitudes linked to the perpetuation of rape culture.

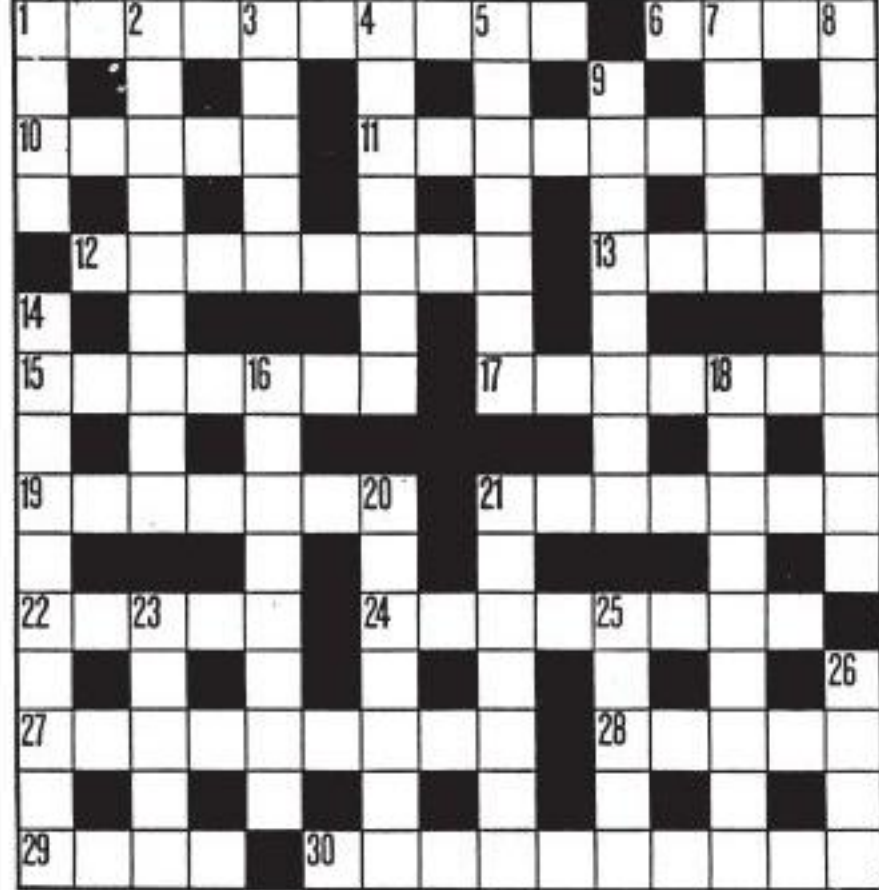
The myths associated with rape promote the idea that rape is usually avoidable if certain precautions are taken. The onus of "don't get raped" is

thrust upon women (as opposed to "don't rape" upon men). And, this self-protective ideal lends itself comfortably to blaming the victim and absolving the perpetrator.

Urgent government action is needed to address this menace. The steps required to be taken include the regulation of free pornographic websites and issuance of trigger warnings as also seeking proof of age for access to such sites and holding awareness campaigns and supervised discussions on consent and respectful relationships. Introducing media and digital literacy in educational institutions, adult education classes, institutions of open and lifelong learning and community and vocational education can further equip students to evaluate harmful content critically.

As we honour Nirbhaya's memory, her legacy demands more than symbolic gestures. Strong laws must be enforced and efforts to inculcate gender sensitivity amongst all stakeholders must continue. Justice-focused narratives should dominate the media, countering misinformation and fostering accountability. The government should commission research studies to find reasons behind the persistence of rape cases. The transformation journey requires a collective effort towards creating a society where every citizen feels safe and no girl has to pay with her life and be named Nirbhaya again.

QUICK CROSSWORD




ACROSS
1 Flooded (5,5)
6 A coarse file (4)
10 To let down (5)
11 Make an exact copy (9)
12 Force through against opposition (8)
13 Negotiate terms (5)
15 Within a building (7)
17 An edible mollusc (7)
19 Holder of unorthodox opinions (7)
21 Moreover (7)
22 Distant (5)
24 Choice item of food (8)
27 Incredulity (9)
28 Home (5)
29 Frustrate (4)
30 Such people as (3,5,2)

DOWN
1 Unpleasant to look at (4)
2 In the Antipodes (4,5)
3 In the countryside (5)
4 Strenuous (7)
5 Directly stated (7)
7 Saw (5)
8 Regrettable state of affairs (6,4)
9 Provisions (8)
14 Arbitrary (4-6)
16 Up (3,2,3)
18 Laughable (9)
20 Ungentlemanly (7)
21 Malignant (7)
23 Desert watering place (5)
25 Sharp witty remark (5)
26 Hard of hearing (4)

Yesterday's solution
Across: 1 Sober up, 5 Sharp, 8 Out of mind, 9 Rat, 10 Form, 12 Inveigle, 14 Foible, 15 Clergy, 17 Infra dig, 18 Used, 21 Bar, 22 Appraisal, 24 Erect, 25 Runaway.
Down: 1 Spoof, 2 Bit, 3 Rift, 4 Pliant, 5 Suddenly, 6 As regards, 7 Pottery, 11 Reinforce, 13 Pleasant, 14 Friable, 16 Simper, 19 Dally, 20 Lawn, 23 Sow.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR
DECEMBER 17, 2024, TUESDAY
■ Shaka Samvat 1946
■ Margshirsh Shaka 26
■ Posh Parvishite 44
■ Hijari 1446
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 2, up to 10.57 am
■ Brahma Yoga up to 9.11 pm
■ Punar Nakshatra up to 12.44 am
■ Moon enters Cancer sign 6.48 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET:	TUESDAY	17-25 HRS
SUNRISE:	WEDNESDAY	07-12 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	06
New Delhi	23	05
Amritsar	21	04
Bathinda	24	04
Jalandhar	21	04
Ludhiana	22	04
Bhiwani	19	04
Hisar	23	02
Sirsa	24	03
Dharamsala	20	03
Manali	17	02
Shimla	19	10
Srinagar	09	-04
Jammu	21	05
Kargil	01	-12
Leh	01	-13
Dehradun	21	06
Mussoorie	22	10

TEMPERATURE IN °C

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

GOVTS NEED TO WORK AS ONE TO COUNTER CYBER THREATS IN 2025

A major challenge looms ahead for India's cyber police, sectors heavily dependent on tech and general public. The India Cyber Threat Report 2025 by the Data Security Council recently raised alerts about AI-driven and deepfake-enabled cyber attacks becoming increasingly prevalent in the new year; with the healthcare and finance sectors featuring among the prime targets. The report warns that AI will be used to develop highly sophisticated, personalised phishing campaigns using deepfake technology, making them harder to detect. AI-enabled malware would be able to adapt real-time to evade traditional security, while data poisoning attacks could compromise the integrity of critical AI systems. It warns of malicious content—including deepfake video or audio messages purportedly from trusted sources—facilitating more effective attacks that allow cybercriminals to trick users into executing malware or revealing sensitive information.

The Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre estimates that, till mid-2024, at least 7,000 cybercrime complaints were recorded daily—a 114 percent increase over the cases logged between 2021 and 2023. This is expected to worsen in 2025 with criminals adopting newer methods in the face of a weak prevention and detection mechanism. In its second annual Data Complexity Report, data infrastructure company NetApp pointed out that 41 percent of global tech executives were bracing for a significant increase in security threats as AI adoption increases—especially in countries such as India, where the rate of adoption is gaining momentum.

Although emphasis on cyber security is expanding beyond the private sector, with the 2024-25 Union budget allocating ₹759 crore to enhance the government's efforts, tangible and effective measures need to be explored to bolster detection of a whole range of cybercrimes. The central and state governments need to work as a federally unified unit to stringently crack down on an increasingly popular crime among white-collar criminals. Dedicated focus is needed on significantly improving investigation and tracking methods to hunt down cyber criminals. The intensified threat perception for 2025 makes the beefing up of cyber security an all-round imperative. It should be accorded more importance than the traditional defence sector, failing which the country's people and institutions would remain exposed to the constantly-evolving methods of cyber criminals.

SAVE CHILIKA ECOSYSTEM FROM HIGHWAY CONCERNS

THE Union road transport and highways ministry has approved the alignment proposal for a two-lane national highway over the Chilika lake in Odisha. Commissioned by the National Highways Authority under the Bharatmala Pariyojna, the 7.8-km link will be part of the Gopalpur-Satapada stretch that seeks to connect national highways 516A and 316.

The project's consequences would be double-edged. Yes, it would link a cluster of villages across three districts; but it would be ominous for Asia's largest brackish-water lake spread over 1,100 sq km. If the project makes through environmental clearances, the two-lane highway will be built over the most vital part of the coastal lagoon—the channel that connects it with the Bay of Bengal, making it a unique blend of marine, brackish and freshwater ecosystems that fosters vibrant biodiversity. The inlet-outlet channel that falls in Coastal Regulation Zone 1 is critical for the hydrology, ecology and productivity of the lake. It regulates the salinity gradient and controls sedimentation. Any project that tampers with it can have disastrous consequences for the wetland. In the early 2000s, a change in its character had prompted the government to go for eco-restoration involving the opening of a new mouth to revive the lagoon.

Chilika is not only the source of livelihood for over 1 lakh fishers, but is also of critical importance as a home to threatened species. The proposed 7.8-km connectivity includes two bridges of 1.7 km and 1.9 km length likely to interfere with the lake's sedimentation, breeding migration and salinity. Add to it the threat from light, sound and vehicular pollution to the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins, for which Chilika is the single largest home. This part of the Ramsar site is also on the Central Asian Flyway used by several migratory waterbirds; about a million avian guests arrive at the lagoon every year to escape harsh Eurasian winters. Chilika is already under pressure from climate change—its growing siltation is a major cause for concern. The central and state governments should draw up plans to conserve the fragile coastal ecosystem and not add to its burden. The need is to explore sustainable connectivity, instead of looking for shortcuts. Chilika must be protected at all costs.

QUICK TAKE

WHAT BILLIONAIRES WANT

THOMAS Piketty recently said India should be “active” in taxing the rich. The French economist showed that the proportion of national income held by the richest 1 percent Indians, estimated at 22.6 percent, surpassed that of their counterparts in the US and Brazil. At the same event in the national capital hosted by the think tank RIS and the Delhi School of Economics, the government's chief economic adviser worried that higher taxes could lead to higher outflows. American multi-billionaires such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have asked their government to impose higher levies on their incomes. Can we expect a similar declaration of intent from some of our 300-plus billionaires?

THE geopolitical complexities of West Asia make it one of the hotbeds of conflict based upon territorial ambitions, political influence, economic considerations and ideological factors. Since all these domains remain dynamic, predictive analysis is always a challenge.

Three major conflict situations have highlighted the combative environment of West Asia for fairly long. These are the Israel-Palestinian, Iran-Israel and the Iran-Saudi (read Shia-Sunni) conflicts. There are subsets within these conflicts that pepper the region. For example, there is the Yemen affair that is a proxy fallout of the Iran-Saudi contestation. The Palestinian-Israeli standoff is meshed with the Iran-Israel affair, with Iran's proxies in the Gaza war zone and the Levant. In the midst of all this, there was the Syrian civil war, which dominated the West Asian security scene for almost a decade and was made worse by the presence of ISIS (Da'esh).

The presence of this ambitious and highly ruthless transnational terrorist group helped complicate the strategic environment of West Asia by many notches. Without a known sponsor and with little known about the actual ambitions of Daesh, the only way to battle it was in the physical domain. It took five years doing this, drawing the Russian, US, Iraqi, Syrian, Kurdish and Iranian armed resources into battle at different times before Daesh was defeated. West Asia remained in the throes of high instability through this period (2014-19), with little clarity on who needed to fight whom.

Is the latest Syrian revolution likely to result in something similar? There are enough reports from Eastern Syria of the potential revival of Daesh. US military resources say “the number of attacks claimed by Daesh in Iraq and Syria is on pace to more than double from last year, indicating the terrorist group is working to regain its strength”. We need to remember that the collapse of the Syrian Army, the weakening of Hezbollah by Israel's war of attrition against it, the apparent loss of confidence of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the rapid partial pullout of Russian military resources from Syria has left some voids for the current.

The lack of military activity and the absence of a rush to fill the voids is apparently a strategy by most powers to assess what exactly is happening in this core centre of conflict zones. It is only

The governance of Syria can well fall into the hands of fundamentalist groups. Global powers must work towards dousing such a fire rather than reigniting it

UPHEAVAL IN LEVANT RAISES UNCERTAINTY AROUND THE WORLD

LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETD)

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



SOURAV ROY

Israel that has taken advantage of the lull to strike the depots and military storage resources of the former Syrian Army where mostly Russian and Iranian equipment was stored. This was to offset the possibility of the employment of this equipment, including possible chemical weapons, against Israeli interests.

The new rulers of Syria, the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have been different to the normal run of rebel forces in West Asia that usually were the promoters of lawlessness, chaos and turmoil. It will be interesting to see the model of governance that HTS establishes. Early talk of a secular model may be for social media attraction. The proof has to be on the table soon enough.

HTS has deeply committed to liquidat-

ing the presence and influence of the Iran-Hezbollah combination and perhaps Russia as well in Syria. Yet, it has an Islamist orientation that poses potential dangers to Syrian minorities—especially Alawites and Christians. Syrian governance falling into the hands of a fundamentalist group containing foreign fighters perhaps still harbouring transnational terrorist sentiments is not something that can be discounted.

Daesh as the undeclared strongest non-state entity in the region could be looking towards contesting the ownership of Syria. That could either lead to an HTS-Daesh conflict or an understanding, since they are not far removed from each other ideologically. The elements that successfully battled Daesh

PROPOSING A 2-FACTOR FORMULA FOR SHARING

R SRINIVASAN

Member, Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission



S RAJA SETHU DURAI

Professor, BITS-Pilani, Dubai



sult, we find states smaller in terms of population growth and larger in terms of size of the economy have received lower shares in the Union tax revenue compared to states with larger populations and smaller economies. Thus, equity is a major factor in the distribution formula.



FINANCE COMMISSION INDIA

One goal of the Finance Commission is to give a desired direction to states' policy behaviour with fiscal incentives. A simple, two-variable formula for distributing tax revenues can go a long way in influencing progressive policies for development

Predictable formula to incentivise fiscal behaviour: The Finance Commission is constituted once in five years; the real concern then is to incentivise the fiscal behaviour of states on the desired path based on their recent behaviour. This requires the distribution formula to be simple with a few economic indicators. Such a formula would signal the states that their future fiscal behaviour will be evaluated based on their impact on a few economic variables.

The area of a state has been a part of the distribution formulas recommended by many commissions. The 15th Finance Commission also gave 15 percent weight to it and had to do a balancing act by adjusting the area to scale up small states. 12 states identified as small states by the 15th FC. Those smaller states had 10 percent of

the 2011 population and got a share of around 12.5 percent of the tax devolution.

Smaller and larger states are not comparable by many indicators, therefore treating them as equals is not fair. Alternatively, we can think of assigning 10 to 12.5 percent of the Union tax revenue to these smaller states and a formula-based set of comparable indicators should be used to derive the *inter se* shares for horizontal distribution. The remaining 85 percent of Union tax revenue can be distributed among larger states.

In the last 75 years, every state ought to have internalised its area in its fiscal policies. This indicator can be dropped from the distribution formula. Some of the previous finance commissions have used forest cover, infrastructure index, and tax effort. Now there are demands to include indicators of urbanisation, old-age population, SC/ST population and poverty ratios.

Increasing the number of indicators and assigning weights to each of them will make the distribution formula complex. As we mentioned already, a finance commission's recommendation is for a brief period of five years, therefore, it has to be simple and predictable to influence fiscal behaviour of states. Continuity between finance commissions is also necessary. Therefore, too many indicators should be avoided in the distribution formula.

Alternatively, for larger states, the distribution formula should have only two variables—population and state's income. Fiscal policies that help reducing population and increasing state's income shall concomitantly reduce fiscal gap and improve fiscal responsibility of states.

This simple two-variable distribution formula—with changing weights in successive finance commissions—will incentivise performing states and motivate the others to reduce population and develop their economies. The natural outcome of this will be reduced fiscal gaps in the states. Thus, the desired objective of the distribution formula will be achieved.

(Views are personal)

last time were the Iraqi Shia militias. We have no reports on the relationship of HTS with the militias, nor on the current military capability of the latter. In the context of recent unexpected military victories and defeats, one could expect surprises all over again.

Iraqi Shia militias, particularly those aligned with Iranian interests, have played a significant role in the region. These militias, such as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, have maintained operations in Syria despite Iraq's internal stabilisation. They were vital to Iran's regional strategy and had been deployed to bolster the Assad regime, particularly in areas like Aleppo, Latakia, and Damascus. With the loss of these areas, it does not seem the militias are in any form to play a major role in the immediate future.

The importance of a Turkey-US joint strategy to keep the Levant area stable and free of terrorist activity becomes a virtual necessity. However, this is subject to the US rescinding its support to the Syrian Kurdish rebels, who played some part in Assad's defeat and flight out of Damascus. The Turks will not play ball with any Kurdish organisation becoming a beneficiary of the results of cooperation.

For Russia and Iran, most doors seem shut. While Russia's chief interest is on Syria to support its foothold on the Mediterranean coast and remain a significant player in the West Asia imbroglio, for Iran it's a question of re-establishing its proxy war strategy. Till the Assad regime lasted, both strategies could be served but no longer. Both powers will have to decide the *inter se* priority between territory and proxy war.

For Israel, it's a win-win thus far. It can focus on Gaza while keeping an eye on Syria and Lebanon. Logically, the capability of both Hamas and Hezbollah would have degraded substantially. Military success of Israel must aim at ending conflict rather than creating potential for reignition of the multiple contests in West Asia.

The last of the conflicts, Iran-Saudi, which is ideological in nature, could be re-ignited if sectarian conflict begins in Syria. This is an opportunity for big powers to prevent any such conflict. However, the weakening of Iran could be a deliberate strategic intent that may initiate dynamics that remain extremely unpredictable for now.

(Views are personal)
(atahasnain@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Lasting solutions

Ref: *Prepare for a weaker, volatile rupee in 2025* (Dec 16). The rupee's fall shows how dependent India is on global markets and how fragile our domestic economy can be. Instead of relying on short-term measures like RBI interventions, we need lasting solutions—investing in manufacturing, encouraging innovation, and boosting exports.

Ritika Sarkar, Bengaluru

RIP Zakir

Zakir Hussain, one of the most celebrated tabla maestros who enthralled millions of music fans for decades, is no more. The tabla he used to entrance, enrapture, and captivate is now lying in the corner of his house sadly singing into itself, mourning the demise of its master. This is an irreparable loss for the nation and the industry, and he will be remembered by music lovers forever.

R Sampath, Chennai

Extraordinary musician

The passing away of Zakir Hussain has left a vacuum in the world of music that cannot be filled. He was an extraordinary musician whose music made hearts all over the world beat with joy. He contributed to Indian music in a big way, making tabla a popular instrument all over the world.

Madhavi Mishra, Bengaluru

Ruining cricket

In earlier years, playing cricket for the country used to be the priority for our cricketers. After the IPL started, the country has become secondary and money-making has become a priority. IPL is giving a backdoor entry to untalented players as business people are showing nepotism in the selection. Earlier, playing for the country used to be equal to military men's patriotism. But now, after IPL, cricket has become money cricket.

T Kaishash Ditya, Hyderabad

Helping ourselves

Ref: *Anniversary of the story of the lord* (Dec 16). The *Bhagavad Gita* sums up that you only have yourself to liberate you from all shackles of the world. Like the five Pandavas with the guidance of Krishna, we have our five senses with the guidance of our mind, to achieve our goal by work.

Ullattil Pakiteeri Raghunathan, Thrissur

Universal scripture

The *Bhagavad Gita* equates life to warfare, in which the virtuous ultimately vanquish the vicious. It is a universal scripture for spiritual unfoldment, making the spiritual aspirant realise pure consciousness with no place for duality.

R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

Syria after Assad’s fall

HARSHA KAKAR

Syrian rebel forces captured Damascus and forced President Bashar al-Assad to flee to Moscow with his family, where he has been granted refuge. In just over a week, the Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS), translated into ‘Organization for the liberation of the Levant,’ backed by Turkey, captured the cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs, before entering Damascus and overthrowing a ruler who had managed to survive the Arab Spring by violently suppressing the agitation. This has thrown the entire region into a mess.

The HTS, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa alias Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, was formerly associated with ISIS and subsequently with al Qaeda. It is still considered a terrorist group by some Western nations. Interestingly, over the years while Turkey, Israel and the US militarily engaged with different Syrian groups including its armed forces, none ever targeted the HTS.

Hoping to gain global acceptance, al-Jolani mentioned that he intends to focus on organized governance in Syria. By appointing Mohamad al-Bashir, the administrator of the earlier rebel-held territory, HTS conveyed its intent on governance. The HTS also reached out to Iraq and Lebanon seeking good ties and non-interference.

Iran and Russia had propped up the al-Assad regime in Syria. Russia, involved in Ukraine, while Iran, internally divided amongst those desiring to support Assad and those opposing this, did not provide the requisite military power to face the HTS offensive. Hezbollah, which had earlier sent its soldiers to support the Syrian armed forces backed down due to Israel’s relentless military offensive against it. The weakened and underpaid Syrian army collapsed rapidly, in many cases discarding their arms and ammunition before fleeing. The end came quickly, bringing back memories of the collapse of the Saddam Hussain regime in Iraq battling the US, as also

Afghan forces fighting the Taliban advance. Nations in the region have begun recalibrating their strategies.

Israel, which is fighting Hamas and is presently in a ceasefire with Hezbollah has to now secure its Syrian border. The 1974 border agreement between Israel and Syria has ended, compelling Netanyahu to occupy beyond the buffer zone between the two states, which is the Golan Heights. It is unlikely to vacate them any time soon as the new Syrian government is militarily weak.

Currently, Israel is targeting Syria’s military power including aircraft, ships, storage depots and air defence systems, ensuring these do not fall into the hands of the incoming HTS. Further, it would open doors for Israel to strike Syria freely in case it attempts to push terrorists into Israel. Israel has to ensure that Syria is no longer capable of posing a threat. By occupying the Golan Heights, Israel has ensured that Damascus remains within range of its artillery.

The HTS is a Sunni terrorist group, which fought against the Shia army of Bashar al-Assad, which was backed by Iran and Russia. Hence its ties with these countries are not conducive. The Iranian embassy in Damascus was ransacked in anger. The support which Syria provided to Hezbollah, including being a conduit for weapons from Iran has ended. A weakened Hezbollah, unable to obtain fresh weapon supplies from Iran, would no longer be the threat which it once was to Israel.

Further, Syria is no longer a buffer between Iran and Israel, nor a member of the axis of resistance. This adds to the insecurities of Iran. Syrian airspace can be exploited by Israel to strike Iran. Iran is hurriedly withdrawing members of its forces from Syria. There is a belief that Iran could be the next target for regime change. The only option for Iran to survive any onslaught from Israel and the US is to ensure development of nuclear weapons, a process which it would now be speeding up.



Russia has two bases in Syria. The Khmeimim airbase houses Russian aircraft and the Tartus naval facility services Russian ships. The airbase is a staging post for Russian mercenaries travelling to Africa while Tartus is its only warm water port. Their future is unknown. Russia is reaching out to the new regime, seeking to continue with these facilities. Moscow’s alternate option is to move these bases to Tobruk in Libya where it is engaged in dialogue with Khalifa Haftar, a pro-Russia leader.

While Russia supported the Assad regime, it faced lesser anger as compared to Iran, hence its assets remain secure and the embassy untouched. At the end of the day, the fall of Assad is a loss of prestige for both Iran and Russia.

Syria is currently far from stable. While Damascus may have fallen, there are other areas where the con-

flict rages, with both Turkey and the US supporting opposing factions. The Turkey-backed Syrian National Army, supported by Turkish air power, captured Manbij, held by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. The US maintains about a battalion strength in Kurdish-controlled oil drilling areas. Turkey considers the Kurds a threat and launches operations against them, while the US backs its Kurdish proxies engaging ISIS.

Turkey, which backed the HTS, would be hoping for a government closely aligned to it. This would enable it to move back over 3 million Syrian refugees on its soil. What is to be seen is whether the new Syrian regime toes the Turkish line or like the Afghan Taliban projects an independent stance. The photograph of Pakistan’s DG ISI having tea in a Kabul hotel to celebrate the arrival of the Taliban regime comes to mind.

The US has been battling ISIS, taking advantage of the turmoil in Syria. It regularly conducts airstrikes in the region. Whether it will continue to engage ISIS with the new Trump administration or pull out is a question. Most Western nations have stopped providing asylum to Syrian refugees, hoping for their return.

Currently Yemen, Somalia and Afghanistan are controlled by terrorist groups. Syria is the latest to join this group. While Yemen and Somalia continue threatening the world in some form, the Taliban has confined itself to its own region. How Syria will play out is to be seen. Like the Taliban, the HTS could concentrate inwards for the moment. However, if pushed by Israel, as is happening between Pakistan and Afghanistan, there could be a change in its approach.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army.)

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE German elections have resulted in a weakening of extremism on either side. Despite the activity and the occasional rhodomontade of the extreme Nationalists, their influence has been almost eliminated, and Dr. Marx was justified in his expectation that the election would rid him of their incubus. The success of the negotiations with England was the decisive factor; any failure to secure good relations would have been the triumph of the Opposition. There were many matters at issue, but supreme was the question whether Germany would take its place readily and without arrière pensée in the new European system, or whether the regret for old traditions and ambitions would be too strong. The battle has been strenuous, but the decision suggests that the Republic has come to stay, and that the policy for which Dr. Marx and Herr Stresemann have fought valiantly and persistently is safe. Ludendorff, one of the trouble-makers for Germany, is losing ground. A few days ago many of the important organs of German opinion were welcoming the Anglo-German treaty as “the real end of the war,” and the results of the elections indicate the same view.

NEWS ITEMS

POSITION IN PERSIA

SHEIKH’S MESSAGE TO PREMIER

THE Military Governor of Teheran publishes the following telegram from the Premier, despatched from Lankir:—

“Sirdar Aghdasse has sent me the following telegram: ‘Your Highness, imbued with kindness and solicitude for one who has always been faithfully devoted to you, has filled me with joy and happiness. In offering you my whole-hearted gratitude I pray God that he may vouchsafe to preserve your life for the protection of Iran and the Iranians. Your Highness had summoned me to Hindian. Although illness and extreme weakness, which have afflicted me for some time and which are growing worse, deprive me of this happiness, yet in view of the keen desire I have of seeing Your Highness I have delegated to you one of my sons so that you may give him necessary instructions concerning our meeting.’”

The Premier adds : ‘I have replied to him : ‘I have received your dispatch. As I am going to Dehmollah send me one of your sons to that place.’”

ARRIVALS IN BOMBAY

AMONG the passengers who arrived by this morning’s mail boat China were Sir Phillip Grey Eberton, Col. J. B. Ingles C.M.G., D.S.O., Sir C. Sankaran Nair and Sir Mahomed Rafique.

COFFEE DISEASES

PROPOSED CESS FOR INVESTIGATION

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT)

A CERTAIN amount of opposition is anticipated at next week’s meeting of the Mysore Legislative Council to a Government Bill to provide for the levy of a coffee cess, temporarily in the Mysore State, in order to maintain an experimental station for the investigation of diseases affecting the coffee plant, and other allied problems relating to coffee cultivation.

The total average area under coffee in the State is 110,000 acres. The outbreak of several kinds of diseases has raised a difficult situation threatening the prospects of the industry. The question of starting an experimental coffee farm for the scientific investigation of these problems has been under consideration by the Government.

The Government were, until recently, paying a contribution to the Madras Government for helping the planting expert to carry on the investigation of such diseases. As the scheme has to be given effect to without delay, and as, under present financial conditions, it is not possible to finance the scheme entirely from State funds, the Government consider it necessary to levy a small cess of two annas per acre, temporarily, on coffee holdings exceeding five acres in extent, with a view to recoup a portion of the expenditure on the farm in the early stages of the undertaking. The Government will contribute towards its support a sum equal to that collected from the cess, subject to a maximum of Rs. 12,500 a year.

A large number of influential planters, Indian and European, have agreed to the levy of the cess, but other Indian planters apprehend, among other things, a permanent enhancement of taxation if the cess is permitted.

MOSCOW DELEGATION

MOSCOW, DEC. 16

THE British trade union delegation, headed by Mr. A. A. Purcell, has left Leningrad for England.

Before departure, the deputation was presented with addresses by the headquarters of the Soviet Unions, hoping for the early attainment of unity in the Labour movement.

The irony of a historical convergence

LEE KYONG-HEE

It is remarkable how historic events converge at times into a deep sense of irony. President Yoon Suk Yeol’s self-coup via martial law order was not only ill-conceived, it eclipsed what should have been a week of joyous national celebration of Han Kang, the first Korean to receive the Nobel Prize in literature.

Yoon’s rash gambit on December 3 echoed the strong-arming of democracy on another December night 45 years ago when Gen. Chun Doo-hwan and his Army cohorts staged a coup d’etat. Six months later, they massacred protesters in Gwangju, Han’s hometown. In her novel, “Human Acts,” Han delves deeply into the pain and suffering inflicted on individuals by state violence during the democratic uprising in Gwangju in the spring of 1980.

Sales of “Human Acts” rocketed after the 2024 Nobel Prize in literature was announced. With the brutal scenes of the massacre freshly inculcated in their minds, many readers must have shuddered at the possibility of similar atrocities recurring today. Particularly, the younger generations must have deemed it unthinkable to live under military rule, with their basic rights and freedoms restricted for unjustifiable reasons.

Who would have imagined that South Korea, arguably an advanced democracy with a thriving economy

and vibrant popular culture, would again face terror and bloodshed under military rule? Who could have expected its democratically elected president to take such a risky action to suppress his political opponents? Most Koreans thought they had long passed such a dark chapter.

It remains to be seen whether Yoon and his acolytes plotted for a permanent dictatorship or tried to “save the country” from what Yoon perceives as “anti-state, pro-North Korean forces trying to overthrow our liberal democratic institutions.” But their audacity suggests they were confident in following Chun’s footsteps in silencing opposition at gunpoint. Now, they have doomed themselves to live the rest of their lives disgraced, just as Chun did.

Yoon’s declaration of martial law was an attempt to break the stalemate with opposition parties. With the administration mired in scandals and criticized for unpopular decisions, there was little reason for the opposition to give any quarter. Yoon and his followers gave up trying to push their agenda through democratic processes. And, as if in a time warp, they failed to realize the big difference between South Korea five decades ago and now.

Unlike the older generations who spent much of their lives under dictators, the younger generations have lived in a full democracy since their birth. Communicating and connecting through social media in one of the most wired countries, they react in

different ways than their parents and grandparents to problems. These young people occupy a huge portion of the crowds calling on Yoon to step down. Hence the unique scenes of street protests, evoking K-pop concerts to the amazement of global citizens.

On the other side of the barricades, young soldiers on the ground also acted in different ways than their commanders. The troops from the Army Special Warfare Command deployed to the National Assembly moved in a noticeably passive manner. And so did the police officers, quietly watching or even helping law-makers and their assistants climb over the fence to enter the Assembly compound. Thus, along with citizens who massed at that late hour of night, they effectively helped parliament to render the martial law invalid through a unanimous vote in just 2 1/2 hours.

Unfortunately, however, Yoon obviously resides in another world in psychological isolation. In his fourth and last TV address, on December 12, Yoon defiantly refused to resign, shifting his earlier position to leave all decisions to his ruling People Power Party. He defended his shock decision as a “legitimate act of governance” and denied charges of insurrection. “I will proudly confront it, whether it’s impeachment or investigation,” he said. “I will fight to the end.”

Yoon’s bold battle cry clearly aimed at his tiny base of die-hard right-wing supporters, who account for his slightly over 10 per cent



approval ratings. In the meantime, the ruling party reeled from a rift between pro- and anti-Yoon factions. The party leader, Han Dong-hoon, finally urged his followers to vote for Yoon’s impeachment in the second bid last Saturday, after pendulating several times with mysterious calculations.

Now, with the opposition-raised impeachment motion against him passed by the Assembly, Yoon awaits the judgment of the Constitutional Court whether to fire him or restore him to office. He has become like Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, two former presidents and his most celebrated targets when he was a prosecutor.

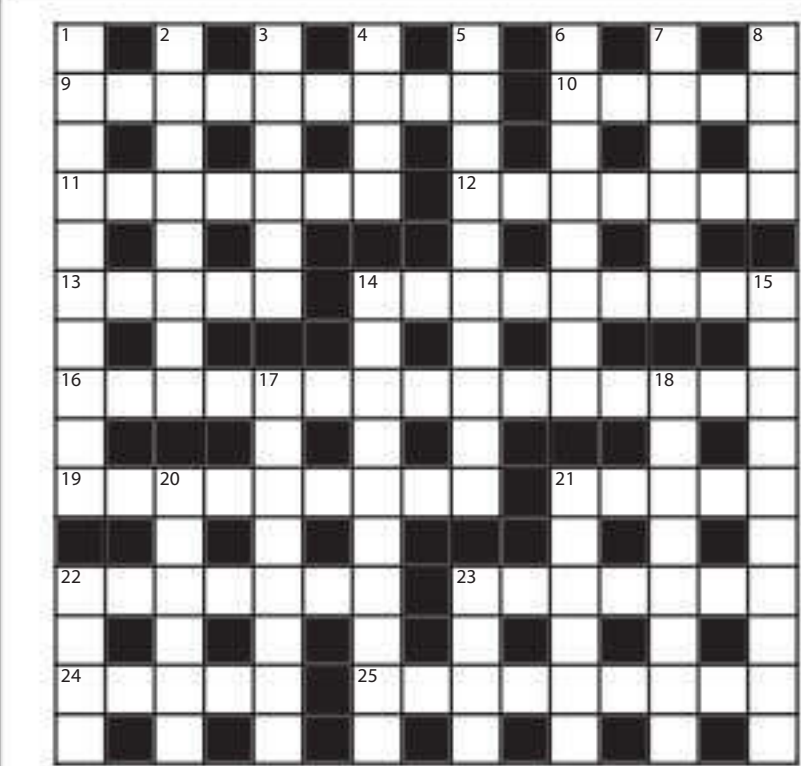
As he vowed in his fiery latest speech, Yoon will defend himself through the court proceedings. And, with investigations on Yoon and military and government officials on allegations of rebellion, the chaos will persist for a considerable time before normal governance is restored with a new president.

It is time that all parties involved, including the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea, reflected calmly on what they did wrong to push the nation into this massive turmoil. It is high time that everyone acts with the “dazzling purity of conscience,” as put by Han Kang in “Human Acts,” as well as courage.

The Korea Herald/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-292992



YESTERDAY’S SOLUTION

C A M B E R W E L L W I T H
H E R R O O F D A
A D D E R E R O T I C I S M
R I A B S N O L
I N C E N S E E L E C T E E
S T I C G S T
M O N T Y O U T S T R I P
A A N E G B
S L A C K E S T D A N N Y
O A E I O P
D I S H R A I G A U S T R I A
D U C R A T O A S
S Y N C O P A T E W I N E S
O N T N T N C E
N A I L S T R E S S L E S S

ACROSS

- 9 Typically taking a very short time (2,7)
10 A northerner’s course (5)
11 Coach likes strapping batter’s midriff to be bowler’s target (7)
12 Talk incessantly about old weapon at sea (7)
13 Bear loses right to invest (5)
14 Immature flyer is rashly flying after cold (9)

DOWN

- 16 Reveal secret to let opposition win (4,3,4,4)
19 Decisive game’s influential, if boring (9)
21 Victor’s first to leave ring circling bull (5)
22 Winger, surprisingly sleek, secures try almost (7)
23 VIP’s six at Lord’s? (3,4)
24 One helps pupils losing way in Windows (5)
25 Try phoning Irish town overlooking last event (9)

DOWN

- 1 Robert longs to overtake the French racing vehicles (10)
2 Indian cricketer lived illicitly with Pakistan’s opening trio (5,3)
3 Player at Twickenham the focus of indecent remark (6)
4 People initially relish good service (10)
5 A number book into unbelievable game (10)

- 6 Sport left burden in A&E (8)
7 Small champion loves large swimming group (6)
8 Bill picked up wall game here (4)
14 What char does at night for unblemished record? (5,5)
15 Unusually striking way to avoid a commercial overhead? (10)
17 Follow round a pair of females in ship’s bar (8)

- 18 Victory banner raised to welcome Hearts player (4-4)
20 Nearly avoid oddly crude error at the Crucible (6)
21 Some tin got smelted making these? (6)
22 Secure measure of speed for flyer (4)
23 Small bar at Old Trafford’s temporarily free (4)

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



Telangana Today

FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

06

VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Tuesday, December 17, 2024



DEBASHISH SAMANTARAY
BJD RS member

“We speak about Emergency, but there is a pseudo-Emergency in India. The Constitution somewhere has gone off track and none of us are willing to address it



RAKESH CHAURASIA
Flautist and Grammy winner

We generally say that tabla starts from 'A' for Alla Rakha and ends at 'Z' for Zakir Hussain. I think everybody in the music fraternity calls him the god of tabla. A blessing from him was more than enough



KAJA KALLAS
EU Foreign Policy Chief

Syria faces an optimistic, positive, but rather uncertain future, and we have to make sure that this goes to the right direction. We want a stable and all-comprising govt in place”

Build consensus first

In a mature democracy, consensus-building should be the preferred way to implement reforms in any sector. However, the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre has thrown this principle to the wind by trying to bulldoze its way in Parliament on the idea of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and Assemblies. The union Cabinet recently gave its nod to two Constitution amendment bills to facilitate 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE), billed as a significant reform that could reshape the country's electoral landscape. Though it postponed the introduction of the Bills to a later date, probably towards the end of the Winter Session of Parliament, the move is facing stiff resistance from the opposition parties which have voiced concerns over its adverse impact on the spirit of democracy. Apparently, the government is buying time over the contentious matter. Given its far-reaching ramifications, there is a need for an informed debate both within and outside Parliament. The BJP and its allies claim that ONOE would not only lead to savings in terms of time as well as financial and human resources but also do away with disruptions caused by the frequent imposition of the Model Code of Conduct. However, the Congress and several other opposition parties fear that this initiative poses a threat to India's federal structure. A key point is the possibility of people voting for the same party at the Centre and in States if simultaneous elections take place. Parliamentary and Assembly polls separated by even a few months can produce strikingly different results, as seen in Maharashtra recently.

ONOE, billed as a significant electoral reform, needs an informed debate both within and outside Parliament

Ever since the idea of simultaneous polls was mooted, there has been no transparency on how the government plans to go about it; whether the current Assemblies would be dissolved prematurely to synchronise the State and the national elections or whether it would be implemented in a phased manner. Instead of hurrying through the process, the government needs to build political consensus before implementing the proposed reform. Even if the Constitution amendment Bills are passed by Parliament now, the earliest that the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections can occur simultaneously would be in 2034. It would be prudent to refer the Bills to a Joint Parliamentary Committee for a thorough examination of the provisions, effectively addressing the concerns of the opposition parties. The Centre will also need to involve the States. For local bodies to be part of the simultaneous elections plan, at least half of the States must ratify the required Constitutional amendment. The ONOE is a key item on the BJP's agenda and was part of its manifesto for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. While the idea of simultaneous polls, on the face of it, is appealing as it helps reduce expenditure, it must be pointed out that Parliamentary and Assembly elections have different dynamics and issues at stake.

Empower the lower 50%

By prioritising their well-being and potential, India can chart a path toward equitable and sustainable development



SUSHILA TTIWARI



D SAMARENDR REDDY

India's economic trajectory has been both inspiring and challenging. While the country has emerged as one of the fastest-growing economies globally, its informal labour sector, which includes the lower 50% of the labour force, such as nano-entrepreneurs, construction workers, domestic helpers and street vendors, continues to operate under severe constraints. Despite their substantial contribution, their potential remains untapped due to systemic barriers such as financial exclusion, lack of training and poor policy support.

As India grapples with GDP growth falling to 5.4%, there is an urgent need to focus on this segment of the workforce. Addressing their challenges and empowering them with better opportunities can be a game changer for economic revival. The insights in this article are drawn significantly from the pioneering research and impactful initiatives of Rajendra Joshi, visionary founder of Saath Charitable Trust.

Unseen Backbone

India's informal sector employs an estimated 87% of the workforce, encompassing millions of workers and micro-entrepreneurs. Nano-entrepreneurs alone account for a significant share, often operating small businesses with minimal investment. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the informal sector's gross value added (GVA) rose from Rs 8.62 lakh crore in 2022 to Rs 9.99 lakh crore in 2023. This growth underscores the resilience of informal workers despite their limited access to institutional support.

Rajendra Joshi, whose work with the Saath Charitable Trust spans over three decades, has been instrumental in highlighting the critical role of the informal



sector in India's urban economy. His efforts focus on integrating marginalised communities into mainstream development through innovative solutions like nano-enterprise support, financial inclusion and skill-building programmes. Joshi's book *Smart Cities: Breaking the Poverty Barrier* provides a comprehensive account of these efforts, offering practical insights into how slums and informal settlements can become hubs for economic growth rather than centres of neglect.

Challenges, Missed Opportunities

The lower 50% of the workforce faces a myriad of challenges that hinder their ability to contribute effectively to the economy. Lack of formal recognition is a major issue. Workers in this sector are often invisible to policymakers, which means they miss out on benefits such as subsidies, skill development programmes and access to credit. Nano-entrepreneurs, for example, are crucial drivers of local economies but rarely receive the support needed to scale their operations.

Moreover, inadequate education and training exacerbate these issues. Many women in the informal sector, particularly those engaged in domestic work and waste picking, have not completed primary education. Men, too, face significant skill deficits, often finding themselves trapped in low-wage, unskilled labour. These gaps prevent workers from transitioning into higher-paying, stable jobs, thereby limiting their economic mobility.

Health and safety concerns are another pressing issue. Informal work environments often lack basic amenities such as clean drinking water, sanitation and safe working conditions. These deficiencies lead to frequent illnesses, reduced productivity and financial strain on already vulnerable families. In turn, this cycle of health issues and eco-

nomical instability reinforces the socio-economic divide.

Unlocking Potential

Financial inclusion is a cornerstone for empowering the lower 50% of the workforce. By providing access to affordable loans, insurance and savings accounts, workers can invest in their businesses and secure their livelihoods. Programmes like the Saath Savings & Credit Cooperative Society offer a model for success. By extending zero-interest loans and connecting workers to microfinance institutions, these initiatives enable nano-entrepreneurs to scale their businesses and achieve financial stability.

Skill development is equally critical. Training programmes that align with market demands can equip workers with the skills needed to secure better-paying jobs. Organisations like the Saath Charitable Trust have made significant strides in this area, training over 72,000 youths and women in formal and non-traditional livelihood courses. These initiatives not only improve individual earning potential but also contribute to broader economic growth by creating a more skilled and productive labour force.

Market linkages can further amplify these efforts. Connecting nano-entrepreneurs to larger markets ensures they receive fair prices for their products and gain access to a broader cus-

Nano-entrepreneurs, construction workers, domestic helpers, street vendors, etc, who form the lower 50% of labour force, continue to operate under severe constraints

tomers base. In Ahmedabad, for instance, cooperatives have successfully aggregated resources, enabling micro-entrepreneurs to compete on a larger scale and increase their profitability.

Case Studies

Leadership plays a pivotal role in transforming the lives of marginalised workers. Rajendra Joshi's work with the Saath Charitable Trust is a shining example of how grassroots initiatives can drive systemic change. With over 1.5 million lives impacted through Saath's programmes, Joshi's vision for equitable urban development combines community empowerment with practical solutions like skill-building and financial inclusion.

Similarly, under the chairmanship of V Vidyasagar, Sagar Asia Pvt Ltd has emerged as a leader in empowering workers from underprivileged backgrounds. Vidyasagar's company, employing over 500 people, specialises in aluminium extrusions and value-added products like ladders, scaffolds and wind tower components. His focus on skill development and equitable wages, particularly for women, reflects his commitment to creating an inclusive industrial ecosystem.

PV Hariharan, ex-CEO of a polymer products company and founder of Agrobiogenics, has done extensive research all over India in over 1,000 villages, studying India's potential in terms of Resources, including Human Resources. His Agrobiogenics initiative leverages sustainable agricultural practices, emphasising environmental sustainability while creating opportunities for those at the lower rungs of society, demonstrating the interconnectedness of social equity and environmental stewardship.

Targeted Interventions

Studies estimate that targeted interventions in financial inclusion, skill development and market access could boost GDP growth by 1.5% annually. Training programmes alone could contribute an additional Rs 10,000 crore to the GVA, while improved financial inclusion could unlock billions in latent economic potential.

Moreover, empowering the informal sector aligns with global sustainability goals, including poverty alleviation, gender equality and decent work for all. By investing in this segment of the workforce, India can address pressing socio-economic issues while achieving sustainable economic growth.

To sum up, the lower 50% of India's labour force represents a vast reservoir of untapped potential. By prioritising their well-being and potential, India can chart a path toward equitable and sustainable development, ensuring that no one is left behind in its journey toward progress.

(Sushila Ttiwari is Managing Director and D Samarendra Reddy is Director, <https://7qube.com/>)

Letters to the Editor

Zakir Hussain

Music has an amazing power to heal the soul and unite the world. And Ustad Zakir Hussain just did that.

TS KARTHIK, Chennai

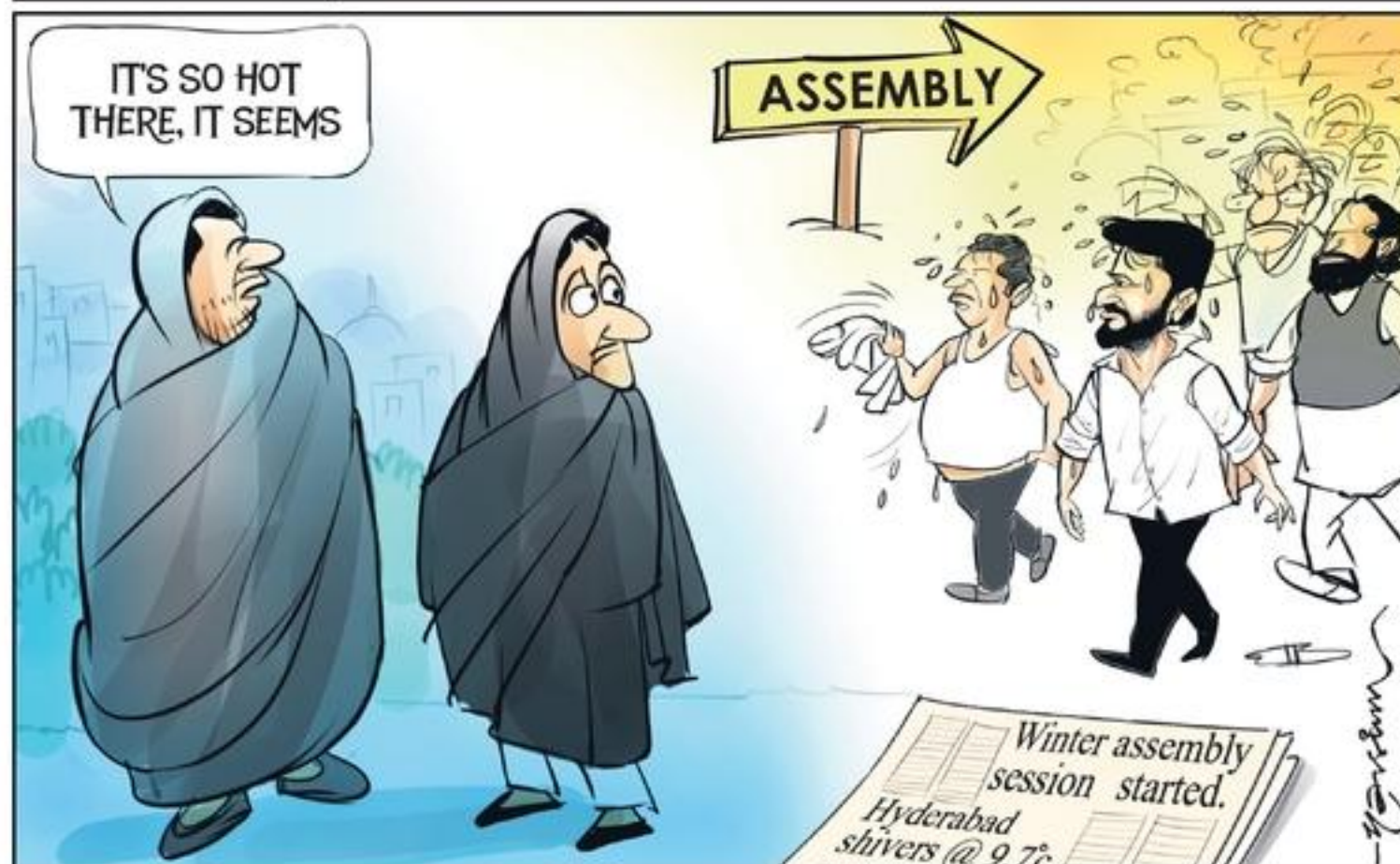
Zakir Hussain could mimic the sounds of a train or a siren on the tabla — a skill that was uniquely his. He often fondly shares a memory of his father, Ustad Alla Rakha — that instead of whispering the Azaan in his ears as a newborn, he whispered a tabla rhythm. That rhythm became the foundation of his life.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR, Chennai

Ustad Zakir Hussain's illustrious career bore the hallmarks of boundless collaboration and innovation. He graced the world stage alongside luminaries such as Pandit Ravi Shankar, John McLaughlin, Mickey Hart and L Shankar, introducing Indian classical music to global audiences. As a founding member of trailblazing ensembles like Shakti and Planet Drum, he transcended cultural boundaries, uniting diverse musical traditions into a harmonious whole. His compositions for films and dance productions earned him accolades. Though his departure leaves an irreplaceable void in the hearts of music lovers, the symphony of his life and work shall echo eternally in the annals of music history.

