

Take a bow

Das infused 'Shakti' in RBI to deal with crises

A most remarkable period of stewardship of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) ends today as Shaktikanta Das steps down as Governor. Das assumed charge at a most difficult time for the financial markets and for the regulator. And when he hands over charge to his successor, Sanjay Malhotra, it will be with a justifiable sense of pride for what he has been able to achieve in the last six years at the helm of the central bank.

He can count many achievements. Taking over in the backdrop of turmoil in the financial markets following the collapse of IL&FS, and friction between his predecessor, Urjit Patel, and the government, Das had to immediately summon all his experience in the bureaucracy to smoothen ruffled feathers, both in the markets and the government, which he did with aplomb. He handled the Dewan Housing Finance bust-up and the near collapse of Yes Bank, both within a few months of his assuming office, with a firm hand, even while signalling to the markets the central bank's commitment to maintain stability. But the biggest test of his office, indeed his career, was to come in a year when Covid hit the world. Das' stewardship of the RBI in this period was outstanding. The central bank cut repo rates by a massive 75 basis points within three days of lockdown. This was followed with frequent, proactive policy measures to calm the markets and the financial sector, coordinating strategy with the government to reassure businesses and markets and keeping communication channels open, appearing before the media at frequent intervals.

Speaking at the *businessline* Changemakers Awards event in New Delhi about a year ago when he received the Changemaker of the Year 2023 award, Das dwelt at length on the steps that the RBI had to take to keep its staff protected even while ensuring that market operations functioned without interruption. In recent times, the RBI has not shied away from wielding the stick to keep its regulated entities in line — whether banks, NBFCs or fintechs — in the matter of curbing sharp practices. A notable facet of the RBI under Das was its ability to "smell a crisis", as he put it in the interview at the Changemakers Awards event, whether it be runaway lending by banks unmindful of risks, or attempts to evergreen loans by some NBFCs. Despite such a stellar list of achievements, one suspects that what Das would cherish most is his role as inflation warrior.

Over the last few months, there have been calls from various quarters, including this newspaper, for him to adopt a more benign stance in favour of growth by cutting rates. But he has refused to shed his samurai suit and sword until the "elephant retreated into the woods" without a threat of return. Look at what the RBI Act says in the matter of Flexible Inflation Targeting, he said, in the latest policy statement last week. Das has taken the inflation battle to the decisive stage; his successor will have a much easier job, at least on this front. While Das' steadfastness is to be admired, the jury is out on whether his commitment to stable prices will come at a cost to growth, and if yes, by how much. Das' list of achievements as Governor are many. Yet, history will probably judge him only on his success as an inflation warrior. That is the lot of central bank governors.



HIMADRI BHATTACHARYA

On the conclusion of its fifth bi-monthly meeting this fiscal on December 6, 2024, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decided with a 4-2 majority to keep the policy repo rate unchanged at 6.50 per cent, i.e., eleven times in a row. The stance of the policy was also kept unchanged at 'neutral'. This decision was unanimous. Most of the surveys conducted before the policy meeting indicated continuance of the *status quo* with regard to both the policy rate and stance. Expectedly, a few of the responses were similar to the dissent opinions within MPC that favoured a rate cut by 25 basis points. Also, in line with the majority responses in the surveys, the RBI announced a favourable liquidity measure: it decided to reduce the cash reserve ratio (CRR) of all banks by 50 basis points, thereby reorienting it to 4 per cent of NDTL, which was prevailing before the commencement of the last policy tightening cycle in April, 2022. Release of primary liquidity to the banks as a consequence of this step would be about ₹1.16 lakh crore, boosting their resources for making loans and investments.

ADAPTIVE PROJECTIONS? Two recent data significantly altered the macroeconomic prospects and, by implication, the expected path of the monetary policy for the rest of the current fiscal as also the next one: (1) CPI print for October 2024 at 6.2 per cent exceeded the upper tolerance level of 6 per cent, and was also way above the latest Q3:2024-25 projection of 4.8 per cent, and (ii) real GDP growth for Q2:2024-25 at 5.4 per cent was much lower than the latest projection of 7 per cent, Q1:2024-25 actual of 6.7 per cent and 8.1 per cent registered in Q2:2023-24.

In the light of the two data, the MPC has reduced the GDP growth projection for 2024-25 from 7.2 per cent to 6.6 per cent and increased CPI projection for 2024-25 to 4.8 per cent from 4.5 per cent made earlier. These are large adjustments happening within a period of about two months, which would raise two questions: One, why, in general, the actual prints with respect to both GDP and CPI happen to be worse than the projections? As a corollary to this: Is there any systematic bias in the quarterly projections? Two, to what extent are the projections also adaptive? Getting answers to both these questions is important, as they will provide an insight into the robustness of the models used in the RBI for the purpose of making macroeconomic projections for monetary policy purposes.