AMARJEET KUMAR, Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

■ The Japan Times

Steel sector risks green goals

India's booming and coal-dependent steel industry means the country faces a "rocky and uncertain path" toward achieving its goal of reaching net zero by 2070, according to Global Energy Monitor.

■ BBC

A nation of 1.45 bn wants more kids

Last year, India nudged past China to become the world's most populous country. With nearly 1.45 bn people, you'd think the country would be quiet about having more children. But guess what? The chatter has picked up.

■ Dawn

Suits against places of worship

The Indian Supreme Court has blocked trial courts from registering any new suits against places of worship until they get further orders from it. The top court hears petitions challenging the Places of Worship Act, 1991.

DECCAN
Chronicle

17 DECEMBER 2024

Cabinet expansion proves challenging for Maha CM

Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis has finally formed his full fledged Cabinet. It took him 11 days after taking oath as the CM to finalise names of his Cabinet members. During the entire process, he had to consult with Eknath Shinde, Ajit Pawar and also get approval from his Delhi bosses, for which he made multiple visits to the national capital. It shows that despite 'Mahayuti' alliance winning a massive mandate, the road ahead of Mr Fadnavis is not going to provide a smooth journey.

The Maharashtra Cabinet has 42 ministers, including the CM and two DCMs. While Mr Fadnavis has included 19 first time ministers, several senior leaders from all three parties — Bharatiya Janata Party, Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party — are sulking after being overlooked.

Prominent BJP leader Sudhir Mungantiwar, who is close to Union minister Nitin Gadkari, has made his displeasure known and claimed that he was kept in dark till the last day. NCP leader Chhagan Bhujbal, who is the senior most OBC leader in Maharashtra across the parties, has rejected his party's offer to go to Rajya Sabha. Shiv Sena's Tanaji Sawant has reportedly returned to his hometown from Nagpur after realising that he will not be in the state Cabinet.

Similarly, there are reports of protests and resignations of BJP leaders from various parts of the state. Mr Fadnavis and his deputies will have to devise a strategy to assuage the sulking leaders, who can be seen creating trouble for the government in the coming days.

One strategy the Mahayuti leaders seem to have is the 'two and half years' formula. Mr Shinde and Mr Pawar have publicly stated that some of the current ministers will be asked to resign after two-and-a-half years so that other legislators can be given a chance. Mr Fadnavis was more diplomatic about it. He has clarified that there will be a performance audit of all ministers and there could be changes based on the performance.

However, at present it looks like a ploy to give hopes to those who have been ignored. Mr Fadnavis has also kept one seat open. The maximum strength of Maharashtra Cabinet can be 43, including the CM. The Mahayuti leaders have not specified which party will get the 43rd Cabinet berth. In all probability, it will never be filled and used as a dangling carrot for their legislators.

Women voters played a decisive part in Mahayuti's victory, but there are only four women ministers in the 42-member Cabinet. Out of 36 districts in Maharashtra, 16 have no representation in the Fadnavis Cabinet. It shows that in spite of his best efforts, the Maharashtra chief minister has not managed to balance all aspects, which has also left many legislators disappointed. With less than 50 MLAs on the Opposition benches, Mr Fadnavis's bigger challenges are going to be from his own party and alliance partners. His longevity in CM office will depend on how long he can please his bosses and how long he can keep his alliance partners and party legislators under a tight leash.

Zakir Hussain's musical legacy

As news about the legendary tabla maestro Zakir Hussain flitted between hope and despair, prompting prayers and tributes, what stood out was how everyone began recalling his music as a divine force that would see it defy human mortality. For his art was a unifying force, a rhythm that formed the base for the blending of beautiful notes and voices into an experience to be cherished and to savour the compelling power of music that transcended human divides like religion and culture.

The emptiness of the unfillable void left by the pioneer of fusion music will feel crushing with relief coming in the form of a grand legacy of recorded work that will be an eternal tribute to the way a musical genius elevated the percussion instrument to glorious heights that could not be imagined even in the time of his father Ustad Alla Rakha who mentored him.

The legend of a handsome young man with effortlessly tousled hair making the tabla speak as it were who made it to Hollywood films too will be remembered for long. But it is his story of musical collaborations that brought about a revolution in the perception of Indian classical music around the world that will remain his finest contribution to universal music.

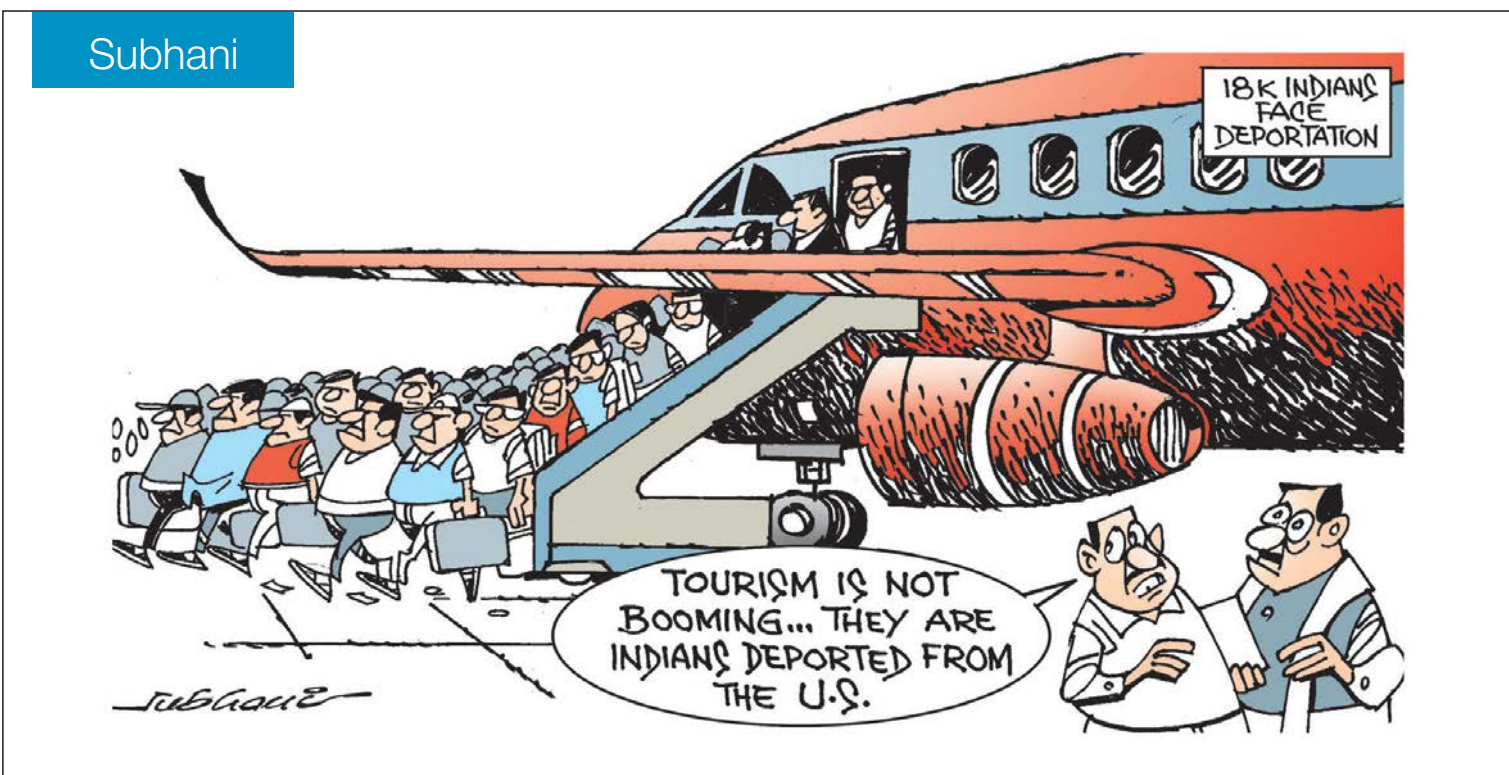
Today, if the notes of the sitar, sarod and santoor and the rhythmic beats of the tabla from classical Indian music are virtually de rigueur in background music to films, be they from Hollywood or any other, it is a tribute to a maestro who made fusion music a phenomenon that will resonate for generations to come.

The appeal of his music stayed lively and relevant to bridge decades and his contributions were recognised with three Grammy awards, among a career collection of five, as recently as this year pointing to the sheer dedication and passion that turned music into memorable melodies. Of course, civilian honours had flowed his way over the years in his home country.

And to think he faked it a bit to be an accompanist at a classical music concert in place of his father without revealing that he was still in his teens to begin a musical journey that will, however, not end with his death in California from chronic lung disease.

He made Indian sounds and rhythms part of the global music scene and conversations even as the music to which he contributed moved people. His legacy will live on.

Subhani



Will Syrian implosion spur a fresh Iran Mideast drive?



Syed Ata Hasnain

For a fairly long time, the world appeared to be fixated on the understanding that Iran and Syria acted as almost one nation in the pursuit of strategic security and foreign policy. As one of the main supporters of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the ayatollahs of Iran secured considerable strategic advantage through the territory of the Levant under Syria's control. Russian President Vladimir Putin's support to Iran and Syria added to their comfort and the Russian military presence in Syria, despite the demands of the Ukrainian battlefield, only reflected how serious Mr Putin was about his foothold in the Middle East and the relationship with the Iran-Syria combine. The progressive following out of the Bashir Assad administration and the corruption and lack of professionalism in the Syrian Army over the years perhaps never occurred to Russia due to the complete focus of attention on the Ukraine front. Even Iran was so totally obsessed with the successful run of strengthening Hezbollah that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's master of proxy war strategy, failed to detect that its hold over Syria through the Syrian Army had been largely diluted. Was the emaciation of the Syrian civil and military capability a deliberate non-military strategy followed by an external power is yet not known, but the advantage which now accrues is not to any one side but to several forces. Among those are the United States, Turkey, Israel and the radical Sunni elements that have vied for space in the Levant. Except for the US and Israel, none of the others have a joint interest. The

ones at the greatest disadvantage from the run of recent events are Iran and Russia. The *Jerusalem Post* wrote: "Iran's loss is staggering. Assad's fall toppled the crown jewel of the arc of resistance that Iran spent over 35 years constructing as a counter-balance to Israel and American influence in the region. The removal of this cornerstone has effectively dismantled the arc". It is said that when a revolution occurs and takes the world by surprise, you should always be prepared for a counter-revolution. So, is there a possibility of a counter-revolution in the making? The factors at play and the strategic environment both do not indicate this and for several reasons this reading should be assumed correct. Hamas' actions in Gaza triggered a chain of events which Iran misread as an opportunity. It activated its proxy strategy by ratcheting up the degree of engagement of Israel, but in the bargain, 15 months later, stands only to count its staggering losses. The entire leaderships of Hamas and Hezbollah were wiped out, and that of the IRGC itself dented. The complete supply chain for moving of military resources and wherewithal to the main proxy — Hezbollah — is now completely disrupted. The fall of Bashar Assad and the neutralisation of Syria's Army is also a result of several factors, with the final nail being the chain reactions set after the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. Clearly, Mr Putin did not accord high enough priority to the Middle East in the run of the ongoing two major wars in the world — Ukraine and Gaza-Lebanon. That ensured that the strategic advantage Russia gained by the support to Iran, Syria and Bashir Assad was never

It is said that when a revolution occurs and takes the world by surprise, you should always be prepared for a counter-revolution. So, is there a possibility of a counter-revolution in the making?

prioritised. However, Mr Putin, never prone to sentimentality, is attempting to regain lost ground. He first described the HTS as "terrorists", but shortly thereafter the Russian foreign ministry was referring to HTS as the armed Syrian opposition; a clear overture to the new ruling authority in Syria, one of the reasons why he refused to meet Assad and only granted him asylum. For how long is this asylum too is anybody's guess. This is the quasi-counter revolution in the making, if at all; the overturning of the US-Israel advantage gained as a result of the Syrian meltdown.

Clearly, Mr Putin can't do much alone, the Russians do not have that kind of bandwidth about the Middle East. They need the services of Iran and perhaps some of its proxies. However, can HTS, which is a Sunni radical organisation, come to work with Iran for any strategic advantage. Provided that HTS is not a proxy of either the US or Turkey, there is always the possibility of it working in close cooperation with Iran. It should be remembered that Hezbollah is a Shia organisation in ideological affinity with Iran, but Hamas has no such connection. It is a Sunni Islamist organisation with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas' ideology is deeply rooted in Sunni Islamic principles, advocating for the establishment of an Islamic state in historical Palestine. However, Hamas has received support from Iran due to shared strategic interests, particularly in opposing Israel. This alliance is

more pragmatic than ideological, as their theological differences remain significant. Iran has provided funding, weapons, and training to Hamas, especially during times of isolation from Sunni Arab states. Despite this cooperation, Hamas and Iran maintain distinct religious and ideological frameworks.

Two other issues bear significance in the aftermath of the Syrian implosion. The rule of the ayatollahs since 1979 has appeared unwavering but sporadic instances of resistance to the theological rule have often occurred. The people of Iran do not entirely support the ayatollahs. Failure on the strategic front spurs the buildup of resistance in the streets. That is what Iran will be concerned about because movements such as those contemplated here need a cause and a leadership. The cause may be there in plenty, it's a dynamic leadership and even external support which could cause a threat to the status quo.

The United States under incoming President Donald Trump may exercise caution about external involvement but Iran remains an anathema and Mr Trump has a particular aversion to the ayatollahs. US strategic circles in consort with Israel and perhaps Saudi Arabia (only to a limited extent) could sense this as opportunity. On the other hand, Iran's long-term strategy revolves around the creation of a strong Shia crescent from Syria to Yemen taking in the majority and minority Shia populations into its fold. Over the last few years this had developed exponentially. The sudden downturn of the rising tide may spur Iran towards greater energisation of its efforts for achieving the crescent. That is where the clash could once again occur, re-energising the sectarian divide within Islam, with the world riding atop and once again deeply affected by that re-emergence.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, is a former GOC of the Srinagar-based 15 ("Chinar") Corps.

LETTERS

ALL FAITHS ARE EQUAL

The Constitution is a legacy of the freedom movement in which people of all faiths were equal partners and upholds equality of religions. The gospel according to the Constitution is human equality. Understandably, the Hindu Right preaching Hindu revivalism and the "virtue" of hierarchically organised society cannot be comfortable with it. The Constitution was authored by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, social revolutionary and not by the Hindutva icons for the BJP to accept and follow it as the Holy Book. One cannot have both the Manusmriti and the Constitution. The party should repudiate what it represents — Hindutva and Hindu nationalism — and adhere to secularism and social justice if it is to be a party of the Book.

G. David Milton
Maruthancode

DON'T KEEP MS AWARD

The High Court of Madras may have cleared the legal objections raised against T.M. Krishna getting the title awarded in the name of the late queen of Carnatic music M.S. Subbulakshmi. However, many are of the view that people like TMK should take into consideration what is construed to be moral laws which are unwritten but followed by people of many generations with scruples and by those who are dictated by their conscience and common sense. TMK is duty bound to introspect and analyse whether it would be appropriate to keep an award in the name of late MS about whom he had made many unsavoury opinions and comments that were not in good taste and wounded hundreds of her fans.

Muthu Srinivasan
Coimbatore

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Aakar Patel



How India keeps falling in global indices: The issue is governance...

In 2021, I wrote a book called *Price of the Modi Years*. In one of its chapters I compared India's rankings on various global indices that I had been tracking over the years to see whether they had improved, stayed the same or deteriorated since 2014. Periodically I keep going back to these to see whether India has risen or fallen on them or stayed the same. Today's column looks at some of the more important ones as we end 2024.

The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index monitors life expectancy at birth, education and national income. Our 2014 rank was 130, and it is today 134, a fall of four places.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index monitors civil liberties, pluralism, political culture and participation and electoral process in nations. Our 2014 rank was 27 and the latest is 47, a fall of 20 places. India is now classified as a "flawed democracy".

The CIVICUS Monitor's National Civic Space Ratings assesses freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. In 2017, it rated India's as a place where freedoms were "Obstructed". India's current rating has fallen to "Repressed" and the reason is that "the deterioration of India's civic space is alarming".

The Lowy Institute Asia Power Index monitors national power and influence based on economy, diplomacy, military capacity, resilience, trade, future trends, cultural influence. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar had met with Lowy Institute experts in November in Sydney.

According to Lowy Institute, India lost its "Major Power" status by falling below the 40-point threshold in 2020 and then falling further in 2021 and 2022. It remains below 40 in 2024.

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" index looks at the rule of law, political pluralism and elections, functioning of government, civil liberties, freedom of expression, association and organisation and individual rights. It rates nations out of 100 and in 2014 India was rated 77/100, and classified as being "Free". Today it is rated 66/100 and classified as "Partly Free" for a variety of reasons.

The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index rates nations on criminal and civil justice system, fundamental rights, constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, transparent government, order and security and regulatory enforcement.

In 2014 India ranked 66 and but fell to 77 in 2022 and 79 in 2024. India fares weakly on, among other things, fundamental rights and the criminal justice system.

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network World Happiness Report looks at GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, perceptions of corruption and dystopia.

India fell from a 2014 ranking of 111 to 126. The reasons given included "large and steady decline in life evaluation", low optimistic outlook of inhabitants (2020) and "longer-term slide in Indian life evaluations" (2021).

The Fraser Institute's Global Economic Freedom Index looks at the size of government, legal structure, freedom to trade internationally, regulation of credit, labour and business. India's ranking here has risen from 112 in 2014 to 84.

The Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index monitors media independence, pluralism, self-censorship, abuses and transparency. India has fallen from a global rank of 140 in 2014 (which was not good in the first place) further to 159 now.

The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law Index monitors laws and regulations that limit women's economic opportunities on indicators like mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets and pension. India fell from its 2014 ranking of 111 to 113.

Transparency International's Global Corruption Perceptions Index looks at corruption in the public sector of nations. India has fallen from a global rank of 85 in 2014 to 93.

The Heritage Foundation's Global Economic Freedom Index monitors rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency and open markets.

India in 2014 was ranked 120 and has since fallen to 126. Reasons cited include "large scale political corruption"; "little evidence that anti-corruption laws are effective"; "foundations for long-term economic development remain fragile without an efficiently functioning legal framework"; "overall rule of law is weak in India".

The International Food Policy Research Institute's

Global Hunger Index monitors hunger, stunting in children and undernourishment. Here India was ranked 55th out of 76 nations in 2014 and is now ranked 105th out of 127 nations. More than 13 per cent of Indians are undernourished, with 37 per cent of children under five being stunted (low height for age) and 18 per cent being wasted (low weight for height).

India has rejected the findings of the hunger index as being flawed, saying that it does not reflect the country's true position. But the true position is also that 60 per cent of Indians are thought by the government itself to require free rations monthly.

Similarly, the government has rejected the fall in other indices as being motivated or biased or based on flawed data or something else. Some indices it has stopped responding to totally. This was not the case when this government first took office and assumed that it would improve things.

When India rose on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term, it was celebrated as an achievement of good governance. This index was discontinued after it was found that countries were gaming the system to rise in the rankings in 2018.

My broader point is this: That those who have been looking at the numbers for over a decade or more can only conclude that there has been slippage on key indicators linked to governance.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

DECCAN
Chronicle

17 DECEMBER 2024

Cabinet expansion proves
challenging for Maha CM

Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis has finally formed his full fledged Cabinet. It took him 11 days after taking oath as the CM to finalise names of his Cabinet members. During the entire process, he had to consult with Eknath Shinde, Ajit Pawar and also get approval from his Delhi bosses, for which he made multiple visits to the national capital. It shows that despite 'Mahayuti' alliance winning a massive mandate, the road ahead of Mr Fadnavis is not going to provide a smooth journey.

The Maharashtra Cabinet has 42 ministers, including the CM and two DCMs. While Mr Fadnavis has included 19 first time ministers, several senior leaders from all three parties — Bharatiya Janata Party, Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party — are sulking after being overlooked.

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Similarly, there are reports of protests and resignations of BJP leaders from various parts of the state. Mr Fadnavis and his deputies will have to devise a strategy to assuage the sulking leaders, who can be seen creating trouble for the government in the coming days.

One strategy the Mahayuti leaders seem to have is the 'two and half years' formula. Mr Shinde and Mr Pawar have publicly stated that some of the current ministers will be asked to resign after two-and-a-half years so that other legislators can be given a chance. Mr Fadnavis was more diplomatic about it. He has clarified that there will be a performance audit of all ministers and there could be changes based on the performance.

However, at present it looks like a ploy to give hopes to those who have been ignored. Mr Fadnavis has also kept one seat open. The maximum strength of Maharashtra Cabinet can be 43, including the CM. The Mahayuti leaders have not specified which party will get the 43rd Cabinet berth. In all probability, it will never be filled and used as a dangling carrot for their legislators.

Women voters played a decisive part in Mahayuti's victory, but there are only four women ministers in the 42-member Cabinet. Out of 36 districts in Maharashtra, 16 have no representation in the Fadnavis Cabinet. It shows that in spite of his best efforts, the Maharashtra chief minister has not managed to balance all aspects, which has also left many legislators disappointed. With less than 50 MLAs on the Opposition benches, Mr Fadnavis's bigger challenges are going to be from his own party and alliance partners. His longevity in CM office will depend on how long he can please his bosses and how long he can keep his alliance partners and party legislators under a tight leash.

Zakir Hussain's musical legacy

As news about the legendary tabla maestro Zakir Hussain flitted between hope and despair, prompting prayers and tributes, what stood out was how everyone began recalling his music as a divine force that would see it defy human mortality. For his art was a unifying force, a rhythm that formed the base for the blending of beautiful notes and voices into an experience to be cherished and to savour the compelling power of music that transcended human divides like religion and culture.

The emptiness of the unfillable void left by the pioneer of fusion music will feel crushing with relief coming in the form of a grand legacy of recorded work that will be an eternal tribute to the way a musical genius elevated the percussion instrument to glorious heights that could not be imagined even in the time of his father Ustad Alla Rakha who mentored him.

The legend of a handsome young man with effortlessly tousled hair making the tabla speak as it were who made it to Hollywood films too will be remembered for long. But it is his story of musical collaborations that brought about a revolution in the perception of Indian classical music around the world that will remain his finest contribution to universal music.

Today, if the notes of the sitar, sarod and santoor and the rhythmic beats of the tabla from classical Indian music are virtually de rigueur in background music to films, be they from Hollywood or any other, it is a tribute to a maestro who made fusion music a phenomenon that will resonate for generations to come.

The appeal of his music stayed lively and relevant to bridge decades and his contributions were recognised with three Grammy awards, among a career collection of five, as recently as this year pointing to the sheer dedication and passion that turned music into memorable melodies. Of course, civilian honours had flowed his way over the years in his home country.

And to think he faked it a bit to be an accompanist at a classical music concert in place of his father without revealing that he was still in his teens to begin a musical journey that will, however, not end with his death in California from chronic lung disease.

He made Indian sounds and rhythms part of the global music scene and conversations even as the music to which he contributed moved people. His legacy will live on.



Will Syrian implosion spur
a fresh Iran Mideast drive?



Syed Ata Hasnain

For a fairly long time, the world appeared to be fixated on the understanding that Iran and Syria acted as almost one nation in the pursuit of strategic security and foreign policy. As one of the main supporters of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the ayatollahs of Iran secured considerable strategic advantage through the territory of the Levant under Syria's control. Russian President Vladimir Putin's support to Iran and Syria added to their comfort and the Russian military presence in Syria, despite the demands of the Ukrainian battlefield, only reflected how serious Mr Putin was about his foothold in the Middle East and the relationship with the Iran-Syria combine. The progressive following out of the Bashir Assad administration and the corruption and lack of professionalism in the Syrian Army over the years perhaps never occurred to Russia due to the complete focus of attention on the Ukraine front. Even Iran was so totally obsessed with the successful run of strengthening Hezbollah that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's master of proxy war strategy, failed to detect that its hold over Syria through the Syrian Army had been largely diluted. Was the emaciation of the Syrian civil and military capability a deliberate non-military strategy followed by an external power is yet not known, but the advantage which now accrues is not to any one side but to several forces. Among those are the United States, Turkey, Israel and the radical Sunni elements that have vied for space in the Levant. Except for the US and Israel, none of the others have a joint interest. The

ones at the greatest disadvantage from the run of recent events are Iran and Russia. The *Jerusalem Post* wrote: "Iran's loss is staggering. Assad's fall toppled the crown jewel of the arc of resistance that Iran spent over 35 years constructing as a counter-balance to Israel and American influence in the region. The removal of this cornerstone has effectively dismantled the arc". It is said that when a revolution occurs and takes the world by surprise, you should always be prepared for a counter-revolution. So, is there a possibility of a counter-revolution in the making? The factors at play and the strategic environment both do not indicate this and for several reasons this reading should be assumed correct. Hamas' actions in Gaza triggered a chain of events which Iran misread as an opportunity. It activated its proxy strategy by ratcheting up the degree of engagement of Israel, but in the bargain, 15 months later, stands only to count its staggering losses. The entire leaderships of Hamas and Hezbollah were wiped out, and that of the IRGC itself dented. The complete supply chain for moving of military resources and wherewithal to the main proxy — Hezbollah — is now completely disrupted. The fall of Bashar Assad and the neutralisation of Syria's Army is also a result of several factors, with the final nail being the chain reactions set after the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. Clearly, Mr Putin did not accord high enough priority to the Middle East in the run of the ongoing two major wars in the world — Ukraine and Gaza-Lebanon. That ensured that the strategic advantage Russia gained by the support to Iran, Syria and Bashir Assad was never

It is said that when a revolution occurs and takes the world by surprise, you should always be prepared for a counter-revolution. So, is there a possibility of a counter-revolution in the making?

prioritised. However, Mr Putin, never prone to sentimentality, is attempting to regain lost ground. He first described the HTS as "terrorists", but shortly thereafter the Russian foreign ministry was referring to HTS as the armed Syrian opposition; a clear overture to the new ruling authority in Syria, one of the reasons why he refused to meet Assad and only granted him asylum. For how long is this asylum too is anybody's guess. This is the quasi-counter revolution in the making, if at all; the overturning of the US-Israel advantage gained as a result of the Syrian meltdown.

Clearly, Mr Putin can't do much alone, the Russians do not have that kind of bandwidth about the Middle East. They need the services of Iran and perhaps some of its proxies. However, can HTS, which is a Sunni radical organisation, come to work with Iran for any strategic advantage. Provided that HTS is not a proxy of either the US or Turkey, there is always the possibility of it working in close cooperation with Iran. It should be remembered that Hezbollah is a Shia organisation in ideological affinity with Iran, but Hamas has no such connection. It is a Sunni Islamist organisation with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas' ideology is deeply rooted in Sunni Islamic principles, advocating for the establishment of an Islamic state in historical Palestine. However, Hamas has received support from Iran due to shared strategic interests, particularly in opposing Israel. This alliance is

more pragmatic than ideological, as their theological differences remain significant. Iran has provided funding, weapons, and training to Hamas, especially during times of isolation from Sunni Arab states. Despite this cooperation, Hamas and Iran maintain distinct religious and ideological frameworks.

Two other issues bear significance in the aftermath of the Syrian implosion. The rule of the ayatollahs since 1979 has appeared unwavering but sporadic instances of resistance to the theological rule have often occurred. The people of Iran do not entirely support the ayatollahs. Failure on the strategic front spurs the buildup of resistance in the streets. That is what Iran will be concerned about because movements such as those contemplated here need a cause and a leadership. The cause may be there in plenty, it's a dynamic leadership and even external support which could cause a threat to the status quo.

The United States under incoming President Donald Trump may exercise caution about external involvement but Iran remains an anathema and Mr Trump has a particular aversion to the ayatollahs. US strategic circles in consort with Israel and perhaps Saudi Arabia (only to a limited extent) could sense this as opportunity. On the other hand, Iran's long-term strategy revolves around the creation of a strong Shia crescent from Syria to Yemen taking in the majority and minority Shia populations into its fold. Over the last few years this had developed exponentially. The sudden downturn of the rising tide may spur Iran towards greater energisation of its efforts for achieving the crescent. That is where the clash could once again occur, re-energising the sectarian divide within Islam, with the world riding atop and once again deeply affected by that re-emergence.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, is a former GOC of the Srinagar-based 15 ("Chinar") Corps.

LETTERS

ALL FAITHS ARE EQUAL

The Constitution is a legacy of the freedom movement in which people of all faiths were equal partners and upholds equality of religions. The gospel according to the Constitution is human equality. Understandably, the Hindu Right preaching Hindu revivalism and the "virtue" of hierarchically organised society cannot be comfortable with it. The Constitution was authored by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, social revolutionary and not by the Hindutva icons for the BJP to accept and follow it as the Holy Book. One cannot have both the Manusmriti and the Constitution. The party should repudiate what it represents — Hindutva and Hindu nationalism — and adhere to secularism and social justice if it is to be a party of the Book.

G. David Milton
Maruthancode

DON'T KEEP MS AWARD

The High Court of Madras may have cleared the legal objections raised against T.M. Krishna getting the title awarded in the name of the late queen of Carnatic music M.S. Subbulakshmi. However, many are of the view that people like TMK should take into consideration what is construed to be moral laws which are unwritten but followed by people of many generations with scruples and by those who are dictated by their conscience and common sense. TMK is duty bound to introspect and analyse whether it would be appropriate to keep an award in the name of late MS about whom he had made many unsavoury opinions and comments that were not in good taste and wounded hundreds of her fans.

Muthu Srinivasan
Coimbatore

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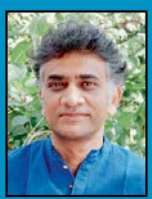
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Aakar Patel



How India keeps
falling in global
indices: The issue
is governance...

In 2021, I wrote a book called *Price of the Modi Years*. In one of its chapters I compared India's rankings on various global indices that I had been tracking over the years to see whether they had improved, stayed the same or deteriorated since 2014. Periodically I keep going back to these to see whether India has risen or fallen on them or stayed the same. Today's column looks at some of the more important ones as we end 2024.

The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index monitors life expectancy at birth, education and national income. Our 2014 rank was 130, and it is today 134, a fall of four places.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index monitors civil liberties, pluralism, political culture and participation and electoral process in nations. Our 2014 rank was 27 and the latest is 47, a fall of 20 places. India is now classified as a "flawed democracy".

The CIVICUS Monitor's National Civic Space Ratings assesses freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. In 2017, it rated India's as a place where freedoms were "Obstructed". India's current rating has fallen to "Repressed" and the reason is that "the deterioration of India's civic space is alarming".

The Lowy Institute Asia Power Asia Power Index monitors national power and influence based on economy, diplomacy, military capacity, resilience, trade, future trends, cultural influence. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar had met with Lowy Institute experts in November in Sydney.

According to Lowy Institute, India lost its "Major Power" status by falling below the 40-point threshold in 2020 and then falling further in 2021 and 2022. It remains below 40 in 2024.

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" index looks at the rule of law, political pluralism and elections, functioning of government, civil liberties, freedom of expression, association and organisation and individual rights. It rates nations out of 100 and in 2014 India was rated 77/100, and classified as being "Free". Today it is rated 66/100 and classified as "Partly Free" for a variety of reasons.

The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index rates nations on criminal and civil justice system, fundamental rights, constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, transparent government, order and security and regulatory enforcement.

In 2014 India ranked 66 and but fell to 77 in 2022 and 79 in 2024. India fares weakly on, among other things, fundamental rights and the criminal justice system.

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network World Happiness Report looks at GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, perceptions of corruption and dystopia.

India fell from a 2014 ranking of 111 to 126. The reasons given included "large and steady decline in life evaluation", low optimistic outlook of inhabitants (2020) and "longer-term slide in Indian life evaluations" (2021).

The Fraser Institute's Global Economic Freedom Index looks at the size of government, legal structure, freedom to trade internationally, regulation of credit, labour and business. India's ranking here has risen from 112 in 2014 to 84.

The Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index monitors media independence, pluralism, self-censorship, abuses and transparency. India has fallen from a global rank of 140 in 2014 (which was not good in the first place) further to 159 now.

The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law Index monitors laws and regulations that limit women's economic opportunities on indicators like mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets and pension. India fell from its 2014 ranking of 111 to 113.

Transparency International's Global Corruption Perceptions Index looks at corruption in the public sector of nations. India has fallen from a global rank of 85 in 2014 to 93.

The Heritage Foundation's Global Economic Freedom Index monitors rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency and open markets.

India in 2014 was ranked 120 and has since fallen to 126. Reasons cited include "large scale political corruption"; "little evidence that anti-corruption laws are effective"; "foundations for long-term economic development remain fragile without an efficiently functioning legal framework"; "overall rule of law is weak in India".

The International Food Policy Research Institute's

Global Hunger Index monitors hunger, stunting in children and undernourishment. Here India was ranked 55th out of 76 nations in 2014 and is now ranked 105th out of 127 nations. More than 13 per cent of Indians are undernourished, with 37 per cent of children under five being stunted (low height for age) and 18 per cent being wasted (low weight for height).

India has rejected the findings of the hunger index as being flawed, saying that it does not reflect the country's true position. But the true position is also that 60 per cent of Indians are thought by the government itself to require free rations monthly.

Similarly, the government has rejected the fall in other indices as being motivated or biased or based on flawed data or something else. Some indices it has stopped responding to totally. This was not the case when this government first took office and assumed that it would improve things.

When India rose on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term, it was celebrated as an achievement of good governance. This index was discontinued after it was found that countries were gaming the system to rise in the rankings in 2018.

My broader point is this: That those who have been looking at the numbers for over a decade or more can only conclude that there has been slippage on key indicators linked to governance.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

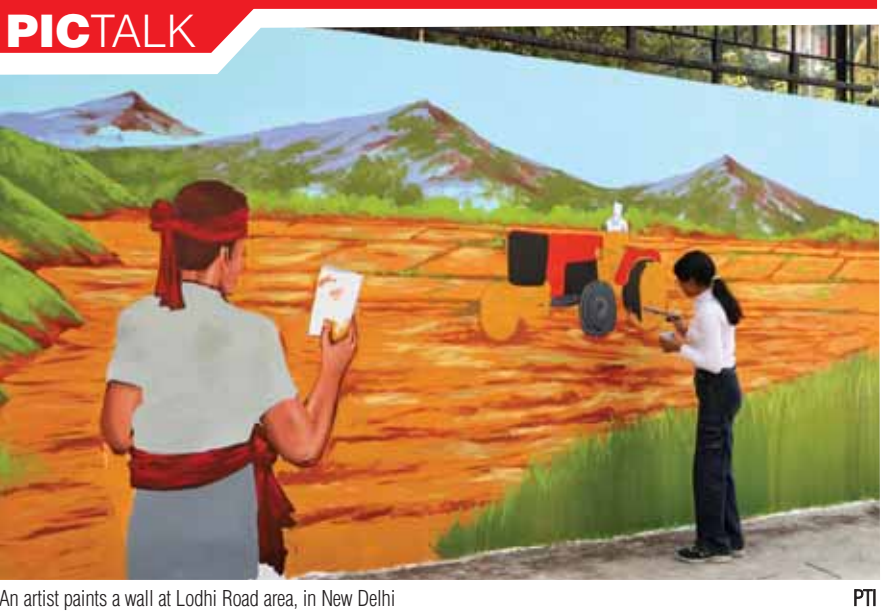
Economy slowing down

India, celebrated as the fastest-growing economy in the world, is showing signs of slowdown

India is facing a pivotal moment as it navigates a notable slowdown. Between July and September 2024, the country's GDP growth rate fell to 5.4 per cent, its lowest in seven quarters and well below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) forecast of 7 per cent. While this growth rate remains enviable compared to developed economies, it highlights significant structural challenges that could impede India's long-term economic ambitions. The implications of this slowdown are multifaceted. A decline in consumer demand and muted private investment have curtailed economic momentum. Sales of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) have dropped, wage bills of publicly traded firms have shrunk, and urban spending has softened. In November alone, car sales plunged by 14 per cent, underscoring the waning strength of urban consumption. Rising inflation adds another layer of complexity. In October 2024, inflation surged to 6.2 per cent, exceeding the RBI's target ceiling of 4 per cent. Escalating food prices, driven by climate disruptions and inefficiencies in supply chains, have inflated costs across sectors, further squeezing disposable incomes.



The slowdown has also placed pressure on India's exports, which account for just 2 per cent of global goods trade. A stronger dollar and rising tariffs have eroded the competitiveness of Indian products in international markets. Compounding the issue is stagnant job creation, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and small-scale industries. Collectively, these factors are eroding confidence in India's growth narrative, despite the government's optimistic outlook. The roots of this economic deceleration lie in several factors. Demand weakness is a central issue. While rural demand remains relatively resilient thanks to a favourable monsoon, it alone cannot offset the broader slowdown. Restrictive monetary policies have further constrained growth. To combat inflation, the RBI has kept interest rates steady for two years, leading to high borrowing costs that discourage both business investment and consumer spending. Global and domestic challenges compound the problem. Slowing global demand and climate-related disruptions in agriculture have adversely affected exports and food production. Additionally, the RBI's interventions to stabilise the rupee by selling dollars have inadvertently tightened liquidity, slowing economic growth. A stronger rupee, while stabilising in some respects, makes Indian exports more expensive and less competitive internationally. Addressing these challenges requires targeted solutions. Boosting consumption through wage growth could be a key strategy. Policy measures that reduce bureaucratic hurdles, provide tax incentives, and simplify labour and land laws can unlock the potential of small and medium enterprises, which form the backbone of the economy. Tackling inflation and strengthening supply chains will also play a critical role in stabilising the economy.



An artist paints a wall at Lodhi Road area, in New Delhi

South Asia: Two decades of turmoil

December marks two pivotal anniversaries — Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Kandhar Hijacking — that changed South Asia's geopolitics



SANTHOSH MATHEW

December marks two pivotal anniversaries that significantly influenced South Asia's geopolitical landscape: 45 years since the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan and 25 years since the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 from Kathmandu to Kandahar. Despite occurring two decades apart, these events underscore the fragility of South Asia and the profound influence of external powers and non-state actors in shaping the region's trajectory.

On December 24, 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to support the struggling communist regime in Kabul, led by Babrak Karmal. This intervention, ostensibly aimed at stabilising Afghanistan, set off a decade-long occupation and transformed the country into one of the Cold War's fiercest battlegrounds. The repercussions extended far beyond Afghanistan, triggering global, regional and internal upheavals that persist to this day. The Soviet invasion catalysed a chain of events that hastened the disintegration of the Soviet Union and radicalised South Asia. The mujahideen-fighters armed and financed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other allies became a formidable force against the Soviets. This external patronage laid the groundwork for militant extremism, which would later engulf the region. The Soviet intervention underscored Afghanistan's strategic importance as the fulcrum of great power politics. Pakistan emerged as a critical player, acting as a frontline state in the anti-Soviet effort. Two decades later, on December 24, 1999, South Asia faced another defining moment when Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 was hijacked en route from Kathmandu to Delhi. Five armed men commandeered the aircraft, eventually forcing it to land in Kandahar, then under Taliban control. What ensued was a week-long standoff that exposed the vulnerabilities of regional counter-terrorism strategies and marked a turning point in how nations approached security and terrorism.



The Kandahar hijacking exposed the evolving nexus between terrorism and geopolitics in South Asia. The Taliban's willingness to shelter the hijackers highlighted its transition into a state sponsor of terrorism. For India, this incident was a stark reminder of the threats posed by cross-border terrorism, often enabled by Pakistan's support for extremist proxies in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The release of Masood Azhar not only emboldened groups like JeM but also underscored the growing influence of non-state actors in undermining regional stability. Although the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking may seem unrelated, they are deeply interconnected in shaping South Asia's trajectory. The destabilisation of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation created fertile ground for militancy, enabling the rise of networks that facilitated events like the Kandahar hijacking. Pakistan's role as a key US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war empowered its military-intelligence complex, which later exploited jihadist networks to further strategic objectives in Kashmir and Afghanistan. These same networks became instrumental in orchestrating attacks against India, exemplified by the IC-814 hijacking.

ADDRESSING SOUTH ASIA'S FRACTURED SECURITY LANDSCAPE REQUIRES COLLECTIVE ACTION. COUNTRIES IN THE REGION MUST TRANSCEND HISTORICAL ANIMOSITIES TO COMBAT TERRORISM AND ADDRESS SHARED CHALLENGES LIKE EXTREMISM AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

Both events marked the ascendancy of non-state actors in South Asia's security dynamics. The mujahideen's success against the Soviets emboldened militant groups across the region, while the Kandahar hijacking demonstrated their ability to exploit state vulnerabilities for political gains. The Kandahar episode underscored the inadequacy of India's counter-terrorism infrastructure at the time. It led to significant reforms, including the establishment of specialised counter-terrorism units like the National Security Guard (NSG) and the strengthening of aviation security protocols. Pakistan's dual role in these episodes—as a US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war and as a sanctuary for groups like JeM—has perpetuated instability in the region. Its support for extremist proxies has strained relations with India and exacerbated internal security challenges. Addressing South Asia's fractured security landscape requires collective action. Countries in the region must transcend historical animosities to combat terrorism and address shared challenges like extremism and socio-economic disparities. Both the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking highlight the need

for strong democratic institutions and accountable governance. Weak states are particularly susceptible to external manipulation and internal subversion, further destabilising the region. The lessons from these pivotal episodes remain crucial as South Asia navigates the 21st century. The radicalisation fueling terrorism often stems from socio-economic deprivation. Investments in education, healthcare, and employment can help counter extremist ideologies. Strengthened regional cooperation and robust international partnerships are essential to addressing the complex interplay of geopolitics and terrorism. Much like the Grand Trunk Road connecting distant regions and histories, these events remind us of the intersecting paths of interventionism and terrorism in shaping modern South Asia. They were not mere crises but turning points that redefined the region's political, social, and economic trajectories. As South Asia confronts new challenges, the enduring lessons of these anniversaries emphasize the importance of resilience, cooperation, and proactive governance in securing a stable future. (The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DEBATE ON CONSTITUTION

Madam — The two-day debate on the Constitution, which began on 13th December, has seen heated discussion on the historical and contemporary significance of the Constitution. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh initiated the debate, emphasising the collective efforts behind the creation of the Constitution. Though he accused Congress and Indira Gandhi for imposing an emergency and supercession of Supreme Court judges to charge Congress with violating constitutional principles, he lauded the progressive and transformative nature of the Constitution that allows individuals from humble backgrounds to rise to the highest positions of power in India. The newly elected MP, Priyanka Gandhi, an articulate and combative speaker, accused the government of undermining the constitutional promises of social, economic and political justice over the past decade. Without mentioning the name of Jawaharlal Nehru, she lauded his contribution in creating so many public sector as well as government firms. She also warned the present government that his role in the freedom struggle and Independent India could never be erased from Indian history. Concluding the debate, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the role of women members of the constituent Assembly in making the Indian Constitution. He also hailed Indian democracy and reminded the journey of the Constitution.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

INDIA'S GDP RISES

Madam — Forbes India estimates India's GDP to be \$3.94 trillion in 2024. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said India rose to the 11th largest economy in the world in seven decades of independence, but in just the last decade, India has risen to the 5th largest economy while addressing a gathering at the Jaipur Exhibition and Convention Centre after the inauguration of the Rising Rajasthan Global Investment Summit 2024. He attributed this growth

Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain passes away



The four-time Grammy Award winner, Indian tabla maestro and an innovative music fusion creator, Zakir Hussain is no more with us. The silence on his tabla is a huge loss for Hindustani classical music and jazz fusion. Zakir was truly an indelible gem in the world of music. The list of his national and international accolades is really long, as he had always made India proud with his tireless contribution in

taking Hindustani classical music to collaborate and fuse with world music. Like his father, Ustad Alha Rakha, Zakir always attempted to proceed to the legacy footprint of his father. His tabla virtuoso legacy had been curated in the golden letters in the history of Indian music because of his glorious contribution to music. Taking an Indian, 18th-century membranophone percussion instrument (tabla) to the world stage is truly an incredible achievement, and history will credit this legendary maestro, Zakir Hussain, for his pertinacious contribution towards Hindustani classical music. He will always stay alive in our hearts and continue to inspire the upcoming generations of music and instrument lovers.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

to the exceptional efficiency of his government. Nevertheless, the story would be incomplete without a mention of the economic growth across different regions. Southern states, which occupy 19.34 per cent of India's land area and 20.76 per cent of its population, contributed about 30.5 per cent of the GDP. Western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, which together occupy 15.32 per cent of India's land area and 14.27 per cent of its population, added another 21.4 per cent. On the contrary, the NDA-BJP-ruled states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which cover 34.09 per cent of the area and have 38.95 per cent of the population, together contributed only 22.4 per cent to the GDP. This is despite the fact that the five BJP states received a significantly higher share of funds from the central divisible revenue pool. They received a 45.29 per cent share, whereas the five southern states got only 15.81 per cent. Further, according to the IMF World Economic Outlook

(October 2024), India is currently ranked 144th among 194 economies in terms of GDP (nominal) per capita at \$2698 at current prices. This suggests that the standard of living and quality of life in much of India improved at a snail's pace, even though the economy expanded rapidly.

Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

PM MODI SLAMS CONGRESS

Madam — Modi lambasted the first parivar as the killers of the constitution during the debate on the constitution in parliament. Right from Nehru's letter in 1951 to the state CM's, Indira's emergency, Rajiv's dealing with the Shah Bano case, and Rahul's tearing of an ordinance, Modi spoke the truth. It is a big blow to the Congress since they were at fault in their earlier tenure. It should introspect. Secondly, Modi has drawn up an 11-point Sankalp like the 20-point programme of Indira Gandhi.

N R Ramachandran | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Overcoming fear to unlock limitless possibilities

Embracing the unknown is essential for innovation, resilience and realising our true potential

Humans possess four basic emotions — happiness, sadness, anger and fear. Each has a unique place in our lives and shapes much of our responses to situations. The unknown is probably one entity that invokes all four emotions and spurs us into action. However, it is the fear of what we project onto the unknown that often paralyses us into inaction. Action is built into our psyche. We must necessarily move, even though we do not know the results of our endeavours. Instead of focusing on the happiness we will derive from success, we let this uncertainty bog us down. We procrastinate terrified of failure and refuse to take the next step. This is an all too familiar phenomenon that we encounter every day of our lives. As we start going up the professional ladder, many of us follow time-tested formulae, handed down to us by predecessors. We hesitate to make decisions contrary to the established norms, even though such decisions may result in sub-



stantial gains, within the framework of certain acceptable risks. All our efforts are guided by that one decision in 10 which did not click. We do not look at the nine that did. We forget that as a child we had no fears when we started exploring the universe around us. We fell, as we tried to get on our two feet, but were encouraged, or even forced, to keep trying till we mastered the art of walking; or for that matter everything. We also forget that we were not scared to take up a job after college, even though we knew nothing about the work we had to do. We learned from our mistakes. The worst was that we failed the first time, and the best

was that we succeeded eventually. Ah! The joy of success! We forget that humans evolved due to an inherent desire to explore the unknown, without a care for failure or success. New worlds were found, and new inventions and scientific discoveries were made. All because a few dared to venture into the unknown. We deny ourselves the endless new opportunities that each new day brings. It is not that we do not possess this spirit. It is just that generations of conditioning have made it dormant, till we are in a situation with our backs to the wall. Nowhere is it more in evidence, than in jugaad, the flexible approach to solve a problem innovatively when one has limited resources. In our personal lives, we are told to pursue our dreams but are often guided towards the more tried and safer options. We do not even try to think of the endless possibilities and the heights that society can reach if everyone is encouraged not to fear the failure of the unknown, but

to think about success, and is free to follow his or her heart! This is the contradiction that most of us from the earlier generation, specifically from the middle class, face when teaching the young. Fortunately for our race, the young of today are better prepared for the unknown with the availability of much better sources of information which were also created by a few who dared to dream. We should teach the young to step out in the rain without an umbrella and get drenched. Let the sky be the roof. They should not regret that they might have led a better life if they had not feared the unknown. Esmeralda Santiago sums it up so well. "How can you know what you are capable of, if you do not embrace the unknown?" (The writer is an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator and strategy consultant. He conducts workshops on creative writing for young adults and corporate executives. The views expressed are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

FIRST COLUMN

WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE

As remote work redefine workplaces, businesses are increasingly turning to employee monitoring



SHAINY SHARMA

In the modern workplace, the rise of remote and hybrid work has led to significant shifts in how businesses operate, manage and monitor their employees. Among the most controversial developments is the growing use of tattleware or brassware, the common nicknames of software applications that monitor employees' activities during work hours. With the advent of normalised remote work, employer surveillance of workers has accelerated. Today, such tools can track a wide range of data, including keystrokes, mouse movements, screenshots, and even video or audio feeds from an employee's device. Not only this, but the much-advanced systems may also use artificial intelligence to analyse patterns, flag unproductive behaviour, or even detect potential security breaches. Employers claim these tools provide valuable insights into work habits, protect sensitive data, and improve overall efficiency. It allows businesses to track productivity metrics thereby ensuring that the employees meet deadlines and work efficiently, especially in remote setups where physical supervision is absent. Also, such surveillance tools help prevent data breaches or intellectual property theft by monitoring unauthorised activities. Moreover, these wares provide evidence in disputes about working hours or performance, thereby offering an objective record of employee activity. When implemented transparently and ethically, these tools even foster accountability and help underperforming employees improve. Despite the above-mentioned benefits, the use of tattleware raises significant ethical concerns wherein the most



common one talked about is privacy. Employees believe that privacy is a fundamental right, and excessive surveillance can infringe upon it. A survey conducted recently found that nearly 78 per cent of employers use monitoring software to track employee performance or online activity. When employees are monitored constantly, they often feel dehumanised, as though they are untrusted or reduced to mere data points resulting in eroding trust between employers and their teams, making it harder to foster collaboration and loyalty. Additionally, the psychological impact often leads them to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Employees may feel pressured to overwork or engage in performative productivity - appearing busy rather than genuinely contributing. Over time, this can harm creativity, innovation, and overall job satisfaction. Not only these, but the use of tattler has also resulted in legal challenges, including claims of unpaid wages for work performed away from computers or intrusion upon privacy. Some employers face allegations of unfair labour practices if monitoring interferes with protected activities, such as union organising? To adhere to the challenges posed by tattlers, businesses must strive to balance productivity goals with respect for employees' rights. As rightly said transparency is the key to success. Only when employees are informed about them being monitored, the necessities for the use of such tattlers or how the data will be used can help build trust and foster a sense of shared responsibility. As businesses navigate the complexities of remote and hybrid work, they must adopt a thoughtful and balanced approach to workplace monitoring. Only by prioritising transparency, fairness, and respect for individual rights, companies and business organisations can create an environment that values both productivity and human dignity.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Call for fast-tracking WTO agricultural negotiations



UTTAM GUPTA

In a recent WTO meeting, India urges prioritisation of issues, including a permanent solution for public stockholding and special safeguard mechanism



In a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) held in Geneva on December 4, 2024, India insisted that negotiations on unresolved/previously mandated issues in agriculture, including a permanent solution to public stockholding, special safeguard mechanism (SSM) and elimination of trade-distorting cotton subsidies by rich countries etc, be 'prioritised' and 'fast-tracked' by treating them as standalone issues instead of clubbing them with other issues. The US, on the other hand, criticised the prioritisation of certain issues over others, stating that this was the primary cause of the longstanding stalemate in agriculture. India also rejected a new proposal presented by Guyana to advance agricultural negotiations ahead of the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) is tentatively scheduled to take place in Cameroon in 2026) by adopting a so-called 'non-traditional approach based on convergence'. India reiterated that any facilitator-led process should be 'consensus-based' and respect WTO's multilateral principles. It emphasised on Text-based negotiation (TBN). TBN refers to the process of working up the text of an agreement that all parties are willing to accept and sign. Negotiating parties may begin with a draft text prepared by the Chair of the particular committee dealing with the subject. The draft is based on discussions amongst the member countries and is fine-tuned till all the nations are in agreement with it. This is in sharp contrast to a convergence-based approach that involves superimposition of non-multilateral trade regimes on the multilateral trading system (MTS). The theorists dealing with international trade in particular, WTO-related issues describe it as a process of 'gradually aligning different trade regimes, in particular preferential trade agreements (PTAs) and the MTS'. Others define convergence as requiring 'greater coherence between trade rules and policies, norms and standards in other areas of international cooperation'. Shorn of jargon, this is a well-orchestrated attempt by the developed countries - the US, the European



THE DRAFT IS BASED ON DISCUSSIONS AMONGST THE MEMBER COUNTRIES AND IS FINE-TUNED TILL ALL THE NATIONS ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH IT. THIS IS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO A CONVERGENCE-BASED APPROACH THAT INVOLVES SUPER-IMPOSITION OF NON-MULTILATERAL TRADE

Union (EU), the UK, Australia, etc (they exercise disproportionately greater influence during actual confabulations at the WTO, set the agenda of meetings, float proposals more often through small countries such as Guyana and get away with what they want) to scuttle the standard practice of taking decisions by consensus where every member country has an equal voice. Therefore, India has rejected this approach, rightly so. But, what happens to India's demand for 'prioritising' and 'fast-tracking' negotiations? In a meeting of the CoA held on October 2, 2023, in Geneva, the EU agreed to consider India's demand for a permanent solution to the public stock-holding (PSH) program for food security. Accordingly, India had urged WTO members to start TBN on the issue as soon as possible and get this deliberated at the WTO MC-13 slated to be held in Abu Dhabi from February 26-29, 2024. But, that was not to be. The Ministerial Conference ended in a deadlock. On the issue of finding a permanent solution to the (PSH) for food security, India's stance was vehemently opposed by the USA/EU. Earlier attempts by India also met with the same fate. At the Trade Policy Review (TPR) meeting held at WTO in January 2021, India insisted that the three issues should be taken up on a priority basis at the MC-12. But, in that Ministerial Conference held in Geneva on June 12-17, 2022, the issues were not even put on the table. The deadlock has existed for more than two decades despite India taking up these issues at WTO under what has come to be known as the Doha Development Agenda (DDA). Developed countries had junked DDA at MC-10 held in Nairobi (2015). On the most contentious issue of a permanent solution for PSH, a ray of hope emerged when in the WTO-General Council (GC) meeting in Geneva (July 31, 2014),

India insisted on a time-bound action plan on the subject matter to be executed before the end of 2014 co-terminus with approval of Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) - an area of great interest to developed countries. This was a good strategic move but it was abandoned mid-stream. In December 2014, even as the developed countries got away with the TFA, the developing countries got an "extension of the peace clause till a permanent solution was found." Put simply, India had literally surrendered its right to secure a permanent solution; that it was "Ok" with "the benefit of peace clause."

What is the peace clause?

To understand this, let us look at the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) of the WTO. Under it, a developing country cannot give aggregate measurement support (AMS) - an acronym for subsidies - over 10 per cent of the value of its farm production. The AMS includes "product-specific" subsidies and "non-product specific" subsidies on agricultural inputs such as fertilisers, seed, irrigation and power. The "product-specific" subsidy is the excess of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) paid to farmers over the External Reference Price (ERP) multiplied by the quantum of agri-produce. Whereas the MSP is taken for the relevant year, say, 2023-24, the ERP is the average of the global price prevailing during 1986-88 fixed in rupee terms. If the subsidy given by a developing country exceeds 10 per cent, it will be treated as a violation of its WTO commitment. This has been a major worry as India could face action in a situation of AMS exceeding the 10 per cent threshold. In this backdrop, the MC-9 in Bali (2013) had agreed to a "peace clause" under which "if a developing country gives AMS in excess of 10 percent, no member will challenge this until 2017, when the WTO would look for a permanent

solution to address their food security concerns." It came with several riders such as submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not "trade distorting." Besides, programs implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the 'peace clause'. In December 2014, the WTO-GC modified the above decision to provide for "extension of the peace clause till a permanent solution was found". Unfortunately, India concurred with this modification. This took away the sanctity of the 2017 deadline by which time members were to find a permanent solution as per the MC-9 mandate. A decade since then, India is still looking for a solution! In regard to SSM - it allows members to temporarily raise tariffs beyond the "bound levels" (this is the maximum permissible duty that a member country can impose under a bound rate agreement) to counter surges in import or price drops. The 2015 MC-10 in Nairobi recognized that developing countries will have the right to take recourse to SSM as envisaged under the Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration. That was at MC - 6 (December 2005). Since then, it has been almost two decades. Even now, these countries can't take recourse to SSM. They haven't also been able to prompt developed countries to eliminate their cotton subsidies. To conclude, despite the deft handling of negotiations at the WTO and representing the majority of the developing countries (India leads about 80 countries - the G33 including India, African, Caribbean and Pacific countries or ACP) so far, India hasn't succeeded in securing the intended outcomes. Given the intransigence of developed countries and their clout at WTO, there is little hope from the MC - 14.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Persisting Central Information Commission vacancies challenge transparency claims

Eight vacancies of Information Commissioners undermine the cause of transparency and accountability

Recently on December 10, Dr. Jitendra Singh, MoS (Personnel, Public Grievances and Pension) made a pitch for Vikashit Bharat, 2047 while addressing the 16th Annual Convention of Central Information Commission at Bharat Mandapam in Pragati Maidan. Ironically, it was the last date allowed by the Supreme Court for the central government to file a status report on the eight posts of Information Commissioners lying vacant out of a total of ten in the Central Information Commission (CIC) for the last year. It might be remembered in October 2023 Anjali Bhargava had brought to the notice of the Supreme Court that whereas seven posts were already lying vacant in the



PRIYADARSHI DUTTA

CIC, four incumbents were due to retire within a week. Sadly, the situation has worsened over the last year, notwithstanding the government's claim to transparency and accountability. At present, there are two Information Commissioners viz. Anandi Ramalingam and Vinod Kumar Tiwari in addition to Chief Information Commissioner viz. Heeralal

Samariya. As per the Pending Cases Report available on the website of CIC, there were a total of 3134 cases - comprising 2310 second appeals and 824 direct complaints with the Commission as of November 1, 2023. A year later on November 1, 2024, the total number of pendency has risen to 20,437 - comprising 17,717 second appeals and 2720 direct complaints. At the time of writing this piece, the total pendency clocked 22,957. This figure is not quite a compliment to the government's alleged commitment to transparency and accountability. A recent RTI application filed by Commodore Lokesh Batra (Retd) elicited the reply that 161 applications were received for filling eight vacancies in

CIC in response to the DoPT's advertisement dated August 14, 2024. Under Section 12 (3) of the RTI Act, 2005 the appointments are to be made by a committee chaired by the Prime Minister, and comprising the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha and another Union minister nominated by the Prime Minister. Filling these positions before the 16th Annual Convention on the RTI would have been a favourable gesture. However, the government did not prioritize the task. A second appeal from this columnist filed on September 13, 2023, is indicated at no 18162 in the list of pendency. The matter was transferred to IC Vinod Kumar Tiwari, after IC Ms. Saroj Punhani retired on November 11, 2023. The



high amount of pendency incentivizes the CPIOs/Appellate Authorities in the ministries/departments to display a cavalier attitude towards applications filed under the RTI Act, 2005. This columnist, however, was able to obtain the information through a fresh application. Though in both cases, the Appellate Authority within the division, who in an IAS officer colluded with the CPIO,

in one of his decisions he stated that the reason for denying information was that the file was under submission with the Joint Secretary. The columnist filed a third application under the RTI Act, 2005 asking the CPIO whether the Joint Secretary has been 'exempted' from the obligation to provide information under the RTI Act, 2005. If the Joint Secretary had been 'exempted', the CPIO must produce the necessary official order, and further inform who else in the ministry had been similarly 'exempted'. Any claim that a Joint Secretary has been 'exempted' from the obligation to provide information would have become controversial for the government. It could have sullied the service record of the

officer attracting a minor if not major penalty for disregarding a Parliamentary statute. The RTI Act, 2005 provides no authority-wise 'exemption'. Exemption under Section 8 of the Act applies only to certain well-defined matters based on merit like security/diplomatic/trade secrets, matters expressly forbidden by court from publication, or cabinet papers etc. This time the CPIO quickly provided the information. The episode, however, underscores a few grievous lapses. First, had the Central Information Commission (CIC) been working at full strength, the second appeal would have been decided within a few months, and the delinquent CPIO might had to pay the monetary penalty for denying information.

Second, it underscores that Appellate Authorities, who are part of the department, actually help the CPIOs to suppress the information, where it is in their interest. Instead of this obligation, they can manipulate the CPIOs in other matters. The high amount of pendency in CIC could be attributed to the devious behaviour of the Appellate Authorities. The RTI Act, 2005 should have provision to penalize not just the CPIO but also the First Appellate Authority if the Information Commissioner declares him/her guilty of deliberate suppression of information.

(The writer is an author and an independent researcher based in New Delhi. The views expressed are his personal)

Political Minefield

The appointment of François Bayrou as France’s new Prime Minister highlights the formidable challenges facing the country as it struggles with political gridlock, economic uncertainty, and public discontent. President Emmanuel Macron’s decision to tap Mr Bayrou ~ a seasoned centrist with decades of political experience ~ signals a cautious yet pragmatic approach to resolving France’s deepening crisis. However, the road ahead is fraught with obstacles, with Mr Bayrou’s ability to navigate a fractured Parliament likely to define both his tenure and Mr Macron’s legacy. Mr Bayrou assumes office in the midst of an unprecedented political landscape. The Parliamentary defeat of his predecessor, Michel Barnier, underscored the fragility of Mr Macron’s administration and the growing polarisation within French politics. With Parliament split into three blocs ~ far left, far right, and Mr Macron’s centrists ~ reaching any form of consensus is akin to scaling the “Himalaya” that Mr Bayrou himself spoke of. His immediate task of passing a provisional budget law for 2024 is already a daunting test of his political acumen. The crux of the crisis lies in France’s fiscal health. A deficit exceeding 6 per cent of GDP and rising public debt have become flashpoints for debate, exposing deep divisions over how to address these issues. Mr Bayrou has framed the fiscal deficit as a “moral” challenge, but this rhetoric may fall flat with opposition leaders who remain sceptical of his ability to govern impartially.

The far left and far right, who joined forces to topple Mr Barnier, are unlikely to grant Mr Bayrou the benefit of the doubt for long. The Socialists, too, have expressed their discontent over Mr Macron’s decision to bypass their calls for a left-leaning Prime Minister. Adding to the complexity is Mr Bayrou’s close association with Mr Macron, whose popularity has waned amid perceptions of elitism and disconnect from everyday French concerns. While Mr Bayrou’s rustic roots and pragmatic persona offer a contrast to Mr Macron’s technocratic style, his proximity to the President could alienate him from potential allies in Parliament. Without a broad coalition, Mr Bayrou may find himself governing on borrowed time, much like Mr Barnier before him. The economic implications of this political paralysis are significant. France’s inability to stabilise its fiscal situation has already raised borrowing costs and shaken investor confidence. With the far right and far left pushing for increased spending and the centrists advocating fiscal restraint, the resulting impasse risks further destabilising the economy. For Mr Bayrou, striking a balance between appeasing the markets and satisfying parliamentary factions is an unenviable task. France’s political crisis is emblematic of a broader struggle facing liberal democracies: how to govern effectively in an era of polarisation and declining trust in institutions. For Mr Bayrou, the challenge is not only to pass a budget or maintain parliamentary support but to restore faith in the government’s ability to act decisively and inclusively. Whether he can rise to this occasion will determine whether France’s current turmoil is a temporary setback or a harbinger of deeper instability.

Day of Reckoning

South Korea’s democracy has faced yet another stern test with the impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol, a polarising figure whose ill-conceived martial law decree plunged the nation into a constitutional crisis. The impeachment motion, carried by an overwhelming 204 votes in the 300-member National Assembly, reflects both the resilience of South Korea’s democratic institutions and the heavy political costs of authoritarian overreach. Mr Yoon’s decision to declare martial law on December 3, ostensibly to “root out anti-state forces” and bypass opposition obstruction, shocked the nation. The decree granted sweeping emergency powers to the military, a chilling echo of South Korea’s authoritarian past. Though it was rescinded within six hours, the damage was done. Parliamentarians defied Mr Yoon’s forces to annul the decree, protesters flooded the streets, and calls for his resignation grew louder. The public and institutional backlash culminated in a second impeachment vote, supported not only by opposition lawmakers but by at least 12 members of Mr Yoon’s own People Power Party. This moment carries striking historical parallels. Yoon is now the second conservative president in recent years to face impeachment after Mr Park Geun-hye’s removal in 2017. Both cases underscore the volatility of South Korean politics, where presidents often end their terms embroiled in scandal. Mr Yoon’s martial law gamble, framed as a desperate bid to protect democracy, instead exposed his isolation and miscalculation. His own party split over the issue, with some lawmakers viewing his actions as an existential threat to democratic norms.

The impeachment itself reveals both the strength and fragility of South Korea’s democratic system. On one hand, it highlights the ability of the legislature to hold even the most powerful leaders accountable. On the other, it underscores the deep political divides and the risks inherent in a system where presidents wield considerable power yet face significant institutional checks. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo’s assumption as acting President reflects the constitutional safeguards in place, but the road ahead is fraught. The Constitutional Court now has six months to decide whether to permanently remove Mr Yoon from office. A decision to uphold the impeachment could trigger a snap election, further shaking South Korea’s political landscape. Meanwhile, Mr Yoon’s defiance, exemplified in his vow to “fight to the end,” signals a drawn-out battle which risks deepening the nation’s divisions. South Korea’s democratic resilience shines through this episode, bolstered by its engaged citizenry and robust institutions. However, the crisis serves as a cautionary tale against the allure of authoritarian shortcuts, even when cloaked in the language of protecting democracy. Mr Yoon’s impeachment is a victory for accountability but also a reminder that democracy requires constant vigilance. As South Koreans await the court’s decision, their nation’s commitment to democratic principles faces its next test: navigating this turbulent chapter without succumbing to further polarisation or instability.

Bhopal revisited~ II

The license for setting up the Union Carbide plant at Bhopal for producing poisonous MIC and a ‘no-objection’ from the Pollution Control Department were granted despite the plant’s location being near a densely populated area. This was against prescribed norms. No action was taken against the erring UCIL for not complying with statutory safety measures. Was it not a hoax? Were the state and Central government officials hypnotized by the gimmicky assurance of UCC that ‘our Bhopal plant will be as inoffensive as a chocolate factory’?



Was the law taken in one’s hand? The answer is ‘yes’. Otherwise, why did the Central government exercise the power of parens patriae (parent of the nation) and prevent the victims from filing suits through lawyers of their choice?

The government also passed the Bhopal Gas Disaster (Processing of Claims) Act, 1985, without consulting the victims or caring for their well-being and took away the victim’s right to fend for themselves.

Within seven days of the tragedy, tort-lawyers from the USA flocked to Bhopal to strike deals with the victims. American tort lawyers are the most aggressive breed of the legal profession who secure settlements for huge sums.

Taking advantage of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s lack of experience and naivety, he was persuaded to exercise the power of parens patriae. And what did the Central government do next?

It lodged a suit in a New York District Court claiming \$3 billion compensation for the victims. Knowing the power of American tort lawyers, who are known to be experts in handling such cases in American courts, UCC, aided and abetted by our Central government, succeeded in transferring the case to an Indian court.

What happened five days after the MIC leak was a drama which naïve citizens of India witnessed. Warren Anderson, Chairman of UCC, reached Bhopal on 7 December 1984.

The MP government, headed by Chief Minister Arjun Singh, presumably with a view to scoring political advantage, spread the news that Anderson had been arrested and subsequently granted bail.

The American embassy used its muscle to ensure the

safe return of Anderson to New Delhi with due ceremony. He was entertained to tea by the first citizen and received with courtesy by the Union Home Minister, Foreign Secretary and other Ministers. Finally, all went to see him off to his home country.

On 14 February 1989, the Central government agreed with the Supreme Court’s judgement that UCC was to pay only \$470 million as compensation. The parens patriae agreed to settle for about 15 per cent of the original claim. The amount is less than half of the amount settled by the US government for the Action Valdagge incident, an oil disaster that took place in 1989 off the shore of Alaska.

There are reasons to believe the comment of one of the lawyers of UCC, “A few hundred bottles of champagne must have popped around the world.” After all, UCC took away \$2530 millions from Bhopal gas victims.

Many facts relating to the industrial disaster were not made public after many years of the tragedy. But if such truths had been unveiled earlier, people’s outrage and fury would have yielded justice for the victims.

The epic tragedy of Bhopal had shaken people all over the world and they raised their voices and expressed their concerns from time to time by unveiling the harsh reality.

Many social activists, artists, novelists, writers and producers brought out the facts through their creations, writings and spoke against the injustice

to the Bhopal victims.

Many film makers turned the spotlight and camera to capture the sufferings of Bhopal victims and tried to present the story of painful story.

One feature film and eighteen documentaries were made on the Bhopal tragedy with an aim to make people visualize the sufferings and harsh realities, but most of them were not made public by the government.

A documentary film entitled ‘Beyond genocide’ had directly accused the government, holding it as responsible as UCIL for the disaster and its fate.

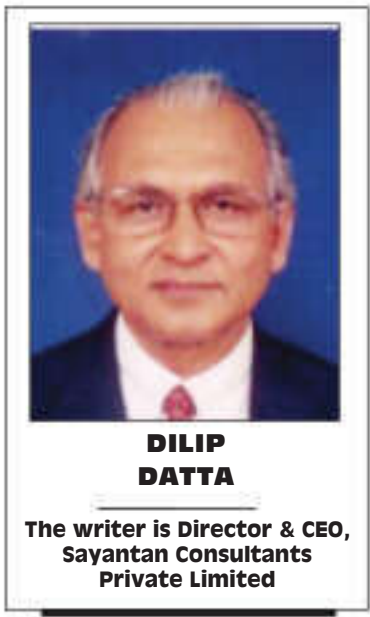
Doordarshan refused to telecast this film and finally, after it had won the international award and gold medal, it was telecast suddenly late at night without any prior announcement.

Pictures of suffering have hardly changed for the people of Bhopal. The deadly toxic clouds of methyl oxide that loomed over Bhopal 40 years back still cast a shadow on the lives of victims.

Standing near the factory site of UCIL, one can only see pictures of misery and disability all over. Mothers still give births to deformed and crippled children. The poisonous garbage that has not yet been removed from the disaster site continuously pollutes the environment.

The place where the victims were shifted is an unhygienic place; there is no access to pure drinking water.

Here, one finds toddlers and grown up children who cannot stand on their own legs, some cannot walk due to their



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crippled legs, some of them have visibility in one eye and most are barred from natural growth.

Those who survived after inhaling the poisonous gas are mostly affected by cancer; some of them have been paralysed. The chemical deposited in more than a 20 square kilometer-area near the factory site is still polluting the underground water, causing cancer and physical deformity.

After the 7 June 2010 verdict of the Bhopal district court, the matter remained the flavour of the day on TV channels and in print media.

Now that the media frenzy is over, it is the appropriate time for all of us to look at some basic issues, including corporate responsibility, the role of the business community, the government system, at state and central level, and finally the judicial system.

Intellectuals and youth should not forget what happened at Bhopal. They should step forward and encourage the people to rise against power and make them realize that their unity and strength are mightier than the wealth of the cowards who absconded after committing the crime.

Forty years of fighting for the right to life, dignity and justice shows the perseverance and courage of Bhopal victims.

The patience of the people of India is legendary, as for the past forty years, they have dreamt of a tomorrow which will give them justice. But justice is denied to them.

Now, even after they have abandoned all hope for real justice, they still dream of a day when at least one member of Warren Anderson’s family will visit them and express his regret for the tragic incident.

(Concluded)

The gift of second chances

The impending return from an Indonesian jail of a Filipino migrant worker tricked into being a drug mule is a spot of good news amid the toxic political scuffle of recent weeks.

The Marcos administration announced over the weekend that, following high-level talks and negotiations, Indonesia has agreed to transfer Mary Jane Veloso to Philippine custody after almost 15 years on death row.

The mother of two was sentenced to death on drug charges after 2.6 kilograms of heroin was found in her luggage in 2010. She narrowly escaped execution in 2015 after last-minute appeals from the Aquino administration, which had arrested and prosecuted for syndicated estafa two individuals involved in recruiting Veloso and slipping drugs in her suitcase without her knowledge.

In Jakarta, Yusril Ihza Mahendra, Indonesia’s coordinating minister for law, human rights, immigration, and corrections, clarified that Veloso was not being released from her sentence; only that Indonesia had agreed to send her back to the Philippines “as a prisoner.”

“[I]t is not an acquittal, not a pardon,” Yusril said, adding that certain conditions must be met, including recognition of Indonesia’s final court ruling. “Once she returns to her country and continues her sentence there, the responsibility for her rehabilitation shifts to her home country,” he added.

The agreement to repatriate



Veloso was “reciprocal,” he said: “If one day Indonesia asks for its citizens jailed in the Philippines to be returned, they must consider it.” A permanent ban on Veloso’s return to Indonesia was also part of the deal.

While no date for Veloso’s return has been set, with Philippine officials saying it might happen before Christmas, the prospect has been widely hailed. President Marcos has expressed “heartfelt gratitude” to Indonesia’s newly elected president Prabowo Subianto for his “goodwill,” while the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) commended the initiative of Philippine authorities “in pursuing justice beyond our own territorial bounds.”

For sure, as Mr. Marcos said in a statement, Veloso must be held accountable under Indonesian law and the Philippines must respect its legal jurisdiction on her case. But given that Veloso, as the President himself described her, is “a victim of circumstances,” the possibility of clemency is an option that he must seriously consider.

It is a call echoed by the Ecumenical Bishops Forum, a fellowship of Catholic and Protestant bishops, who see Veloso as the “symbol” of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and the myriad suffering they endure “at the hands of merciless persons who take [advantage] of their gullibility while seeking overseas employment.”

While Mr. Marcos mulls the grant of clemency that only he can decide on, justice officials have assured Veloso’s family that she would not be detained in the same facilities where her illegal recruiters are currently serving their sentence.

The family had earlier expressed fears of retaliation from the syndicate behind her plight amid previous threats to their safety. It is a well-considered move, as this ensures that Veloso can finally testify against these felons for qualified human trafficking in a long overdue court case.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Soft power

SIR, The ongoing conflict in Gaza and Israel’s military action against Hamas have drawn global attention. In this context, Israeli Ambassador to India, Reuven Azar, has praised India’s soft power policy, underlining its relevance in international diplomacy. He acknowledged that Israel, due to its heavy reliance on military strength, has lagged in areas like information management and public relations.



India has strengthened its global position through diplomacy, cultural influence, and dialogue as key tools of soft power. Initiatives like yoga, cultural exchanges, and multilateral diplomacy have not only earned India international goodwill but also enhanced its global image.

Despite its firm stance against terrorism, India has effectively combined dialogue and public relations to make its policies inspirational for the global community.

In contrast, Israel’s excessive reliance on military power weak-

ens it in ideological battles, further complicated by adversarial propaganda from Arab media. Military strength alone is insufficient; tools of soft power, such as dialogue, empathy, and media management, are essential for long-term success.

India’s example demonstrates that balancing soft and hard power not only safeguards national interests but also garners global acceptance. Israel should take inspiration from India’s strategy to refine its policies and strengthen its information and public relations framework.

Yours, etc.,
Prof. R K Jain,
Barwani (MP), 12 December.

FARM PLATFORMS

SIR, Sustainable agriculture is possible only with positive interventions from the states and the Centre. Demand for MSP guarantee and higher wages will be louder still if farmers don’t see any ray of hope in the crop diversification calls sans any solid financial and infrastructural marketing support. Farmers’ fears of corporates

have to be allayed by ensuring the lifting of their produce, be it in the open market or through the FCI mechanism. Actually, states like Punjab and Haryana have miserably failed to encourage cooperatives of small farmers.

The Union government and

states must come forward by giving cooperatives seed money subsidy for encouraging creation of a robust platform for all farm operations.

Yours, etc.,
Brij Bhushan Goyal,
Ludhiana, 11 December.

SECTION 498A

SIR, Apropos the news report “SC expresses concern over misuse of Section 498A”, published today, I would like to thank the apex court for realising the fact, albeit belatedly that Section 498A IPC is being grossly misused as a tool for unleashing personal vendetta with tacit support from a section of presiding officers of subordinate courts.

Barring exceptions, lower courts on receiving complaints hurry the issue of warrant or summons to the accused husband and his parents without application of judicial mind, and direct them to be personally present in court.

In some cases, a husband is taken into custody merely on surmise and conjecture. If the detention of husband is prolonged, he may run the risk of being suspended from his job.

The apex court has rightly said that before the issuance of summons or warrant, the presiding officers must be fully satisfied that prima facie evidence exists in cases lodged by aggrieved wives. This golden rule must be followed in its letter and spirit to avoid miscarriage of justice.

Yours, etc., Arun Gupta,
Kolkata, 12 December.





Sound and fury The Constitution might be a unifier, but the debate exposed polarisation

The parliamentary debate on the Constitution turned out to be yet another occasion of intense diatribe between the ruling alliance and the Opposition. While both sides agreed on the supremacy of the Constitution, now in its 75th year, each accused the other of undermining it. The debate could have been an opportunity to explore a new common ground for a sharply polarised polity, but, unfortunately, that is not how it played out. Speakers from parties in power, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Opposition speakers led by the Leader of Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, railed against their political opponents and used the Constitution as a facade for their partisan politics. Mr. Gandhi views the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Mr. Modi as disloyal to the Constitution, and sought to connect it all to the Hindutva ideology. Mr. Modi singled out Mr. Gandhi's family, starting from his great-grandfather and the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, for a no-holds-barred attack – that it has undermined the Constitution through acts of omission and commission. Both sides used facts selectively and the statements of past actors to exaggerate the point that their opponents did more harm to the Constitution than they themselves. Such an approach may work as a propaganda strategy but can do little in terms of constructive engagement on the question.

The Constitution, understood as a living document, provides the foundation and the framework for a fairer social, political and economic order for the country. Constitutionalism is an evolving project, and any discussion on it must account for this dynamism. History is a good teacher, but litigating the past endlessly is not a helpful learning technique. There have been many dark moments in the 75-year history of the Constitution, including the imposition of Emergency, but the brighter and bigger picture is that it still offers the strongest possible ethos for a secular, pluralist and progressive nation. The BJP and the Congress calling each other names is akin to the pot calling the kettle black. Both sides say they are for strengthening the unity of the country, but accuse each other of dividing the country. What emerges from the debate is that there is a lot of blame to go around, what was missing was introspection and self-reflection. Mr. Modi is right in saying that the Constitution is a unifier of the nation, and cited his government's push for a uniform civil code as an example of the commitment to advancing this unity. Uneven demographic and economic trends will require close and unified attention by the political class in the decades ahead to reimagine the constitutional scheme. Sadly, little time was spent on these questions.

Costly gambles

Emmanuel Macron is driving France into one crisis after another

When France's President, Emmanuel Macron, called a snap legislative election in June, he had two political objectives: secure a new mandate for his government, and arrest the surge of the far-right National Rally, which had just finished first in the European elections. But what he got was a hung parliament with the left-wing New Popular Front (NPF) emerging as the largest bloc. And what he did was to pick Michel Barnier, a conservative leader of the Republican Party, which had finished fourth in the elections, to form the government. It was a disaster foretold. The government collapsed within three months, leaving France without a budget for 2025. And now, as if he learnt nothing from his gambles, Mr. Macron has appointed François Bayrou, leader of the Democratic Movement party, which has just 33 seats in the 577-member National Assembly, as the next Prime Minister. Even if Mr. Macron's coalition, Ensemble, which finished second in the elections, and the Republicans come together, they do not have a majority (289 seats) to pass bills in Parliament. The Socialist Party, which is part of the left-wing alliance, has already said it will not join the new government. This would mean that Mr. Bayrou's government would be at the mercy of Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally, as Mr. Barnier's government was, for survival.

With rising unemployment and falling domestic consumption, France needs urgent policy interventions. It has seen a jump in fiscal deficit, to 6.1% of GDP, worse than Greece, Spain and Italy, the Eurozone countries hit hard by the 2008-09 debt crisis. France's debt has also ballooned to €3.2 trillion, more than 112% of its GDP. What makes the crisis worse is the absence of a stable government. Mr. Bayrou's immediate task is to get an emergency budget passed in Parliament so that essential services run. But this will entail painful negotiations with the far-right, which is opposed to any more cuts in social spending. This takes the political and economic situation back to square one. Part of the problem is Mr. Macron's refusal to accept shifting political dynamics. An anti-establishment constituency is gaining strength from economic agonies. While the far-right and the left are trying to mobilise the working population from different political platforms, Mr. Macron is trying to preserve the status quo (mis)using his presidential powers. By appointing unpopular leaders who lack a clear mandate as Prime Ministers, he is prolonging the crisis. If he was serious about 'institutional stability', a favourite Macronian mantra, he should have sought to build a coalition with the largest bloc, the Left, and helped them rule based on a consensus-driven political and economic programme.

The hidden cost of greenwashing the Indian Railways



K. Balakrishna

formerly of the Indian Railway Service of Mechanical Engineers, was Member Staff, Railway Board

According to a recent report published in this daily, RITES Ltd., the consultancy arm of the Indian Railways, has won two contracts for the repurposing of six broad gauge diesel electric locomotives for export to some African railways. These locomotives will be converted for use on railways that use the Cape Gauge of 1,067 mm as against the 1,676 mm used on the broad gauge of the Indian Railways. While the Indian Railways, in collaboration with its consultancy public sector undertakings such as RITES and IRCON, has exported locomotives to countries in Asia and Africa in the past, this is probably for the first time that second-hand (used) locomotives are proposed to be exported after "gauge conversion". While there is no doubt that this is a commendable effort in re-engineering that involves virtually rebuilding the locomotives on a narrower platform, the story that lies hidden is a sordid saga of the humongous wasting of costly assets and profligacy unmatched in the annals of railways anywhere in the world, in pursuit of a wholly fictitious goal.

RTI data and policy justification

The report mentions "soon to be redundant diesel locomotives". The fact is that even as far back as March 31, 2023, according to information obtained by this writer under the Right to Information (RTI) Act more than a year ago, there were 585 diesel locomotives stabled (kept idling/stored) in various locations across the Indian Railways' network. Further over 60% of those locomotives had a residual life of more than 15 years. Today, the figure is reported to be about 760 locomotives. How and why did the Indian Railways end up in a situation where hundreds of diesel electric locomotives in good working order with years of service still left in them became redundant? The answer lies with the policy of the government to electrify the entire broad gauge network of Indian Railways in mission mode, at a frenetic pace.

Railway electrification in India has long ago transcended mundane considerations such as economic and financial viability and joined the pantheon of universal desiderata such as world peace and universal brotherhood (*Vasudha Kutumbakam*). Today, railway electrification is generally justified broadly on two grounds: a saving of foreign exchange by reducing the import of crude oil and reducing environmental pollution, and, as a corollary of the second point, the adaptability to switch over to renewable sources of energy such as solar and wind. In fact, in an official pamphlet issued by the Ministry of Railways in February 2021, entitled 'Mission 100% Electrification - Moving Towards net zero carbon

The 'mission 100% electrification' project is about chasing a mirage of turning into a green railway: a large number of serviceable diesel locomotives will also become redundant

emission', the objectives of the mission have been spelt out thus: to provide environment friendly, green and clean mode of transport to the people; and to unleash its potential to use of renewable energy, especially solar, by making use of the huge land parcel available along the railway tracks.

Let us examine these justifications in greater detail. The benefit of saving in foreign exchange is true in absolute terms. But viewed in the context of the total consumption of high speed diesel (HSD) oil in the country, the consumption for railway traction is minuscule. According to a study conducted by AC Nielsen and published by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (January 2014), when electrification of the Indian Railways was proceeding at a sedate "conventional" pace, 70% of total diesel oil consumption in the country was by the transport sector. Out of this, the share of the Railways was just 3.24%. In comparison, trucks consumed 28% and agricultural sector consumed 13.2%. The share of the Railways reduced further to about 2% in 2021-22. So, 16% reduction in diesel will eliminate one of the smallest segments of diesel consumption, leaving the elephants in the room to roam free.

Truth about environmental considerations

The claim of environmental benefits is even more untenable in the Indian context. Consider the following facts. Electricity is a secondary source of energy, except when generated by lightning. It needs to be generated by burning a primary source of energy from fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas, nuclear energy or the kinetic energy of water stored at a height (as in hydroelectric projects), or through solar or wind power.

What is the situation in India? Nearly 50% of the electricity generated today in the country is through coal-fired thermal plants and the Indian Railways plays a crucial role in transporting the coal from the pit heads to the thermal power plants. In fact, nearly 50% of the Railways' total freight earnings of about ₹1.7 lakh crore in 2023-24 (revised estimates) was generated by transporting coal for various purposes of which 80%, i.e., 40% of total freight earnings was generated only by transporting coal to thermal generating plants.

Replacing diesel locomotives with electric locomotives will only result in electric locomotives powered by electricity – about 50% of which is generated by burning coal – being used to move more coal to coal-fired thermal plants to generate more electricity, to transport more coal. Coal is considered the dirtiest fuel, environmentally, on the planet. A complete

switchover by the Indian Railways to electric traction merely shifts the pollution caused by diesel locomotives near the railway tracks to the source of power generation in a more concentrated form, ultimately polluting the same atmosphere. Unless and until about 80% of the total electricity generated in the country comes from non-fossil fuels – and that day seems far off – any claim of 100% electrification of the Indian Railways, making it a "Green Railway", is in the realm of fantasy. Incidentally, before that situation becomes a reality, the Railways will have to find alternative commodities to coal – which, today, is the single highest freight earner – to avoid a financial meltdown.

This article is not intended to reopen the time-worn debate of electric traction versus diesel traction. The issue is about chasing a mirage of converting the Indian Railways into a "green railway", and, in the process, rendering a large number of serviceable diesel locomotives redundant. If all the locomotives already stabled are lined up today and end to end, they will stretch for a length of almost 16 kilometres, a majority of them heading prematurely to the scrapyard.

'Disaster management, strategic purposes'

Mission 100% electrification of the Railways will also result in a dichotomy in the near term. The Indian Railways today has more than 4,000 diesel locomotives. With the impending 100% electrification of the system, all of them will not become redundant overnight. According to a recent news report in a reputed financial daily, quoting a senior official, 2,500 diesel locomotives are proposed to be retained by the Railways for "disaster management and strategic purposes". It is beyond comprehension what disaster will require such a large number of diesel locomotives to be set aside, unless this is a ruse to avoid sending locomotives with considerable residual service life prematurely to the scrapyard. Further, it is reported that another nearly 1,000 locomotives will continue in service for the next few years to meet traffic commitments. In other words, a 100% electrified "green" railway will continue to use about 3,500 "dirty diesels" in the foreseeable future, financially sustained to a large extent by transporting a not-so-green commodity: King Coal. That raises the question: what was the ultimate purpose of the tearing hurry to electrify 100%?

The Indian Railways' Mission 100% electrification is a sterling example of what happens when headline-grabbing slogans promoting vanity projects substitute for well-thought out policies, finally resulting in colossal wastage of tax-payers' money. But does anyone care?

Levy a higher GST rate on tobacco, sugared beverages

Over the past seven years, since the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), there have been no significant increases in GST rates on harmful products such as tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages, except for two minor hikes in National Calamity Contingent Duties (NCCD) on tobacco. This has made these products more affordable, undermining efforts to curb their consumption. In this context, the proposal by the Group of Ministers (GoM) to raise the highest GST tier on tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages from 28% to 35% is a welcome step. However, further tax reforms are essential to effectively tackle the public health and fiscal challenges associated with these products.

Impact of proposed GST rate hike

India is the second-largest consumer of tobacco globally, with 28.6% of adults above 15 years and 8.5% of students aged 13 to 15 years using tobacco in some form. Tobacco is a leading risk factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and causes over 3,500 daily deaths in India. In 2017, the annual economic burden of tobacco use and second-hand smoke was estimated at ₹2,340 billion, or 1.4% of GDP – far exceeding the ₹538 billion collected annually in tobacco tax revenue. The proposed GST hike to 35% is expected to reduce tobacco consumption and boost tax revenues. Preliminary estimates suggest the 35% rate would lead to a 5.5% price increase, a 5% drop in consumption, and an 18.6% revenue rise for *beedis*. For cigarettes, prices would increase by 3.9%, consumption decline by 1.3%, and revenue increase by 1.9%. Overall, this would generate an additional ₹43 billion annually, provided the industry does not "over-shield" the tax burden, which can result in excess profits at



Rijo M. John
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In addition to the proposal by the Group of Ministers, further tax reforms are needed to tackle the public health and fiscal challenges associated with these products

the expense of government revenue and public health.

The GoM's recommendation to raise GST rates to 35% is a positive step but falls short of the 40% peak rate allowed under GST law. A 40% rate would have a greater impact, leading to sharper price increases, larger consumption reductions, and an additional ₹72 billion in revenue. It would also lower the risk of the industry over-shifting the tax burden. Currently, the tax burden on tobacco products is uneven, with taxes accounting for only 22% of the retail price of *beedis*, while it accounts for 49.5% for cigarettes and 64% for smokeless tobacco. The 35% GST rate would narrow this gap slightly, raising their respective tax shares to 26%, 51%, and 65%, but a 40% rate could reduce this disparity further. The World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), to which India is a signatory, recommends that all tobacco products be taxed comparably to prevent substitution between them.

Concerns from the tobacco industry about increased illicit trade due to higher taxes are unfounded. Evidence, including from India, shows that tax hikes have minimal impact on illicit trade. Instead, factors such as tax administration quality, regulatory frameworks, government corruption, and governance strength, behind the replacement of the painting is obvious to all those who follow the politics of the day. The armed forces belong to the nation and not to any government or party. Diminishing the historic achievements of the armed forces for political convenience is an insult.

Balancing GST and excise taxes

Another key issue is the reliance on GST, a purely *ad valorem* tax, to regulate tobacco consumption. *Ad valorem* taxes are less effective than specific excise taxes in curbing tobacco use as they are tied to product prices, which the industry can manipulate. Since the introduction of GST, the share of excise taxes in total tobacco taxation has

declined, reducing the tax system's effectiveness in discouraging tobacco use. Many countries with GST or value-added tax (VAT) supplement these with specific excise duties on harmful products such as tobacco. India should consider raising excise taxes alongside the GST revision for a stronger and more comprehensive taxation framework.

While much of the public discourse has focused on tobacco, the proposed GST hike on sugar-sweetened beverages is equally significant. Excessive consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is a major contributor to obesity, diabetes, and other NCDs. Increasing the GST rate to 35% could discourage consumption and align with India's broader public health goals. However, the government should also consider introducing additional health-focused levies, such as a specific excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, to further strengthen the tax framework.

Key considerations for GST Council

As the GST Council considers the GoM's recommendations, it should use this opportunity to reform the taxation of harmful products. Raising GST rates to 40% for tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages would enhance public health benefits while aligning with the peak rate under GST law. Pairing this with higher excise taxes would create a mixed tax structure, proven more effective at reducing consumption than relying predominantly on *ad valorem* taxes. Reducing the discrepancy in tax burden between *beedis*, cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco is also crucial to discourage substitution and follow global best practices. These steps could significantly reduce the health and economic impacts of tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages while generating vital revenue for development.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Debate in Parliament

A media article has highlighted how politicians in particular keep repeating the same thing over and over again. This is very true of Indian politicians. One is unable to understand what useful purpose is served by harping on the Emergency-era all the time, regardless of its relevance to current issues and legislative proposals. Those at the helm of affairs may not be assured that the Emergency is deeply etched in the collective memory of

the nation, which will ensure that the people of India will never let anyone dare to attempt it again.
M. Jameel Ahmed,
Mysuru

The picture of victory

The replacement of the photo/painting in the Indian Army Chief's lounge, which commemorated Pakistan's surrender to India in the 1971 war, with another painting depicting mythology and modern themes, is deeply disturbing. The 1971 victory

symbolises the valour of the armed forces and the strategic leadership which led to the liberation of Bangladesh. The replacement of the painting is obvious to all those who follow the politics of the day. The armed forces belong to the nation and not to any government or party. Diminishing the historic achievements of the armed forces for political convenience is an insult.
Kurian Mathew,
Kochi, Kerala

Ustad Zakir Hussain

The passing of tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain marks the end of an era. A country that faces threats to its diversity, the legendary artist was a shining example who demonstrated the fact that music is that divine and powerful unifier which transcends all such man-made barriers, bringing together mankind under one roof. The catch word coined by him, 'Wah Taj', in the advertisement featuring

him in the late 1980s will also be etched in the minds of his admirers.
B. Suresh Kumar,
Coimbatore

Ustad Zakir Hussain mesmerised when he played the tabla. His passing will leave a huge void in the world of culture.
Sudhir G. Kangutkar,
Vangani, Thane, Maharashtra

No navab-era cricket test The franchisees of the IPL possess a lot more men in picking their teams and

assessing the performance and the potential of Indian cricketers than our official selectors. The ongoing Test with Australia is not going too well and the "creamy" lot of players consistently out of form ought to have been benched. Our cricket board is affluent enough to have flown out replacements from its enviable talent pool. The era of cricket as a game of the lords out for a sun tan, has long gone.
R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

Green hydrogen and the financing challenge

As India charts its path to net-zero emissions by 2070, green hydrogen offers an ideal pathway to decarbonise its industrial sectors. India's ambitious target of producing 5 million metric tonnes (MMT) of green hydrogen annually by 2030 signals its bid to establish early leadership in this emerging sector. However, the daunting economics of financing these projects threatens to derail India's green hydrogen ambition.

Based on a recent analysis by BloombergNEF, India is on track to meet only 10% of its stated goal. The sluggish progress is attributable to the substantial disparity between green hydrogen production costs (\$5.30-\$6.70 per kg) and traditional grey/blue production costs (\$1.9-\$2.4 per kg). This wide price differential makes it challenging to drive domestic off-take and attract private investment. It also creates a classic market deadlock – green hydrogen costs can only decrease with scaled production, but scaling requires viable economics.

The barriers

The economics of green hydrogen production hinge on two factors – the levelised cost of electricity (LCOE) and electrolyzer costs, both driven by the cost of capital. In emerging markets like India, perceived higher risks push up borrowing costs, leading to a high weighted average cost of capital (WACC). As investment costs make up 50-80% of LCOE in renewable energy projects, WACC becomes significantly impacts overall costs.

Studies show that an increase in WACC from 10% to 20% can trigger up to a 73% surge in the levelised cost of hydrogen, even when all other production factors remain constant. Add to this the current high costs of electrolyzers, ranging from \$500-1,400/kW for alkaline and \$1,100-1,800/kW for proton exchange membrane systems, and the financial viability becomes even more challenging.

The global perspective on investments reflects these



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barriers. By May 2024, only 27.6% of the 1,572 announced large-scale clean hydrogen projects valued at \$3.7 billion had reached final investment decisions. This disparity between plans and financial commitments indicates that the market's structural barriers extend beyond technological readiness. India needs to adopt innovative financing mechanisms and policy frameworks to effectively de-risk investments and attract capital to scale its green hydrogen sector.

On the policy front, several countries are showing the way. The U.K.'s Low Carbon Hydrogen Standard Certification provides a model for building market confidence. Similarly, strategic hydrogen hubs in the U.S., Japan, and Australia reflect a shift from traditional industrial clusters to approaches – rather than letting infrastructure follow demand, these nations are fostering integrated ecosystems where infrastructure, production, innovation, and consumption co-evolve. Adapting this approach, with localised industrial clusters linked to renewable energy sources, could create self-sustaining hydrogen corridors in India that attract investment.

How to de-risk investments

On financing, India needs a multi-pronged approach to de-risk investments. First, the government must implement a comprehensive policy framework that extends beyond production incentives to address fundamental financing barriers. This includes establishing long-term hydrogen purchase agreements and partial loan guarantees to reduce investor uncertainty. It should also create "regulatory sandboxes" that allow for rapid experimentation with novel business models while maintaining safety standards, similar to how fintech innovation was accelerated in India.

Second, India's financial sector must move beyond traditional project finance paradigms designed for conventional energy

infrastructure. Indian banks and financial institutions must develop products that address hydrogen's distinctive challenges – long development timelines, uncertain demand, and complex value chains. While blended finance and green bonds provide initial momentum, the sector requires innovative approaches like modular project financing that lets facilities scale in phases, reducing initial capital requirements.

"Anchor-plus" financing models could help, where a creditworthy industrial anchor customer underwrites the base capacity while additional capacity is financed using flexible instruments as market demand grows. Equipment-leasing structures could transform electrolyzer investments from prohibitive upfront costs into manageable operational expenses, following the successful model of solar and wind sectors.

Third, India's international collaboration must move beyond aspirational agreements to tackle practical market-making challenges. Establishing standardised carbon intensity and hydrogen origin certification can facilitate exports and bolster trust in India's hydrogen supply chain. Key trade corridors, such as the Hydrogen Energy Supply Chain Project between Australia and Japan, show how cross-border partnerships can provide the demand certainty needed for large-scale investments.

In the next few years, early projects in industrial hubs such as Odisha, Maharashtra, and Gujarat that demonstrate viable business models will shape how the sector develops in India. The green hydrogen projects must integrate financial structuring from the outset. The focus must be on delivering hydrogen at prices that suit key industries.

India's success in green hydrogen will depend on leveraging its abundant renewable resources through efficient project execution, access to low-cost capital, and strategic investments.

Panchamasalis back to square one

Caught in a legal tangle, this reservation demand defies easy resolution

STATE OF PLAY

Girish Pattanashetti

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Last week, Lingayat-Panchamasali activists protested before the Suvarna Vidhana Soudha in Belagavi of north Karnataka, where the winter session of the legislature was being held. The protest demanding the community's inclusion under the 2-A category of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) reservation list turned violent. But this is no new protest; it is a three-decade-old demand yet there is no sign of resolution.

The demand received a lip under the seer of the Lingayat Panchamasali Peeth, Sri Basava Jaya Mrutyunjaya Swami, who was earlier actively involved in the movement for independent religion status for Lingayat faith. The movement has seen several highs and lows owing to the vacillating positions of community leaders and politicians.

The seer led a massive padayatra from Koodalsangama, an important centre of pilgrimage for Lingayats, to Bengaluru during the previous BJP regime and almost brought the government to its knees. Fully aware of the complexities involved in reclassification but not willing to invite the wrath of the dominant Lingayat-Panchamasali community, the government, led by Basavaraj Bommai, cleverly came out with a strategy to hit two birds with one stone.

Instead of stirring a hornet's nest by tampering with the 2-A category, it carved out two more categories – 2-C and 2-D – to appease Panchamasalis and also the Vokkaligas who were demanding a greater share in the reservation pie at the time. And to capture the



Hindutva vote bank just before the 2023 Assembly elections, the government also sought to scrap the 4% reservation given to Muslims under the 2-B category and redistribute it between these two communities. The two dominant communities were divided on accepting the proposal. At the same time, in response to a petition in the Supreme Court, the then BJP government filed an affidavit that it will not implement the order on the new reservation categories.

Months after the Congress government came to power in 2023, the Panchamasalis resumed the agitation. It became violent in Belagavi and resulted in lathi charge. Considering the sensitivity of the issue, the government has been cautious in its reply on the demand, and even allowed its own minister and legislators to be part of the protest.

In his carefully worded reply in the Karnataka Legislative Council, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah pointed out that he was not against the demand. "Let me make it clear. I will not use the word demand, but the 'insistence' is against the Constitution," he said, and went into the details of the legal wrangle.

There are three major legal hurdles for the Panchamasali demand. The first one is a PIL writ petition filed by Raghavendra D.G. against the State of Karnataka and Others. The

then Secretary of Backward Classes filed an affidavit in this petition before the Karnataka High Court, stating that the government would not alter the existing composition of the 2-A category either by addition or by deletion of any caste.

The second hurdle is the compliance/undertaking affidavit filed by the Karnataka government in the Supreme Court in March 2023 that any changes in the 2-A category or any addition or deletion will not be implemented without further approval of the Court.

The third is the interim report of the Backward Classes Commission of Karnataka, which recommended against any change in the composition of 2-A and abolition of 2-B. These aside, the 102 communities that are currently in the 2-A category are opposed to the idea of a bigger and stronger community joining the group and shrinking their share.

The next ideal course of action for the Lingayat-Panchamasali community is to approach the Permanent Backward Classes Commission with their demand for inclusion in the 2-A category. The Chief Minister has been saying that any such demand on reservation should be routed through the Commission, which is mandated under a provision of Article 340 of the Constitution.

Meanwhile, Panchamasali community leaders, including the seer, have chalked out protest plans to exert pressure. The Opposition BJP has raised a ruckus in the House on the lathi charge. Although the BJP has been caught on the wrong foot on the issue, particularly because of the affidavits, it does not want to lose the chance of putting the government on the mat.

Lack of good jobs push young J&K women back to the fields

J&K's urban female unemployment rate of 53.6% is the highest in the country by a wide margin

DATA POINT

Samreen Wani
Amitha Reji George

Over 50% of young urban women who are searching for jobs in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) are not finding any. Among those who are finding jobs, an increasing number of women are being pushed out of the service sector and into agriculture. This indicates distressed employment. J&K's urban female unemployment rate (youth aged 15-29) of 53.6% in the July-September quarter this year was the highest in the country by a wide margin. This was more than 30 percentage points higher than the national average in this category (23%).

However, the Union Territory's female urban labour force participation rate (LFPR) among youth aged 15-29 at 30.2% was second only to Himachal Pradesh (34.9%) in the same quarter. Here, J&K's figure was more than 8 points higher than India's average (21.9%).

Simply put, a significant share of urban women in the UT are persistently searching for jobs but over half of them are unable to find any over an extended period. This trend is not new. The region's female urban unemployment rate and urban LFPR have remained higher than most States since 2018.

Mariam, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Kashmir, explains that high rates of female unemployment would push women to take up low-wage jobs with high levels of precarity, leading to distress-driven creation of low quality jobs.

"Women are actively looking for jobs in J&K and are desperate to have them but there are no jobs in the region. It's a case of structural unemployment. There is a huge mismatch between the skills of the people looking for jobs, the demand of the labour market, and government policies".

Drawing from her field work Mariam adds, "In Budgam (a district in Kashmir) and Srinagar, women in the handicraft sector work for ₹50-100 a day. Students with a PhD degree are working for ₹15,000-20,000 a month."

Anamitra Roy Chowdhury, Assistant Professor, Centre for Informal Sector and Labour Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, says if the LFPR is increasing quarter to quarter but the actual employment is not increasing at the same pace, the gap between labour supply and demand is going to increase, which is a serious problem. "It means that you are unable to provide any job regardless of quality. Unlike developed economies, we do not have fall back options like unemployment insurance. So, what could happen in the next few quarters is these women become 'discouraged workers' and leave the labour market. That will be a tragedy."

Chart 1 shows the urban LFPR for women aged 15-29 years in J&K compared with the all-India average. The urban LFPR in the latest quarter for young J&K women – 30.2% – is the third highest for the UT in the last six years. Notably, the urban LFPR of young women in J&K has remained above 10 points higher than the national average across most months.

Chart 2 shows the urban unemployment rate for women aged 15-29 years in J&K compared with the all-India average. In general, post-pandemic, the unemployment rate among young urban women has remained above 50%, dipping below this level only in a few months. Moreover, the unemployment rate of young urban women in J&K has remained above 30 points higher than the national average across most months.

The lack of employment opportunities, along with jobs in the services and manufacturing sectors that either do not match their skill set or fail to offer sustainable wages, is driving women in J&K back into agriculture.

Chart 3 shows the distribution of the urban female workforce in the J&K across three major sectors. The share of urban women employed in agriculture has more than doubled from 13.2% in July-September 2018 to 27.6% in the same quarter in 2024. The share of urban women in the service sector shrunk from 61.7% to 47.6% in the same period. Even the share of women working in the manufacturing/construction sector declined marginally.

"This data strengthens the argument that this is distress-related employment, indicating reversal of structural change, and can be better described as feminisation of agrarian distress. In every developing economy, people move out of agriculture to other sectors but if the reverse is happening here, it is a clear sign of distress in the economy," adds Mariam.

The government has introduced a host of schemes such as Hausa, Umeed, and Tejwani to provide financial assistance to address this issue of unemployment in the region, predominantly for women.

However, Mariam is sceptical about the efficacy of these schemes to boost female entrepreneurship and employment. She says the success rate of startups is limited and access to bank loans and financial assistance is subject to the right political network which often is not easy.

"Public sector employment in J&K is one of the highest in the country, underscoring the lack of a well-developed private sector and indicating limited success of industrialisation in the region since decades. To think that startups and self-employment are suddenly going to solve the long-standing employment crisis in the region is too simple a solution," she says.

Instead, Mariam believes that the government needs to come up with "policies that trigger self-sustained agglomeration economies" in the region to address persistent high rates of unemployment.

In search of jobs

Data for the charts were sourced from the Periodic Labour Force Surveys' Quarterly Bulletins



Chart 1: The chart shows the urban LFPR for women aged 15-29 years in J&K compared with the all-India average (current weekly status). All figures in %

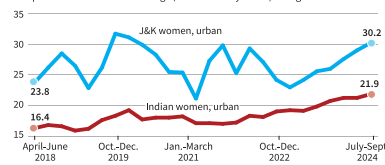


Chart 2: The urban unemployment rate for women aged 15-29 years in J&K compared with the all-India average (current weekly status). All figures in %

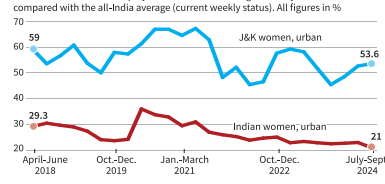


Chart 3: The distribution of the urban female workforce in J&K across three major sectors (in %). Data for those aged 15 years and above (current weekly status)

AMITHA REJI GEORGE IS INTERVIEWING WITH THE HINDU DATA TEAM

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 17, 1974

Speaker disallows privilege motion against L.N. Mishra

New Delhi, Dec. 16: The Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Mr. G.S. Dhillon, today ruled that the Railway Minister, Mr. L.N. Mishra, had not committed any breach of privilege of the House in his statements on the import licences case and refused to give consent to the Opposition motion.

He held there was no case to suggest that Mr. Mishra had misled the House.

As soon as the Speaker announced his verdict, several Opposition members sprang up from their seats protesting in chorus, virtually challenging the Chair's conclusions.

When the Speaker refused to allow any debate or points of order on the subject which had closed, the Opposition members, barring the CPI and DMK, walked out of the House in protest.

The privilege motion had been sponsored by Mr. A.B. Vajpayee (J.S.), Mr. Madhu Limaye (Soc.), Mr. Jyotirmoy Basu (CPM) and Mr. S.N. Mishra (Cong.O).

The Speaker said it was clear that the statements made by Mr. Mishra disowning responsibility for action on the memorandum purportedly signed by several MPs were "factually correct" and had not been proven to be "false".

Mr. Dhillon quoted in detail the operative portions in L.N. Mishra's statements before the House and the cascade made out by the members in support of their notices of questions of privilege.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 17, 1924

World prices on the increase

The latest index numbers of wholesale prices published by the International Labour Office, those for August and September, show a tendency for prices to rise in certain countries. This movement was most marked in Poland and Germany, but was also appreciable in Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In Austria, Switzerland, Canada, India and Japan, wholesale prices fell, while in other countries for which new figures are available, the level appears to have been stable or the movement insignificant.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Coal India Ltd.'s expenditure on solar projects

1,209 in ₹ crore. Coal India Ltd. (CIL) has a plan to achieve 3,000 MW solar project capacity by 2027-28 which consists of 211.59 MW in the current fiscal, 697.85 MW in FY26, 1,235 MW in FY27 and 785 MW in FY28, said Coal and Mines Minister G. Kishan Reddy. PTI

Madhya Pradesh's wheat production declines over 5 years

43 in lakh tonnes. Madhya Pradesh has seen a decline in wheat crop production in the past five years from 371.98 lakh tonnes in FY 2019-20 to 328.96 lakh tonnes in FY 2023-24, the Assembly was told. This was stated in a reply submitted by Agriculture Minister Aidal Singh Kansana. PTI

Norway's donation to the Ukraine navy to deter Russian forces

240 in \$ million. Norway will provide 2.7 billion kroner to strengthen the Ukrainian navy to help it deter Russian forces in the Black Sea, the Norwegian government said. As per the government, 100 million kroner had previously been earmarked for maritime training. AP

Capex requirement to meet EV charging demand by 2030

16,000 in ₹ crore. India needs capital expenditure to the tune of ₹16,000 crore to meet the country's public charging demand for Electric Vehicles (EVs) and achieve the mission of over 30% electrification by 2030. PTI

Cost of a production unit for Taiwan company in T.N.

1,500 in ₹ crore. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin laid the foundation stone for the Taiwanese footwear manufacturing plant at the SIPCOT Industrial Estate at Panapakam in Ranipet district. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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How does La Niña affect India's climate?

How do the La Niña and El Niño influence global atmospheric circulation and weather patterns? What is a Triple Dip La Niña? If a La Niña was to form now, how would it affect the current Indian winters and subsequent summers and monsoons as well?

EXPLAINER

Mohammad Rafiuddin
Shikhar Tiwari
Rishikesh P.

The story so far:

While the La Niña was expected to emerge by July this year, it is yet to. The India Meteorological Department now expects a La Niña to set in by late 2024 or early 2025, plus a milder winter due to this delay.

What is La Niña?

La Niña, a phase of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), occurs when the region of the Pacific Ocean between Indonesia and South America is cooler than usual. Its counterpart, El Niño, represents a warming of the same region. These two phases significantly influence global atmospheric circulation and weather patterns. During La Niña years, India receives normal or above-normal rainfall during the monsoon season. Yet the same phenomenon causes droughts in Africa and intensifies hurricanes over the Atlantic Ocean. Conversely, the El Niño brings extreme summers and droughts in India while increasing rainfall in the southern US.

This decade began with three consecutive La Niña events (2020-2022), a rare occurrence known as Triple Dip La Niña, followed by an El Niño in 2023. Climate change may increase the frequency and intensity of both La Niña and El Niño events, as rising sea and land temperatures disrupt the Pacific's balance. This could also amplify extreme La Niña events, which generally lead to harsh winters in India.

Will a La Niña emerge this winter?

2024 is different; the La Niña has not emerged as expected. Historically, the La Niña has usually formed during the monsoon or the pre-monsoon period, and it has formed only twice between

Weather fluctuations

La Niña, a phase of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), occurs when the region of the Pacific Ocean between Indonesia and South America is cooler than usual. Its counterpart, El Niño, represents a warming of the same region.



October and December since 1950. Global forecasts had also predicted its emergence this monsoon. But in December, there remains only a 57% chance of it forming in 2024. It will be weak if it still does but it could affect global weather.

The onset of La Niña or El Niño can be declared on the basis of many indices. For instance, the oceanic Niño index (ONI) compares the three-month average sea surface temperatures in the East-Central Tropical Pacific with the 30-year average. When the difference between the two is 0.5°C or higher, it is an El Niño, and when it is -0.5°C or lower, it is a La Niña. Currently, it is around -0.3°C. To be classified as a full-fledged La Niña or El Niño, ONI values need to exceed the thresholds at least five times

consecutively.

What is the meteorology?

Cities in southern India like Bengaluru and Hyderabad are experiencing a colder than usual winter this year, while north India is witnessing a delayed winter with above-normal temperatures. Some reports have linked the southern chill to a La Niña, but the current ONI values suggest otherwise. Had a La Niña developed already, north India would likely be experiencing a colder winter than usual.

An analysis of meteorological data over 35 years by researchers at the Council on Energy Environment and Water, New Delhi, has revealed that while La Niña winters feature colder nights compared to El Niño, daytime temperatures tend to be

FIGURE 1: Planetary Boundary Layer Height (PBLH) is slightly lower during La Niña. But the difference is not noticeable during daytime. This could lead to more trapping of pollutants near the surface

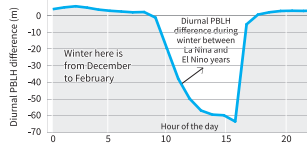
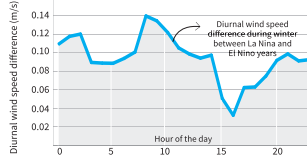


FIGURE 2: Wind speed is higher throughout the day during La Niña compared with El Niño. This could counter the impact of lower temperatures and help in lowering pollutant concentration levels



higher. Meteorological parameters like wind speed and planetary boundary layer height (PBLH) – the lowest atmospheric layer directly influenced by land-atmosphere interactions – also vary during ENSO phases, affecting air quality.

The team found the average wind speed is higher throughout the day during La Niña winters. Faster winds help reduce air pollution by transporting pollutants away. They also found that the average PBLH is slightly lower during La Niña winters. If La Niña sets in, lower temperatures in north India may lead people to burn more biomass for heating, worsening air pollution. A lower PBLH could also trap more pollutants near the ground. But higher wind speeds could disperse the pollutants, potentially leading to better air quality.

What about La Niña and monsoons?

El Niño summers are relatively harsher, as was the case in April this year, when India experienced intense, record-breaking heat waves. If a La Niña arrives and persists into the summer of 2025, it may offer relief from high heat. Additionally, an El Niño often disrupts monsoons, with India historically receiving below-average rainfall during at least half of all El Niño years since 1871. But the same figures also indicate evolving patterns since 1980.

Both north and south India, for instance, have received less rainfall during more intense El Niño events while central India has been barely affected. A La Niña, on the other hand, promotes robust monsoons as evidenced by the "normal" or "above-normal" rainfall in the La Niña years of 2020, 2021, and 2022. There were "below normal" rains in the El Niño year of 2023.

Thus it would be a welcome development if a La Niña forms now or early next year and continues until the monsoon season.

Mohammad Rafiuddin is programme associate, and Shikhar Tiwari and Rishikesh P. are consultants – all at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW).

THE GIST

During La Niña years, India receives normal or above-normal rainfall during the monsoon season. Yet the same phenomenon causes droughts in Africa and intensifies hurricanes over the Atlantic Ocean.

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What is the procedure for removing judges?

Why have some Rajya Sabha members called for the removal of Allahabad High Court Judge, Justice Yadav?

Rangarajan R

The story so far:

Fifty-five MPs of the Rajya Sabha have submitted a motion, for removing Allahabad High Court Judge, Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav, to Chairman of the Rajya Sabha.

What is the procedure for removal?

Articles 124 and 217 of the Constitution provide that a judge of the Supreme Court/High Court shall be removed by the President, on the grounds of 'proved misbehaviour' or 'incapacity' after a motion is passed in each House of Parliament by a majority of the total membership of that House and by a majority of not less than two thirds of the members of that House present and voting (special majority) in the same session. The Constitution does not define the terms 'proved misbehaviour' or 'incapacity'. The Supreme Court has

opined in various cases that wilful misconduct in office, corruption, lack of integrity or any other offence involving moral turpitude would constitute misbehaviour. Incapacity here means a medical condition that may include physical or mental incapacity.

The detailed procedure for removal is provided in the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968. It stipulates that a notice of motion for removal should be signed by not less than 50 members in the Rajya Sabha and 100 members in the Lok Sabha. The Chairman or Speaker may after due consideration and consultation admit or refuse to admit the motion. If admitted, a three-member committee will be constituted consisting of Supreme Court/High Court judges and a distinguished jurist. If the Committee, after investigation, absolves the judge of any misbehaviour or incapacity, the motion pending shall not be proceeded with. If found guilty of misbehaviour or

suffering from incapacity, the committee report will be taken up in the Houses of Parliament which would then need to pass the motion with special majority.

What is the current issue?

Justice Yadav made communally-charged remarks while speaking at an event organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. He is reported to have said the country would be run according to the wishes of the majority. The 'Reinstatement of Values of Judicial Life' adopted by the Supreme Court in 1997, and followed by all the High Courts, mandates that behaviour and conduct of members of the higher judiciary must reaffirm people's faith in the impartiality of the judiciary. The judges should not commit any act of omission or commission that is unbecoming of the high office they occupy. Notably, though the Judges (Inquiry) Bill, 2006 was not passed by the Parliament, it defined 'misbehaviour' to

include violation of code of conduct for the judges. This bill proposed imposition of 'minor measures,' like issuing warnings, public or private censure, withdrawal of judicial work for a limited time etc., for misconduct that does not warrant removal.

What is required?

The Blackstone's ratio in criminal jurisprudence that 'it is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer' can be applied even when it comes to the removal of judges. The stringent process with the requirement of special majority in both houses has resulted in the non-removal of judges even after having been found guilty of misbehaviour by the inquiry committee. This is nevertheless essential to protect the independence of judges while discharging their duties. The Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, against whom himself a notice of motion for removal has been submitted, is unlikely to admit the present motion. The Supreme Court has issued a notice seeking details of the controversial speech made by Justice Yadav. The Judge is likely to appear before the Supreme Court Collegium to explain his stand. It is cardinal that judges display behaviour that behoves the high constitutional office they hold.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

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Justice Yadav made communally-charged remarks while speaking at an event organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

The stringent process with the requirement of special majority in both houses has resulted in the non-removal of judges even after having been found guilty of misbehaviour by the inquiry committee.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Why the legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru endures even now

The belittling of Nehru is odd, because the standing of the current Prime Minister is not validated by writing out a previous PM from the annals of history. The future will judge both leaders on their own merit

Neera Chandhoke

At the end of a two-day debate on the Indian Constitution in Parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi critiqued previous Congress governments stating that former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru started the "subversion" of the Constitution with his amendment to the fundamental right to expression. The External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, in another venue, similarly critiqued Nehru saying that the current government was trying to correct the 'Nehru foreign policy'. This article, dated December 4, 2021, by Neera Chandhoke tries to explain why Nehru is more important than ever now.

An otherwise ordinary 'first' speech given by India's fourteenth President, Ram Nath Kovind, would have gone unremarked, except for one notable omission. The name of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, arguably the foremost leader of the freedom struggle, and India's first Prime Minister, was spectacularly missing from the inventory of prominent Indians listed by the President. Though the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has gone to extraordinary lengths to eliminate references to the architect of democratic India, we expect the head of state to stand above partisan party politics. There is cause for disappointment.

A few days after Mr. Kovind's speech, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) published a largish booklet to celebrate the birth centenary of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. In the section on great leaders of India, 'Mahapurush', the names of Nehru as well as Mahatma Gandhi are conspicuous by their absence. Almost 10 lakh senior school students in Uttar Pradesh are forced to study the booklet, appear for an exam, and be rewarded if they perform well. Many of the 'great men' listed in the booklet have never taken part in the freedom struggle, and never been jailed for combating colonialism, unlike Nehru and the Mahatma. But their names occupy pride of place in oral and written histories authored by the BJP. Leaders who fought for independence are simply written off.

The historical perspective
The belittling of Pandit Nehru is odd, because the standing of the current Prime Minister is not validated by writing out a previous Prime Minister from the annals of history. The future will judge both leaders on their own merit, their success or their failure in managing a complex and plural society, their credentials as democrats, and their political, economic, and strategic visions. Both have a place in modern India. What that place is, will be decided by history. The current dispensation should take the art of history writing seriously and not reduce it to pamphleteering. History is important for collective self-understanding, because it enables us to understand where we have come from, and how we got from 'there' to 'here'. Without competent histories that allow us to understand our collective past and present, and help us generate visions for the future, entire generations will lose their bearings.

What the philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls the 'public use of history'



In remembrance: School students pay homage to former Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on his 135th birth anniversary, in Kolkata on November 14. An

should be, for this reason, subjected to strong evaluations. Since the craft has a bearing on the human condition, we ought to distinguish between histories that inspire a democratic, critical sensibility to contain and challenge authoritarianism, from those that feed appetites for absolute power. History, of course, must narrate tales of tyrants and despots, so that we take care not to repeat the errors of the past. But it must also chronicle tales of the triumph of the human spirit, and inspire us to struggle against totalitarianism and suppression of individual freedom.

For the ruling class, history should be important, because it reminds them that absolute power, often won at the expense of human freedom, does not endure. Unexpected moments arise in the life of a society when its members clamour for change, when existing gods are brought down, and new ones erected in their place, condemned to wait for their own

downfall. All of us should be wary of changing tides of fortune.

Fortune, wrote the 16th century political theorist of Florence, Niccolò Machiavelli, is unpredictable and inexplicable. She is an active shaver in man's making of history, she produces the unforeseen, and she will never be dominated, but will dominate men. That is why Machiavelli advised the Prince of Florence to study history. The public role of history is to remind rulers that fortune is fickle. After all, Nehru, who once led India to freedom, is vilified in his own country by the benighted cyberspace industry. This is short-sighted, because to unremember the man is to forget that there is an alternative to narrow and energy-consuming nationalism.

Despite all attempts, Nehru continues to be remembered by many for his contribution to the institutionalisation of democracy, establishing institutions of excellence, and his conviction that

poverty and inequality in India cannot be tackled by the market. There is, however, more to a good society: solidarity with struggling people within and outside the country.

Nehru, as one of the most distinguished leaders of Third World solidarity, reached out to the rest of the colonised world, and forged a joint front against colonialism and a reinvented imperialism. He was, by temperament and experience, a cosmopolitan. His frequent visits to Europe, his deep familiarity with the past, and his understanding of the contemporary ideologies of the day, from liberalism to Fabian socialism, to communist internationalism, had convinced him that the future of India was incomplete without the liberation of other colonies.

Role of intellectual journeys

Nehru's commitment to the independence of the Third World had been shaped by intellectual journeys through history, as well as participation in a number of international conferences such as the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels in 1927. He played a prominent role in the 1955 Bandung Conference, which set the stage for the emergence of a new bloc, and a new ideology in global affairs. Representatives of 29 countries from the global South, comprising well over a billion people, met to consider and debate on how they could help each other to neutralise the harmful effects of colonialism, and bring economic and social well-being to their people. Towering over leaders who had won their political spurs by piloting their countries to independence were Nehru, Kwame Nkrumah, the Prime Minister of Ghana, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President of Egypt, Zhou Enlai, the Premier of China, and Ho Chi Minh, the Prime Minister of Vietnam. The agenda included every topic over which the colonised and the newly decolonised world had agonised for decades – religion, colonialism, sovereignty, and world peace. The Bandung meeting sparked off reflections on the distinct attractions of non-alignment, and of the strengths that a movement of the non-aligned could achieve in global forums.

A deep cosmopolitanism

Interestingly, if one strand of anti-colonial nationalism focussed on the idea and the imaginaries of the nation, the second moved away from processes of closed identity formation towards other ways of being in the world. Nehru's cosmopolitanism acknowledged that our political identities are forged in an amalgam of conversations not only with people who are like us, but people who belong to other cultures, other countries, other societies, and other traditions, but who are like us in many ways.

Contemporary history has not treated this statesman kindly. This is a great pity because today's generation might know what globalisation is, but not what cosmopolitanism is about. Even as our society globalises at a frenetic pace, it has turned inwards and become claustrophobic. History must remember Nehru, he taught us to look outwards, to express solidarity, and to become, in the process, cosmopolitans. We must remember him because we have lost out on something that is rather important, teaching our children that our imaginations and our energies should be harnessed to the cause of the oppressed over the world, that closed-in societies lead to stagnation if not to certain death, and that such societies circumscribe imaginings and truncate visions.

We have, perhaps, become lesser human beings.

Neera Chandhoke is a former Professor of Political Science, Delhi University



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Do you know that a skunk has escaped from the zoo?"

"Yes, I read about it."

"The zoo authorities have been trying to find it for three days now. I wonder where it's hiding?"

"Probably in Chicago!"

"Chicago! You mean that city in America?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think the skunk has gone to Chicago?"

"Because the word 'Chicago' means 'Skunktown'."

"Skunktown! You're joking, right?"

"No, I'm quite serious. 'Chicago' is an American Indian word meaning 'place of bad smell', 'place of skunk smells' or 'skunktown'."

"I just don't believe this. Why would anybody name their city 'Skunktown'?"

"Don't ask me, I just ..."

"... I would forbid anyone from calling the place ..."

"... You cannot 'forbid' someone 'from' doing something."

"You mean it's wrong to say 'I forbid you from going out'?"

"Yes, it's wrong. You should say 'I forbid you to go out'. The word 'forbid' takes 'to'."

"I see. I forbid you to sing that song. Is that O.K.?"

"Sounds fine."

"Good. So 'forbid' is followed by 'to'. But there's another word which also means 'not allow', but is followed by 'from'."

"The word you're thinking of is 'prohibit'."

"Yes, that's right. PROHIBIT."

"It's not PROHIBIT, but PROHIBIT. The stress is on the second syllable. The word prohibit is usually followed by the word 'from'. For example, in my company employees are prohibited from smoking."

"In some countries, people are prohibited from smoking in public places."

"I wish they would introduce such a law in our country as well. Well, I'd like to get back to work. There are oodles of things to do."

"Oodles? What does it mean?"

"It means 'a great amount, lots'. This morning, I ate toast with oodles of butter."

"I had oodles of idlis this morning."

"Good for you. I have ..."

"Oodles. Oodles. Sounds like noodles, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it rhymes with noodles. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to have my lunch and start on my work."

"Give me two minutes and I'll have oodles of noodles ready. Ha! Ha!"
Published in The Hindu on May 31, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Fandoms are a big part of any sport. A quiz on fan-owned sport clubs around the world

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1

Name the only major American sport team that is community-owned?

QUESTION 2

Name the club playing in English league Two that was founded in 2002 by supporters of another club which chose to relocate from its hometown?

QUESTION 3

Which country legally requires teams to give '50%+1' voting rights to its fans in order to compete in top domestic leagues?

QUESTION 4

Name the only fan-owned professional football club currently existing in India?

QUESTION 5

Name the four Spanish first division clubs that have resisted legal restructuring to 'Public limited sports companies' (SAD), remaining under the control of its fans or socios?



Visual question:

Fans of which community-owned English club displayed this banner referring to a former chief executive of a premier league club? The former was formed after the takeover of the latter by an American businessman. AP

Questions and Answers to the previous day's

- daily quiz:** 1. The name of the offensive operation launched by the Indian Navy on Karachi during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. **Ans: Operation Trident**
2. The number of days the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War lasted. **Ans: 13 days**
3. The Chief of Army Staff for India during the 1971 War. **Ans: General Sam Manekshaw**
4. The codename assigned for the pre-emptive strikes carried out by the IAF on the forward airbases and radar installations of the IAF on December 3, 1971. **Ans: Operation Chengiz Khan**
5. The name of the Pakistani naval submarine sunk by India in the 1971 War. **Ans: P.N.5 Ghazi**
6. The only member of the Indian Air Force to be honoured by the Param Vir Chakra posthumously for his action in the 1971 War. **Ans: Flying Officer Nirmaljit Singh Sekhon PVC**
7. This man commanded the guerrilla resistance movement called Mukti Bahini during the 1971 War. **Ans: General Muhammad Osman**
Visual: This Pakistan General signed the Instrument of Surrender. **Ans: Lieutenant General A.A.K. Niazi**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| C. Saravanan| Sonali Das| Dodo Jayaditya| Tamal Biswas

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

Word of the day

Drub:

beat thoroughly and conclusively in a competition or fight

Synonyms: bat, clobber, lick, thrash

Usage: The small family drama was drubbed by critics.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/drubpo

International Phonetic Alphabet: /dʁʌb/

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

New chemical pathway worsens quality of air in harsh winters

Shahzad Gani, of the Centre for Atmospheric Sciences in IIT Delhi, said the new study indexes a 'major shift' in our understanding of how the formation of secondary aerosols like hydroxymethanesulphonate 'can happen in fine particles even in extremely cold, dark conditions'

Savyant Datta

In winter, the temperature in Dras in Ladakh drops to -20°C, making it the coldest place in India. On the other side of the world, Fairbanks, the capital city of Alaska, holds a similar record in the U.S., its temperature hovering around -22.4°C in winter. But the two cities have drastically different air quality. Unlike Dras, where the air is remarkably healthy, Fairbanks is among the U.S.'s worst-performing cities. One estimate ranked it tenth in a list of the country's most air-polluted cities. Another ranked it first for particle pollution.

Particle pollution, also called 'particulate matter' (PM), is a mix of solid particles and liquid droplets suspended in the air. PM can be classified into two broad categories: PM_{10-2.5} and PM_{2.5}. PM_{10-2.5} refers to particles whose diameter ranges between 2.5 and 10 micrometres (µm, equal to one millionth of a metre), and PM_{2.5} refers to particles that are less than 2.5 µm in diameter.

PM_{2.5} particles are also called ultrafine particles. They are considered to be particularly dangerous: they enter the lungs through the nose and throat; once in, they reduce lung function, aggravate asthma, and – for people with lung or heart disease – pave the way for premature death.

Pollution and temperature

In 2009, authorities from the Division of Air Quality in Alaska declared Fairbanks to be a "PM_{2.5} nonattainment area": that is, the amount of PM_{2.5} in the city exceeded the limit of 35 µg per cubic metre of air. The main sources of these pollutants were identified to be emissions from wood stoves, the burning of distillate fuel oil, industrial sources, and automobiles, all of which also emit a large amount of sulphur dioxide.

To bring PM_{2.5} levels below the permissible limits, the Division in a 2022 directive banned the use of fuel with sulphur concentrations exceeding 1,000 parts per million in Fairbanks. Now, a study led by researchers from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the Georgia Institute of Technology, both in the U.S., has found that the ban may not be entirely effective because the chemistry of PM_{2.5} particles changes in cold weather.

In their study, published in the journal *Science Advances* on September 4, the researchers found that lower sulphate concentrations in the air combined with low temperatures (around -35°C) made the PM particles less acidic. This in turn increased the production of hydroxymethanesulphonate – another component of PM_{2.5} – in the air.

Rodney J. Weber, a professor at the School of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, Georgia Institute of Technology, and one of the corresponding authors of the study, told this reporter that the study's findings have implications for the "effectiveness of emission controls to reduce pollution levels."

Aerosol chemistry

In a 2022 study, James Campbell, the lead author of the current study and a doctoral scholar at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, showed that a large amount of hydroxymethanesulphonate



An aerial view of the smog-covered city of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in January 2023. COLLAB MEDIA

formed during winters in Fairbanks when formaldehyde and sulphur dioxide reacted in the presence of liquid water.

Campbell's finding was surprising because hydroxymethanesulphonate formation has been traditionally thought to occur in clouds and fog, not in aerosols, because the former have more liquid water.

Hydroxymethanesulphonate formation also requires more acidic conditions, whereas the sulphite ions (SO₃²⁻) required for its formation are present in adequate amounts only when the air is less acidic. The higher density of water droplets in clouds and fog absorbs more water-soluble gases, rendering them less acidic than most aerosols, the authors wrote in their paper.

What, then, explained the formation of large amounts of hydroxymethanesulphonate particles in Fairbanks during the winter?

To investigate, the researchers combined measurements obtained previously from the Alaskan Layered Pollution and Chemical Analysis (ALPACA) project with thermodynamic modelling. For the latter, they used computational models to calculate the amount of various ions and gases in aerosol particles in a given air mass.

At very low temperatures, water typically freezes to ice. But sometimes, in a process called supercooling, the temperature of a liquid can drop well below its freezing point without it turning solid.

The researchers wrote in their paper that aerosol particles exist in a supercooled state during Fairbanks winters. As a result, they contain liquid water, which allows hydroxymethanesulphonate to form within these particles. The researchers also reported that the acidity of aerosol

particles in Fairbanks changes rapidly during the winter from low to high, making the conditions more favourable for the formation of hydroxymethanesulphonate. The rapid shift in the acidity of PM_{2.5} in many places is largely the handwork of the relative concentration of two ions: sulphate (SO₄²⁻) and ammonium (NH₄⁺). Sulphate ions increase the acidity of aerosol particles while the latter, a base, neutralise the acidity.

Two ammonium ions are required to neutralise the acidity contributed by each sulphate ion.

If there were to be an equal number of sulphate and ammonium ions in an aerosol particle, it would be more acidic. But since the 2022 ban on high-sulphur fuel in Fairbanks, the concentration of ammonium ions in PM_{2.5} particles increased relative to that of sulphate ions. This lowered the acidity.

Further, ammonium in aerosols can exist in its gaseous form, ammonia, and in its ionic form dissolved in the liquid water in the aerosol. In normal conditions, the two forms exist in equilibrium, where the rates of conversion of ammonium to ammonia and ammonia to ammonium are equal.

But since Fairbanks's winters register very low temperatures, fewer ammonium ions are able to jump to the gaseous state. And as the concentration of ammonium

ions within the aerosol particle builds up, its acidity drops further, making it a fertile site for hydroxymethanesulphonate production.

Relevance to the Global South

According to Prof. Weber, the Georgia Tech atmospheric scientist, the study's results are "broadly applicable to cold regions but also provide new insights into aerosol thermodynamics."

Shahzad Gani, an assistant professor at the Centre for Atmospheric Sciences in IIT Delhi, told this reporter the study indexes a "major shift" in our

understanding of how "secondary aerosol formation can happen in fine particles even in extremely cold, dark conditions." Secondary aerosol refers to molecules like hydroxymethanesulphonate that are formed from parent molecules in chemical reactions.

"These findings have important implications for understanding how air quality-relevant aerosols form in extremely cold urban and industrial regions," he added.

At the same time, he clarified the study's relevance to "many areas of the Global South is limited, except for some high-altitude regions like the Andes or Himalayas." He said he is looking forward to future research in other cold regions that could help validate the findings of the study and expand its implications to the Global South.

Meanwhile, he added, the study compels scientists to confront how temperature changes might affect chemical pathways related to air quality and climate, especially in a world that is being rapidly reshaped by global warming.

(Savyant Datta is a science journalist and a faculty member at Krea University. (dattasavyant95@gmail.com))



Residents transport drinking water from Humaita to the Paraizinho community along the Madeira river, a tributary of the Amazon, during a dry spell in Amazonas state, Brazil. AP

UN talks on drought deal in Saudi fail to produce pact

Agence France Presse

Negotiators failed to produce an agreement on how to respond to drought at Saudi-hosted UN talks, participants have said, falling short of a hoped-for binding protocol addressing the scourge.

The 12-day meeting of parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), known as COP16, concluded early on Saturday morning, a day later than scheduled, as parties tried to finalise a deal.

Prior to the talks, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw said the world expected negotiators "to adopt a bold decision that can help turn the tide on the most pervasive and the most disruptive environmental disaster: drought." But addressing the plenary session before dawn, Thiaw acknowledged that "parties need more time to agree on the best way forward."

A press release on Saturday said the parties – 196 countries and the European Union – had "made significant progress in laying the groundwork for a future global drought regime, which they intend to complete at COP17 in Mongolia in 2026."

The Riyadh talks came after the partial failure of biodiversity talks in Colombia, the failure to reach a UN deal on plastic pollution in South Korea, and a climate finance deal that disappointed developing nations at COP29 in Azerbaijan.

Droughts "fuelled by human destruction of the environment" cost the world more than \$300 billion each year, the UN said in a report published on December 3, the second day of the talks

Developed nations seek a framework that does not commit them to a course of action, something nations most affected by droughts find is an unsatisfactory solution

in Riyadh. Droughts are projected to affect 75% of the world's population by 2050, it said.

A delegate at COP16 from a country in Africa, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations, said African nations had hoped the talks would produce a binding protocol on drought.

That would ensure "every government will be held responsible" for devising stronger preparation and response plans, the delegate said.

"It's the first time I've seen Africa so united, with a strong united front, with respect to the drought protocol."

Two other COP16 participants, also requesting anonymity, said developed countries did not want a binding protocol and instead were pushing for a "framework," which African countries deemed inadequate.

Indigenous groups also wanted a protocol to better monitor progress and develop response plans, said Praveena Sridhar, chief technical officer for Save Soil, a global campaign backed by UN agencies.

Yet the absence of a protocol from COP16 "shouldn't delay progress," as national governments can still allocate "budgets and subsidies to financially support farmers in adopting sustainable soil and land management."

Ahead of the Riyadh talks, the UNCCD said 1.5 billion ha of land must be restored by the decade's end and that at least \$2.6 trillion in global investments was needed.

The first week saw pledges of more than \$12 billion from national and regional institutions and the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership, which is meant to mobilise public and private money to help at-risk countries.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a... UFO?

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

Fifty-five years ago on this day, the US Air Force concluded its 17-year investigation into unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and the threat they posed to national security. What was the codename of this exercise?

QUESTION 2

On December 13, Larry Hogan, the governor of Maryland State in the USA, posted a video on a social media platform that he claimed was evidence of three drones flying in a straight line. But astronomers quickly pointed out the lights were stars in which famous constellation?

QUESTION 3

During World War II, Allied and Axis pilots of fighter jets reported orbs of

bright light in the sky that seemed to fly quickly and often disappear without a trace. Scientists later attributed the phenomenon to unusual electrical discharges between the jets' wings and the air. What did the pilots call these orbs? Hint: It's also the name of a popular rock band.

QUESTION 4

When air flows around an object containing a high voltage, a light-emitting plasma surrounds the object, sometimes with a buzzing sound. What's the colloquial name for this phenomenon? Sailors of the pre-modern era have reported sensing these lights and sounds above their ships' masts.

QUESTION 5

Name the controversial Harvard University scientist who launched Project Galileo in 2021 to investigate

UFOs and unidentified aerial phenomena on or around the earth. He had first sought NASA's involvement in the project but the agency didn't respond.

Answers to the December 12 quiz:

1. Earth sciences unit to measure rate of erosion — **Ans: Bubnoff unit**
 2. Entity rising at 0.3 trillionths of a kilometre per hour — **Ans: Sea level**
 3. Entity that will have moved 4.7 away from the earth in a billion years — **Ans: Moon**
 4. Fastest-growing woody plant — **Ans: Bamboo**
 5. Identity of Archie that set a record by moving 33 cm in two minutes — **Ans: Snail**
- Visual: **Greenland**
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Basavaraj Meti | Jose Jogi | Chandan Kumar Singha | Anmol Agrawal



Visual: This photo taken in North Dakota in 2009 shows a sun pillar in the centre flanked by two... an atmospheric phenomenon sometimes confused with UFOs. Fill in the blanks. CREDIT: PUBLIC DOMAIN

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THANK YOU, USTAD

Zakir Hussain saw himself as a lifelong student. His quest to find new sounds made tabla one of India's biggest cultural exports

THE NOTION OF perfection in music is allegorical at best. Even while imbibing the fundamentals, there is always more to discover or review. The technically precise and expressive music of Ustad Zakir Hussain, the tabla genius, who passed away at 73 on Sunday in San Francisco, was probably the closest an artist of his generation got to that standard of perfection. His excellence stood on two pillars — integrity towards his art form combined with open-mindedness towards every other, and never wanting to stop being a student. “Main iss layak nahi ki mera zikr kiya jaye. Abhi toh hum seekh rahe hai” (There isn't a single day where I can look in the mirror and say that I know everything. We are all students), he once said.

He was only 37, when in 1988, Pt Ravi Shankar introduced his accompanying tabla artiste as Ustad Zakir Hussain. A day earlier, he was conferred the Padma Shri. Hussain, though, was never comfortable being called Ustad. He felt that it would increase the distance between him and the audience in a musical form that was already the preserve of a few. Unlike most of his predecessors, he loved interacting with his audience. Hussain's approach to music and people and his generosity of spirit were rooted in the way he was brought up to understand religion, faith and music as a child. As a young boy, he went to goddess Saraswati, and learnt about Lord Shiva and Ganesha during the 3 am *nyayaz* with his father, guru and Punjab gharana icon Ustad Allarakha. This was followed by a visit to the madrasa to study the Quran. Then at the morning assembly at St Michael's school at Mahim, in what was then Bombay, there were hymns and psalms. This is probably why he'd feel at home during performances in different places of worship with music as his only religion.

A child prodigy, Hussain was touring by the time he turned 13. His mother wanted him to take up a more stable job — an engineer or a doctor. But Hussain wanted to listen to rock music, wear jeans and become a rockstar. At 20, he went to the US, found more music and with guitarist John McLaughlin created what is now described as “world music”. While he scaled heights with this music, Hussain would often come back to his roots and perform at traditional classical concerts. His quest to find newer sounds made the tabla one of India's greatest cultural exports. His father along with Pt Krishna Maharaj and Pt Santa Prasad, brought tabla out from the shadows of being just an accompanying instrument to a solo instrument. Hussain climbed the pedestal they built and reached heights that percussionists in India consider the pinnacle of success. So long, Ustad, and thank you for the music.

PIKETTY'S RIGHTS, WRONGS

India needs to reduce inequality of opportunity, invest in health, and education. Taxing wealth of rich could be counterproductive

RENCH ECONOMIST THOMAS Piketty is right that inequality isn't a “rich country concern” and India shouldn't wait to become richer before addressing what is definitely a serious issue. Whether inequality in India is widening is a moot point. Official household consumption expenditure surveys show a decline in the Gini coefficient between 2011-12 and 2022-23 for rural and urban areas. In other words, consumption inequality has reduced. The same may not be true with income and wealth inequality, which would well have gone up in the past decade or more. That, if so, isn't good not just from a moral, social or political, but also economic standpoint. Leveraging the market potential of India's large population cannot happen without incomes rising at the bottom of the pyramid. Less inequality and the aspiring poor having more money to spend is desirable even from a hard-nosed business perspective; ask any FMCG, two-wheeler or micro-finance company executive.

Piketty is equally right with his diagnosis. The real inequality is one of opportunity. A large part of India's population suffers from a lack of access to quality education, health, nutrition and sanitation facilities. It makes them less productive. Incomes are ultimately a function of productivity — how much output and value a worker adds from economic activity. Incomes cannot rise without productivity improving. If the bulk of the workforce is, as Piketty notes, “stuck in a low productivity trap”, they cannot contribute to growth nor partake of its fruits. That's all the more reason, then, why India needs to reduce inequality — in this case, of opportunity — early enough. It calls for increasing public investment in good schools, hospitals, provision of clean drinking water, human waste disposal and sewage treatment systems, and other physical and social infrastructure — much more than what the Centre and states are doing now.

Where Piketty, however, is wrong is in his prescription of taxing the wealth, and not just incomes, of the rich. Much of the Forbes billionaires' wealth are held as shares in the companies promoted by them. This is paper wealth that can be realised only when the shares are sold. It's one thing to tax incomes, capital gains from property or share sales, and goods and services transactions — which are all “flow” variables. Taxing unrealised wealth — which is a “stock” — is unnecessary. The tax reforms of recent times have helped broaden the base and reduce evasion. There's enough scope to raise additional resources from the already existing avenues, including through better enforcement and advanced analytics. The last thing India needs is a new tax that will create more disruptions than revenues for funding essential public goods.

TOUCH GRASS

For a cooler mind, politics and Earth, put the phone down

IT'S OFFICIAL. DOOMS SCROLLING is bad — not just for the mind, society and politics, but also for the environment. In fact, according to a recent study by French firm Greenly, it has managed to do damage worth an entire nation's energy demands — TikTok, a social media app centred around short videos (averaging 42 seconds in 2024), likely produced a larger carbon footprint than Greece this year. YouTube and Instagram aren't too far behind. Of note is the fact that despite having fewer users than many other apps, TikTok's energy emissions far surpassed the other platforms in proportion. One of the crucial deciding variables? Addiction (or brain rot, as Gen Z netizens have named it). Users spend much more time on the platform once they log on due to its scroll-happy user interface.

Previous studies on the environmental impact of the IT sector have come to similar conclusions. A 2019 report by the Shift Project notes how CO2 emissions of digital technology increased by 450 million tons since 2013 globally — TikTok is the worst culprit according to multiple studies. Notwithstanding its grim subtext, these platforms may soon be littered with 42 second-videos on these reports, if the comically predictable nature of the digital age is to be trusted. This year was the hottest year on record, as was 2023. Ironically, the many laments one scrolls by online seem to be only intensifying the crisis. Given the success of the brain rot formula on TikTok, several other social media platforms, such as YouTube's Shorts and Instagram's Reels, are replicating the business impulse.

The attention economy is here to stay, as are the year-end climate reports that rudely wake one to reality. “Touching grass” then is more than an internet meme. It may be part of the solution — for a cooler mind, politics and Earth, to interrupt the doom and the scrolling — put the phone down.



DAYANITA SINGH

TO LOSE ONE'S mentor is a different kind of loss — not many rituals, just a hole in one's core. I saw this with Zakir when he lost his own guru *abbaji* (Ustad Allarakha Khan), perhaps the only time I saw him shaken. Otherwise, he was great at taking things in his stride. Today, I can't imagine this world without Zakir and I am sure I speak for all his students here. Among them, I may seem the unlikely student, but that's Zakir — he made a photographer out of me. At first by teaching me how to be invisible yet present with the camera — no flash, no loud shutter, just a shot or two at a time, no endlessly making photos. And then he taught me life — how to live the life of an artist, to try and reach a place when your *ryaz* is in your breath. He taught me how to learn.

Zakir is a genius, he revolutionised the tabla, elevating it from an accompanist instrument to a solo one. I was witness to that journey. His magic was not just in his hands but how he played with his entire being, body and mind. Filled with laughter and *raaga*, he had a rare ability to engage with people in a manner few could match. Each person he met felt “seen” by him. Even on stage while many musicians retreat inwardly, often closing their eyes to immerse themselves in their internal world, Zakir's inner world was so rich and vibrant that he didn't need to close his eyes; he could make eye contact with his listeners, absorb every nuance of the moment, and still play with unparalleled mastery. There are stories that he outlived the computer in creating *taal*.

I was only 18 when I first encountered Zakir, as a student at the National Institute of Design, having gone to photograph him at a concert in 1981. I didn't have permission to photograph him on stage, and when the

My friend Zakir

He taught me how to live the life of an artist — and made a photographer out of me

I was only 18 when I first encountered Zakir, as a student at the National Institute of Design, having gone to photograph him at a concert in 1981. I didn't have permission to photograph him on stage, and when the event organiser pushed me aside, I lost my balance and fell. But I got up and mustered up the courage to approach Zakir after the concert. I told him that though I was just a young student, one day I would become an important photographer and then we would see. He invited me to complete my assignment by photographing him during rehearsals. That moment marked the beginning of a lifelong connection. I became a student at the “Zakir Hussain Academy of Focus”.

Through the '80s, I travelled with him and his peers. Those years were a masterclass in learning. Zakir opened his world to me in ways I couldn't have imagined. He said that he saw glimpses of his young self in me. He had left this country when he was 18, with \$8 in his pocket, to perfect his art. By allowing me unfettered access to his life, Zakir showed me what it means to be an artist and to be committed to that choice.

What I learned most profoundly from him was rigour. The rigour of practice, of thought, and the relentless pursuit of excellence. He was encouraging and protective, but also a tough mentor. I remember when Haraji (Hariprasad Chaurasia) offered to teach me the flute. I was overwhelmed, but Zakir did not allow me to pursue it. He asked me, “Are you willing to dedicate 18 hours a day to this for the rest of your life?” When I hesitated, he said, “You take one thing, commit to it, master it, and then challenge it.” That lesson — of unwavering focus and discipline — became a cornerstone of my life.

Over the years, Zakir and I became like family. Even when he wasn't around, I never had to inform *ammaji* (his mother — Bavi Begum) and *abbaji* (Ustad Allarakha Khan) before visiting; I could simply drop by. He shared a deep connection with my mother and would visit her when in Delhi. She would prepare his favourite meal, which included sarsun ka saag and makke ki roti. He loved going to Karim's near Jama Masjid, where one waiter recited the menu like tabla bols. Zakir loved the *nihari* there.

In 1986, I published my book on him. I tried selling it at his concerts but people were surprised by it, they thought it should have been about the tabla. In 2019, Steidl published the maquette of that same book and Zakir launched it at Artisans in Bombay. I feel my entire journey has been from Zakir Hussain 1986 to Zakir Hussain maquette 2019. I learned to learn and challenge one's medium from him and how dissemination is part of one's pursuit. He famously said, “If the Wah Taj ad can bring two more people into the concert hall, it's worth it.”

In 2011, he served on a jury for a film festival at the Venice Biennale, and sent me a message saying, “So proud to see your work at the Venice Biennale.” This time, I felt like he's not the only star in the picture, so I responded saying, “See I'm also a big star now.” He said, “Sweetheart, I hope you never start to believe that because the day you do is the day it's over.”

The world is a lesser place without his presence — mine certainly is. But as he once said, “When a renowned musician passes, the world does not fall silent; their wisdom, their music, the words and emotions they shared stay with us. We arrive in this world with nothing, and we depart in the same way, but in the end, we leave behind all that we have learned.”

The writer is a photo artist.
(As told to Vandana Kalra)

A CRISIS IN THE MAKING

Asset-less, ageing population with poor health could be a demographic challenge



VEENA S RAO

INDIA'S POPULATION has reached its demographic prime. Around 67.3 per cent of our population is between 15-59 years of age, a demographic advantage which will persist for another three decades. Approximately 26 per cent of the population is below 14 years, and just 7 per cent above the age of 65, as against 17 per cent in the US and 21 per cent in Europe. By 2030, India's working age population will reach 68.9 per cent, with a median age of 28.4 years and a dependency ratio of just 31.2 per cent. In absolute numbers, India, with 1.04 billion working age persons, will constitute the largest workforce in the world.

But these large demographic numbers can translate into dividends only with high productivity that drives wealth creation and achieve our \$7 trillion GDP target by 2030? Clearly, this capacity can only develop with right education and skills, which require cognitive power and physical health. Both start developing at foetal stage and continue developing through childhood and adolescence into adulthood, with proper health, nutritional and educational care. Only then can the demographic dividend have the capacity for higher learning, superior skills and qualifications to fit contemporary job requirements.

As per NFHS 5, among our present demographic dividend (15-49 years), only 41 per cent women and 50.2 per cent men have 10 years plus schooling; 57 per cent women and 25 per cent men are anaemic; and 18.7 per cent women and 16.2 per cent

men have Body Mass Index below normal. Not surprising therefore, that despite several ongoing skilling programmes, employers are unable to find the skills they want, and unemployment rates of “educated” youth remain high.

Our immediate demographic dividend, 15-19 years adolescent girls and boys, will constitute India's workforce for the next three decades. Among them, only 34 per cent girls and 35.9 per cent boys of age 15-24 have completed 12 years or more education; 59 per cent girls and 31 per cent boys are anaemic, and only 54.9 per cent girls and 52.6 per cent boys have normal BMI. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (2023) found that nationally, only 77 per cent in the 17-18 years category could read Class 2 textbooks, and 35 per cent could do division. Learning trajectory over Grades V, VI, VII and VIII was relatively flat, meaning that there was little difference in learning levels within these grades.

This is our demographic dividend for the next three decades.

It's not a very bright picture about our future demographic dividend either — our children, who will enter the workforce after a decade or two. As per NFHS 5, 35.5 per cent children below five years are stunted, 19.3 per cent are wasted, 32.1 per cent are underweight; and 67.1 per cent children between 6-59 months are anaemic. (Figures for the two poorest quintiles are almost 50 per cent higher.) But most shockingly, only 11.3 per cent children aged 6-23 months receive minimal adequate diet, improved from 9.6 per cent as in NFHS 4. The foundation of our demographic dividend for the next three decades lies here.

Medical science confirms that 90 per cent of a child brain development happens

before the age of 5, and lays the physical, mental, and emotional foundations for future life. Optimal brain development therefore becomes the first casualty of the 88.7 per cent children under two, not receiving minimal and adequate diet. India's routine dietary deficit is well documented in national surveys. Not surprising therefore that the resultant under-nutrition, poor health and morbidity, prevents children and adolescents from achieving their complete cognitive and physical potential, and therefore prevents them from acquiring the education and skills required for emerging higher end job market.

India will start ageing with each passing year after 2030 with the workforce population declining and the ageing population increasing. A growing skill-less, asset-less, ageing population in poor health can become India's greatest future burden.

It is unlikely that a large population will strengthen our economy through high consumption — more likely a large population with low education/skills will increase unemployment, and have little disposable income for high consumption. The expected flight of human capital from weaker sections to foreign lands with scarce secondary labour is hardly a solution.

The time for a serious real-time situation analysis of our immediate and future demographic dividend and a redesign our policy framework to strengthen it through the life cycle is now. A sound foundation of better nutrition, health and education will enable our demographic dividend to capitalise future economic and job-market opportunities.

The writer is former Secretary, Government of India

DECEMBER 17, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

OPERATION FAITH

WITH THE INDIAN Carbide plant in Bhopal using up four tonnes of the remaining 15 tonnes of the deadly methyl isocyanate (MIC), the first day of “Operation Faith”, without any mishap there was discernible lessening of tension in the city. The few people who had chosen to stay heard a sigh of relief on being informed that nothing untoward had happened in the opening phase of the operation.

GAS TRAGEDY CAUSE

IT IS NOW almost certain that the accident at the Indian Carbide production plant, which

killed over 2,000, was the result of water seepage into the methyl isocyanate (MIC) tank, causing a violent reaction resulting in the leakage of the killer gas. According to the Director General of CSIR, S Varadarajan, who is leading a team of top scientists and experts currently investigating the accident, at least two tonnes of water must have entered the tank.

NC FACTION CLASH

AS MANY AS 22 persons were injured when workers of rival factions of the National Congress clashed in and outside Singarai City using “kangris” — fire pots — as missiles. Police have arrested a large number of mis-

creants”, but the number of arrested was not disclosed. The National Congress General Secretary, Sheikh Nazim Ahmed said most of the persons were NC (F) workers.

PM'S INTERVIEW

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi has said the Punjab problem would be solved on top priority basis and the Assam would be tackled satisfactorily. In an interview with Gulf News, Gandhi expressed deep concern at the recent tragic events in Sri Lanka where thousands of Tamils were killed and uprooted. He hoped that an understanding would be reached soon to resolve the ethnic problem there.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Modern and uniquely Indian

The Constitution is a testament to our desi genius — it is about reinvigorating our present by reinterpreting received wisdom



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

THE TWO-DAY PARLIAMENTARY debate on 75 years of the Constitution skirted around a question that has been hanging in the air: What is Indian about the Indian Constitution? This may have been an uncomfortable question for benches on both sides. Having burnt its fingers in the Lok Sabha elections, the ruling party must have found it politically imprudent to raise the question at this stage. So the BJP reined its ideological impulse, left the job of questioning the Constitution to its minions and fellow travellers outside Parliament, as the PM enacted the face of being the principal defender of this Constitution. The Opposition must have found it ideologically difficult and culturally tricky, best to skip. Rahul Gandhi's reference to Savarkar brought him face to face with this question, but only momentarily. The debate degenerated into the usual political slanging match.

Yet, this question won't go away. Let us not delude ourselves with the BJP's new found love for the Constitution. We are in the midst of an assault on constitutional republic. Questioning the legitimacy of the Constitution is imperative for this assault. And questioning its Indianness is the most potent ideological weapon in the armoury of the attackers. Let us acknowledge that it is a serious question. Our Constitution was written, thought and deliberated mostly in the language of the colonial masters. The entire exercise of the making of the Indian Constitution used the received alphabet of modern Western constitutionalism. Let us not forget that the question of the Constitution being "alien" and "foreign" was raised in the Constituent Assembly itself.

Let us also admit that modernist-universalist hubris is no answer to this question. "Why does modern India's Constitution need to be Indian?" is a bad retort to the question. Every constitution must pass the test of cultural authenticity and own context. The modernist response is also counter-productive, as it strengthens the suspicion of cultural inauthenticity that gives credence to this question in the first place. The break from the past that the modern constitution makers were so keen to underline can be easily made to look like a break from Indianness, detached from the cultural mores of our civilisation. (J Sai Deepak has argued this case, *IE*, November 29, Constitution is not at ease with civilisation).

Let us begin by setting aside what Indianness must mean. On the one hand, an Indian Constitution is one that is based on a pristine document from India's past, untouched by anything "foreign", oblivious to the context of a modern state that requires a written constitution. In that sense, an Indian Constitution would be an oxymoron. On the other hand, a truly Indian version of any document does not make it Indian. Illustrations from Indian mythology on the original copy of the Constitution does not make it Indian; renaming Indian Penal Code as Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita does not make it Indian.

Similarly, there is nothing self-evidently Indian about privileging one's own pre-modern history and demanding its pre-



C R Sankumar

eminence in the contemporary constitutional arrangements. One can debate the merits of this model followed by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (in their case, at least it was in line with the founding idea of Pakistan), but it is not clear why this selective appropriation lends greater authenticity to a constitution. Basically, it is a demand for instituting Hindu-ness (as "Sanatana" or in any other garb) at the heart of a modern constitutional arrangement for India. Without getting distracted into its disastrous social consequences, here we just need to note how imitative this suggestion is. If anything, this version of Indianness is mimicry; it is either a demand for Hindu Pakistan or a replica of Germany of the 1930s, or perhaps Israel of today. This is a travesty of Indianness.

A serious search for Indianness in the Constitution can take two forms, one more radical than the other. In its more ambitious avatar, authenticity can require a *de novo* originality. A very Indian version of the Constitution would have meant setting aside the entire received gamut of western political thought and carving each element of the institutional design afresh, drawing upon our civilizational heritage. This is why Gandhi wanted in *Hind Swaraj*. This is why Gandhians like Shriharan Narayan felt that the Constitution did not do justice to the genius of India. It must also be noted that hardly any constitution of the last century (with the exception of Iran and Bolivia) would pass this test of authenticity. While searching for this alternative is a valid aspiration, no one has anything like a workable draft of such a constitution. Indianness in this sense must remain a work in progress.

The more feasible version, the only version known across the world recently, is compositional originality, newness as rearrangement. The Indianness of the constitution would be tested by a different set of yardsticks: How were the many elements received from the western constitutional tradition rearranged and modified to suit the Indian context? Does this new arrangement reflect India's civilizational journey? Is the philosophy underlying the Constitution in line with our intellectual traditions? And has the working of this Constitution validated these assumptions?

Once we ask these appropriate and relevant questions, we can see what is Indian about the Indian Constitution. One Constitution of India may have been written in less than three years, but it was thought

The Constitution of India may have been written in less than three years, but it was thought through for well over a century. In its essence, the Constitution is a distillation of "modern Indian political thought".

Since this body of knowledge was not limited to any one ism or orientation, the Constitution reflects an equilibrium of contesting visions of India. It is informed by a deep engagement with the multiple strands of our pre-colonial past. Faced with a colonial modernity, our Constitution is informed by a conscious effort to forge a very Indian modernity.

through for well over a century. In its essence, the Constitution is a distillation of "modern Indian political thought". Since this body of knowledge was not limited to any one ism or orientation, the Constitution reflects an equilibrium of contesting visions of India. It is informed by a deep engagement with the multiple strands of our intellectual traditions. Faced with a colonial modernity, our Constitution is informed by a conscious effort to forge a very Indian modernity. And the lived experience of jurisprudence and litigation in the last 75 years has shown that the people of India — even those who have never heard of the constitution — partake of this very Indian constitutional morality.

The Indianness of the Indian Constitution is not in your-face. Seemingly familiar strands have been woven to produce something unique. The design of the "Union of India", instead of a classic federal state, is in line with the multi-layered character of the pre-modern state in India. The crafting of a "state-nation" rather than a European-style "nation-state" reflected an old tradition of respect for deep cultural and social diversity. The secular features of the Constitution are not a replica of American or French style secularism; the Indian "principled distance" version of secularism is drawn from the tradition of *ma'at* and is closer to the idea of *sarva dharma samabhava*. The "socialist" features of the Indian Constitution are a continuity of the principle of *karuna* or active compassion. And yes, the rejection of the caste system and untouchability also builds upon long traditions of social and religious reform. In India, *parampara* is not about conserving the past, it is about reinvigorating our present by reinterpreting the received wisdom, recasting the best and discarding the deadwood. This is what our Constitution does.

The Indianness of the Constitution is like that of the bread *pavla* that transforms an alien white bread into an authentic Indian dish. Or that of Indian cinema that has used a received technology to create an art form that echoes the spirit of India. Like bread *pavla* or cinema, the Constitution of India is a testament to our desi genius — very modern and distinctly Indian.

The writer is member, *Svaraj India*, and national convenor of *Bharat Jodo Abhiyan*. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The facts prove that the economic interests of China and the US are deeply intertwined, which is the fundamental logic behind why the two countries should not, and cannot, become 'parallel worlds'."

— THE GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

In the spirit of the Constitution

Debate in Parliament should end narrative that India's founding document is in danger. Political differences should not be cause of animosity



RAKESH SINHA

THE DEBATE ON the Constitution in Parliament not only led to constructive dialogue between the treasury benches and the Opposition but also engaged the people at large. Confusion about the Constitution's future is not healthy for a democratic polity. The Opposition's narrative that the government intends to change the basic structure of the Constitution was proved wrong. Members of Congress and the party's allies criticised the government on governance issues. This was not unexpected. The Prime Minister utilised the opportunity to re-articulate the compatibility between his social philosophy and the Constitution's letter and spirit. It's now clear that his well-articulated schemes have precipitated a change in the voting pattern among the marginalised sections and enhanced the political autonomy of women voters.

PM Modi is a daring cultural nationalist and a social democrat. This came out in his speech. He linked the Constitution's progress with the country's civilisational and cultural aspects, which unfortunately finds no space in the worldview of the Opposition parties. There is no one like K M Munshi, Purushottam Das Tandon, B Patraji Sitarayya, Sampurnanand or Ram Manohar Lohia among them. The RSS-BJP enjoys a monopoly in this aspect. A nation with thousands of years of history can not ignore its past. In the Constituent Assembly, Congress leader Lokanath Mishra had warned that "secular state is a slippery phrase, a device to bypass the ancient culture of the land." That's exactly what happened during Congress's rule. This began with an act of deceit on the Constitution itself.

On September 5, 1952, the Speaker of the Constituent Assembly G V Mavalankar, in his farewell speech, announced that "the pages of the Constitution are decorated by scenes of Indian life in ancient period by well-known artist Nandalal Bose." The sketches included that of Ram, Sita, Krishna, Shiva, Lord Buddha, Mahavira, Shivali, Guru Govind Singh, Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose. But when the printed copies were distributed, the sketches had mysteriously disappeared. Rahul Gandhi and his party now share this legacy. The BJP government has to confront allegations of composing majoritarianism. Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav says minorities are being made second-rate citizens. But why should giving ancient culture, heroes and history their due be seen as coercion of minorities? Secularism is not a religion. It is a way of life. Mela and Rajendra Prasad and more than half a dozen ministers of the Nehru cabinet took part in the reconstruction of the Somnath temple.

The so-called champions of secularism ignored the views of representatives of the minorities — H C Mookerjee, Tajamul Hussain, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Nazimuddin Ahmad — because they did not help perpetuate binaries. Mookerjee, a Christian

and Vice President of the Constituent Assembly, argued that the recognition of a community as a minority on the basis of religion negates the idea of one nation one people. The RSS-BJP aligns with the idea of such minority leaders.

The shadow of pseudo-secularism hangs over our body politic. That's why the right to propagate religion as a fundamental right, mentioned in Article 25, remains uncontested. Such rights deter secularisation and unity of the people. This was also the view of several Constituent Assembly members including M Ananthasayanam Ayyangar, R V Dhulekar and K M Munshi. No one accused them of being majoritarian. However, it's obvious that secularism was nipped in the bud in India, and in its place came pseudo-secularism. This needs to be corrected. Modi's spirituality and his respect for culture offer reason for hope.

Modi attacked dynasty-based politics. It is true there are shades of micro dynasties in the BJP too. The party sees it as a necessary evil. However, the Opposition politics morally is by taking refuge in the people's mandate. Modi, in contrast, raises his democratic morality by vouching to end it. His message is for the entire body politic, including both fat and thin dynasts. He knows there are people beyond political membership and commitments. Such people play a silent but vital role at all critical junctures.

Modi's attack on Congress's poor record on freedom of speech and press is not without historical background. Barely 15 months after the implementation of the Constitution, Nehru brought the First Amendment Bill before the provisional Parliament. This was intended to limit the freedom of expression and press. He could not provide the substantive reasons for such censorship. He couldn't wait for the formation of the first Parliament by elected representatives. He argued that the Constitution could not be static. This led Syama Prasad Mookerjee to accuse him of treating the Constitution as a "scrap of paper." Another member Nazimuddin Ahmed argued that Nehru went against his own argument. The Amendment constituted the first amendment, in contrast, enlarged the scope of freedom of expression. Congress can not dismiss the BJP's role in safeguarding the Constitution during the Emergency. History offers lessons in times of divisions in politics and society. There are three great lessons which today's political and intellectual class have not absorbed adequately. Ideas must not be suppressed under the iron law of discipline. Deshbandhu Gupta of the Congress and a member of the Constituent Assembly opposed the First Amendment Bill. Second, differences of ideas should not lead to hatred among members of the political and intellectual classes — this hurts the evolution of parliamentary democracy. Finally, every member of the Constituent Assembly was a thought leader. They provided intellectual grounds to even tolerate extreme views. Similarly, the debate in Parliament offers hope. At the end of the day, Modi counted his political and ideological gains, while the Opposition had to reckon with its intellectual cowardice and ideological failures. False narrative does not give political dividends.

The writer is a former BJP Rajya Sabha MP



V S CHAUHAN, REMYA HARIDASAN

Scholars without borders

One Nation One Subscription could make high-quality research more accessible

ON NOVEMBER 25, the Centre approved the Pradhan Mantri One Nation One Subscription (PM-ONOS) scheme. This ambitious initiative will grant access to a vast collection of scholarly research e-journals, marking a transformative moment for students, researchers, and academic institutions across India, especially those from the country's less-endowed institutions. The scheme is designed to provide all government Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and research institutions access to over 13,000 e-journals from 30 of the world's most prominent publishers. Such access spans disciplines including STEM, medicine, management, social sciences, and the humanities, offering an unprecedented expansion of knowledge.

At present, approximately 2,400 institutions benefit from subscriptions through 10 different library consortia. These consortia, managed by various government ministries and departments, provide access to e-resources such as journals, databases, standards, and e-books. Some key players in this ecosystem include the Ministry of Education, the Department of Science and Technology, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Department of Biotechnology, the Department of Agricultural Research and Education, the Ministry of Earth Sciences, the Department of Atomic Energy, the Department of Space, Defence Research and Development Organisation and the Ministry

of Health & Family Welfare. The largest of these is E-Shodh Sindhu (ESS) under the Ministry of Education, which serves around 2,000 government institutions, including Institutes of National Importance (INIs) like IITs, IIMs, IISERs, and NITs. The new initiative includes all central universities, state public universities, and colleges supported by the government of India. Historically, these consortia have operated in a fragmented manner, catering to specific disciplines, but ONOS offers centralised access to resources across all disciplines.

The number of institutions benefiting from these subscriptions will increase by over 160 per cent. Notably this initiative will extend access to all government medical colleges, addressing the current gap in coverage by the National Medical Library's Electronic Resources in Medicine Consortium (ERMED) under MoHFW. Currently, only 74 medical colleges, including 14 AIIMS (out of 26) are covered under the medical consortium, ERMED. With the introduction of ONOS, all government medical colleges in the country will get access to e-journals. ONOS also seeks to foster research culture in tier-2 and tier-3 HEIs.

Under the existing consortia model, journal access has been discipline-specific, limiting researchers' ability to access materials outside their immediate field. ONOS will consolidate these resources, offering access to approximately 13,000 journals

across various disciplines.

This shift is aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 objectives and the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, which emphasise the importance of multi-disciplinary education and research. Institutes like IIT Madras are already blending traditional engineering and technology curricula with social sciences and offering clinical research programmes in partnership with leading medical institutions. Through ONOS, these efforts can be reinforced, with easy access to relevant journals across fields like science, electronics, psychology, and the like. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation also encourages cross-sector collaborations and ONOS is expected to be a powerful tool in promoting such partnerships. The removal of disciplinary silos in academic research will not only enhance the quality and impact of Indian research but also drive innovation that can contribute to social and economic development.

With its vast coverage of journals, ONOS has ensured 98-100 per cent fulfilment of the e-journal requirement of most consortia. In its next phases, ONOS has a plan, subject to approvals, to expand to private higher educational institutions through a public-private partnership model. Ways of moving forward towards this stage will be guided by the learnings from the current pilot phase and will likely involve new models such as transfor-

mative agreements that combine subscription costs with open-access publishing. ONOS is not a value judgement on the subscription-based model of scholarly publishing but the adoption of the most practical India-specific solution towards expanding knowledge access to a sustainable open access model is achieved globally. The initiative represents a fundamental shift in the way scholarly research is accessed and shared in India. It is an important step towards a universal and equitable approach to achieving open access — a principle enshrined in Article 27 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

By expanding access to scholarly resources, ONOS will empower students, faculty, and researchers to push the boundaries of knowledge and innovation. It presents great opportunities to state universities that do not possess the financial strength of many elite institutions in the country. Even for leading academic and R&D institutions, this opens up the opportunity for cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary research like never before. It has the potential to be a game-changer in the knowledge ecosystem.

Chauhan is former director, International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology and Haridasan is scientist, Office of the Principal Scientist, Advisor to the Government of India

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ODE TO HUSSAIN

I WAS SHOCKED to learn that the great persianist Ustad Zakir Hussain has passed away in San Francisco. His father, Ustad Alla Rakha, was from a village near Jammu and always cherished his association with the Dogras. I knew Zakir Hussain from the time when he was a young boy and swam in with great pleasure growing into perhaps the greatest tabla player we have produced. He and the late Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma are two great musicians that Jammu has given to the nation in recent years. My condolences to Hussain's family.

Karan Singh, New Delhi

FRIENDS IN ARMS

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Friends and neighbours" (*IE*, December 16). Sri Lanka President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's India visit marks a significant moment in the strengthening of bilateral relations between the two countries. This is not just a diplomatic milestone, but an occasion to celebrate Sri Lanka's renewed commitment to democratic values and India's continued adherence to its Neighbourhood-First Policy. Sri Lanka's transition towards a more inclusive, democratic governance structure under Dissanayake is a hopeful development. By supporting its democratic journey, India demonstrates its commitment to stability and cooperation in the region.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

THIS REFERS TO the article, "An unraveling Syria" (*IE*, December 16). Syria's future is uncertain after the abrupt fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. General public perception highlights largely untold sufferings of ruined swathes, migrating refugees, a shattered economy and an impoverished population. With Russia and Iran already preoccupied with their struggles, all the international community can do is offer their support to Syria as they set up their new government and hold them accountable on matters of human rights and regional stability.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

TO PROTECT RIGHTS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "A living document" (*IE*, December 16). We celebrate 75 years of our Constitution's glorious journey, guiding India's growth and shaping our society, economy, and politics. Its makers envisioned a dynamic document, adaptable to changing times. Recent parliamentary discussions highlight the need to balance the provisions with contemporary realities. Effective governance demands understanding its spirit and letter. We must protect fundamental rights, engage in constructive dialogue and respect all views. The government should harness our Constitution's power to address pressing challenges: social inequality, economic disparities, environmental concerns, etc.

Yuvraj Singh, Hisar

In Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar & Munshi's views on UCC

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 16

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi once again pitched for a nationwide Uniform Civil Code (UCC) on Saturday, recalling the views of Dr B R Ambedkar and K M Munshi in the Constituent Assembly.

"The Constituent Assembly...decided...it would be good for the future elected government to...implement the UCC," Babasaheb Ambedkar advocated for ending religion-based personal laws, the PM said in Lok Sabha.

K M Munshi, who would go on to serve in the Cabinet of PM Jawaharlal Nehru, described the UCC as being integral for national unity and modernisation, Modi said.

UCC refers to a common set of laws governing personal matters (succession, marriage, inheritance etc), instead of the current system, in which religious communities have their own sets of personal laws.

The UCC was discussed as Article 35 in the Constituent Assembly, put to vote, and passed. It was later renumbered as Article 44 of the Indian Constitution.

Criticism of the UCC

The debate in the Constituent Assembly on November 23, 1948, focused on a draft Article on the UCC, to be included under the "Directive Principles of State Policy" — broad ideas that the state ought to incorporate in policymaking, but would not be legally bound to abide by.

Draft Article 35 said, "The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India".

Some members, like Mohamad Ismail Shah of the Indian Union Muslim League, criticised it. He said the idea may be "to secure harmony through uniformity", "but...for that purpose it is not necessary to regiment the civil law of the people including the personal law".



B R Ambedkar (left) and K M Munshi. Wikimedia Commons

"Such regimentation", he said, "will bring discontent and harmony will be affected".

It was likely in anticipation of such opposition that the article was only suggested to be incorporated in the Directive Principles.

Munshi: not 'tyrannical'

Munshi disagreed that having a UCC would be "tyrannical" to minorities.

"Nowhere in advanced Muslim countries the personal law of each minority has been recognised as so sacrosanct as to prevent the enactment of a Civil Code," he argued.

He said "there [were] many among Hindus who [did] not like a uniform Civil Code, because they...feel that the personal law of inheritance, succession etc. is really a part of their religion". But in that case, "you can never give, for instance, equality to women", Munshi said — even though "you have already passed Fundamental Right (s) to that effect...".

Munshi pointed out that in Hindu Law, "you get any amount of discrimination against women; and if that is part of Hindu religion or Hindu religious practice, you cannot pass a single law which would elevate the position of Hindu women to that of men". Thus, he argued, there was no reason for not having a civil code for India.

He asked Muslims to realise "that the

sooner we forget this isolationist outlook on religion, it will be better for the country". Religion, must be restricted to spheres pertaining to it, and the rest of life must be regulated so that India evolves into a "strong and consolidated nation", he said.

Ambedkar backed Art 35

Ambedkar said he would not discuss the merits or demerits of a UCC but he advocated for Article 35.

He said he was "very much surprised" at the suggestion that a UCC was not possible or desirable in a vast country like India.

"We have in this country a uniform code of laws covering almost every aspect of human relationship...[including] a uniform and complete criminal Code operating throughout the country, which is contained in the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code," he pointed out.

Muslim personal law was not "im-

mutable and uniform through the whole of India", Ambedkar said. For example, "up to 1935 the North-West Frontier Province...followed the Hindu Law in the matter of succession and in other matters on that field".

Later on December 2, during another discussion on the power of the state to legislate on religious matters, he said: "I...do not understand why religion should be given this vast, expansive jurisdiction...to prevent the legislature from encroaching upon that field".

When the task is to reform a social system full of inequities and discrimination, "it is...quite impossible for anybody to conceive that the personal law shall be excluded from the jurisdiction of the State," he said.

Ambedkar added that "all that the State is claiming...is a power to legislate", and there was no need to fear "that if the State has the power, [it] will immediately proceed to execute or enforce [it] in a manner that may be...objectionable [to] Muslims or...Christians or any other community in India".

EXPLAINED HEALTH

IDIOPATHIC PULMONARY FIBROSIS (IPF), WHICH LED TO ZAKIR HUSSAIN'S DEATH

PARUL CHANDIGARH, DECEMBER 16

TABLA MAESTRO Zakir Hussain passed away on Sunday in San Francisco due to idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF), a lung disease. According to Dr Deepak Bhasin, Senior Director of Pulmonology, Critical Care, at Max Hospital in Mohali, "It is a chronic, progressive lung disease characterised by scarring of the lung tissue, leading to irreversible loss of lung function. The exact cause of IPF is unknown, so it is termed idiopathic [without a clear sign]. IPF belongs to a group of conditions called interstitial lung diseases (ILDs), which involve inflammation or scarring in the lung."

How does IPF lead to lung scarring?

IPF is believed to result from problems in the way the body deals with injuries. "The body's healing process plays a critical role in scarring. When the lungs experience injury — due to environmental factors like dust, smoke, or infections, or possibly even from autoimmune responses — the body attempts to repair the damaged tissue. In a healthy response, this repair is controlled and temporary. However, in IPF, this repair process becomes dysregulated, and the body overproduces collagen and other fibrous materials. Instead of normal lung tissue regenerating, excessive scar tissue forms, which progressively impairs lung function," said Dr Mahavir Modi, pulmonologist and sleep specialist at the Ruby Hall Clinic in Pune.

This abnormal response leads to irreversible scarring. The mechanism behind it is under research, but genetic factors, environmental exposures, and chronic inflammation all likely help trigger this faulty repair process.

What are its symptoms?

DR. MAHAVIR MODI
Pulmonologist and Sleep Specialist at Ruby Hall Clinic, Pune.

DR. ARUN KOCHAR
Additional Director of Cardiology at Fortis Hospital in Mohali.

Fibrosis causes the lungs to thicken and stiffen, making their expansion harder and impacting breathing. Symptoms include shortness of breath (dyspnea), dry cough, fatigue, and weight loss. Over time, oxygen levels in the blood drop, causing complications such as pulmonary hypertension, heart failure, or respiratory failure.

Who is at risk of the disease?

Dr Arun Kochar, Additional Director of Cardiology at Fortis Hospital in Mohali, said the incidence of IPF worldwide ranges between 0.09 and 1.30 per 10,000 people. The figures are higher for India.

Most cases occur in people over 50 years; men are at a slightly higher risk than women. Current or former smokers have a higher risk, and genetic predisposition also plays a role in some cases. Prolonged exposure to dust, wood, or metal particles could additionally increase the likelihood of contracting the disease.

How do diagnosis, treatment work?

High-resolution CT scans, pulmonary function tests, and lung biopsies can help confirm the diagnosis. However, doctors say it is essential to rule out other causes of lung diseases first.

Antifibrotic drugs like pirfenidone and nintedanib slow the disease progression, alongside oxygen therapy and lung exercises. Advanced cases could require lung transplants, making early diagnosis of the disease critical.

Treatment is aimed at only relieving symptoms and slowing disease progression. In most cases, the patient's health condition tends to worsen over time despite therapies and treatment.

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 16

THE SUPREME COURT orally observed last week that "reservation cannot be on the basis of religion". The Bench of Justices B R Gopal and V Viswanath was hearing a challenge to the May 22 Calcutta High Court decision which struck down reservation for 77 communities (castes) — 75 of which were Muslim — within the quota for Other Backward Classes (OBC).

On November 26, the court had rejected an appeal against the denial of a Scheduled Caste (SC) certificate to a woman from Puducherry after holding that she was a "born Christian and could not be associated with any caste".

The relationship between religion and reservations has been debated since the commencement of the Constitution in 1950. Both the Centre and Supreme Court have sought to define the extent to which religion can be considered for providing reservation.

OBC quota for Muslims

Article 16(4) of the Constitution gives the State power to reserve "posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State". While there is no bar on identifying a religious group as the beneficiary of reservation within the OBC and ST quotas, efforts to include religious groups or communities within the scope of reservation have mostly been in the OBC category.

Kerala has provided reservation to Muslims within the OBC quota since 1956. Karnataka (in 1995) and Tamil Nadu (in 2007) too, have sought to include Muslim groups within the OBC quota. In Karnataka, Muslims were given reservation after the Third Backward Classes Commission of the state, chaired by Justice O Chinappa Reddy, said in its report (1990) that Muslims "as a whole" could be considered a socially and economically backward class. In 2006, the Justice Rajinder Sachar Committee, appointed by the Manmohan Singh government to inquire into the social, economic, and educational status of Muslims found that the representation of Muslim OBCs was "abysmally low" in government jobs, which suggested that "benefits of entitlements meant for the backward classes are yet to reach them".

In its landmark 1992 judgment in the



Dalit converts to Islam and Christianity are not included in the SC quota. Archive

Mandal case (*Indra Sawhney v Union of India*) the SC said the purpose of the OBC quota was to address historical discrimination faced by certain groups, and "No class of citizens can be classified as backward solely by reason of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them".

In essence, the court held that while religion and other factors of group identity were relevant, they could not be the sole criteria to provide reservation within the OBC quota.

Based on this ruling, the Calcutta High Court struck down OBC reservation for 77 castes — this quota, it said, had been provided without using "objective criteria" to determine the backwardness of these classes. "Religion indeed appears to have been the sole criterion for declaring these communities as OBCs," Justice Tapabrat Chakraborty and Rajasekhara Mantha said. This court's mind is not free from doubt that the caste community has been treated as a commodity for political ends.

Conversion and the SC quota

Under Article 341(1), the President can "specify the castes, races or tribes or parts or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall...be deemed to be Scheduled Castes".

Shortly after the Constitution came into force, the President issued The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, which contained a list of SC communities in each state. Clause 3 of this order now says that "no

person who professes a religion different

from the Hindu, the Sikh or the Buddhist religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste". The Order was originally restricted to Hindus, but was later expanded to include SC Hindus who converted to Sikhism (in 1956), and Buddhism (in 1990).

The Order was challenged in 1983 by a cobble merchant Sosaal who was trained by the SC Adi-Dravida community but was denied access to a government scheme for SCs because he was a Christian convert. Sosaal argued before the top court that the Scheduled Castes Order was discriminatory, and that despite having converted to Christianity, he was still a member of the Adi-Dravida community.

The court in *Sosaal v Union of India* (1985) did not answer whether a religious convert would retain their caste status after conversion, holding that this would not be "sufficient" to access SC benefits. It said that a person must prove that even after conversion, the "handicaps suffered from such caste membership...continue in their oppressive severity in the new environment of a different religious community".

The push for including other religious converts — primarily Hindus who converted to Christianity or Islam — within the SC quota has since progressed in fits and starts.

In 1996, the P V Narasimha Rao government introduced a Bill to amend the 1950 Order to include Christian converts, but it was never tabled.

In 2007, the Justice Ranganath Misra Commission, appointed by the UPA-1 gov-

ernment in 2004 to look into various issues of India's linguistic and religious minorities, found "the caste system to be an all-pervading social phenomenon...shared by almost all Indian communities irrespective of religious persuasions".

The Commission recommended that "once a person has been included in a Scheduled Caste list a willful change of religion on his part should not adversely affect his or her Scheduled Caste status".

The findings of the panel were disputed in later years. Converts to Islam and Christianity remain excluded from the scope of reservations.

Questions before top court

The constitutional validity of the 1950 Scheduled Castes Order was challenged again in *Ghazi Saaduddin v State of Maharashtra*. The case has been pending since 2004, but the court said in 2011 that it would examine Clause 3 and the constitutionality of not including Christians and Muslims alongside Buddhists and Sikhs.

In April 2024, the court decided to delay hearing arguments in the case after noting that the Centre had set up a commission to examine whether religious converts should retain their Scheduled Caste status. The Centre had submitted that it had not accepted the Ranganath Misra Commission's 2007 report, and set up a new commission chaired by former Chief Justice of India K G Balakrishnan. The Balakrishnan panel has conducted public hearings in various states. In November 2024 it received an extension until October 2025 to submit its final report.

The Supreme Court is also considering whether a religious group as a whole can be provided reservation. The court has heard public hearings in various states. In November 2024 it received an extension until October 2025 to submit its final report.

The SC had said it would hear the case after deciding the challenge to reservations for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), but there has been no movement so far. The court upheld the 10% EWS quota in a majority verdict in November 2022.

Like in the Calcutta HC ruling, the AP HC had held that the government did not use "objective criteria" to label Muslims as a whole as a backward class.

The SC had said it would hear the case after deciding the challenge to reservations for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), but there has been no movement so far. The court upheld the 10% EWS quota in a majority verdict in November 2022.

Technical mastery, charisma, innovation: the genius of Zakir Hussain

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 16

IN ALL the tributes for Ustad Zakir Hussain since his passing on Sunday, there is a common thread: that the holy grail for any musician is to enjoy credibility among connoisseurs and popularity among the public; to be able to take the art forward while staying true to its roots; and to synthesise technical mastery over the craft with artistry that makes it art.

The legendary tabla maestro had achieved this holy grail. For this reason, his musical legacy will resonate around the world for decades to come.

Taking tabla to new heights

In Hussain's own words, the tabla is "one of the youngest instruments in the field of North Indian Classical music". (Foreword to Sadanand Naimpalli's *Theory And Practice Of Tabla*, 2005). Some precursors go back a couple of millennia, but the instrument we know today evolved as recently as the early 19th century, according to the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol 5 — South Asia (1999). And until the 1950s, it was re-

stricted to being merely an accompaniment in musical performances.

"Earlier tabla players were basically nonentities when it came to receiving any attention in a performance. Their names did not appear in ads, and...record covers did not list their names... Their remuneration was a tenth of what the lead artist was paid... There was never any focus on tabla players as being an equally important part of a classical concert," Hussain told his biographer Nasreen Munni Kabir. (*Zakir Hussain: A Life in Music*, 2018).

It is Zakir Hussain whom many credit for elevating the status of the tabla. "He was a pathbreaker, a game-changer, an icon who put tabla and Indian music on the world map..." Nayan Ghosh, who plays the sitar and tabla, told the BBC.

Hussain himself always credited the so-called "big three" — Ustad Santar Prasad, Pandit Kishan Maharaj, and his father Ustad Alla Rakha.

Transcending styles, genres

Hussain used the tabla in ways and situations that were previously unimaginable. "Beyond pure classical music, he experimented, dabbled in all kinds of fusion mu-



Ustad Zakir Hussain was a renowned for his connect with audiences. Archive

sic... he was a great creator," Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri, a legendary tabla player in his own right and a close friend of Hussain's, told *The Indian Express*.

Hussain was among the musicians to popularise "world music", an eclectic coming-together of musical traditions from around the world, most notably with his Grammy-winning band Shakti, where he

partnered jazz guitarist John McLaughlin, violinist I. Sharaf, and ghatam maestro "Vikku" Vinayakram.

Although he was seen as a musical maverick by many, Hussain "did not break any rules," Chaudhuri said. "He simply expanded the boundaries of music, and applied it such that he created his own style."

Hussain did not necessarily see things this way. "The most important fact was that we, the Shakti team, were young enough to allow for musical 'sacrilege', and so we could ignore the restrictions imposed on us by our respective traditions in the interest of finding a road towards oneness," he said in his biography.

He was always confident that his pioneering path would be walked by many in the future. "We were confident that our [Shakti's] musical statement would become valid and accepted as a road to traverse and that would eventually lead to what is now known as world music," he said.

Charismatic master of his craft

Chaudhuri said that while Hussain "be-longed to the Punjab Gharana (one of the

six schools of tabla with their own unique repertoire and style), he was trained by his father to play in all different *gharanas* styles... this helped him create his own unique style".

In his biography, Hussain said *gharanas* could be limiting. He said he often told young tabla players: "There's no such thing as wrong, it's just different... Use it in your playing. Don't think of it as wrong. If you do, you're limiting your experience."

Hussain always had a great connection with his audience. "To be a good musician, you have to know how to present to the audiences...to connect with them... [Hussain] was great at this. He was a communicator on stage, very jovial... but still respectful and serious about his music," Chaudhuri said.

This charisma made Hussain's live performances memorable, and kept his audience transfixed for hours. He could tell stories with the beats of his tabla and, sometimes, with the verbalisations of bols, the fundamental rhythmic syllable used in tabla compositions.

He has also an unparalleled technical

master of his craft. *The New York Times*, in its review of a 2009 jazz performance at the Carnegie Hall, wrote: "He's a fearsome technician but also a whimsical inventor, devoted to exuberant play. So he rarely seems overbearing, even when the blur of his fingers rings the beat of a hummingbird's wings."

Chaudhuri, who lives a couple of miles away from Hussain's residence in San Francisco, and frequently collaborated with the late maestro, said they had never once rehearsed a performance. "We would just get on the stage... Hussain was among the very few tabla players who could adapt to any kind of style, any music in just a couple of minutes," he said.

The Ustad himself did not agree he was perfect, and not just because he was by all accounts a very humble man. "I always say music dies each night and is reborn the next day. *Ek shamka jili, parwana uda, tairiyar hui, tairiyar hui*. The *parwana* [moth] will burn, and yet it will be drawn to the flame again the next day," he said in his biography.

"Perfection is something you'll never attain. But it doesn't matter if I don't attain it, at least, I would have tried."

Ethanol excesses

Petrol blending can take off only with feedstock surplus

The news that the Centre may relax its target of achieving 20 per cent ethanol blending in petrol by this year augurs well for consumers, automobile users and the larger economy. The target is likely to be scaled down to 18 per cent, as reported by this newspaper. In 2021, the government decided to bring forward its 20 per cent ethanol blending in petrol (EBP) target to 2025 instead of 2030.



While NITI Aayog’s roadmap appeared feasible, the experience since then has shown that ensuring feedstock availability for the requisite quantities of ethanol is a challenge. A majority of India’s vehicle population not being BS-VI compliant, is also a constraint. It therefore appears pragmatic for the government to relax its EBP targets until solutions are found. There can be little doubt that EBP — if pursued in moderation — can unlock benefits for the economy and the exchequer. Every litre of petrol substituted with ethanol helps India reduce its dependence on oil imports while saving on foreign exchange outgo. Diversion of agricultural produce to ethanol can help unlock ancillary income streams for farmers in years of excess production. But the experience since 2021 shows that India’s agri-commodity output is not consistent enough to fuel its ethanol ambitions.

When NITI Aayog envisaged domestic production of 10.1 billion litres of ethanol to meet the 20 per cent blending target, it assumed that 5.5 billion litres would be derived from sugarcane and 4.6 billion litres from maize, rice and damaged grains. This required the diversion of roughly 78 million tonnes of sugarcane, about 5 million tonnes of paddy and 6 million tonnes of excess maize for ethanol. But the availability of damaged grains for ethanol has been patchy. A prolonged El Nino over 2022-23 and an erratic monsoon in 2024, have led to sharp setbacks in the output of all three crops. With sugarcane output dropping 7 per cent between FY23 and FY24, the government was forced to ban direct conversion of cane juice into ethanol (apart from curbing sugar exports), to ensure sugar supplies for domestic consumers. In 2024, the Food Corporation of India’s dwindling buffer stock of rice prompted a ban on paddy sales for conversion to ethanol. Attempts to make up this shortfall in ethanol feedstock through maize have since run up against protests from the animal and poultry feed industry about spiralling input costs, forcing India to turn a net importer of this cereal.

These supply constraints have added to food inflation. Moreover, ad-hoc changes in policies relating to imports, exports and duty structures have undermined India’s rising position as a reliable supplier of agri-produce to global markets. As food security cannot be compromised to meet EBP targets, diversion of food crops to ethanol may need to wait till India produces durable surpluses of these crops. Apart from resolving feedstock challenges, the EBP programme will also have to convince vehicle users that ethanol-blended fuel will not cause damage to vehicles or reduce mileage.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



India’s trade basket is changing

MOVING UP. There has been a rise of high-value and technology-driven exports, reflecting industrial sophistication



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

Between FY2004 and FY2024, India’s merchandise exports surged six-fold to \$437.1 billion, while imports skyrocketed nearly nine-fold to \$678.2 billion. This remarkable growth, however, masks significant sectoral variations driven by global disruptions such as the 2008 financial crisis, the Covid pandemic, the US-China trade tensions; and domestic initiatives like ‘Make in India’.

This analysis explores how India’s trade composition has changed over the years, highlighting the shifting roles of different sectors in shaping the country’s trade ambitions.

DIVERSIFYING EXPORTS

India’s merchandise export basket has diversified significantly. The agriculture, meat, and processed food sector maintained a stable share of around 11 per cent but saw absolute volumes jump from \$7.6 billion in FY2004 to \$48.5 billion in FY2024. This growth reflects the rising global appetite for Indian products led by rice, sugar, groundnuts, meat, marine products, coffee, pepper, oil cake, raw tobacco etc.

Energy-related exports, including iron ore and petroleum products, expanded their dominance, with their share rising from 8.9 per cent in FY2004 to over 21 per cent in FY2024. Volumes in this sector reached a staggering \$94 billion. Petroleum product exports reached \$89.3 billion in FY2024, underscoring India’s role as a key supplier.

Export volumes in chemicals and pharmaceuticals rose from \$6.6 billion to \$60.8 billion. Their share increased from 10.4 per cent to 13.9 per cent during the period, supported by India’s pharmaceutical leadership and chemical manufacturing advancements.

Machinery, computers, and electrical and electronic products emerged as strong performers. Their shares increased to 6.9 per cent and 7.9 per cent, respectively, with export volumes reaching \$30.1 billion and \$34.5 billion. These gains highlight India’s growing industrial and technological capabilities. Smartphones are the best success story, with exports rising from zero to \$15.6 billion.

Automobiles and parts exports also gained traction, with their share rising to 4.8 per cent in FY2024, as India cemented its position as a global hub for vehicle and component manufacturing. Volumes in this segment surged from \$1.7 billion to \$21 billion.

Traditional sectors such as textiles



Export and import: Sectoral shares (in %)

Sector	Exports			Imports		
	2004	2014	2024	2004	2014	2024
Agriculture, meat and processed food	11.9	12.5	11.1	5.2	3.7	4.7
Petroleum, ores, minerals, coal	8.9	21.9	21.5	30.2	42.3	33.8
Chemicals and pharmaceuticals	10.4	10.4	13.9	8.7	8	9.3
Plastics, articles	2.1	1.8	1.7	1.6	2.2	3.2
Textile and clothing	21.1	11.9	8	2.6	1.2	1.3
Diamonds, gold and products	16.9	13.3	7.5	18.1	13	11.6
Products of iron, steel and base metals	8.8	7.4	8.1	5	5	6.9
Machinery, computers	3.9	3.8	6.9	8.9	6.8	8.5
Electrical and electronics products including telecom, smartphones	3	3.3	7.9	8.4	6.5	11.7
Automobiles, parts	2.7	4.1	4.8	0.7	1	1.1
Remaining categories (medical, leather, paper, ships, aircraft etc.)	10.3	9.6	8.7	10.6	10.4	8
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total (\$ billion)	63.8	314.4	437.1	78.1	450.2	678.2

and clothing, however, lost ground. Their share dropped sharply from 21.1 per cent in FY2004 to 8 per cent in FY2024. Volume increased from \$13.5 billion in FY2004 to \$35.0 billion in FY2024. Still, growth lagged behind other sectors due to competition from countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam.

Similarly, the share of diamonds, gold, and related products fell significantly, though volumes increased modestly, underscoring changing global consumer preferences.

Overall, India’s export basket has diversified significantly. While traditional sectors have faced challenges, the rise of high-value and technology-driven exports signals a shift towards industrial sophistication. This transformation positions India as a competitive global exporter, though lagging sectors like textiles and

Iron ore and petroleum products, machinery, computers, and electrical and electronic products have emerged as strong performers on the export front

diamonds highlight the need for innovation, branding, and strategic interventions to sustain growth across the board.

IMPORT SURGE

India’s import basket reflects the country’s expanding energy needs, industrial growth, and technological ambitions. The share of ores, minerals, coal, and petroleum peaked at 42.3 per cent in FY2014 but came down to 33.8 per cent in FY2024. Import volumes surged from \$23.6 billion to \$229.2 billion, driven by reliance on crude oil, and coal. Crude petroleum oil was the most significant import, with \$139.2 billion in FY2024.

Electrical and electronics imports experienced the most significant growth, with their share rising from 8.4 per cent in FY2004 to 11.7 per cent in FY2024. Import volumes reached \$79.4 billion, driven by the need to import components for smartphones, telecom equipment, and other electronics.

Machinery and computer imports accounted for 8.5 per cent of the total in FY2024. Import volumes climbed to \$57.6 billion, reflecting an expanding economy. Similarly, plastics imports grew steadily, supporting the country’s expanding manufacturing base.

Syria has a long way to go

Bashar al Assad’s exit has brought cheer all around. The global community must join hands to help Syria

Sridhar Krishnaswami

Few in the comity of nations are shedding tears or losing sleep over the quick fall of a dreaded entity in the Middle East. Syria’s Bashar al Assad flight to Russia was perhaps more “eventful” than his coming to power in 2000 after the death of his father Hafez al Assad.

The father-son duo presided over a ruthless regime that put fellow dictators in the neighbourhood to shame in terms of sheer brutality they unleashed perhaps even giving some respectability to Pol Pot’s killing fields of Cambodia.

What started off as a pledge to crush “foreign backed terrorism” in 2011 soon plunged the country into absolute mayhem with independent monitoring groups saying that more than 600,000 have perished in the decade-plus fighting together with thousands done to death in government/military run torture chambers.

Syria not only turned into a fertile ground for foreign powers to field their perceived national interests but also a parking ground for terror outfits like the al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

It requires no big thinking to figure out the sudden collapse of the Assad show: the benefactors were simply too pre-occupied elsewhere. Russia was tied down in the Ukraine war and Iran was nursing its wounds with the Hamas and Hezbollah routed in the Gaza and Lebanon; and rebel groups supported by the US, Britain, France, Turkey and a few others in the Middle East suddenly found an opening.

An offensive that started on November 27 ended in a matter of days. Assad’s writing was on the wall.

REFUGEE CRISIS

Prior to the start of the civil war, the population was put at around 22 million. But as of 2024 it is estimated that there are more than six million refugees and asylum seekers primarily hosted by Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon in spite of their own economic challenges.

Europe too has seen Syrians arrive at their shores. Another seven million plus are internally displaced, seen generally as the largest displacement crisis of the world. Add to this the millions of Syrians living in extreme poverty as a war of 13 years has indeed taken a toll.



SYRIA. Picking up the pieces REUTERS

The fall of Assad may have come as a breather but to watchdog groups monitoring chemical and other weapons of mass destruction there is the urgent need to secure the stocks.

The regime has been accused of using chemical weapons as also the terrorist group Islamic State; and the latest Israeli bombing of Syria has raised the spectre of hits on dangerous sites and the ensuing contamination.

As soon as rebels entered Damascus, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) held an emergency meeting reminding Syria of its obligations on compliance and safeguard.

Diamonds, gold, and luxury goods remained significant, with import volumes rising to \$78.6 billion. However, their share in the import basket fell from 18.1 per cent to 11.6 per cent, indicating a shift in India’s import priorities. Imports of steel and other base metals like copper grew to \$46.8 billion, reflecting increased industrial and construction activity.

Agricultural imports reached \$32 billion, with a share of 4.7 per cent in FY2024, reflecting growing domestic demand for specific food products. Key imports are vegetable oil (\$15 billion), pulses, sugar, cashew nuts, and apples.

THE CHALLENGES

India faces a trio of external challenges that threaten its trade prospects. First, the US-China trade and tariff war, with Trump’s return in January, added further uncertainty.

Second, the European Union’s green laws, such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), set to impose a 20-35 per cent carbon tax from January 2026, and other European green regulations raise compliance costs for Indian exporters.

Third, India’s heavy reliance on China for industrial imports — accounting for 30 per cent of its needs — exposes critical sectors like electronics, chemicals, and renewable energy to supply chain vulnerabilities.

Domestically, high input costs, labour and logistics inefficiencies, and superficial manufacturing practices hinder India’s global competitiveness. Energy and financing costs in India are significantly higher than in China, making products like solar cells 40 per cent more expensive to produce domestically.

Rigid labour laws and reliance on foreign shipping routes inflate trade costs and timelines. At the same time, shallow ports force cargo through hubs like Colombo.

Additionally, sectors like electronics remain confined to assembly operations, relying on imported components. At the same time, labour-intensive industries such as garments and gems face stiff competition from low-cost countries.

To overcome these challenges, India must prioritise cost reductions in energy, logistics, and financing, implement labour reforms, and incentivise domestic production of critical inputs like solar cells and machinery. These measures are essential for transitioning from assembly-based exports to deep manufacturing and capturing emerging opportunities in global trade. These efforts are also crucial for realising India’s ambitious goal of reaching \$1 trillion in merchandise exports by 2030.

The writes is founder of Global Trade Research Initiative

“Chemical weapons have been used in Syria on multiple occasions and victims deserve that perpetrators that we identified be brought to justice and held accountable for what they did and that investigations continue,” Fernando Arias González, the OPCW secretary general said, adding “Our reports over the past few years have reached very clear conclusions and we hope that the new circumstances in Syria will allow this chapter to be closed soon”.

Assad has consistently denied using chemical weapons against his enemies.

In a virtual meeting the leaders of the Group of Seven have affirmed their commitment to the people of Syria and their support for an “inclusive Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition process”.

The Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the current dispensation in Damascus, is still a designated terrorist organisation by many in the West but its leader Abu Mohammed al Jolani has pledged a tolerant path.

The need of the hour in Syria is to find ways to pull that country out of its mess.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

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For a competition policy

With reference to “A case for a national competition policy” (December 16), in the absence of well-defined policy guidelines, the actions of regulator will be operating in a volatile situation leading inconsistency in regulation. CCI’s recent reforms in introducing the ex-ante measures in monitoring the anti-competitive practices from its earlier path of post-ante actions set a good example of how the systems failed due to absence of concrete policy guidelines.

It is high time that the abandoned national competition policy is revived.

Sitaram Popuri
Bengaluru

Ethical dilemma

This refers to ‘Corporates and ‘cancel culture’ (December 16). A company not getting involved in an employee’s domestic problems is a sensible HR policy. But the issue becomes complicated when it comes out in the public domain, where often the existing employees show sympathy to the

victim. In such cases the pressure mounts on the company to intervene.

Some companies do take action on the employee when they feel their image is being tarnished. But it is a slippery slope.

YG Chouksey
Pune

Case for green tourism

This is with reference to the article ‘India’s path to sustainable tourism’, (December 16). On embracing sustainable tourism practices, India can lead the way in

creating a greener and more responsible tourism sector. It requires a collective effort from government bodies, tourism industry stakeholders, local communities, and tourists themselves. Governments need to provide policy and regulatory support that incentivizes sustainable practices and sets clear guidelines. The tourism industry must take responsibility by adopting sustainable practices and offering eco-friendly options. Local communities need to actively

participate in decision-making and receive the benefits of tourism development. Lastly, tourists themselves should embrace responsible behaviour and support sustainable initiatives. By nurturing tourism sustainability, India can showcase its natural and cultural treasures while ensuring their preservation for future generations. Let’s all work together to make India the capital of Sustainable Tourism for travellers worldwide.

P Sundara Pandian
Virudhunagar

Raise alumni funding

Higher education institutes must reorient themselves

Jai Mohan Pandit

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in India, particularly public ones, have long relied heavily on government funding as their primary — perhaps the only — source of income. While these grants have been instrumental in sustaining affordable education and ensuring a minimum standard of quality, over-reliance on this model has created several challenges, such as limitations on institutional growth, innovation, flexibility, and autonomy.

This dependency has often stifled efforts to explore alternative revenue streams, like fundraising and industrial partnerships. Given the growing limits on government grants, the existing funding approach might not be viable in the long term.

Self-generated revenue enables HEIs to provide scholarships, foster innovation and, most importantly, offer autonomy over operations. A concerted effort that brings together alumni, corporate sponsors, and philanthropy is needed.

Although some institutions, such as the IITs and IIMs, have made progress in attracting philanthropic and alumni contributions, these efforts remain sporadic and underdeveloped. Unlike Western HEIs, where alumni engagement and private fundraising are considered core institutional functions, Indian HEIs are in the nascent stages of developing a culture of sustained external support.

PERIPHERAL ACTIVITY Fundraising in Indian HEIs is treated as a peripheral activity managed by faculty and staff already overburdened with significant academic and administrative workloads. This fragmented approach, combined with the absence of specialised fundraising offices or trained professionals, hampers the institution’s ability to build robust donor networks.

Robust alumni networks in the West support everything from scholarship programme to infrastructure development. But alumni programmes in India are typically underfunded, fragmented, and de-prioritised.

Effective alumni engagement hinges on comprehensive, up-to-date alumni records. Many Indian HEIs struggle with outdated alumni data. This is particularly true for institutions



FUNDING. Developing robust alumni networks vital

with long histories, where early alumni records may not have been digitised or centralised.

While digital engagement is increasingly recognised as a valuable tool for alumni outreach, many HEIs have yet to embrace it fully. This limits their ability to reach a geographically diverse alumni base. Most HEIs engage alumni through one-off events, such as reunions and alumni day, which often turn out to be decorative events; HEIs need ongoing engagement strategies.

Indian HEIs face challenges in generating funds through industry engagement due to constraints such as misalignment of goals and lack of professional human resources. While academics focus on long-term, fundamental research, the industry prioritises immediate, commercially viable outcomes, creating a dissonance between the two stakeholders. Many HEIs lack advanced research infrastructure and a dedicated professional team to manage industry relations effectively.

Adopting a triple-helix model, which emphasises collaboration among HEIs, industry, and government, also faces numerous challenges. A significant issue is the lack of an established entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Similarly, luring large-scale philanthropy from affluent businesspersons presents several challenges. Most HEIs need a strategic plan for cultivating long-term relationships with donors. Without a formal system in place, it is challenging to generate sustained philanthropic support.

Institutions must prioritise setting up specialised development and fundraising offices supported by qualified experts. This entails using an alumni network, establishing clear channels for interacting with donors and demonstrating the results of contributions through clearly defined projects.

The writer works at IGIDR. Views are personal

CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHA MISHRA

India’s renewable energy push is now an accepted narrative in any energy transition discussion. But there are also issues of delay in project implementation and Centre versus State challenges because of the powers that State governments have in the electricity sector.

Recently in the news was the indictment by a US district court of a 2019 tender floated by Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI), alleging that Adani Group Chairman Gautam S Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani, and six others had offered ₹2,029 crore (\$265 million) in bribes to Indian government officials.

Allegations were also made against certain State governments — the previous regime in Andhra Pradesh led by YS Jagan Mohan Reddy being one. This exposes the loopholes in implementation that cause inordinate delays in signing power purchase agreements (PPAs) and power sale agreements (PSAs).

Andhra Pradesh is critical in this story because its agreement to purchase 7,000 MW of solar power in 2019, when Chandrababu Naidu was in power, is the largest among the States involved here. On paper, both SECI and the Andhra Pradesh government are on the right. Thereafter, the Jagan government held up these projects. As a result, a PPA was finalised between SECI and the developer, but the PSA between the SECI and the State was held up.

Before moving further, let us understand the role of SECI. Technically, SECI is supposed to be an intermediary. It’s a Navratna central public sector undertaking dedicated to the development and expansion of renewable energy (RE) capacity in India.

SECI is one of the Renewable Energy Implementing Agencies (REIAs) of India and it has been facilitating market development and creating an ecosystem for RE by conceiving, prototyping, modelling as well as policy advocacy with innovative project configurations, such as solar-wind hybrid with or without energy storage, round-the-clock power supply, RE with assured peak power supply, and firm and dispatchable renewable energy (FDRE) to name a few.

These initiatives have been undertaken as part of various government schemes and SECI’s own initiatives, to provide RE towards meeting the ever-growing energy requirements of the nation. Since it came into existence in 2011 it has



REUTERS

established a pan-India presence in almost all States and Union Territories.

What went wrong this time? The developers were arguably in a hurry to implement the project, said an observer.

When the whole controversy came to light, the current government in Andhra Pradesh led by Chandrababu Naidu decided to tread cautiously. If the local government decides to cancel the agreement, it will end up paying a substantial amount. If it decides to go ahead with the project, the cost of the power to the end-consumer will be higher than the existing rates on account of the delay.

A way to deal with this is to narrow down the time lag between award and signing of PPAs and PSAs. Another way could be to strictly implement the

The Government should enforce renewable purchase obligations strictly so that Discoms procure renewables on time and do not give financial ill-health as an excuse

uniform renewable energy tariff so that there are no disputes on price.

ASSESS DEMAND

It may be argued that SECI and others should first assess the demand and then go for such contracts. Demand, however, cannot be artificially created. Any government push is short-term, unless driven by market forces. The government’s initiative of 24/7 power for all will reveal the actual power demand numbers hidden behind unscheduled and unregulated power cuts by States which claim to have surplus power. Once the demand is known, commissioning of any project will be easier to handle.

Another option is to have uniform tariff so that there are no challenges of price escalation if the projects get delayed. Earlier, SECI tried pooling of tariff once in six months but that didn’t work out since tariffs kept falling.

The only solution is the Government should enforce renewable purchase obligations (RPOs) strictly so that distribution companies (Discoms) procure renewables on time and do not give financial ill-health as an excuse.

A clear target has been set by the

Central Government for green energy. In fact, the Minister of New and Renewable Energy, Prahlad Joshi, after receiving record high capacity addition commitment from States and the private sector alike, has been quoted as saying that the ministry is gearing up for the next task of ironing out the challenges in the sector.

Recently, he announced that a dedicated task force comprising all stakeholders will be set up under his ministry in collaboration with the Ministry of Power to achieve the goal of 500 GW by 2030.

He emphasised the need to install 288 GW of renewable energy capacity over the next six years, requiring a substantial investment of ₹42 lakh crore, including transmission infrastructure. The minister called for the early finalisation of PPAs and strict enforcement of RPOs.

In the given situation, the way out is strict implementation of RPOs, which mandate that all electricity distribution licensees should purchase or produce a minimum specified quantity of their requirements from renewable energy sources. This will ensure a much fairer system.

India needs to resolve tricky demographic issues

Milind Kumar Sharma

Observations made by chief ministers of two southern States on the need to expand family sizes in a bid to arrest population ageing have sparked the debate around the demographic transition underway in India. Today, the country stands on the cusp of a seminal demographic moment. Having become the most populous nation, accounting for over a sixth of humanity, India is also among the youngest nations with a median age of 29 years and 65 per cent of its population below the age of 35 years.

Save for a brief period during the Emergency, India’s family planning paradigm has been largely underpinned by human development approach involving equitable access to education, healthcare, nutrition, employment opportunities, provisioning of birth control measures such as contraceptives including mass sensitisation and awareness drives, as opposed to the sledgehammer approach adopted by countries like China through their coercive diktats such as the “one child policy” norm.

Consequently, fertility rates have plummeted considerably over the past several years. Strikingly, all States barring Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh have witnessed their total fertility rate (TFR) declining below 2.1. A recent Lancet report suggests that TFR for the country will fall to 1.29 by 2050. According to the UN, India’s population growth rate has been steadily declining since the 1990s and in 2021 the average annual rate of change of population was barely 1 per cent. At this rate, India’s population will continue to grow, peak by 2060 and thereafter start to decline. Also “India ageing report 2023”, by UNFPA, postulates that the share of elderly (above 60 years) in total population would nearly double from 10.5 per cent in 2022 to 20.8 per cent by 2050.

AGEING POPULATION

Unsurprisingly, population ageing is much more pronounced in the southern States *vis-a-vis* northern States owing to the massive strides made in socio- economic development indicators ranging from health, nutrition, education, and employment. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare



ADVANTAGE. A young population

data indicates that TFR in Tamil Nadu is the lowest in the country at 1.4 followed by 1.5 in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Kerala and 1.6 in Karnataka, far below the national average of 2.0.

These developments have triggered a political frenzy in the South and understandably so. For, these States will be at the receiving end in terms of declining future economic growth potential and rise in inbound migration. But more worrying is a significant potential decline in resource transfers from the Centre, as also erosion of political representation in the Parliament upon the conduct of the next delimitation exercise. This could accentuate the already widening

trust deficit between the Centre and States, thereby severely straining the federal compact and eventually leading to “confrontationist federalism” instead of “cooperative federalism”.

Besides, this rapidly evolving uneven demographic landscape could also exacerbate inter-State migration — from the northern and eastern States to the more affluent southern States. This demographic rebalancing could become a recipe for social disharmony, economic slowdown, political disequilibrium, and constitutional complications unless managed properly.

Without a policy paradigm in place, regressive steps such as imposing restrictions on couples having less or no children from contesting polls or accessing welfare benefits could do more harm than good. In the longer run, India must also prepare itself for harnessing the “silver dividend by expanding safety nets, fostering care economy, silver economy, and support systems for the greying population.

The writer teaches in the Department of Production & Industrial Engineering, MBM University, Jodhpur. Views are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 17, 2004

States’ share in divisible tax pool may be hiked to 30.5 pc

States may receive a higher share of the Centre’s tax revenue kitty for the five-year period starting from April 1, 2005. The 12th Finance Commission is set to recommend an increase in the States’ share in the divisible pool of taxes from the existing 29.5 per cent (including the 1.5 per cent share on account of additional excise duty on three items) to 30.5 per cent, sources said.

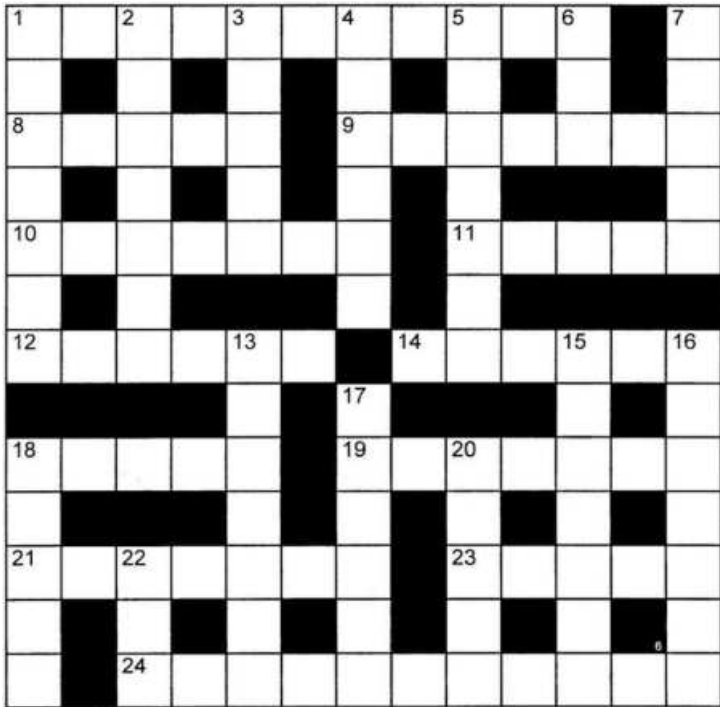
UTI Bank to split CMD post

The board of UTI Bank has decided to split the post of Chairman and Managing Director into two non-executive Chairman and Managing Director. However, no decision has been taken about who will hold these two positions after December 31, 2004, when the tenure of the present Chairman and Managing Director, Dr PJ Nayak, ends.

Will look into issue of raising interest rate on PF funds: PM

The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh said the Government would look into the issue of raising the interest rate payable on provident fund deposits. Dr Singh told reporters, “We have always said we will look into the matter but I cannot make any commitment because Parliament is in session.”

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2590



EASY

ACROSS

- Having close association with (4,2,5)
- Comments (5)
- Part of electric kettle (7)
- Hangs about (7)
- Tied (result) (5)
- Geographical area (6)
- Stops (6)
- Small biting insect (5)
- Stops functioning (5,2)
- Vexation, annoyance (7)
- Lift (5)
- Resultant happening (11)

DOWN

- Man in charge of dog (7)
- Earning as a clear profit (7)
- Publish (5)
- Oily, slippery (6)
- Later than expected (7)
- Female sheep (3)
- The Devil (5)
- Swarm over, infest (7)
- A sitting (7)
- Topmost (7)
- Type of cake (6)
- Scoffs at (5)
- Greek island (5)
- Part of circle circumference (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- To be in cahoots with somebody, fingers should be warm (4,2,5)
- Makes memoranda of what musician utters (5)
- Essential part of fire, say, to the Greeks (7)
- Loser is upset about it and hangs around (7)
- Tied, like a picture in crayon (5)
- One might be wrong to ignore this area (6)
- Doesn’t go on with lawsuits the East is involved in (6)
- Among them I’d gestured to it as a cause of irritation (5)
- Engine stops working, so one prepares to go home (5,2)
- Tea? Smile broadly that it should be cause of vexation (7)
- Put up more to come in one’s wage-packet (5)
- Study the order cards may take as a result (11)

DOWN

- Man with dog is right to go after the title (7)
- Getting – after paying tax – an open fabric (7)
- It is an edition for the children (5)
- Slippery as it may appear in the hair of the elderly (6)
- Deliveries from bowler awaited when payment is late (7)
- She puts in a sheepish appearance in every new enterprise (3)
- Poles getting around at a Devil (5)
- Invade somebody with words carried on to next line (7)
- During which those who stood take their seats (7)
- Presume such changes may be needed for the very highest (7)
- Victoria, for one, will make one behave like a parasite (6)
- Derides such simple garment as is made head-to-foot (5)
- Firm that ruffled fur on the island (5)
- Circle line held up in scenic railway (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2589

ACROSS 1. Salon 4. Heroism 8. High water mark 10. Spelt 11. Owns 12. Sign 16. Trace 17. Non-appearance 19. Surgeon 20. Sabot

DOWN 1. School outings 2. Leg 3. Newish 4. Hither 5. Rarity 6. Imagining 7. Makes ends meet 9. Gun-runner 13. Staple 14. Cavern 15. Debris 18. Nab

Interventionist policy

QCOs should not hurt Indian producers

The government has stated in recent years that India is taking a pragmatic approach to trade and economic integration. It has sought better utilisation of existing free-trade agreements and looked for new ones to sign. Partly this is because it recognises that, for manufacturing to grow, India must become part of global value chains. Yet, at the same time, it has introduced a new licence-permit system that traders in multiple sectors must deal with. The number of “quality control orders”, or QCOs, has multiplied. These restrict imports of goods unless various certifications are obtained, particularly from the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS). The government’s justification is that Indian consumers need to be protected from substandard goods; it is also likely the case that this is used informally to minimise the presence of Chinese manufacturing in Indian supply chains. But the fact is that a new set of non-tariff barriers have been erected and they are antithetical to consumer interests and hurt both traders and manufacturers.

Steel is a case in point. The industry is naturally concerned about the impact of overcapacity in China, which might render Indian-made steel uncompetitive. But steel dumping by China cannot be addressed through the overuse of QCOs. Orders have been issued for different kinds of steel in an arbitrary fashion. This has hurt other manufacturing companies that might require imported or speciality steel to produce their goods, including goods for export. Getting the BIS licence is an expensive and time-consuming process. Even if not covered by QCOs, importers are expected to get a “no objection certificate”. Many will simply make do with inferior-quality steel rather than jump through these hoops — which, in turn, renders them less competitive on both price and quality. This is not the way to build a world-class domestic manufacturing sector.

It also specifically harms small and medium enterprises. Larger companies making larger orders of import might find it cost-effective to deal with the required bureaucratic hurdles. But smaller companies will naturally find it more difficult. Thus, they will be rendered comparatively costly and their goods of poorer quality. Given that a government priority has been to expand the markets for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and enabling their entry into global value chains, the promulgation of a large number of QCOs seems counterproductive. Labour-intensive tradeable goods like textiles have suffered disproportionately as a consequence of QCOs in raw materials. They are now at the mercy of monopolistic producers of those materials within the country. This rash of new bureaucratic interventions in markets will not achieve the ends of protecting Indian industry, which will wither away without inputs. Instead, it will merely reduce investment in manufacturing in India because few will want to expand capacity when access to vital inputs is rendered uncertain, thanks to an arbitrary QCO regime.

The government can rightly be proud of its record of deregulation and reform. However, it is putting its achievements in jeopardy by reinstating a bureaucratic control regime in the name of combating substandard Chinese imports. The government had earlier said that QCOs would eventually cover 2,500 goods. This would effectively return India to autarkic foreign-trade policy, with catastrophic results for Indian productivity and quality, as well as for consumer welfare. A reconsideration of this undesirable turn to statism and intervention is overdue.

Declining interest

Political shift is affecting ESG investing

Environmentally and socially responsible investing, for a while after the pandemic, became fairly popular. Billions of dollars globally shifted into funds that promised to track environmental, social, and governance (ESG) indicators. Companies began to disclose details of their ESG footprint in order to access these funds — but also as a consequence of pressure from activist stakeholders. But it appears that this trend has reversed. According to *Bloomberg*, which used the data from research firm Morningstar, about \$24 billion has exited green-focused funds in particular in the first three quarters of 2024. And there are good reasons why that might get worse. Clearly, the markets believe it will: ESG-adjacent stocks, such as solar and wind, are underperforming the broader indices globally.

What could have driven this shift? Multiple factors are in play, but perhaps the most important is the political situation in the United States. President-elect Donald Trump has been quite clear that he does not see any need for any further climate action, and will likely roll back some of the efforts made by his predecessor, Joe Biden. But ESG had become divisive politically well before Mr Trump’s election. One of his associates, former pharmaceuticals entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, designed his entire public persona around attacking ESG investing as “woke capital”. Multiple states run by the Republican Party, including large and influential ones like Florida and Texas, have tried to legislate against ESG as far as they can. The government in Texas, an oil-rich state, has even sued ESG investors, claiming they are part of a conspiracy against the fossil-fuel industry. In the US, in fact, the high point of ESG investing was during the pandemic; money has been ebbing out of these funds in North America for about two years.

This is not great news for India and other developing countries, which have been hoping to increase the level of concessional private finance available for their green transition and for sustainable development. There are good reasons to be concerned that India’s own delays have caused it to miss the boat here. The government and regulators have been warned for over five years that it is necessary to put in place a proper taxonomy that defines and clarifies sensible green investing in India. A few committees have been formed, but bureaucratic inaction and crossed connections between multiple regulatory authorities have meant that not much has emerged. Billions of dollars in long-term investment have passed this country by as a result. India’s knee-jerk desire to reinvent the regulatory wheel — rather than, for example, simply building on existing taxonomies developed in the European Union and even in peer nations like Indonesia and Sri Lanka — has affected prospects. Not only will the guidelines for ESG investors emerge delayed but there is every reason to fear they will not be interoperable with those in the rest of the world. Simple and harmonised regulations and definitions are required to ease the flow of capital. There is still interest in sustainable investing, but India will have to work harder to cultivate it now. The government recently unveiled the taxonomy of green steel and more such efforts will be needed. Some new changes, including those at the recent climate summit in Azerbaijan, have opened up additional paths for concessional private finance. The government will need to invest time, energy, and attention in attracting sustainable private capital.

Development in the Nehru era

The policies of the first decade—and-a half of planned development are better characterised as Nehruvian Humanism



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The development policy implemented in the Nehru era (1950-64) has been the subject of criticism not just in politics, but also in the performance assessments presented by some economists. A sharp contrast is often drawn between the growth performance of about 4 per cent in the Nehru era and the 6 per cent experienced since the 1980s. But do note that the 4 per cent growth experienced in the Nehru era was a major structural change in an economy whose growth in the previous 100 years had been under 1 per cent. The comparable data available in the World Bank Database for the final years of the Nehru era (1961-64) show India with a gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 5 per cent, compared to the average of 4.3 per cent in low- and middle-income countries and the 5.2 per cent global average.

The real shortfall in development came after the Nehru era, when the severe food crisis in 1965 and 1966 disrupted development. Development effort was further disrupted by political turbulence arising from the split in the Congress, the political impact of the imposition of an emergency, and the victory and collapse of the Janata government. One must also note the deleterious development impact of the war with China in 1962 and the wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. But there was a shift to a higher average of 6 per cent growth after 1980-81.

This difference in growth between the Nehru era and the 6 per cent average experienced since 1980-81 is often attributed to the emphasis on import-substituting industrialisation in the Nehruvian era, which failed to exploit opportunities for labour-intensive export production that could have led to a faster growth in manufacturing employment. The main export-oriented possibility in 1951 was for mill-based textile production, and there the constraint was the strongly supported political movement to protect handloom weavers. Do note that the direction of pre-Independence corporate industrial development was very much oriented towards import substitution, and that led to demands for trade protection, a tendency that has never disappeared from our corporate sector’s outlook on development.

The basis for export pessimism in 1950 was also the stagnation in global trade growth in merchandise products in the preceding years, with trade valued at

\$58.5 billion in 1948, \$58.6 billion in 1949, and \$61.5 billion in 1950. The boom in global trade that led to export growth acceleration, particularly in East and Southeast Asia is more a post-1960 happening.

In 1950, the developed world showed limited interest in the prospects of developing countries. In the early 1950s, the countries of Europe and Russia were still in the process of recovering from the ravages of the Second World War. Even the US was focused on European recovery with the Marshall Plan. The development assistance of the World Bank started focusing on soft loans for developing countries only in the late 1950s, and the International Development Association for this purpose was set up in 1960.

Given this reality about the state of the global economy around the start of planned development, the choice of a domestic self-sufficiency-oriented economic strategy was the only available reliable choice.

A related criticism contrasts what is described as Nehruvian socialism with the market capitalism that is a current focus of development. It is true that during the Nehru era, the government put in a significant effort to develop public

sector enterprises, initially in sectors like steel and engineering, and a little later in chemicals, oil exploration and refining.

The public sector’s share in gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) rose from 22.7 per cent in 1950-51 to 47.7 per cent in 1960-61, including not just industrial investment but also heavy investment in irrigation projects and infrastructure. This was done mainly because of the assessment that the private sector’s motivation and capacity for investment in these areas was rather limited and that these areas mattered greatly for building up the potential for growth.

At the same time, the government’s policy towards the private sector was quite constructive. The only significant takeover of private sector entities occurred when life insurance companies were nationalised in 1956, as some corporate conglomerates were alleged to have directed their insurance company investments into their own conglomerate enterprises. Established private sector industries did expand during this period, even in areas like

steel, which was designated as public sector-preferred in the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956. The growth of the private corporate sector is reflected in their share of GFCF, which went up from 9.5 per cent in 1950-51 to 16.2 per cent in 1960-61. This is more or less the level that prevailed till 1990-91.

Apart from the physical infrastructure, the main substantial contribution of the Nehru era development policy is the expansion of higher education, particularly in technical education and in advancing research capacity. This goal was reflected in the establishment of the University Education Commission in 1948-49, the Secondary Education Commission in 1952-53, the National Council of Educational Research and Training in 1961, and the Kothari Commission (1964-1966). The Nehru era was also the time when the first IITs and IIMs were established and research capacity strengthened, particularly in agriculture, atomic research and space science. I believe this Nehru era emphasis on higher education, technology and research is what has led to the substantial availability of trained persons for the rapid growth of technology-oriented production and trade in India, which is a significant part of the rise in the growth rate in recent decades.

Development policy in the Nehru era aimed at not just economic growth, but also social transformation. The first Five-Year Plan argued clearly for “re-adaptation of social institutions and social relationships” and included, for instance, a widespread community development programme. In fact, the First Five-Year Plan states this clearly: “...the economic condition of a country at any given time is a product of the broader social environment, and economic planning has to be viewed as an integral part of a wider process aiming not merely at the development of resources in a narrow technical sense, but at the development of human faculties and the building up of an institutional framework adequate to the needs and aspirations of the people.” (Chapter 1, para 1, FFYP)

Even the objective of a socialist pattern of society in the Second Five-Year Plan was projected as a measure to reduce inequality. The data in the World Inequality database does show a significant fall from 40 per cent to 30 per cent in the share of the richest 10 per cent from 1950 to 1980, and a substantial rise after that to 55 per cent by 2010. Hence, the development strategy of the first decade-and-a-half of planned development is better characterised as Nehruvian Humanism rather than as Nehruvian Socialism.

As someone who is old enough to have grown up to adulthood in the Nehru era, I would like to emphasise the spirit of optimism that prevailed amongst us youngsters about India’s economic prospects and the possibility of social transformation. In fact, there was a fine sense of togetherness and cooperation that prevailed widely. You can see it reflected in the song you should hear: “*Saathi hath badhana...eke akela thak jayega, milke bojh uthana*”. Perhaps this song is the finest description of the Nehru era.

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US-China trade: Winners, losers, and lessons

The US-China trade war began in March 2018 when then-President Donald Trump introduced a 25 per cent import tariff on steel and 10 per cent on aluminium. The tariffs were later extended to cover hundreds of Chinese goods in an effort to address the trade imbalance and protect US industries.

Now, with President-elect Trump planning new tariffs on Mexico, Canada, China, and others, it is interesting to examine how America’s earlier tariffs and other trade restrictions affected global trade over the past six years. Who are the biggest winners and losers of the trade war? To find out, we tracked changes in global trade between 2017 (year before the trade war began) and 2023 (the latest available data). The results are surprising.

Rising US imports: When the US imposed tariffs, it expected fewer imports from China and the world, and a revival of American manufacturing. Between 2017 and 2023, US imports from China dropped by \$81.56 billion, from \$519.52 billion to \$437.96 billion. However, overall US imports rose by 31.51 per cent, increasing from \$2.31 trillion to \$3.04 trillion — an additional \$763.2 billion, nearly ten times the drop in imports from China. This highlights erosion of the US manufacturing competitiveness. Meanwhile, China expanded its global exports by an impressive \$1.1 trillion, from \$2.3 trillion to \$3.4 trillion. US exports grew by \$383 billion, from \$1.31 trillion to \$1.69 trillion.

Top gainers: While US imports from China fell, other countries stepped in to fill the gap, with Mexico benefiting the most. Between 2017 and 2023, Mexico’s exports to the US grew by \$164.3 billion, followed by Canada at \$124.0 billion, and Vietnam at \$70.5 billion. South Korea (\$46.3 billion) and Germany (\$43.0 billion) rounded out the top five. India came in sixth, increasing its exports by \$36.8 billion. Other notable gainers included Ireland (\$33.6

billion), Thailand (\$26.5 billion), Italy (\$23.8 billion), and Singapore (\$21.1 billion). Mexico, Canada, and Asean collectively accounted for \$427.5 billion, or 57 per cent of the growth in US imports during this period. Much of this growth was due to tariff-free trade via the US-Mexico-Canada agreement and the US-Vietnam free trade agreement (FTA).

China’s expanding role: Between 2017 and 2023, while China’s exports to the US declined, its exports to many countries grew significantly. Exports to Vietnam rose by 92.14 per cent to \$137.61 billion. South Korea saw a 45.06 per cent increase, Malaysia 109.46 per cent, and Mexico saw the highest growth at 126.88 per cent, reaching \$81.46 billion.

China used two strategies to bypass US tariffs. First, it exported raw materials and intermediates to Mexico, Vietnam, and other Asean countries, which processed them and exported to the US. Second, Chinese firms invested in manufacturing in these countries, particularly in the automotive, electronics, and heavy machinery sectors in Mexico, and electronics, textiles, and automotive sectors in Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Most of these exports to the US were tariff-free under the FTAs.

Gains to India: India experienced notable growth in its exports to the US, with an increase of \$36.8 billion — from \$50.5 billion to \$87.3 billion — between 2017 and 2023. This made India the sixth-largest contributor to the increase in US imports. Smartphones and telecom equipment drove India’s export growth, increasing by \$6.2 billion and accounting for 17.2 per cent of the total rise. Medicines contributed \$4.5 billion (12.4 per cent), petroleum oils added \$2.5 billion (6.8 per cent), and solar cells accounted for \$1.9 billion (5.3 per cent). Gold jewellery and lab-grown diamonds together added \$2.3 billion. Other exports, such as garments, motor vehicle parts, electric transformers, and trans-

mission shafts, also showed significant growth.

For sustainable exports, India must boost local value addition, as many exports to the US depend on imported inputs. For instance, most parts for assembling smartphones are imported. Solar cells for assembling solar panels come largely from China. And up to 70 per cent of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) for making medicines are imported from China.

The US must rethink tariff: To counter China’s trade dominance and boost US manufacturing and jobs, a strategy beyond high tariffs is essential. One effective approach is limiting the use of Chinese inputs in US imports by revising non-preferential rules of origin. This common tool in FTAs could apply to all imports and prove more effective than tariffs, which risk rerouting goods through other countries. Strengthening rules of origin in trade agreements can also block Chinese goods from bypassing tariffs through minimal processing elsewhere.

Tariffs should target critical sectors tied to technological leadership, such as semiconductors, renewable energy, and pharmaceuticals, instead of broad measures that are easily circumvented. These targeted tariffs can be paired with tax benefits or subsidies to encourage US firms to source from domestic or allied suppliers. Expanding the CHIPS Act to include more high-tech sectors, encouraging supply chain relocation to allied countries, and investing in critical inputs like rare earth minerals, APIs, and lithium-ion batteries are also vital. Increased funding for research and development in artificial intelligence, robotics, and green technologies will further ensure the US stays competitive in the future.

Conclusion: As Mr Trump plans new tariffs, the US must confront a stark reality: It played a key role in making China the factory of the world. Undoing this dependence, if possible at all, will take years of efforts and strengthening of domestic industries. The results cannot be achieved overnight.

The author is the founder Global Trade Research Initiative

The myths of energy transition



BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

Jean Baptiste-Fressoz has written one of the most important books on the challenge of global climate change, laying bare the self-serving and utterly cynical deflection of the climate discourse towards artfully calculated obfuscation and conjuring up a future of abundance decoupled from fossil fuel-based energy. This is a damning expose of governments and corporations, in particular the powerful fossil fuel conglomerates, from the developed, industrialised world that have adopted the rhetoric of a green future while reinforcing the entrenched under-

pinnings of the carbon economy. In a brief review it is impossible to capture the wealth of compelling data and historical perspective that the author deploys to support his analysis and conclusions but one will try to present his key findings.

The author rejects the notion of “energy transition”, which posits a historical, stage-by-stage shift from wood to coal to oil and natural gas, each more efficient and “cleaner” than the previous main source of energy. The inevitability of the next stage — a non-fossil future based on renewable and clean sources of energy — is presented as the promise of environmentally sustainable development. The book demonstrates the phenomenon of “energy symbiosis” rather than energy transition, pointing out that historically, at each stage the consumption of the fuel category of the previous stage has increased together with the newer fuel source.

Thus, in the early years of the oil boom, it was wooden derricks and barrels that were used before steel came in. The

volume of timber multiplied several times more than during the age when it was the main fuel source. In 2010, figures showed that in the past three decades, “gas consumption would triple, coal consumption would double and oil consumption would increase by 60 per cent.” By 2010, China alone was burning as much coal as the entire world in 1980.

In the past couple of decades, renewal power capacity has dramatically increased but in achieving this, so has the use of steel, of concrete and a slew of materials, all of them using fossil fuels in the production of solar panels, wind turbines and nuclear reactors. The production of electric vehicles may be expanding rapidly but the electricity they consume is coming mainly from burning fossil fuels and that certainly is the case in China. The final product may be consuming clean electric power, but the supply chain leading to it may be overwhelmingly carbon-based. As the author points out, “This symbiosis is the foundation of the entire material dynamic

of the 20th century. Most materials — wood, agricultural products, metals — are products extracted and transported using steel machines, manufactured using coal and powered by oil.” Decarbonisation of energy, even if it were possible in a shorter time-frame, does not translate into decarbonisation of material processing and production. The notion of energy transition obscures this uncomfortable reality.

The author assails what he calls, “dubious futurology” which seeks to “postpone the climate constraint into the future and into technological progress.” This is a ploy adopted by the corporate world, in particular the fossil fuel industry, to prevent consideration of the drastic action that is required to deal with the climate emergency and which would impact their profit margins. “It is always easy to imagine major changes when the time horizon is distant,” he writes. And that is precisely the

problem we are facing with the goal of net-zero by 2050. The energy transition away from fossil fuels, which is supposed to get us there, is really a delaying tactic — and it is succeeding.

The spread of electricity use is rightly welcomed as a key index of development. And renewable-based power and nuclear power are promoted as carbon-free

sources of electricity. But they are not sufficient. They should be promoted as they already are by India. In doing so, it is important to appreciate the compelling reality posed by the author, that our world “whose very materiality is and will be, for a long time to come, based on carbon.”

What emerges from the searching analysis presented by the book is a certain collective blindness that afflicts the world when dealing with the climate crisis. In this, the developing countries have been as complicit as the advanced

industrialised countries, though the former will be more impacted than the latter. They have tacitly accepted the terms of the climate discourse set by the advanced countries rather than fashioning their own narrative based on the true nature of the challenge we all confront. I must confess that as a one-time climate negotiator, I wish I had the benefit of the sharp perspective provided by this book rather than having to tilt at the wind-mills set up to draw the developing world into pathways that lead to unproductive dead-ends.

This book is a must-read for policymakers in India and in other key developing countries. It should also lead to a re-think of our own development strategies. One is more convinced than ever that India must pioneer a development pathway that does not mimic the Western world and China. Its success in doing so will itself be a significant contribution to dealing with the global climate crisis.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and a former chief negotiator for Climate Change (2007-10)

{ OUR TAKE }

The gains of going it alone

Why the AAP may have decided against an alliance with the Congress in Delhi polls

Days after AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal restated that his party will not align with the Congress in the upcoming Delhi assembly elections, the party released its final list of candidates. Last week, the Congress announced its first list of 21 candidates, with former MP Sandeep Dikshit set to take on Kejriwal in the New Delhi constituency. The two parties contested the general election as INDIA bloc allies, though the alliance had little impact in Delhi—the BJP won all seven seats with a 54.35% vote share as against the Opposition’s 43.08%. Evidently, the Delhi electorate votes differently in general and assembly elections. Conventional wisdom suggests that an alliance with the Congress could help the AAP, which is battling anti-incumbency, by preventing a division of the Opposition votes, but the parties have drifted apart after the parliamentary polls.

The AAP’s refusal of an alliance with the Congress could also be a tactical ploy, explained by the party’s transformation since its inception in 2013. Initially, the party positioned itself as a liberal, centrist alternative to both the Congress and BJP. That helped it win over voters dissatisfied with the Congress. An internal churn in the party and the extended tenure in office saw the party embrace Hindu communitarian politics—its silence on the Shaheen Bagh protests, 2020 communal riots in Northeast Delhi, Kejriwal’s endorsement of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, public chanting of the *Hanuman Chalisa*, and the announcement of free pilgrimages for senior citizens have helped reinforce the AAP’s image as a pro-Hindu party, allowing it to avoid a communal-secular political binary, which it believes benefits the BJP; any association with the Congress could help the BJP to pivot the debate in that direction. Without the Congress, the AAP hopes to turn the contest into a referendum of its record in office—the welfare schemes and promises, the latest being the Mahila Samman Yojana—and claim to be a victim of the Centre’s “vendetta politics” by showcasing the jailing of Kejriwal and his deputy Manish Sisodia (both are out on bail).

One way to look at the Delhi contest is to see it as a battle for the non-ideological Hindu votes. The AAP is better placed than the Congress on this front. Further, the party is keen to win over traditional Congress voters by getting Congress leaders to contest on the AAP ticket rather than having an alliance with the Congress party. It has also dropped 20 sitting legislators, making room for defectors from other parties. Electoral politics today is all about negotiation, not principles—and India’s youngest successful political start-up is indicating it knows how to play the game.

Wah Ustad! A global musician from India

As the disciple and son of Ustad Alla Rakha, Zakir Hussain inherited a formidable legacy. At 12, he performed with his father before an audience that included masters such as Pandit Kishan Maharaj, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, and Ravi Shankar. In later years, he would accompany Khan and Ravi Shankar, just as his father did. The exhilarating father-son duets were compositions of pure musical joy; between them, the tabla moved to the centre stage from the restricted space of an accompanying instrument. Like all great musicians, Ustad Zakir Hussain was sure of his genius, but as a refined percussionist, he took care not to overshadow the musician he accompanied. His mere presence could shift the gaze and, of course, lift the concert. Such was his charm and charisma. He was the perfect percussionist for the TV age. His youthful look, curls swinging as *bols* flew off the tabla, and stage presence complemented the joyous music he created. In many ways, he was the perfect successor to Ravi Shankar. In the 1960s, Ravi Shankar (with Alla Rakha) charmed the Woodstock and introduced a generation of westerners to Indian music. In the 1970s, a young Zakir Hussain teamed up with guitarist John McLaughlin and others to form the band, Shakti, which experimented with eastern and western musical traditions to achieve global acclaim. He also engaged selectively with cinema, acting and composing music (like Ravi Shankar). His rigorous training in the classical tradition meant he didn’t get carried away by accolades, including five Grammys. In that sense, he was perfectly poised to be the face of a generation eclectic in its musical preferences and exposed to global sounds. The outpouring of grief following his demise suggests that his music spoke to them—and others as well.

{ SIMPLY ECONOMICS }

Pramit Bhattacharya



The shaky foundations of Bangladesh’s growth

The lack of diversification in its economy, the small size of its middle class, and subdued wages have contributed to the current crisis. Aggregate GDP numbers put a gloss on it

Bangladesh’s political crisis caught India’s strategic community off guard earlier this year. India’s intelligence agencies were roundly criticised for failing to track the storm brewing in India’s neighbourhood. But they were not the only ones who missed the warning signs in that country. Another tribe completely misread Bangladesh—economists. Until recently, economists viewed Bangladesh as a paragon of development. They raved about its booming garment sector that employed millions of women and generated billions of dollars in export earnings. Some economists argued that India should follow the “Bangladesh growth model” to boost exports, create more factory jobs in the country, and raise the country’s female workforce participation rates. Noah Smith, a popular economic commentator, declared in 2021 that Bangladesh was the “new Asian Tiger”.

By 2022, Bangladesh’s garment-led growth engine had run out of steam. Struggling to pay for its imports, it approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout package. As this column pointed out then (“*The great divergence across South Asia*”, August 9, 2022), India was the only large economy in South Asia that didn’t need an IMF bailout in the wake of the pandemic. Pakistan and Sri Lanka also dialled IMF for help. The economic bailouts were followed by political upheavals in these countries. Economists were so enamoured with Bangladesh’s impressive growth numbers that they failed to check beneath the hood. They missed the dark underbelly of Bangladesh’s garment industry. Bangladesh became a part of the global garment value chain in the 1980s when East Asian entrepreneurs were scouring for alternate production bases, given rising labour costs in their own countries. Ethnic strife in Sri Lanka forced them to look for other low-cost locations. Bangladesh’s military regime appeared to be pro-business and had crushed labour unions in the country. So, it seemed a lucrative alternative. Retired military officers and bureaucrats based in Dhaka and Chittagong were able to stitch up partnerships with East Asian garment producers. Since they were part of the entrenched elite, they were able to

develop close ties with the two major parties—Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—during Bangladesh’s democratic transition in the early 1990s. By the time garment exports boomed in the late 1990s, the Bangladeshi deep state had developed a vested interest in the success of the industry. Several politicians from the two main parties owned stakes in garment firms and gained massively from the boom. Since then, the AL and the BNP have fought intense battles for political supremacy, with their cadres clashing frequently on the streets, and outside polling booths. Yet, they did not hurt the garment industry. Even during *hartals* and shutdowns that paralysed the rest of the country, garment production continued apace. Not just that, the garment sector was exempted from standard compliance measures. Instead, the garment lobby group Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) was granted the status of a self-regulatory organisation. BGMEA issues utilisation certificates (for duty free imports) and certificates of origin (the proof that a garment has been made in Bangladesh) to its members, without any involvement of State agencies. It has also set up arbitration committees to settle disputes between its members. It has ensured that factory inspections are minimal, and rules relating to safety



Economists were so enamoured with Bangladesh’s impressive growth numbers that they failed to check beneath the hood. They missed the dark underbelly of Bangladesh’s garment industry.

AFP

standards are rarely enforced. By winning over the political class, BGMEA has ensured that efforts to raise minimum wages, or to form trade unions, are rarely successful. The garment lobby has effectively captured key organs of the State, the Bangladeshi economists Mirza Hassan and Selim Raihan wrote in a 2017 research paper. No other industry was able to exert such influence. And no other industry grew similarly. Bangladesh’s economy became a one-trick pony, with garments accounting for most of its exports. The post-pandemic slowdown in global demand for garments exposed the weakness of the Bangladeshi growth strategy. Had economists been paying attention to the evolution of Bangladesh’s political economy, they would have been more sceptical of the Bangladesh “growth model”. They would have paid more attention to Bangladesh’s weaknesses: The lack of diversification in its economy, the small-sized middle class, and subdued wages. Instead, they relied on an aggregate

index of economic performance—the gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate. Although GDP growth is an important metric, it can sometimes hide more than it reveals. And in this case, the GDP numbers are suspect. After the interim government took charge earlier this year, it appointed a committee of economists to prepare a white paper on the state of Bangladesh’s economy. The committee found that the GDP numbers may have been grossly overstated. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics manipulated data sources and the GDP-estimation methodology to overstate growth numbers, the committee said. Even population figures were deliberately kept low to overstate per capita income estimates, the committee found. Bangladesh’s corrected per capita income figure might be around 20% lower than India’s. Economists will have to find another growth model now!

Pramit Bhattacharya is a Chennai-based writer. The views expressed are personal

IIT Madras has a digital human brain atlas ready

The complexity of the human brain has always presented one of the greatest challenges in science. Neurological disorders such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, and epilepsy affect millions of people worldwide, yet we still know relatively little about their underlying causes. Existing treatments are often expensive, difficult to access, and only modestly effective. This leaves millions of patients and families facing daunting uncertainty, as well as health care systems strained by the burden of care. At the same time, the rapid advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) are transforming industries and creating new opportunities, yet AI still pales in comparison to the efficiency, adaptability, and learning capacity of the human brain. Despite its ability to process massive datasets and perform specific tasks at superhuman speeds, AI systems remain energy-intensive and lack the flexibility that comes naturally to human cognition. If we could better understand how the brain works—its adaptability, efficiency, and ability to process information—we could revolutionise not only the treatment of neurological diseases but also the future of AI.



Vivek Wadhwa

This is where the work being done at IIT Madras comes in. By creating the world’s most detailed digital human brain atlas, the researchers at IIT Madras are embarking on a journey that could fundamentally change how we approach both medicine and AI. This digital brain atlas will map the human brain at an unprecedented level of detail, providing insights into its structure, connectivity, and the underlying mechanisms that make human cognition so unique. The brain is estimated to be made up of approximately 80 billion neurons, with trillions of connections forming a network of incomprehensible complexity. Mapping this network has long been a dream of neuroscientists, but existing tools have been limited in their ability to provide a clear, detailed picture of how the brain is structured and how its different regions communicate with one another. The team at IIT Madras, however, is changing that. Their project involves slicing human brains into ultra-thin sections—10,000 slices per brain—each captured at tens of gigapixels resolution, resulting in a 3D, fully digital model of the whole brain. This process generates three petabytes of data per brain, creating a dataset that offers unprecedented insights into the inner workings of this most complex organ. In an exciting new development, the Sudha Gopalakrishnan Brain Centre at IIT Madras has released DHARANI, the first-ever 3D high-resolution imaging dataset of the human foetal brain. Featuring over 5,000 sections at cellular resolution, this groundbreaking dataset offers researchers a detailed view of early brain development. Remarkably, the team achieved this at less than one-tenth the cost of similar projects in the West. This achievement, led by Mohanasankar Sivaprakasam, professor in department of electrical engineering at IIT Madras and head of the Healthcare Technology Innovation Centre (HTIC), a joint ini-

tiative of IIT Madras and department of biotechnology (DBT), ministry of science and technology, sets the stage for major advancements in neuroscience and foetal medicine, with potential applications ranging from early diagnosis of developmental disorders to understanding the origins of neurological diseases. The potential applications of this research are vast. By studying the brain at this level of detail, scientists will gain new insights into how neurological diseases develop, what biomarkers signal their onset, and how various treatments affect brain function over time. The digital brain atlas could help researchers identify early indicators of diseases like Alzheimer’s, enabling earlier diagnosis and more effective interventions before symptoms become severe. This is particularly important in countries like India, where access to expensive diagnostic tools is limited and millions of people go undiagnosed until it is too late for treatment to make a meaningful difference. The affordability aspect is central to the project’s mission, with the team focused on making their tools and insights available at a fraction of the cost, democratising access to this critical information and ensuring it benefits patients everywhere. The brain atlas also represents a new model for innovation in India, where affordability and scalability are essential. For years, much of the cutting-edge research in fields like neuroscience and AI has been concentrated in the West. IIT Madras is proving that India has the talent and creativity to not only participate in but lead the next wave of breakthroughs. International collaborations with institutions like the University of California underscore the global significance of this work. India’s ability to innovate at lower costs gives it a unique advantage in addressing global problems. If solutions can work in India, where resources are often stretched thin, they will be effective everywhere. This democratisation of science and technology is central to the mission of the brain atlas project. Transformative work like this is made possible by visionary donors like Kris Gopalakrishnan, co-founder of Infosys, who has dedicated his post-corporate career to supporting research with global impact. His investment in the Sudha Gopalakrishnan Brain Centre reflects a belief that India can lead the world in creating affordable, scalable solutions for some of humanity’s greatest challenges. Witnessing the groundbreaking work at IIT Madras firsthand early this year also inspired me to collaborate with them and relocate my company, Vionix Biosciences’ R&D to India, leveraging their expertise to develop advanced diagnostic technologies. Their commitment to making cutting-edge science accessible to all aligns perfectly with the mission of democratising innovation. These are shining examples of how grand visions, rooted in affordability and global collaboration, can transform industries and improve lives.

Vivek Wadhwa is CEO, Vionix Biosciences. The views expressed are personal

{ ANURA KUMARA DISSANAYAKE } SRI LANKAN PRESIDENT



I will not allow Sri Lanka to be used in a manner that is detrimental to the interest of India. The cooperation with India will certainly flourish



With Zakir Hussain, tabla started on its solo journey

A baba came to Ustad Alla Rakha’s house the day his wife delivered their first son. As per the family’s tradition, the boy should have carried the surname Qureshi, but the *baba* said the boy must be named after Hazrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, as the boy might become a *fakir* (wandering ascetic) in future. The boy who would have been Zakir Qureshi, thus became Zakir Hussain, who, over half a century, brought an evergreen musical spring to the tabla. In the process, he also gave a distinct identity and individuality to the tabla artist, who until then had mostly been relegated to the role of an accompanist. Upon hearing of Hussain passing away, I was reminded of a tribute by American drummer-musician Dave Grohl to John Bonham, one of western percussion’s all-time greats: “John Bonham played the drums like someone who didn’t know what was going to happen next—like he was teetering on the edge of a cliff. No one has come close to that since, and I don’t think anybody ever will. I think he will forever be the greatest drummer of all time.” In a 1964 interview, Ustad Ahmed Jan Thirakwa, possibly the first acclaimed *tabla* soloist, contested an assumption that *placed* tabla further to pakhavaj in Indian percussion evolution: The origin of tabla has always attracted contesting views. Be that as it may, the instrument remained the principal percussion ingredient in North Indian folk and classical music since the 18th century, and Hussain will be remembered as its most cherished global face. In the early 20th century, a trinity revolutionised mridangam playing in South Indian classical music: Palakkad Mani Iyer, Palani Subramanya Pillai, and Ramanathapuram CS Murugabhoopathy. All three started giving solo performances along with accompanying vocalists. We see a parallel in the Hindustani classical tradition in Ustad Alla Rakha, Pandit Samta Prasad, and Pandit Kishan Maharaj. Of course, Thirakwa towered as a visionary predecessor. But all these artists, whether in the North or the South, were mostly heard by seasoned or skillful classical music lovers. However, it was Hussain who expanded the audience of Indian percussion phenomenally. His teen *taal* only had 16 beats, but its appeal among the masses made it a favourite



S Gopalakrishnan

of different kinds of listeners. What Pandit Ravi Shankar did with the sitar, Hussain did through the tabla. While the former had the *raga* as a bridge to ears not tuned to Indian classical music, Hussain had the *tala*. Both charmed the West as well and brought a stamp of universality to the soundscape of Indian *swaras* and *talas*. Hussain got all accolades that mark a successful Indian classical musician’s life: Padma Shri in 1988, Padma Bhushan in 2002, and Padma Vibhushan in 2023. He also won five Grammys. Ustad Zakir Hussain belonged to the Punjab gharana, one of the six major traditions in tabla. The Punjab *gharana*’s lineage places Lal Bhavanidas as its founder, followed by Mian Qadir Baksh-I. Hussain’s father, Alla Rakha, was the disciple of Mian Qadir Baksh-II. Alla Rakha was a staff artist with the Lahore Radio Station in 1936 and shifted to Bombay in 1938. Hussain blossomed into early fame because of his *talim* under a very strict, disciplined, and talented *Guru-baap* (teacher-father). “I think I was about nine. He slapped me because I had broken my third finger while playing cricket. And that was a no-no as far as he was concerned. I was going to use those hands to play the tabla. When he slapped me, I had tears in my eyes. He gave me a hug and got me a plate of *dahi batata puri* from a nearby *Sindhi chaat* shop,” he once told author and TV producer-director Nasreen Munni Kabir. “My father used to wake me up at 3 am. He would teach me vocally. We didn’t play (the tabla). We just sang rhythms back and forth. That’s how we spent the hours between three and six in the morning,” he added. Hussain’s persona had elements of the dance of the dervishes, a contagion of happiness and celebration without affecting the dervish’s personality. A detached *fakir* shows through in his flamboyant artistic life. Not surprisingly, he found it funny when women readers of a magazine (*Gentleman*) voted him as the sexiest man in India. Hussain was loved not only by connoisseurs but also by lay listeners, in India and abroad. In this respect, he has no parallel among Indian classical musicians.

S Gopalakrishnan is a writer, broadcaster, and founder of the podcast, Dilli Doli. The views expressed are personal

OUR VIEW



Cooperative federalism can revive farm reforms

The Centre's last big moves to reform agriculture were rolled back. Getting Indian states to effect change is now worth a try. It may help soften farmer resistance to market orientation

India's farm sector has long been bonded to the state. The supply of major crops is responsive not to price signals that reflect actual demand, but mostly to minimum support prices (MSPs) set by the government, which is widely seen by farmers as their buyer of first and last resort. To reduce the state's role, enable private procurement of farm produce and grant market forces more space to shape outcomes, the Centre enacted a trio of laws in 2020, but only to roll them back in the face of farmer resistance. The first law would have let farmers sell their harvest anywhere, not just at state-regulated wholesale *mandis* under Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs). With the monopoly of local intermediaries gone, direct buyer-seller deals would have meant efficient price discovery (at least on paper), and the rise of national markets for each crop. The second law, by lifting movement and storage curbs on cereals, pulses, onions, potatoes and other essentials, would have acted in conjunction with the first. The third law laid out a legal framework for contract farming, so that farmers could strike deals with food processors and other private procurers. But then, rumours of state procurement being axed for farmers to be put at the mercy of private bullies got in their way, and all three enactments were repealed in November 2021. Can the spirit of cooperative federalism achieve what the Centre's legislative effort could not? A recently published draft policy for agricultural marketing reform suggests that such an attempt is afoot.

Among the brickbats aimed at the 2020 push for a structural rejig was the charge that how farm output is marketed is a state-level subject of legislation. The revised policy approach not only tries to persuade states to do their own

reforms, it takes a cue from the GST model to propose a panel of agriculture ministers who could work out how best to converge towards a single market with all rules in harmony. The draft policy urges states to ease restrictions and enable market purchases by private parties, though it also covers a digital upgrade that can improve existing mechanisms, even as it envisions an all-India market portal on the internet with live data-feeds and useful tools for farmers. On contract farming, the draft advises its promotion as a way for farmer-producer organizations to strike supply deals with bulk buyers at locked-in prices. Given the broad thrust of the draft policy, it's no surprise that critics have called it a cynical endeavour to resurrect dead laws, abridge the autonomy of states and expose farmers to exploitation by large enterprises.

And that's the crux of the matter: the fear of a few profit-motivated bulk buyers replacing a public buyer. To assuage this worry, India's antitrust authority could make it clear it will not let power gaps crush the interests of farmers. But even the Centre must pledge not to distort market forces. Unfortunately, the government's use of export barriers as price-control tools has fanned suspicions among cultivators that their interests count for little. Yet, India simply has no option but to revitalize farming for the sake of farmers and the rest of the economy. Market reforms could plausibly be rekindled by talks among political leaders, which is why the idea of a politically diverse panel holds some hope. A key challenge is to convince farmers of sufficient rivalry among would-be buyers of their output. A test of competition sufficiency in one reformist state could inform the approach of others. Fixing Indian farming was always going to be a long haul. Let's not give up the quest.

Geopolitics has played a massive role in the rise of 'Master States'

The success of states has so far been driven largely by their ability to leverage geopolitical upheavals



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Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must"—Thucydides.

Nothing describes the evolution of the Westphalian system of 'nation states' that humanity has adopted better than Thucydides' pithy observation in his *Melian Dialogue*. This system is governed not by rules or by any manner of a 'global rules-based order,' but by an oligarchy of 'Master States' that, by dint of their dominance of military and economic affairs, create and impose rules as they deem fit in their own interests.

While military strength is important, the entry ticket to this elite club of 'Master Nations' is governed by economic influence. This means that less developed countries face an unequal global economic system where the rules are stacked against them and in favour of a few powerful states that shape it to their own advantage.

But every once in a while, geopolitical chaos roils this oligarchy and offers other countries a ladder to climb out of their pit of economic weakness and join the top ranks.

The fundamental problem that a poor country faces is a lack of resources (capital, raw material, technology and others) that can be used for production,

coupled with weak access to markets where these goods can be sold freely to generate surpluses. The old Master States of Europe, as founding members of an oligarchy, solved their resource and market problem through geopolitical chaos. They led a wave of pillage, plunder and conquest in Asia, Africa and the 'new world' to generate surpluses that enriched and empowered them. The British fine-tuned this formula, with their colonies serving as sources of cheap raw material and labour and also as large markets for their products. While early industrial-age innovation certainly played a role in Britain's success, the Raj helped it consolidate its authority as the world's reigning hegemon.

Countries that came late to the global imperial project have used more innovative geopolitical operations to succeed. America, for instance, could not resort to empire building because of its inherent inconsistency with its Constitution and the fact that most of the world had already been colonized by European powers, but it had no qualms using slavery to cover its labour shortage. It also used geopolitical chaos in the 'old world' of Europe to brazenly steal European technology while protecting its manufacturers with high tariff walls. The new world began to attract European and British capital for infrastructure development.

The English, who seemed to have developed a misguided sense of overconfidence and had pivoted to free trade, perhaps on the assumption that their manufacturing might could not be challenged, looked on indulgently as the US came up with its own factory innovations for mass production, which sent it barreling towards success and power. This model would be copied to some extent by another power. But more on that later.

While America was well on its way to joining this elite club by the start of the 20th century, it was the geopolitical upheaval of World War II that put

America at the head of the top table.

The US economy generated massive surpluses by supplying war materiel to its allies and storming the war-front after Japan's bombing of its Pearl Harbour. By the end of the war, its ally France was shattered and Britain was economically exhausted.

No longer able to uphold the value of the sterling, a weary Britain passed the crown to the US, whose entry had turned the war's tide against Germany and Japan. This made the US the world's top power, while the arrangements forged at the 1944 Bretton Woods huddle affirmed the dollar's new status as the world's principal trade currency.

The post-war rise of Germany and Japan can be attributed partly to the war's repercussions.

The US generously funded a Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and West Germany served as the West's bulwark against Soviet expansionism as the Cold War got underway.

To keep Japan under its influence, the US not only took charge of its security, but helped the Japanese economy export its way to prosperity. The US sourced massively from Japan during the Korean war and continued to do so afterwards, endowing Japan with capital, technology and management know-how that formed the basis of the latter's success (though Japan made a few factory innovations of its own; think of just-in-time operations).

The US also lobbied to get Japanese exports market access throughout the world. While Britain and others refused to give Japanese exports access and 'most favoured nation' status, the US opened its own market to Japanese products. The rest is history.

The rise of 'Master States' clearly owes as much to geopolitics as it does to other factors. The economic success of almost every such state so far has in large part been driven by its ability to harness geopolitical chaos in its favour and obtain favourable terms.



GUEST VIEW

Notify data protection rules: India can't afford a delay

SRIDHAR GANAPATHY



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A few days ago, Signzy, a popular Know Your Customer (KYC) verification service used by India's top banks and fintech firms, was affected by a cyber attack that may have exposed the sensitive personal information of millions. Our lack of safeguards for data that businesses collect and process is an urgent problem waiting to be addressed. Major data breaches over the past four years include the exposure of personal and sensitive data of citizens held by the government (covid data from ICMR), airlines (Air India and Akasa), a major health insurer (Star Health), an ed-tech firm (Unacademy), financial intermediaries (JusPay and Upstox) and other consumer-facing internet firms (BigBasket and RentoMojo).

India's internet adoption continues at a blistering pace. We could have 900 million active users by 2025, with world-leading levels of app downloads and content consumption. Both the government and private sector are betting on digital channels to strengthen service delivery and reach new

markets. Existing internet businesses with large customer bases are turning to ad-supported business models in pursuit of sustainability, while states use WhatsApp to facilitate citizen-centric public services. These developments mean internet users have richer-than-ever digital footprints.

Individuals navigating the digital economy must increasingly deal with interfaces powered by artificial intelligence (AI). As businesses test the premise that AI-led automation will cut costs and enhance service levels, consumers are forced to share information with AI chatbots for everything from purchases to grievance redressal. AI's lure as a productivity enhancer means that unsuspecting consumers are sharing confidential personal information for financial planning, mental health support and other services.

India's Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act was passed six years after the Right to Privacy verdict in 2017. That landmark Supreme Court ruling was followed by an initial draft bill proposed by the Justice Srikrishna Committee in 2019, a Joint Parliamentary Committee report and revised draft in 2021, a withdrawal of that draft in 2022, and then a new bill that was eventually passed by Parliament in August 2023. Since then, there have been discussions and hints

about planned penalty limits, potential transition periods, enforcement mechanisms and many missed deadlines to notify the DPDP Act's rules, but no progress has been made that's publicly known. Announced before the 2024 general elections as part of the government's 100-day action plan, individuals and businesses still await clarity on what this new legislation holds.

The Digital India Act, touted as a law to cover everything from social media regulation to AI governance, and the national cybersecurity policy last updated in 2013 are both essential to India's data governance framework, but haven't seen progress in the past four years. Efforts by telecom authorities to curb spam and frauds have been in the works since 2021 and are yet to be fully implemented. This is an indication of the intensive engagement, adaptation and refinement needed to roll out a system that works for India's scale and diversity of users.

Businesses will need a substantial transi-

tion period to comply with the rules once they are notified; most countries opt for 24 months (except China), so the Act may be fully in effect only after 2027 in India. Companies will need to assess gaps in how they currently collect and process data and the cost of complying with the DPDP Act, and then put in place systems to follow the rules while minimizing customer-service disruption. Regular audits and data breach reporting are key requirements of the Act that will pose challenges for small businesses with resource constraints.

Apart from businesses, the government too will need to tweak its policy. Global experience has shown that arriving at the right balance of effective protection and a low compliance burden requires consultation with stakeholders and feedback from them. Countries have increased financial penalties for non-compliance, strengthened accountability requirements and enhanced the investigative power of their data-protection authorities as they learn from the transition

period. It could also lead to a revision of foundational concepts of data classification or provide new protections, like the right to data portability. This is complicated by the need for data protection to work in harmony with policies in other areas, such as consumer protection, competition, cybersecurity and international cooperation.

The government's proposed measures in the DPDP Act include age verification for minors, a contentious topic that has seen experiments ranging from self-reporting a date of birth before accessing a service—mostly ineffective—to excessive and invasive modes such as AI-based age verification through photos or KYC checks. 'Deemed consent' provisions enable the processing of a user's data without explicit consent under specific conditions, and if combined with the many exemptions made for the state, these may hollow out the protections for vulnerable groups who have little choice but to provide their data to the government for social protection and other essential services.

The delay in India's notification of draft rules imposes a high and invisible cost on people's privacy. Their rollout must be prioritized to prepare the online ecosystem and institute an effective data protection regime in the country.

Rising instances of data attacks have made it imperative that our privacy shield is quickly put in place

The Swiss confusion

Constantly varying interpretations of treaty provisions can potentially dent India’s image

SWITZERLAND’S DECISION TO suspend the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) treatment for India under the two countries’ 30-year-old double-taxation avoidance agreement (DTAA) from January 1 shows that as far as India is concerned, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Despite the rapid changes in the external environment, the difference in understanding or interpretation of the country’s laws and rules by companies, tax administration, and judiciary has remained constant. The result is there for all to see: India’s reputation as an attractive investment destination has taken quite a few knocks because of its unpredictable, ever-changing tax rules and their interpretation. Though in a different context, the storm over Vodafone and Nokia tax dispute is still cited by many foreign investors as shining examples of India’s tax arbitrariness.

The Swiss government’s move follows the Supreme Court of India’s ruling last year that the MFN clause doesn’t automatically trigger when a country joins the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) if the Indian government signed a tax treaty with that country before it joined the organisation. This view in a case involving dividend payment by Nestle India was at variance with Switzerland’s stand that the MFN clause applies automatically to countries that joined the OECD after 1994. As a demonstrative effect of its belief, Switzerland unilaterally reduced the tax rate on dividends for Indian firms from 10% to 5%, citing treaties India signed with Lithuania and Colombia, which became OECD members in 2018 and 2020 respectively. The Indian government, however, felt that the MFN clause applies only to countries that were OECD members in 1994, when the treaty was signed. India also argued that MFN benefits are not automatic and require explicit notification—a stand the SC agreed to.

The immediate implication of the move will be a higher tax burden on Indian firms operating in Switzerland, reducing their competitiveness compared to businesses from countries still benefiting from MFN provisions. If disputes over MFN interpretations persist, Indian businesses could face similar challenges in other jurisdictions as well. Both Switzerland and Indian government officials have, however, put up a brave face and said the DTTA dispute should have no impact on any other treaties under international law concluded between Switzerland (independently or under the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) framework and India. The agreement signed with the four-nation EFTA bloc is a unique free trade agreement, as it includes a binding commitment of \$100 billion investment and the creation of one million direct jobs in India by companies from those four countries over the next 15 years. An external affairs ministry spokesman also said that the double taxation treaty with Switzerland may require renegotiation in view of its trade pact with the member states of the EFTA.

One has to wait for the validity of these assertions, but the short point is India should avoid the kind of confusion that was visible in the case of the DTAA with Switzerland. In this context, the government would do well to listen to think tank Global Trade Research Initiative, which stressed the need for India to adopt a more consistent and strategic approach to international taxation treaties. Proactive negotiations to clarify and harmonise interpretations of treaty provisions are essential to safeguard Indian firms’ interests abroad. Additionally, India must ensure that its treaty frameworks reflect contemporary business realities, particularly in the digital and service sectors, to reduce tax uncertainties.

Mega deals won't lead M&A rebound under Trump

US BANKERS ARE rubbing their hands at an expected boom in dealmaking under a market-friendly President-elect Donald Trump next year. But scratch the surface and it is apparent that the mergers and acquisitions to come are far more likely to be among smaller companies. Mega deals won’t lead the way.

Denis Coleman, the chief financial officer of Goldman Sachs Group Inc., summed up the optimism on Bloomberg TV last week. He expects the coming change of leadership at the Federal Trade Commission, one key antitrust regulator, to remove some of the headwinds to takeovers and help improve “CEO confidence and unlock more investment, more activity and provide a more favourable strategic backdrop.”

However, Trump’s populist brand of Republicanism retains a strong dislike of the power of big companies, embodied by his Vice-President-elect JD Vance. The incoming administration’s pick to replace the staunchly progressive Lina Khan in running the FTC is a Republican lawyer called Andrew Ferguson, who joined the agency in April. His work suggests he’s no friend of big tech, with his initial moves including a call for an investigation into censorship and bans of some users on social networks.

The antitrust division of the Justice Department, meanwhile, is set to be led by Vance’s former economic policy adviser, Gail Slater, suggesting it too will maintain a tough line on corporate monopoly power.

Over the past three years, the share of global deals worth more than \$10 billion has been relatively low by historic standards at less than 20% of volume in many quarters, according to data compiled by UBS, while transactions in the \$2 billion to \$10 billion range have been more than 30% in several quarters. That trend is set to continue.

Legal battles over deals in the US have also become more common, which can mean delays in closing transactions and extra costs – and that could deter chief executives. “Courts have been taking a bigger role in deciding the outcome of contested deals, which can take more time, and that is likely to remain,” according to Richard Casavechia, UBS’s head of global banking in the US.

Under Joe Biden’s presidency, the FTC and DoJ blocked a string of deals and pursued investigations against the existing powers of big companies with antitrust court cases, particularly in technology. Bankers say that activist stance put a chilling effect on proposals for deals that large companies might otherwise have tried to do, and helped scupper some that they did attempt, such as Alphabet Inc.’s offers for Wiz Inc. and HubSpot Inc.

Smaller deals, though, may flourish. Regional banking, for example, is one area ripe for consolidation after the damage done by high interest rates and the deposit flight to big banks during 2023. Many of America’s more than 4,000 smaller lenders need to scale up so that they can appear sturdier, attract more deposits and afford the technology investment needed to modernize their services and run more efficiently.

Deals are most likely among banks below the threshold of \$100 billion in assets at which stricter regulation, capital and liquidity requirements kick in. New York Community Bancorp, now renamed Flagstar Financial Inc., came close to collapse in early 2024 because of the tougher oversight of its balance sheet that came with leaping into the big league after two quick acquisitions boosted its assets.

Bob Diamond, former CEO of Barclays Plc, has a venture focused on US banking consolidation and reckons there’ll be deals among banks with \$50 billion of assets and below. Those banks can gain scale but not break that \$100 billion barrier. Over the next few years, deal making will shrink to the roughly 4,500 banks in the US down to just 1,000 to 2,000 lenders, he said at a recent Financial Times banking conference.

In banking and elsewhere, while the activism of US antitrust regulators might not disappear entirely it’s likely to become friendlier to companies that are not yet giants. Investment bankers have good reasons for optimism – but their bonuses will more likely come from an accumulation of smaller deals than from single outsized paydays.



PAUL J DAVIES

Bloomberg

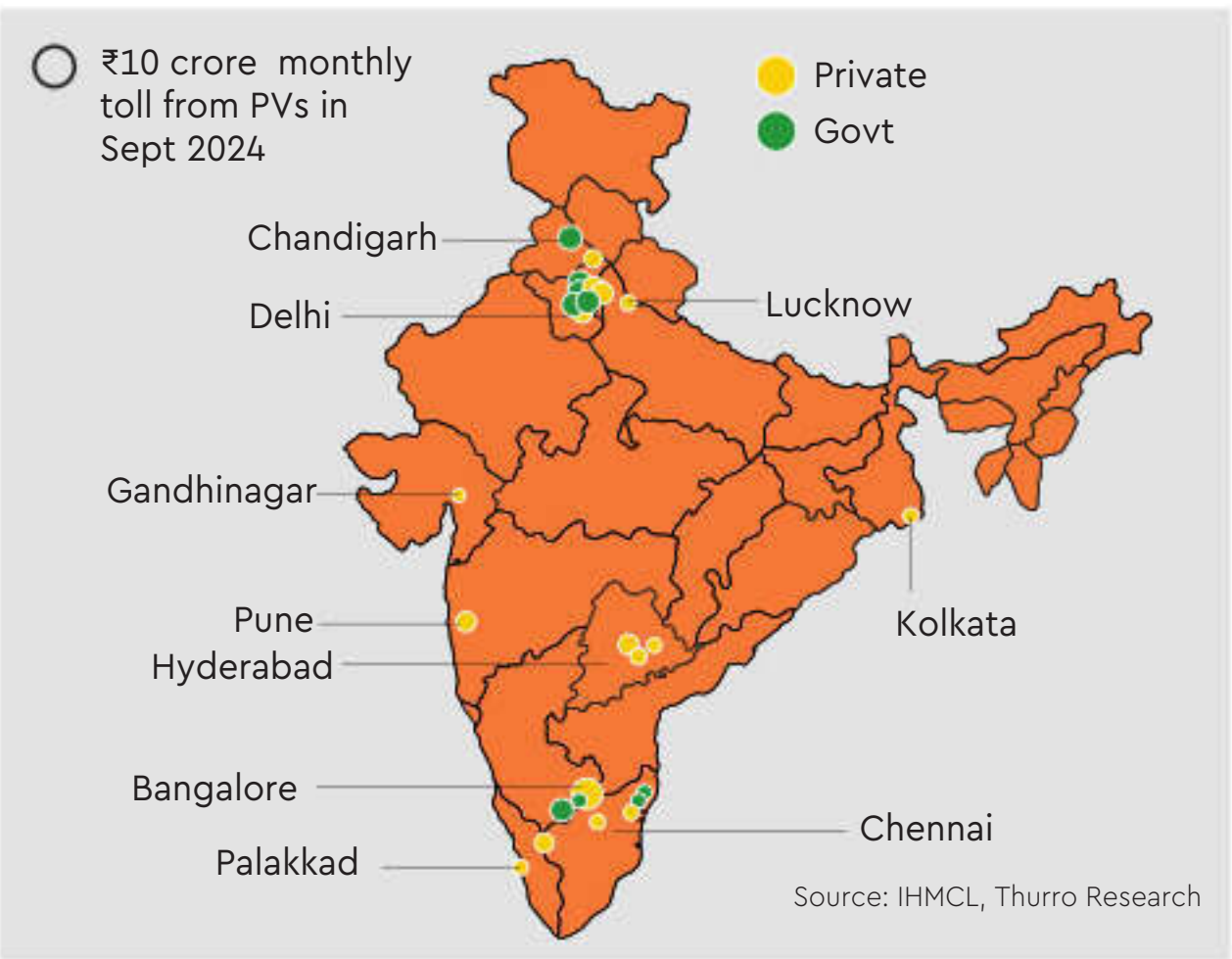
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

TOLLING IN WHAT HAVE BECOME ARTERIAL ROADS IN CITIES GETS A PUSHBACK FROM CITIZENS

Urban growth takes a toll

AKHILESH TILOTIA

Distinguished fellow, The Infravision Foundation and co-founder, Thurro



commuters to travel long distances, sometimes using intercity trains to reach the farthest reaches of the urban sprawl. Roads that once connected different towns now function as vital arteries of an expanded city. This growing infrastructure must be designed to accommodate large numbers of daily users from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, creating a more complex set of challenges for city planners.

Public infrastructure, by its very nature, must be inclusive and cater to a wide cross-section of the population. When such infrastructure faces pressure—due to overuse or unequal access—it can lead to political friction.

In recent months, this has been exem-

plified by the move in Maharashtra to waive tolls for light motor vehicles entering Mumbai. This was one of the last executive decisions of an outgoing government before the model code kicked in before elections. Elections are fought on multi-dimensional issues and it is difficult to attribute electoral outcomes to any one action, this move seems to have met the approval of the public.

This decision to do away with tolls around a growing city mirrors a similar move in the National Capital Region, where tolls were removed from the Noida Toll Bridge after a ruling by the Allahabad High Court. The toll waivers are seen as a way to ease congestion, but they also reflect the political sensitivity surround-

ing the cost of urban mobility.

To gauge the significance of tolling passenger vehicles (PVs) around Indian cities, data from FasTag, coupled with insights from the Indian Highways Management Corporation Limited (IHMCL) and Thurro, an alternative data provider, reveals some striking trends in toll revenue.

As of August 2023, the latest month for which vehicle-specific data is available, PVs contributed around 21% of the total toll revenue, despite comprising a far larger share of the total vehicle count. The average toll paid by PVs—approximately ₹80 per transaction—is considerably lower than the ₹175 charged on commercial vehicles, reflecting the differing toll structures for different vehicle classes.

Thurro’s analysis highlights specific toll plazas where PVs make a substantial contribution. In September 2024, there were 30 toll plazas which generated more than ₹45 lakh (approximately ₹1.5 lakh per day) from PVs alone. Unsurprisingly, these toll plazas are situated near major urban centers.

In total, these plazas collectively accounted for ₹207 crore) in toll revenue from PVs in that month. About half of this toll revenue—around ₹113 crore—was generated at toll plazas which are operated by private concessionaires. Notably, this represents less than 5% of the total national toll revenue collected across India (~₹4,500 crore).

While toll revenues from passenger vehicles are a crucial source of funding, particularly around major cities, striking the right balance between the needs of citizens and investors will require careful consideration. As urban sprawl continues, India’s ability to adapt its infrastructure planning and financing mechanisms will be key to maintaining liveable, efficient cities. In the next article, we discuss what options governments can consider in balancing the interests of investors and citizens.

This is the first of a two-part column. Views are personal

Upgrade cross-border payments



PRATIK SHAH
RANADURJAY TALUKDAR

Respectively financial services leader, and partner and payments sector leader, EY India

With India being the world’s largest recipient of remittances since 2022, the urgency to modernise its payment systems has never been greater

IN A WORLD where economic and social ties transcend borders, cross-border payments are the backbone of international trade and global finance. For India, which receives the most remittances, these transactions are crucial to the country’s economic fabric. In 2023, India received \$120 billion in foreign remittances, with over 20% coming from the US and 18% from the UAE, per World Bank data.

Beyond personal remittances, payments also include services provided by Indian professionals and business remittances. However, beneath the impressive figures lies a somewhat inadequate payment infrastructure, marked by slow processing times due to intermediaries and high transaction costs. To maintain competitiveness in the global market, India must address these challenges through regulatory reform and innovation.

More to cross-border payments

In FY24, India’s IT exports welcomed \$199 billion, while foreign domestic investments (FDIs) into India totalled \$70.95 billion, per data from India Brand Equity Foundation. These figures underscore the need for an efficient payment infrastructure that can support growing cross-border transactions. Outbound payments also face challenges, from regulatory hurdles to inconsistent infrastructure, which must be addressed to enhance the country’s global competitiveness and digital growth.

Modernising regulations and payment systems

India’s cross-border payments face two major challenges—stringent regulations and outdated payment infrastructure. While these regulations aim to prevent fraud and money laundering, they often slow down legitimate transactions. For instance, non-bank Payment Aggregators (PA-CBs) face strict capital requirements, including an upper cap of ₹25 crore by 2026, which poses challenges for smaller startups. The transaction caps also restrict larger business operations from scaling up their cross-border dealings. However, recent Reserve Bank of India (RBI) draft guidelines on forex correspondents (who will be able to conduct business via an agency model) are likely to further strengthen the inward remittances ecosystem.

Infrastructure-wise, India relies heavily on traditional systems like Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) and wire transfers, which are slow and costly. To stay competitive, India must adopt newer technologies. The domestic success of Unified Payments Interface (UPI) offers promise for international scaling, though issues like interoperability and currency exchange must be resolved. Blockchain and Central Bank Digital

Currency (CBDC) initiatives also hold potential for enhancing speed, security, and cost in cross-border payments.

In 2021, RBI partnered with Open Financial Technologies to develop a blockchain-based payment system to enhance transparency, security, and fraud prevention. However, scalability during high transaction volumes requires solutions, like Layer 2 technologies, for efficiency.

India’s CBDC, eRupee, is another key project aimed at real-time settlement of cross-border transactions. By reducing reliance on intermediaries, eRupee could lower transaction costs and improve security. However, this will require interoperability between central banks across jurisdictions, which poses its own challenges.

These efforts promise significant economic benefits. Blockchain-based payments could save Indian banks millions annually, while reducing the number of intermediaries could open international markets for smaller enterprises.

Scaling UPI for global use

UPI has transformed domestic payments, but scaling it globally requires addressing challenges like system interoperability and currency exchange. UPI’s daily transaction cap of ₹2 lakh limits larger international transfers. The UPI-

PayNow partnership between India and Singapore expands UPI’s reach, though further collaborations are needed. Cross-border P2P payments will also require KYC and Anti-Money Laundering (AML) checks, making real-time transfers unlikely and necessitating a deferred settlement model.

Learning from the ‘Wiser’

Traditional cross-border payment methods like SWIFT remain dominant but incur high costs and slow processing times. The UK-based fintech Wise has disrupted this space by providing faster transactions at lower fees using real exchange rates in its P2P model. Indian fintechs could adopt similar P2P models to enhance international transfers.

India’s modernisation of cross-border payments hinges on regulatory reforms and technological innovations. Amidst all, interoperability between domestic and international payment systems is key to creating a seamless global ecosystem. While blockchain, CBDC, and UPI are promising, other methods should be explored to ensure cross-border payments are fast, secure, and affordable. RBI is actively working on balancing the risks of rapid technological changes while facilitating easier transactions, showcasing its commitment to fostering innovation in the payment landscape. With such efforts, India is well-positioned to enhance its leadership in global cross-border payments.

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You have massive potential...in recognition of this, would you mind having your salary halved

- ANONYMOUS

Netas’ Bell Curve? Huh

How to review performance of mantrīs when even companies are junking classic appraisal systems

CM Fadnavis’s Mahayuti govt has 42 ministers, up from Shinde govt’s 29. Coalition compulsions, not unlike a rash of promotions in a bid to lock-in veterans. But there are more MLAs from the bell curves of political life to please. Shinde’s looking at a ‘rotation policy’ to make more MLAs ministers. Ajit Pawar speaks of 30-month ministerial terms for some ministries on his beat, presumably barring his own ‘finance’. Management funda buzz of appraisals – ‘periodic review’ and ‘underperformance’ – already has newly minted mantrīs bristling. And why not, for what ‘performance review’ has ever been not-annoying or seen as ‘fair’?

Competent performance reviews are elusive across the corporate world. Most companies agree, even if they do little about it, that they’re largely demotivating, time-consuming, and entirely unhelpful exercises. The view via the bell curve is unnatural in 21st century workplaces. The bell curve or Gaussian normal has ‘over-performers’ and under-performers as outliers who fan out at either end of a central hump (bell shape) of averages. The world is mediocre, but there’s nothing like an ‘average’ world or workplace. It’s long been recognised that the bell curve isn’t how the real world stacks up.

A workplace, across sectors, follows more a Pareto distribution (80-20 rule), which is like a ‘hockey stick with a long tail’. That is, a few high values/key performers, alongside very many lower values, the long ‘tail’.

Essentially, 80% of ‘outcomes/results’ come from 20% of ‘causes/employees’. Focusing on fixing the glitchy twitchy tail-end, even trimming it time to time, has better impact in terms of workforce competency and improved outcomes. Some, like GE, Adobe and GAP, junked ratings – employees find them irritating. Google pays outsize rewards to retain its top performers, seeing compensation as a ‘lock-in’.

Reviews are flawed as much because of reviewer’s bias, an entire range including unconscious bias. Drawing contrast between two individuals is itself biased, or the halo/horns bias, where a reviewer allows a good or bad trait to eclipse others. And what to say of a reviewer’s pet peeves...or attitudes on gender? Among the least discussed is a reviewer’s desire for a convenient ‘average’ – the bell curve’s legacy. It’s so outdated it’s called HR’s carrier pigeon. Of course, political parties aren’t workplaces. Compensations are, ahem, of varying kinds. Elections are the real performance review. How will CMs play boss-sir? What, after all, is the measure? It can safely be said consensus on KRAs will remain elusive.

Wise Turtle, Foolish Man

Olive ridleys travel great distances to continue life, we destroy environments with abandon

The olive ridley sea turtles swim incredibly long distances to give birth to their babies, at selected sites every year. We don’t know how these sites have come to be imprinted upon them. But each of us can see footage of a vast number of them hitting a beach to lay their eggs on a given night. It is the wonder of life writ vital and beautiful. But sometimes they are dead on arrival. For example, their carcasses have been washing ashore along the Visakhapatnam coast over the past few days. This is the inhuman work of humanity.

Land creatures have already paid a high price for our consumption lust. This century, it’s the ocean frontiers that are systematically under attack. Industrial fishing, marine pollution and rising sea temperatures are wreaking havoc with marine life cycles. But govt’s continue to turn a determined blind eye to this. Both at national and multilateral levels, they continue to perpetuate a colonial mythology of the seas, whose creatures continue to be treated as feedstock to be further exploited and decimated, gratis. This is so different from the mythologies of our ancestors. Native American to African, Japanese and Indian, the stories from centuries ago are about the sentience of earth’s exotic inhabitants. About what we can learn from them, admire about them, how to be one with them. In rescinding these ancient wisdoms we are racing towards doomsday.

By hurting its creatures we are hurting the ocean itself. We are making an enemy out of our ally in the fight against global warming. But there are also beaches where sustained environmental efforts have seen the happy return of olive ridley nesters. Chennai’s beaches regularly see school and college goers, working professionals and families work together to save the hatchlings. It’s a reminder of the value of local agency in a global nightmare.

Boss, tiger, champion

What a wife rarely calls her husband

Bikram Vohra

I was at this party for only eight people and they were playing games, a change from the ‘so what’s new kya khabar aur sunao’ drivel that passes for convo. Hadn’t been to a game night in years. And one of these games was what can your wife say to you with no problem that you would not say to her. You wouldn’t dare.

I kind of made a shortlist while competing and if you are the sort of brave soul who does not agree with me well then, that’s what you are...the brave soul. Salud.

As we are leaving the house | Go change your shirt, it is shabby, I am not going with you dressed like this, comfy is not an excuse for sloppy. Why didn’t you at least get your trousers ironed?

You are wearing the wrong colour socks. And at least comb whatever hair you have left, it is unkempt. You have put on weight, tuck your tummy in, ever since you retired you have become a couch potato. I hate to say it but you have become boring and dull and unromantic.

At an event | Don’t try to charm people, it always goes flat and if the party is dull, leave it that way. No one wants to know, no one cares about your 4 par saga on the seventh.

In a group | Buss, you have had two samosas, then you will whine about acidity, he always overdoes it (Go on then share my medical history with the world).

The car is another battlefield | Watch it, don’t go so fast, you just went through a stop sign, change the lane, slow down, you are such a bad driver, watch it, there is a truck 200 metres away.

In the house | On complaining about leaving the lights on: You have become old and crusty and grumpy and your memory is falling to pieces. On meeting some friend of hers: Don’t embarrass me and don’t tell those boring old jokes, they are not funny.

To the children | Your father did it again, he forgot the name of the host, can you believe it, I mean how can you be so disinterested in those around you, you cannot keep saying boss, tiger, champion, hero to cover up.

Which husband has ever said that?

The Shloka, The Rasa, The Raga

The enduring appeal of Indian classical music, as performed by greats like Zakir Hussain, lies in its incredible complexity & sophistication. It combines iron-cast fixity with complete freedom of improvisation

Pavan K Varma

A single resonant beat – clear and pellucid – on the tabla, mridangam or pakhawaj, is a cosmos unto itself. It has the ringing autonomy to reverberate through the universe. And when that beat is part of a pattern, in the hands of a maestro of rhythm, the likes of which the world has rarely seen, the galaxies themselves dance in sheer abandon and delight.

Ustad Zakir Hussain could make the cosmos dance. His hair awhirl, his fingers moving effortlessly at the speed of light, and his entire demeanour in ecstasy, when he played the tabla, it was both a moment of aesthetic implosion and spiritual rapture.

The tradition of Indian classical music has few parallels in world music. Its theoretical elaboration can be traced to the *Natya Shastra*, written by sage Bharat Muni, sometime around 200 BCE. This seminal work, consisting of 36 chapters and 6,000 Sanskrit shlokas, has entire chapters on music, musical scales, musical instrumentation, and the confluence of melody and rhythm.

The melodic chanting of shlokas of the Riga and Sama Veda, encrypted twelve different swaras, and their innumerable combinations, for the intonation of shlokas. The encryption indicated the melody, rhythm and the metric organisation. The later Puranas – Bhagwata, Markandeya, Vayu and Linga – and the Vishnudharmottara (mid 5th century), along with many other texts now no longer extant, also display

prodigious scholarship on classical music.

Our classical music is devoted to creating the right mood for evocation of rasa, which is the essence, the sap, the inner feeling of artistic joy. The Upanishadic dictum is, *Raso vai saha*. He is rasa. The ‘He’ is Brahman. Brahman is joy. Therefore, rasa, or the essence as the relish or flavour of artistic experience, has to be joyous.

The embodiment of this principle began with Dhrupad music. The word Dhrupad is derived from ‘Dhruva’, which means immovable and

Each raga is in itself the embodiment of a mood. Thus, a raga can stand for the mood of the time of day – early morning, afternoon, dusk or evening. It can also represent the mood of the changing season, as for instance, raga Malhar evokes the mood of the monsoons. A raga can also portray different emotional moods – of love, languor, separation, joy, contemplation, detachment, and devotion.

One can only marvel at the degree of study that must have gone into the selection of varying structures of notes to create a distinct melody, and then to identify the melody with the



permanent. Dhrupad sangeet has a deeply soulful quality to it, a robust yet infinitely delicate feel. Khayal, a later classical rendition, which made its advent in the medieval period, added a seductive lassitude to the austere grandeur of Dhrupad.

The raga is the centre of our tradition of classical music. Each raga consists of a fixed set of notes, an arrangement of swaras, that are immutable. The swara structure of a raga is inexorably fixed. But its presentation by a musician is infinitely flexible. The combination of iron-cast fixity and complete freedom of improvisation is one of the unique defining features of a raga.

revolution of planets, the movement of galaxies – everything reverberates to an eternal rhythm. The word ‘tala’ is said to originate from two words – ta from the tandava of Shiva, and la from the lasya of Parvati. Lasya connotes the cadence of rhythm, ta stands for the beat itself.

Broadly, all talas are divided into three main categories – vilambit (slow laya), madhya (medium laya) and drut (fast laya). Within this framework, there is an incredible number of permutations and combinations. Well-known talas of north Indian music are Dadra, Rupak, Kaharva, Jhaptala, Chautala, Ektala, Jhumra and Dhamar.

The talas of Carnatic music vary slightly and are highly scientific. All talas are bound by a specific time structure (based on precise mathematical calculations), which is cyclical and ends in the sama. The sama marks the coming together in marvellous symmetry of melody and metre, and both the musician and the percussionist delight in that moment of ecstatic synchronisation.

Interestingly, there is also the notion of khali, when there is one tantalising moment of the *absence* of beat. This moment of silence is as explosive as the symphony of sound before and after it.

It is of this remarkably complex and incredibly sophisticated musical tradition of which my friend, Zakir Hussain, was an outstanding symbol. His death is an irreparable loss, but it is also a reminder to all of us, especially the younger generation, of the great importance of preserving our great musical heritage, and retaining the unfortunately fast-eroding balance between popular and classical traditions.

Sharp Bends In The New Road To Damascus

A Syrian journalist writes his compatriots are full of hope after Assad’s fall. But that tricky ethno-religious equations can still play spoilers

Steven Sahiounie

Hundreds of people have slept outside in freezing weather in Damascus region, hoping to find a loved one who might still be alive in one of the many prison complexes run by former president Assad, who fled Syria on Dec 8. Recently, the unguarded prisons began to be broken into as thousands of prisoners found freedom, some after decades of torture.

Every country has prisons, but Syria’s were notorious for being filled with hundreds of thousands of political prisoners. Sednaya prison has been dubbed as a ‘human slaughterhouse’. It’s just one of the dozens of horrific prisons in Syria. But it became the focus of news after journalists gained access to it recently and found bone saws, vats of acid, and body-crushing machines.

Assad’s dreaded secret police, Mohabarat, hunted down citizens who said anything against his regime. A careless comment on Facebook, or a slip of the tongue on the phone, could send a person to prison. And many a time this meant death.

There were no charges, lawyers, trials, sentencing, or family visits. A person just disappeared. If loved ones asked questions, they were told to shut up or face the same fate. Occasionally, a judge could be bribed with huge sums of money, and a prisoner could be freed. But since poverty is rampant in Syria, even the door of bribery was locked shut.

Before the 2011 uprising against Assad, Syria had enough gas and oil wells to meet domestic needs. Once the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish militia in the northeast, occupied the oil wells, the Assad regime had to buy petroleum products from Iran, and the price of gasoline went up, heating oil

became scarce, and electricity supply dropped to 30 minutes in three intervals per day.

The economic situation in Syria is dire. According to World Bank, as of 2022, poverty affects 69% of the population, while extreme poverty reached 27%, up from a negligible level in 2009.

The Syrian people seek peace, security and stability. This can only be achieved through the unity of all regions in Syria, and the creation of a new govt that puts the hopes and needs of the people first. The present caretaker govt of Mohammed al-Bashir, appointed PM by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani – leader of Hayat Tahrir

But Bahra and most of the Syrian opposition seek a secular, democratic Syria. Bahra might end up being the newest opposition to the opposition if an agreement is not found between the current caretaker PM and the Istanbul group.

It needs recalling that when former US president Obama created and funded Free Syrian Army (FSA) after the uprising began in 2011, its fighters admitted they were not fighting for freedom or democracy, but to establish an Islamic state. Obama sought to portray the fight as a secular one; however, the Syrian people always saw FSA in the cold, harsh light of reality. This was a major factor in FSA becoming extinct once Jolani’s forces burst onto the scene in 2014.

The Syrian population is diverse. Demographically, 80-90% are Arabs, 9-10% Kurds, and 1-10% are Assyrians. Religion-wise, 87% follow Islam, with 74% identifying as Sunni, 13% Alawite, including Shiite, and 10% are Christian and 3% Druze.

The Assad regime was mainly, but not exclusively, made up of members of the Alawite sect. Therefore, the new govt should ideally reflect the country’s ethno-religious diversity. But signs are that the previously marginalised Sunni community will be heavily represented in the new dispensation.

Talking with people in the streets of Latakia, I heard many wishes and dreams being voiced for the first time publicly without fear of Assad’s Mohabarat.

Abu Hussein asked for more electricity. Em Mustapha wanted her sons home from Germany to where they had fled by sea in the summer of 2015. Nadia Kanaan wished all the thousands of prisoners in Sednaya would be released. Her brother was tortured and starved to death there in 2012. Shopkeeper George M’bayed said he wanted to see sanctions lifted so merchants could import products necessary for rebuilding Syria.

Only time will tell if the Syrian people get their desired future of peace and prosperity.





#CancelPatriarchy

An initiative of The Times of India

Swissful MFN Thinking Can Help...

...consent-building prowess in tax agreements

Switzerland's revocation of 'most favoured nation' (MFN) status in its tax treaty with India doesn't signal any possible deterioration of trade and investment between the two countries. It, however, does appreciate India's heightened sensitivity to consensual changes in international tax agreements. Bern's reaction to India's altered stance on automatic measures to make trade non-discriminatory could, of course, be replicated by other countries. Yet, trade-distorting outcomes, if any, will be restricted to tax treaties they have with India. Essentially, India's position will prevail and can be renegotiated, which works to the country's benefit across the tapestry of its trade agreements.

The altered scenario arose after the Supreme Court ruled last year that changes in MFN status, which apply when a country joins a trade bloc, will need to be notified separately. The issue was over OECD expanding its membership and India having to offer these



new members the same terms it has with older members. OECD treats all its members equally, and this automatically expands the scope of MFN status non-members may have with even a single nation in the grouping. The Supreme Court verdict makes it incumbent on GoI to negotiate trade deals through mutual agreement, instead of relying on a templatised mechanism. The deliberative approach should improve outcomes, and avoid unintended ones.

The MFN tool is not perfect, which has kept alive the provision for it to be revoked. Stronger agreements can be arrived at through negotiation that serves bilateral interests better. These can come in handy during phases of rising trade protectionism, such as now. India is now at a position to better communicate its reservations over trade mechanisms that require intensive scrutiny over rules of origin. Being able to do so without doing any material damage to bilateral trade and investment is a considerable achievement. The Swiss reaction ought to trigger consent-building capability in India's international tax agreements.

Fourth Tango in Paris To Stop Right Steps?

France seems to be having its own not-so-great Britain moment, with a revolving door of PMs — it's fourth in 12 months. Late last week, Emmanuel Macron appointed centrist ally François Bayrou. The 73-yr-old enters office with a set of challenges. Hours after he was named PM, Moody's downgraded France's sovereign debt rating to Aa3, reflecting doubt about whether the new administration can mend a deteriorating fiscal situation that has made the nation one of the most financially wobbly countries in a financially wobbly Europe.

Bayrou's first task is to form a government that won't be toppled by either the extreme Left or Right. He started on a positive note: on Monday, he met far-right poster-girl Marine Le Pen, and the meeting ended cordially. In the coming months, Bayrou must pass the budget and deliver a politically stable and economically sound government. *C'est un défi de taille* — that's a tall order. On his part, Macron needs to ensure he doesn't hand over power to the extreme right, namely Le Pen and her National Rally.

France's challenges are not just domestic and political. Passing policies that will reinvigorate the economy has become existential. The recent conclusion of a trade agreement between Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) and the EU is a red flag for France. While it tries to deal with the fallout of the deal, Paris will need to rework its strategy at home, creating alternative opportunities. Bayrou needs to reduce the government's vulnerability to extremes while delivering good governance and a stable economy. And, *ah, oui*, every political party and faction will try to exploit the situation. This means being extra adroit to halt France's drift to the right.

Walmart's 'explanation' of rolling back its DEI policies is superb gibberish

Mind the Wall When Making a U-Turn

Obfuscation is one of the great art forms. And some corporates can paint a picture so abstract that you're left squinting, wondering if it's a masterpiece that Kandinsky had wished he had come up with, or just a stream of carefully-strung garbage. In this world of high AQI smoke and fair-ground mirrors, Walmart is trending for its recent decision to roll back its expansive diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies. It turns out that between DO or DEI, it has ended up choosing the latter.

Understandably, there's been a backlash, prompting the retail giant to issue a response that could earn it a spot in the PR Hall of Fame: 'Our purpose, to help people save money and live better... um... er... You get the idea. This has a faint whiff of déjà vu, reminiscent of our own dear Deepinder 'Zo-mato woh Sikandar' Goyal. After the infamous 'pay-us-to-hire-you' debacle, Goyal claimed they'd pay the right candidates anyway and then waxed poetic about money and market rates. With now the likes of Walmart joining the fray, damage control, it seems, needs damage control.

Shivaji Dasgupta

On a stage, where content and form are often destined for collision, Ustad Zakir Hussain was an exception. The flailing head and flying hair were never the main course. These were simply able accompanists for the finest gravitas of the Punjab gharana, with no less than Alla Rakha as parent-guru.

Alla Rakha on tabla, to set the context, was Ravi Shankar's preferred partner — *not* sarod meister Ali Akbar Khan, with whom the sitar great spread soft power of Hindustani music to a world that needed healing from the ravages of WW2 and, soon enough, Vietnam. Alla Rakha's tabla was both erudite and subversive, enabling the two masters of strings to cast their spell. Normally in traditional ethnic gear, Alla Rakha could occasionally be seen in Saville Row threads. Empathy — not just sermons — was a key trait his son Zakir would ably pick up.

At the Dover Lane Music Conference in the early 1990s, father and son were in performance in the persuasive Taal Vadya Kacheri. The patriarch was clearly in retirement mode, an occasional flourish brightening his technical mastery. The heir apparent was on call to bare the baton of imagination and interpretation. Sheer magic was the outcome.

For a novice listener, the establishment of 'tehzeeb' — manners — was a revelation. During that performance, Sultan Khan on sarangi was rightfully introduced as a notable peer, not an accompanist. This non-negotiable adherence to tradition was, indeed, as remarkable as Hussain's flair for innovation.

In yet another concert in the '90s, an overzealous organiser tried to give Hussain first billing over another 'instrumentalist'. Hussain took to the mic with trademark alacrity and went on to tell the audience that he was on stage to give 'sangāt' — fellowship — to the musician on strings. Stardom would not interfere with protocol. Throughout the evening, he insisted on offering sublime 'theke' — the musical phrase establishing beat — disappointing the popcorn-munching cohorts in search of

non-stop flamboyance. In the 'theke' — the ability to build bridges with sitar, sarod, santoor or voice — lay Hussain's truest genius, even as he was feted for his solo bursts of exuberance.

In his alliances with Ali Akbar Khan, Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar, his mode was *sotto voce*, and stroke-play was unleashed only when summoned as a breezy interlude, or as a subtle breather. In collabs with sarod master Amjad Ali Khan, the licence to indulge was more pronounced, as they matched

each other in performance bravado. In sitar genius Nikhil Banerjee's company, the mood was always measured. When on stage with an emerging star, he switched to discreet mentoring, helping folks like sitarist Purbayan Chatterjee and the Bangash brothers on sarod to fulfil their performance potential.

When accompanying Bhimsen Joshi or other vocal legends, Hussain was restrained, earnestly seeking to enrich the maestro's craft. Many believed that santoor maestro Shiv Kumar Sharma

ZAKIR HUSSAIN 1951-2024

ZAKIR DHIN DHA

His genius lay in his mastery of blending with other instruments, even as he was feted for his solo bursts of exuberance

Taal-tale heart

He was the proud member of the iconic band Shakti, which was formed in 1973, with the original line-up that included John McLaughlin on guitar, Vikku Vinayakram on ghatam, and L. Shankar on violin.

He was winner of four Grammy Awards, including three as recently as this year: two of which were Best Global Music Album for Shakti's 'This Moment', and Best Contemporary Instrumental Album for 'As We Speak' by the quartet of Béla Fleck (banjo), Edgar Meyer (double bass), Rakesh Chaurasia (flute) and Hussain. Other notable global collaborators included cellist Yo-Yo Ma and saxophonist Charles Lloyd.

Any everlasting memory of Zakir Hussain would have to be on a concert stage, whether in Uttarpara, Pune or Delhi. First, the Ustad, in zen-like state, imbibes the *alaap*, *jor* and *jhalā* of the sitar. Then he gently preps his tabla for imminent artistry, seeking blessings of the elders. A calm build-up in the *Madhyalaya* gat (mid-tempo melody set out for improv) follows, leading to the fiery crescendo of the finale, with inspired answers for the probing *Sawaal-Jawab* (call-and-response) stretch. Then, finally, post-exhalation, he respectfully greets those in the audience in his spell.

There were others before him. There will be others after him. But in his time, and on his day, there was nobody quite like Ustad Zakir Hussain.

EK-DO-TEEN-CHAAR FINEST PERFORMANCES

'Mishra Mand in Trita', from Mesmerizing Maestros (pic), with Vilayat Khan, 1980 Mastery of seamless sangāt

'Raga Jait', with Ravi Shankar & Partho Sarathy, Royal Albert Hall, London, 1993 Exquisite solo in cameo mode

'Bending the Rules', Shakti, with John McLaughlin & Shankar Mahadevan, Ryman Auditorium, Nashville, 2023 Breathtaking, breathless fusion

'Raga Kirwani', with Shiv Kumar Sharma, Rang Bhavan, Bombay, 1979 His finest partnership, via soulful bonding

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a shopper named Raj,
Who suddenly realised ki aaj,
If he doesn't start shopping,
He will be caught napping,
And Christmas gifts will be a mirage.

HEALTH SPENDING

Aggregate global health spending in 2022 was estimated to be \$9.8 trillion, or 9.9% of global GDP, down from 2021 and marking the first decline in real terms since 2000—but still well above that in 2019, according to WHO. Also, the spending was highly uneven. In 2022, high income countries accounted for 79% of global health spending (US alone accounting for 43%)...

Global spending on health was \$9.8 trillion in 2022

Health spending is still highly unequal

■ Low income ■ Lower-middle income ■ Upper-middle income

Total health spending (constant \$)

% figures are shares

Total health spending: \$9.8 trillion

Private: \$3.7 trillion (37.6%)

Domestic public: \$6.1 trillion (62.1%)

External: \$27.8 billion (0.3%)

Total health spending (constant \$)

% figures are shares

US: \$4.5 trillion (43%)

Other high income: \$3.6 trillion (36%)

Low income: \$0.16 trillion (1.6%)

Lower-middle income: \$1.05 trillion (10.5%)

Upper-middle income: \$2.2 trillion (22%)

2000 2005 2010 2015 2019 2022

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN

STATE OF PLAY ❗ Lose election, and it's 'Bring ballot papers back!' Win it, and all is fine? Move Along Now, EVMs Don't Bite

Pranab Dhal Samanta

Omar Abdullah's remarks on the convenience of blaming EVMs for electoral defeats deserve attention. He has just been elected J&K CM, beating the ruling BJP alliance in the first post-Article 370, post-delineation election. And he did so by effecting an impressive turnaround following his own defeat in the Lok Sabha polls, just three months prior to the assembly elections.

In many ways, his National Conference has achieved the kind of success in J&K that BJP has had in Haryana and Maharashtra, performing well beyond expectations since parliamentary polls. So, the question Abdullah poses — Why blame EVMs only when you lose? — is quite pertinent. The NCP(SP)-Congress-Shiv Sena (UBT) alliance had outperformed the BJP-led NDA in the Lok Sabha polls. But, now, as Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), when it lost the assembly polls, knives are out against EVMs.

This has become a sort of a pattern with the losing side ever since the EVMs were introduced. In 2004, the first general election where EVMs were used across all constituencies, Congress emerged as the largest party, and BJP had turned EVM-sceptic. One of its leaders even wrote a book on how the machine could be hacked.

A mindset from past decades of rig-

ging and booth capturing that had dented the credibility of elections largely drove this scepticism. The prevailing sentiment was that elections could be managed at the booth, through power, manipulation and violence. This 'rigging mindset' was the starting point of a rigging toolkit that could potentially deny a fair electoral result. So, in all fairness, a losing party couldn't be blamed for looking at EVMs from the same prism.

But over two decades since EVMs were introduced on a large scale, almost every major national and regional party has managed at the booth, through power, manipulation and violence. This 'rigging mindset' was the starting point of a rigging toolkit that could potentially deny a fair electoral result. So, in all fairness, a losing party couldn't be blamed for looking at EVMs from the same prism.

Introduction of voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) through a 2013 amendment in election rules, following a court order, was a step in allay-

ing such fears. Few years later, a ruling led to manual counting of VVPAT slips of five randomly selected assembly segments. Now, there's a demand to make it 100%, even though no error has been detected.

The Supreme Court recently allowed burnt memory chips of EVMs to be inspected at a cost to be incurred by the candidate seeking such a check. While there were just eight such requests after the general elections, and six after Haryana polls, there are over 100 in Maharashtra, mostly from NCP(SP). This brings us to the technology question. A workable parallel here would be the debate around Aadhaar-related privacy issues, verification and sharing of data. Several questions have been raised, and guard rails built, around one agreed-upon assumption that Aadhaar has been a truly empowering citizen tool. Benefits have far outweighed pitfalls.

Similarly, EVMs have raised the credibility of the electoral process by bringing voters back to booths. So far, EVMs have proved impregnable to any manipulation or rigging. VVPATs, random counting of VVPAT slips, and number of inspections so far of memory chips have not revealed any discrepancy. As a result, booths are now safer, more accessible places, a fact visible in the rising voting percentages among the rising and young.

The past two decades have shown that tech is an essential empowering tool in India, which is showcased by GoI through its digital stack. But the Indian EVM, a standalone unit, into its third generation of machines now, has operated successfully within the thinnest margin of infallibility.

SOPs ensure this — from the time they are taken out of a warehouse, checked, randomised, installed in booths, stored and removed for counting, representing every contenting candidate. They also sign on to the seals, which works as an added attestation to the process.

At a time when India is looking at democracy as a strategic asset, it's time to distinguish technology from other aspects that inform an institution. There are, for instance, several sets of electoral reforms that need attention. Enormous expenditure by candidates, use of black money, limited impact of the model code of conduct, among others, are still live issues on the table.

The EVM debate may have run its course. Enough, at least, to lose its centrality. With no evidence of tampering, demands like 100% counting of VVPAT slips are not only tantamount to making polls a ballot paper affair all over again, but also render the tech innovation redundant.

Abdullah's comments are, in a way, a message to move on. The fact is that with time, returning to the ballot paper is now almost an impossibility. At the same time, it's important to keep refining and improving on the EVM, its efficacy and SOPs.

But, somewhere, a line will have to be drawn on the 'right-wrong' debate, in which in defeat, a party wants ballot papers back, and in victory, the same party changes tack. The only thing taking a needless hit in this charade is the machine, its credentials and, by extension, the process.

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Bell Curves ■ R Prasad

Lord, I seek no favourable judgment, but, pray, recuse yourself on the day of judgment!

THE SPEAKING TREE

Presence That Transforms

SUMIT PAUL

Rumi emphasises the embodiment of the soul within one's surroundings. 'Wherever you stand, be the soul of that place,' echoes the transformative power of presence and the deep connection between ourselves and our environment. It alludes to the notion that each place possesses a unique energy, and as individuals, we can infuse it with our essence.

Rumi's words invite us to be fully present in every moment, to acknowledge and honour the spirit of the location in which we find ourselves. By doing so, we become active participants in shaping its atmosphere and creating a harmonious resonance between our souls and the world around us. This quote reminds us of our capacity to bring light positivity to any space, leaving a lasting impact on others. Rumi says, 'I don't crib that the place is bad. I will adjust myself to the place.'

Human existence is all about synchronicity. Be in sync with not just the place you're in but stay on an even keel with whoever you meet, whatever you see and wherever you go because the soul is here for its joy. Make your existence meaningful because you are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop. This encapsulates the profound essence of human potential and individuality. It suggests that each person is not merely insignificant or lost in the vastness of existence, but rather holds within themselves the boundless power and depth of the entire universe.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

Paragraphs From Fiction

After Dark, My Sweet

Jim Thompson

It's funny how wrong your first impressions of people can be. Me, now, the first impression I'd had of her was that she wasn't much to look at — just a female barfly with money. And she *did* hit the booze too hard. Even I could see that. But I was all wrong about her looks. She was young. I'm thirty-three and she couldn't have been any older. She was pretty — beautiful, I should say — when she dolled herself up a little. She'd led a hard life for a long time, and it told on her face. But she had the looks, all right, the features and the figure. And sometimes — well, quite a bit of the time — she could act just as nice as she looked.

I'd only got down the road a few hundred yards when the station wagon drew up beside me and she swung the door open. 'Get in,' she said, smiling. 'It's all right. Bert isn't going to make any trouble for you.'

'Yeah? Well, he's not going to get the chance, lady. I just stopped in there for a minute, and now I'm going on.'

'I tell you it's all right. Bert's the last person in the world to holler for the cops. Anyway, we're not going back there. I'm taking you home with me.'

After Dark, My Sweet

Jim Thompson

Chat Room

Time We Cut the Long Rope Short

Apropos the Edit, 'There's No Place for Majoritarian Judges' (Dec 16), the controversy surrounding Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav's remarks at a VHP event has ignited a broader debate on the delicate balance judges must maintain between personal beliefs and their professional obligation to uphold impartiality and neutrality. While judges, like all individuals, inevitably hold diverse perspectives, these mustn't seep into their decisions. The issue, however, extends beyond the appropriateness of Justice Yadav's comments — pointing, instead, to the systemic concerns that permit such occurrences. Addressing these challenges calls for a more nuanced approach, such as reinforcing internal mechanisms for judicial discipline and accountability, rather than removing judges with unpopular views. This approach preserves the judiciary's integrity while safeguarding citizens' rights.

AMARJEET KUMAR
Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

2024 marks a confluence of climate skeptics

DESPITE the defiant in-your-face 'all is well' stance, especially of rich nations, climate change is a clear and present danger to the humanity, and the life itself on the planet. Dry regions are be-coming drier and wet areas wetter. In dry regions, water is evaporating more quickly, and in-creasing both the intensity as well as duration of periods of drought.

We only have to look around and learn that droughts can occur any-where, though their onset is slow, lulling people as well as govern-ments into complacency. But, once they set in, they start wreaking hav-oc on health, agriculture, livelihoods and economies, energy and the en-vironment. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), water scarcity impacts 40% of the world's population, and as many as 700

million people are at risk of be-ing displaced as a result of drought by 2030. Drought plagued South America and Africa in 2024, while parts of other con-tinents were dry.

No matter which country you look at, it is common now to hear farmers complain of low levels of soil moisture and groundwater lev-els. Amid this bleak scenario comes the dismal news that even after de-liberations for 12 days, the United Nations Convention to Combat De-certification (UNCCD), known as COP16 (attended by 196 countries and the European Union), has just ended in Riyadh without any deal on how to respond to the expanding scourge of drought.

The parties, i.e., member-nations, however, agreed on one thing – that they need more time to discuss the

most pervasive and the most disrup-tive environmental disaster which is costing the world more than \$300 billion every year. A UN report re-leased at the meet said droughts would affect 75% of global popula-tion by 2050. Yet, the conference decided that a future global drought regime could be arrived only dur-ing the COP17 meet in Mongolia in 2026.

The Riyadh talks failure comes after the partial success of biodiver-sity talks in Colombia, the failure to reach a UN deal on plastics pollu-tion in South Korea, and a climate finance deal that disappointed de-veloping nations at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The crux of the matter is that the woes of planet are to a large extent rooted in the climate irre-sponsibili-

ty of rich nations. After emitting the majority of greenhouse gases since the Industrial Revolution era, they are shrugging off their responsibili-ties, and duty, of coming to the aid of developing countries. The solu-tion is either to shun or cut back on lifestyles that are character-ised by high energy use and carbon-inten-sive consumption.

Despite making pledges in the 2015 Paris Agreement (pledge to try and prevent global tempera-tures rising by more than 1.5C), the rich nations are not meeting their com-mitments, raising concerns about their accountability and sincerity. Add to it, their MNCs make false or mislead-ing claims about a product or service's environmental benefits, which came to be known as 'Green Washing'. Plastic is a great example.

At this juncture, it is worth por-ing over what Paul Krugman, an eminent economist, contends: "The deniers are choosing, willfully, to ignore that threat, placing future generations of Ameri-cans in grave danger, simply because it's in their political interest to pretend that there's nothing to worry about. If that's not betrayal, I don't know what is." This is true of all rich nations.

All disasters so far during 2024 point out the record-level occur-rence of natural hazards such as floods, glacial outbursts, groundwa-ter depletion, drying up of springs, droughts, tropical cy-clones, heat waves and severe storms. As rich nations and their firms feign 'all is well' – even as disasters lie in wait... to sneak in or pounce upon at once – people as well as governments in developing countries need to scale up climate activism as well as ac-tivities to stem the tide of climate change.

LETTERS

A great loss to world of music

WE pay heartfelt homage to the illustrious music maestro Padmavibhushan Zakir Hussain (73) who passed away in USA while undergoing treatment for heart-related issues. As a tabla player, Zakir liter-ally outshone his own mentor and father Ustad Allah Rakha who was himself a legendary tabla player. The awards/rewards and other civilian recognitions from time to time speak for themselves about the "class" of this tabla genius. He was also popular for that famous "Wah Taj" advertisement concerning Taj Mahal tea of Brooke Bond Co. He inspired many a youngster to take a passion for tabla.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

THE tabla beat has fallen silent. Zakir Hussain was a true leg-
end who gave rhythm to our hearts and soul. His tabla spoke a universal language, transcending borders and generations. An irreplaceable loss to the world of music. Rest in peace, maestro.
Philip Joshua, Secunderabad

HISTORY will credit this legendary maestro for his
pertinacious contribution to Hindustani classical music. He will always stay alive in our hearts and continue to inspire the upcoming generations of music and instru-ment lovers for taking forward his music legacy to the next level. Meanwhile, his sad demise is an irreparable loss of the entire music world.

Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur

“Neither a lofty degree of intelligence nor imagination
nor both together go to the making of genius. Love, love, love, that is the soul of genius,” said Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Zakir was a man, who went beyond creating a Pied Piper-like magic with his fingers on two pieces of stretched leather. Zakir spread love, love and more love wherever and everywhere he went. Therein lies the real greatness of Zakir Hussain. We will miss that warm disarming smile and the curly hairdo that was singularly yours, Zakir Bhai!

Avinash Godbole, Dewas, MP

THE maestro transformed tabla into a globally loved solo
instrument. He contributed soundtrack to number of films. His music was a gift a treasure. He left behind an ex-traordinary legacy cherished by countless music lovers around the globe. He left a deep impact on Indian music and his cul-tural herit-age. His death is an irreparable loss to music lovers.

Zakir Hussain, Kazipet

RENOWNED tabla player Ustad Zakir Hussain mesmer-
ised everyone to the beat of the tabla. He has fans all over the world for his tabla playing skills. He composed music and played tabla for songs in Bolly-wood and various language films around the world. There have been and will be many tabla players, but none like Zakir, because there was unique magic in his fingers. He was one of the greatest in his field.

Sudhir G Gangutkar, Thane

Address all concerns over ONOE

REG: Editorial - Govt pause on ONOE bill may be stra-
tegic (Dec. 16, 2024). The One Nation One Election (ONOE) is seen to be a good idea for the country that is not new to the nation and had happened through simul-taneous elections in 1971. The argument by the states that ONOE is an infringement on federalism and other regional aspects will not carry weight. Moreover, this ar-rangement for the coun-try would be implemented only in 2034 as the governments have to prepare on all fronts. It would dramatically reduce election expenses.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

THE EC has estimated that it would cost Rs 7,000 crore to
conduct such elections in 2029. The propo-nents say that such an arrangement will allow uninterrupted governance. But if the ruling party is seri-ous about democratic norms and see the polls in bipartisan manner, it doesn't need to get dis-turbed and move away from routine governance in the times of polls. The main complaint against the idea is its negative effect on federalism, as the national issues drown the regional aspirations during cam-paigns. The likely rise of horse trading to save the government or to escape instability for a certain pe-riod cannot be ruled out. The ONOE Bill needs to be dis-cussed well not only in the parliament, but also in the streets of the country. It should be accompanied with other electoral reforms that ensure real political power to the common man.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

BMRCL signs Rs 3,000 cr loan agreement for Namma Metro Phase 2

BENGALURU: BMRCL has signed a Rs 3,000 crore loan agreement for Namma Metro Phase 2, thereby obtain-ing full external financing for the Phase 2 project. The Government of India has signed a loan agreement with German investment bank KfW for a loan of Rs 3,044.54 crore (€340 million) in New Delhi by Manisha Sinha, Ad-ditional Secre-tary, Department of Economic Affairs, and Caroline Gassner, Director (South Asia), KfW Germany. BMRCL Managing Director M Maheshwar Rao signed a separate agreement with Gassner at the KfW office.

The Phase 2 project covers a route of 75.06 km and has so far received a loan of Rs 12,141.14 crore. A loan of Rs 9,096.60 crore has been obtained through Japan Inter-national Cooperation Agency, Agence Française de Développement, Asian Infra-structure Investment Bank, and European Investment Bank, and now a loan has been obtained from Germany's KfW Bank. Rs 30,695 crore was approved for the work of Namma Metro Phase 2, but due to delays in the work, additional land requirement for the work and other reasons, the project cost has increased by Rs 40,614.27 crore.

The Cabinet meeting approved the pre-planning prepara-tion of the 36.59 km long metro work from Sarjapur to Hebbal in Phase-3 of the Bangalore Metro Rail Project.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

PSBs emerge a resurgent force

NEW DELHI: Public Sec-tor Banks (PSBs) in India have achieved a remarkable milestone by recording their highest-ever aggregate net profit of ₹1.41 lakh crore in the financial year 2023-24. This landmark achievement reflects the sector's robust turnaround, underpinned by a significant improvement in asset quality. The Gross Non-Performing Assets (GNPA) ratio steeply declined, drop-ping to 3.12% in Septem-ber 2024. Demonstrating continued momentum, they registered a net profit of ₹85,5206,000 crore in the first half of 2024-25. In addition to their stellar performance, PSBs have contributed sig-nificantly to shareholder returns, paying a total divid-
end of ₹61,964 crore over the past three years. This remarkable financial growth underscores the sector's operational efficiency, im-proved asset quality, and stronger capital base.

Beyond their financial achievements, these banks have played a key role in pro-moting financial inclusion. They have implemented crucial government schemes like the Atal Pension Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, to name a few. These efforts have ensured that vital benefits reach under-served sections of society. The government of India has actively sup-ported the sector with re-forms, wel-fare measures, and strong policies. This has strengthened the bank-ing system, fostering greater trans-parency, stability, and inclusivity.

The Gross NPA ratio of Public Sector Banks (PSBs) has witnessed a remarkable improvement, declining to

Public sector banks achieve ₹1.41 lakh crore net profit; GNPA drops to 3.12%

3.12% in September 2024 from a peak of 14.58% in March 2018. This significant reduction reflects the success of targeted interventions aimed at addressing stress within the banking system.

A turning point came in 2015 when the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) initiated the Asset Quality Review (AQR). This exercise aimed to iden-tify and address hidden stress in banks by mandating the transparent recognition of NPAs. It also reclassified previously restructured loans as NPAs, resulting in a sharp in-crease in reported NPAs. The heightened provision-
ing requirements during this period impacted the fi-nancial parameters of banks, restricting their ability to lend and support productive sectors of the econ-omy.

To address these chal-lenges, the Government in-troduced a comprehensive 4Rs strategy: They are: Rec-ognising NPAs transparently to ensure accurate identi-fication of stressed assets; Resolution and Recovery of NPAs through targeted measures and legal frame-works; Recapitalising PSBs to strengthen their financial position and lending capac-ity; and, Reforms in govern-ance and operational prac-tices to enhance efficiency and resilience.

Another indicator of the improved resilience of Public Sector Banks (PSBs) is their Capital to Risk (Weighted) Assets Ratio (CRAR), which rose by 3983 basis points to 15.43% in September 2024, up from 11.45% in March 2015. This substantial im-provement not only high-lights the renewed stabil-



They are achieving unprecedented financial milestones and contributing significantly to the nation's economic stability and growth. The decline in Gross Non-Performing Assets (GNPA) and improved Capi-tal to Risk (Weighted) Assets Ratio (CRAR) reflect the sector's resilience and sound risk management practices

Here's how PSBs/SCBs are deepening financial inclusion: 54 crore Jan Dhan ac-
counts and more than 52 crore collateral-free loans have been sanctioned under various flagship financial inclusion schemes (PM Mudra, Stand-Up India, PM-SVANidhi, PM Vishwa-karma).

The number of bank branches has increased from 1,17,990 in March 2014 to 1,60,501 in September 2024; out of which 1,00,686 branches are in Rural and Semi-Urban (RUSU) areas.

The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) Scheme aims to provide short-term crop loans to farmers. Total operative

Lime-flavoured memories drive innovation

MD SAUD ALHUMAIID

MOHAMED Alnwairan stands in front of a ver-dant citrus tree which four months hence will bear his first harvest of limes. A former businessman turned farmer, he has been culti-vating land in Al Ahsa, in the eastern deserts of Saudi Arabia, for the last 15 years. Now, due to climate change and dwindling supplies of water, he is adopting new technology as well as a new crop.

"We are very proud of our limes in this part of Saudi Arabia. You can feel the citrus oil on your hands when you touch them," he told UN News. "They re-mind us of our childhood, and now I have the chance to grow them commercial-ly." Alnwairan looks across his small farm which is lo-cated in an oasis near the city of Hofuf. It is approxi-mately a thousand square metres, and the sandy soil is dotted with some 120 two-metre-high trees that have been growing for al-most four years.



Smart irrigation
"On my left are trees which have been irrigated using innovative techniques and to the right are the ones I have been hand watering using traditional methods," he said. "The irrigated trees are thriving more." The dif-ference in colour, shape and sturdiness is noticeable, and their robust health is largely due to the way they have been watered. Alnwairan's farm is piloting what is known as smart irrigation, a resource-efficient ap-proach to growing crops, which is being promoted in this region by the UN's Food and Agri-culture Or-ganization (FAO).

He uses an app on his

smartphone to monitor the soil and track and deliver the water his lime trees need to flourish. When it rains, sensors register the damp conditions and pause scheduled water provisions. If the trees are not getting enough water, the app can instruct a greater water flow, if necessary, all re-motely.

Water stress
Water used to be plenti-ful in the oasis farmland, but reduced rainfall due to climate change and the culti-vation of water-thirsty rice, a local specialty, has driven the water table lower making water more prob-lematic and pricier to ac-

Farmers in Saudi Arabia are being encouraged to adopt new irrigation techniques as water and land re-sources are put under increasing pressure. Alnwairan's farm is piloting what is known as smart irrigation, a resource-efficient approach to growing crops, which is being promoted in this region by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization



cess. Alnwairan had to stop farming rice on another nearby plot when the water in his well fell to 300 metres below ground. Mahmoud Abdelnabby, an irrigation expert with FAO, said that "smart irrigation can re-duce water consumption by 70 per cent and is more sustainable for the envi-ronment."

Farmers don't currently have to pay for water, but automation provides other savings as fewer farm work-ers are needed to water the trees, a time consuming and onerous job during the intense heat of the Saudi growing season. The tech-nology whilst advanced is readily available on the lo-cal market and alt-hough financial investment is re-quired, "it pays off in higher

yields and a lower wage bill," according to FAO's Abdelnabby.

Land lost
As the climate continues to change across the de-sert lands of Saudi Arabia and drought conditions in-crease in frequency, farmers are also fighting desertification and the loss of productive land. Jaffar Al-mubarak, who works for the Saudi Irrigation Or-ganization, an FAO partner, said, "smart irrigation is part of an integrated re-sponse to climate change, which includes soil man-agement and the choice of crops," adding that "such an approach can maximise the use of water, but also help to rehabilitate land and work against desertification."

The Swiss confusion

Constantly varying interpretations of treaty provisions can potentially dent India’s image

SWITZERLAND’S DECISION TO suspend the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) treatment for India under the two countries’ 30-year-old double-taxation avoidance agreement (DTAA) from January 1 shows that as far as India is concerned, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Despite the rapid changes in the external environment, the difference in understanding or interpretation of the country’s laws and rules by companies, tax administration, and judiciary has remained constant. The result is there for all to see: India’s reputation as an attractive investment destination has taken quite a few knocks because of its unpredictable, ever-changing tax rules and their interpretation. Though in a different context, the storm over Vodafone and Nokia tax dispute is still cited by many foreign investors as shining examples of India’s tax arbitrariness.

The Swiss government’s move follows the Supreme Court of India’s ruling last year that the MFN clause doesn’t automatically trigger when a country joins the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) if the Indian government signed a tax treaty with that country before it joined the organisation. This view in a case involving dividend payment by Nestle India was at variance with Switzerland’s stand that the MFN clause applies automatically to countries that joined the OECD after 1994. As a demonstrative effect of its belief, Switzerland unilaterally reduced the tax rate on dividends for Indian firms from 10% to 5%, citing treaties India signed with Lithuania and Colombia, which became OECD members in 2018 and 2020 respectively. The Indian government, however, felt that the MFN clause applies only to countries that were OECD members in 1994, when the treaty was signed. India also argued that MFN benefits are not automatic and require explicit notification—a stand the SC agreed to.

The immediate implication of the move will be a higher tax burden on Indian firms operating in Switzerland, reducing their competitiveness compared to businesses from countries still benefiting from MFN provisions. If disputes over MFN interpretations persist, Indian businesses could face similar challenges in other jurisdictions as well. Both Switzerland and Indian government officials have, however, put up a brave face and said the DTTA dispute should have no impact on any other treaties under international law concluded between Switzerland (independently or under the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) framework and India. The agreement signed with the four-nation EFTA bloc is a unique free trade agreement, as it includes a binding commitment of \$100 billion investment and the creation of one million direct jobs in India by companies from those four countries over the next 15 years. An external affairs ministry spokesman also said that the double taxation treaty with Switzerland may require renegotiation in view of its trade pact with the member states of the EFTA.

One has to wait for the validity of these assertions, but the short point is India should avoid the kind of confusion that was visible in the case of the DTAA with Switzerland. In this context, the government would do well to listen to think tank Global Trade Research Initiative, which stressed the need for India to adopt a more consistent and strategic approach to international taxation treaties. Proactive negotiations to clarify and harmonise interpretations of treaty provisions are essential to safeguard Indian firms’ interests abroad. Additionally, India must ensure that its treaty frameworks reflect contemporary business realities, particularly in the digital and service sectors, to reduce tax uncertainties.

Mega deals won't lead M&A rebound under Trump

US BANKERS ARE rubbing their hands at an expected boom in dealmaking under a market-friendly President-elect Donald Trump next year. But scratch the surface and it is apparent that the mergers and acquisitions to come are far more likely to be among smaller companies. Mega deals won’t lead the way.

Denis Coleman, the chief financial officer of Goldman Sachs Group Inc., summed up the optimism on Bloomberg TV last week. He expects the coming change of leadership at the Federal Trade Commission, one key antitrust regulator, to remove some of the headwinds to takeovers and help improve “CEO confidence and unlock more investment, more activity and provide a more favourable strategic backdrop.”

However, Trump’s populist brand of Republicanism retains a strong dislike of the power of big companies, embodied by his Vice-President-elect JD Vance. The incoming administration’s pick to replace the staunchly progressive Lina Khan in running the FTC is a Republican lawyer called Andrew Ferguson, who joined the agency in April. His work suggests he’s no friend of big tech, with his initial moves including a call for an investigation into censorship and bans of some users on social networks.

The antitrust division of the Justice Department, meanwhile, is set to be led by Vance’s former economic policy adviser, Gail Slater, suggesting it too will maintain a tough line on corporate monopoly power.

Over the past three years, the share of global deals worth more than \$10 billion has been relatively low by historic standards at less than 20% of volume in many quarters, according to data compiled by UBS, while transactions in the \$2 billion to \$10 billion range have been more than 30% in several quarters. That trend is set to continue.

Legal battles over deals in the US have also become more common, which can mean delays in closing transactions and extra costs – and that could deter chief executives. “Courts have been taking a bigger role in deciding the outcome of contested deals, which can take more time, and that is likely to remain,” according to Richard Casavechia, UBS’s head of global banking in the US.

Under Joe Biden’s presidency, the FTC and DoJ blocked a string of deals and pursued investigations against the existing powers of big companies with antitrust court cases, particularly in technology. Bankers say that activist stance put a chilling effect on proposals for deals that large companies might otherwise have tried to do, and helped scupper some that they did attempt, such as Alphabet Inc.’s offers for Wiz Inc. and HubSpot Inc.

Smaller deals, though, may flourish. Regional banking, for example, is one area ripe for consolidation after the damage done by high interest rates and the deposit flight to big banks during 2023. Many of America’s more than 4,000 smaller lenders need to scale up so that they can appear sturdier, attract more deposits and afford the technology investment needed to modernize their services and run more efficiently.

Deals are most likely among banks below the threshold of \$100 billion in assets at which stricter regulation, capital and liquidity requirements kick in. New York Community Bancorp, now renamed Flagstar Financial Inc., came close to collapse in early 2024 because of the tougher oversight of its balance sheet that came with leaping into the big league after two quick acquisitions boosted its assets.

Bob Diamond, former CEO of Barclays Plc, has a venture focused on US banking consolidation and reckons there’ll be deals among banks with \$50 billion of assets and below. Those banks can gain scale but not break that \$100 billion barrier. Over the next few years, deal making will shrink to the roughly 4,500 banks in the US down to just 1,000 to 2,000 lenders, he said at a recent Financial Times banking conference.

In banking and elsewhere, while the activism of US antitrust regulators might not disappear entirely it’s likely to become friendlier to companies that are not yet giants. Investment bankers have good reasons for optimism – but their bonuses will more likely come from an accumulation of smaller deals than from single outsized paydays.



PAUL J DAVIES

Bloomberg

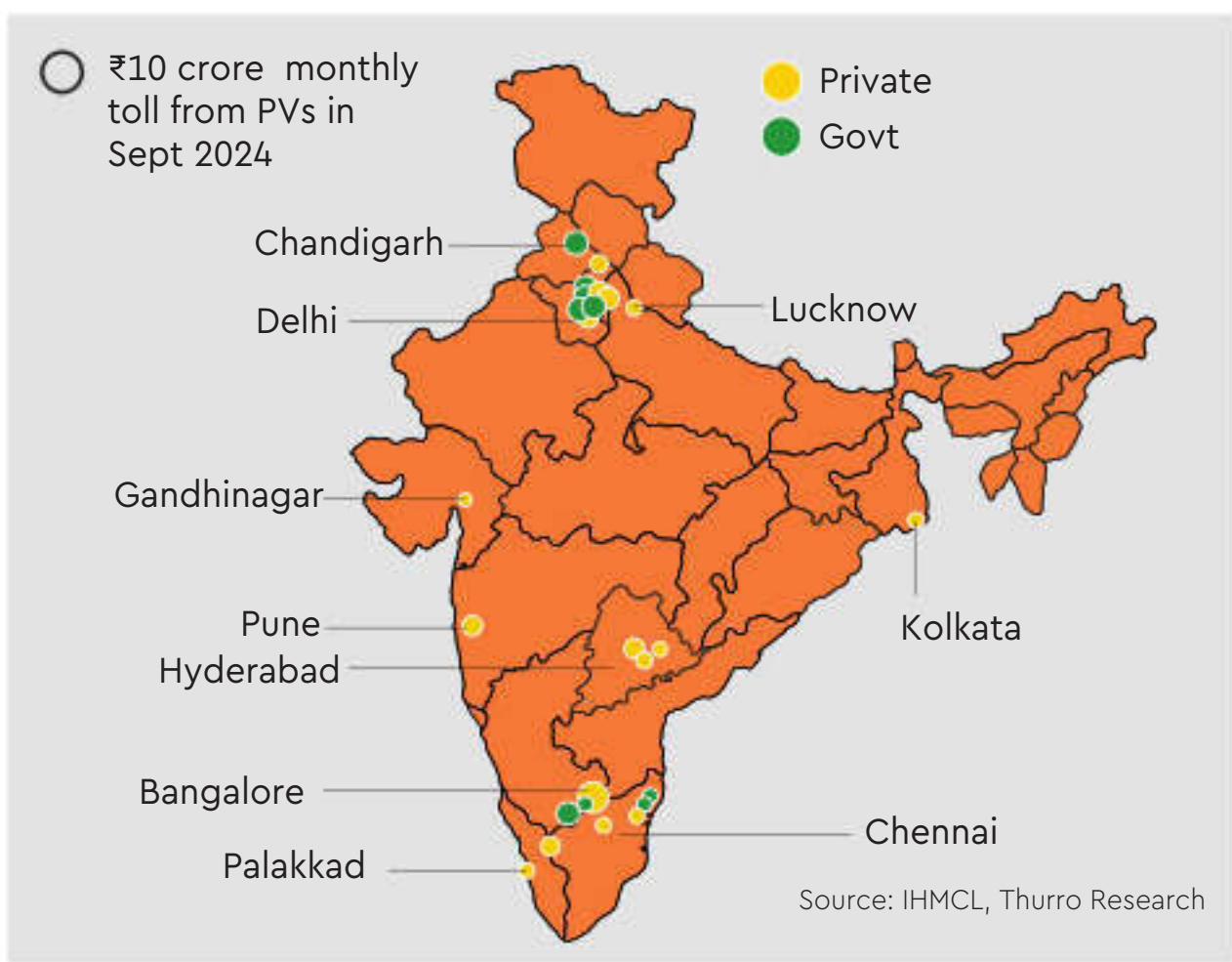
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

TOLLING IN WHAT HAVE BECOME ARTERIAL ROADS IN CITIES GETS A PUSHBACK FROM CITIZENS

Urban growth takes a toll

AKHILESH TILOTIA

Distinguished fellow, The Infravision Foundation and co-founder, Thurro



commuters to travel long distances, sometimes using intercity trains to reach the farthest reaches of the urban sprawl. Roads that once connected different towns now function as vital arteries of an expanded city. This growing infrastructure must be designed to accommodate large numbers of daily users from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, creating a more complex set of challenges for city planners.

Public infrastructure, by its very nature, must be inclusive and cater to a wide cross-section of the population. When such infrastructure faces pressure—due to overuse or unequal access—it can lead to political friction.

In recent months, this has been exem-

plified by the move in Maharashtra to waive tolls for light motor vehicles entering Mumbai. This was one of the last executive decisions of an outgoing government before the model code kicked in before elections. Elections are fought on multi-dimensional issues and it is difficult to attribute electoral outcomes to any one action, this move seems to have met the approval of the public.

This decision to do away with tolls around a growing city mirrors a similar move in the National Capital Region, where tolls were removed from the Noida Toll Bridge after a ruling by the Allahabad High Court. The toll waivers are seen as a way to ease congestion, but they also reflect the political sensitivity surround-

ing the cost of urban mobility.

To gauge the significance of tolling passenger vehicles (PVs) around Indian cities, data from FasTag, coupled with insights from the Indian Highways Management Corporation Limited (IHMCL) and Thurro, an alternative data provider, reveals some striking trends in toll revenue.

As of August 2023, the latest month for which vehicle-specific data is available, PVs contributed around 21% of the total toll revenue, despite comprising a far larger share of the total vehicle count. The average toll paid by PVs—approximately ₹80 per transaction—is considerably lower than the ₹175 charged on commercial vehicles, reflecting the differing toll structures for different vehicle classes.

Thurro’s analysis highlights specific toll plazas where PVs make a substantial contribution. In September 2024, there were 30 toll plazas which generated more than ₹45 lakh (approximately ₹1.5 lakh per day) from PVs alone. Unsurprisingly, these toll plazas are situated near major urban centers.

In total, these plazas collectively accounted for ₹207 crore) in toll revenue from PVs in that month. About half of this toll revenue—around ₹113 crore—was generated at toll plazas which are operated by private concessionaires. Notably, this represents less than 5% of the total national toll revenue collected across India (~₹4,500 crore).

While toll revenues from passenger vehicles are a crucial source of funding, particularly around major cities, striking the right balance between the needs of citizens and investors will require careful consideration. As urban sprawl continues, India’s ability to adapt its infrastructure planning and financing mechanisms will be key to maintaining liveable, efficient cities. In the next article, we discuss what options governments can consider in balancing the interests of investors and citizens.

This is the first of a two-part column. Views are personal

Upgrade cross-border payments



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With India being the world’s largest recipient of remittances since 2022, the urgency to modernise its payment systems has never been greater

IN A WORLD where economic and social ties transcend borders, cross-border payments are the backbone of international trade and global finance. For India, which receives the most remittances, these transactions are crucial to the country’s economic fabric. In 2023, India received \$120 billion in foreign remittances, with over 20% coming from the US and 18% from the UAE, per World Bank data.

Beyond personal remittances, payments also include services provided by Indian professionals and business remittances. However, beneath the impressive figures lies a somewhat inadequate payment infrastructure, marked by slow processing times due to intermediaries and high transaction costs. To maintain competitiveness in the global market, India must address these challenges through regulatory reform and innovation.

More to cross-border payments

In FY24, India’s IT exports welcomed \$199 billion, while foreign domestic investments (FDIs) into India totalled \$70.95 billion, per data from India Brand Equity Foundation. These figures underscore the need for an efficient payment infrastructure that can support growing cross-border transactions. Outbound payments also face challenges, from regulatory hurdles to inconsistent infrastructure, which must be addressed to enhance the country’s global competitiveness and digital growth.

Modernising regulations and payment systems

India’s cross-border payments face two major challenges—stringent regulations and outdated payment infrastructure. While these regulations aim to prevent fraud and money laundering, they often slow down legitimate transactions. For instance, non-bank Payment Aggregators (PA-CBs) face strict capital requirements, including an upper cap of ₹25 crore by 2026, which poses challenges for smaller startups. The transaction caps also restrict larger business operations from scaling up their cross-border dealings. However, recent Reserve Bank of India (RBI) draft guidelines on forex correspondents (who will be able to conduct business via an agency model) are likely to further strengthen the inward remittances ecosystem.

Infrastructure-wise, India relies heavily on traditional systems like Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) and wire transfers, which are slow and costly. To stay competitive, India must adopt newer technologies. The domestic success of Unified Payments Interface (UPI) offers promise for international scaling, though issues like interoperability and currency exchange must be resolved. Blockchain and Central Bank Digital

Currency (CBDC) initiatives also hold potential for enhancing speed, security, and cost in cross-border payments.

In 2021, RBI partnered with Open Financial Technologies to develop a blockchain-based payment system to enhance transparency, security, and fraud prevention. However, scalability during high transaction volumes requires solutions, like Layer 2 technologies, for efficiency.

India’s CBDC, eRupee, is another key project aimed at real-time settlement of cross-border transactions. By reducing reliance on intermediaries, eRupee could lower transaction costs and improve security. However, this will require interoperability between central banks across jurisdictions, which poses its own challenges.

These efforts promise significant economic benefits. Blockchain-based payments could save Indian banks millions annually, while reducing the number of intermediaries could open international markets for smaller enterprises.

Scaling UPI for global use

UPI has transformed domestic payments, but scaling it globally requires addressing challenges like system interoperability and currency exchange. UPI’s daily transaction cap of ₹2 lakh limits larger international transfers. The UPI-

PayNow partnership between India and Singapore expands UPI’s reach, though further collaborations are needed. Cross-border P2P payments will also require KYC and Anti-Money Laundering (AML) checks, making real-time transfers unlikely and necessitating a deferred settlement model.

Learning from the ‘Wiser’

Traditional cross-border payment methods like SWIFT remain dominant but incur high costs and slow processing times. The UK-based fintech Wise has disrupted this space by providing faster transactions at lower fees using real exchange rates in its P2P model. Indian fintechs could adopt similar P2P models to enhance international transfers.

India’s modernisation of cross-border payments hinges on regulatory reforms and technological innovations. Amidst all, interoperability between domestic and international payment systems is key to creating a seamless global ecosystem. While blockchain, CBDC, and UPI are promising, other methods should be explored to ensure cross-border payments are fast, secure, and affordable. RBI is actively working on balancing the risks of rapid technological changes while facilitating easier transactions, showcasing its commitment to fostering innovation in the payment landscape. With such efforts, India is well-positioned to enhance its leadership in global cross-border payments.

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