RBI does well to keep status quo

RIGHT MOVE. Monetary policy is not about looking for opportunities to cut the policy rate. It is about macro stability

The number of dissenting members of MPC who favoured a commencement of policy easing with a rate cut by 25 basis points has now increased from one to two. Their line of argument seems to be the following: the recent slowdown in the growth rate as also in private investment in the manufacturing sector point to a demand deficit in the economy, which has been compounded by a lacklustre demand for industrial products in India's export markets. Real exchange rate appreciation of the Indian rupee since the onset of the tightening cycle in May 2022 and thereafter has contributed to the poor overall export performance during this period. More real appreciation of the rupee is a possibility if the process of 'normalisation of monetary policy', involving reduction in the policy rate by MPC does not begin here and now.

The majority opinion, the essence of which has been articulated by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das on several occasions in recent months, is that strong foundations for high growth can be secured only with durable price stability. Restoration of the balance between inflation and growth in the

overall interest of the economy is the foremost task of the MPC. High inflation not only reduces the purchasing power of both rural and urban consumers but also alters relative prices. Both can have adverse implications for private consumption. Any premature cut in the policy rate, i.e., before durable alignment of CPI inflation with the 4 per cent target could lead to several macro-financial setbacks.

The higher-than-expected CPI print for October was occasioned by a sharp rise in food inflation and an uptick in core inflation. Any cut in the policy rate now may engender the risk of inflation getting out of control, requiring policy reversal and several doses of rate increases. Doing so will run against the very grain of the inflation-targeting framework now in place.

TURKEY EXPERIENCE The experience of Turkey in recent years highlights the likely mistakes in monetary policy-making in a succinct manner. In the wake of the outbreak of war in the Black Sea region in early 2022, Turkey faced a significant spurt in consumer inflation, like many other countries. The central bank there responded to this development with a very unconventional measure: it slashed the policy rates (the main ones being the central bank's overnight borrowing/lending rates) three times that year. This action was based on the assumption that a lower interest rate

would reduce the economy's cost structure which, in turn, would reduce inflation and provide a boost to local industry, particularly the exporters. None of the anticipated outcomes materialised, though. The spike in inflation continued unabated, leading to a harsh policy reversal in early 2023. The central bank's overnight borrowing rate rose from 7 per cent in February 2023 to 13.5 per cent in June 2023. Despite the tightening, consumer inflation in Turkey is still very high at around 47 per cent.

Monetary policy-making is not about looking for tactical opportunities and pretexts to cut the policy rate. This approach is likely to be costly in a macro-economic sense and could even be destabilising. The decision to develop a benchmark overnight interest rate to be called SOFR (Secured Overnight Reserve Rate) and based on two secured overnight money market instruments (basket repo and TREP) is a timely step. Over the last several years, there has been a continuous shift in volume from the unsecured overnight lending and borrowing market (with MIBOR as its benchmark) in favour of the secured market. And in the secured segment, TREP has been gaining in volume. Subsequent to the commencement of publication of SOFR by FIBL, one would expect the emergence of SOFR-based interest rate derivatives in India.

The writer is a former central banker and a consultant to the IMF. Through The Billion Press

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Unease over Presidential pardons

The Biden administration is toying with the idea of issuing pre-emptive pardons given Trump's long 'foe' list

Sridhar Krishnaswami

It is not just the world that's waiting with a degree of apprehension on the incoming President Donald J Trump. America, too, is watching with a sense of unease, of President Joe Biden leaving on January 20, 2025. For all those who were under the impression that Biden's exit was going to be as unceremonious as that of President Jimmy Carter in 1981, there is a reason for re-think. Bizarre as it may sound, Biden is likely to leave behind a legacy not on domestic or foreign policies but on Presidential pardons, something that started with George Washington and the Whiskey Rebellion.

Many Democrats are simply outraged that President went back on his word on pardoning his son Hunter Biden of any federal crimes he may have committed between 2014 and 2024. His decision to pardon Hunter Biden opened a Pandora's box with civil rights groups slamming the President for not extending the pardon to hundreds, if not thousands, who are in jail for a number of reasons. After all, President Carter

had pardoned all those who had evaded the draft in the Vietnam War and Barack Obama freed hundreds convicted of non-violent drug offences. Pardoning Hunter Biden was not the only thing that upset Democrats and Biden allies. It was also in the rationale that was advanced: "I believe in the justice system, but as I have wrestled with this, I also believe raw politics has infected this process and it led to a miscarriage of justice," the President said. And this is precisely what President-elect Trump has been saying for four years, especially as he was taken through Special Counsels — that he was a victim of politics.

MANY TARGETS The unease in America today is not of Biden demitting office without a legacy. It is one of leaving the White House with an unease that administration officials may be toying with the idea of issuing pre-emptive pardons, given what Trump has said on "enemies". Chants of "Lock Him Up" or "Lock Her Up" had been a mantra right through Trump's political career — from the yesteryear of Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi to today's Kamala Harris, they have been through



UNSETTLING. The pardoning of Hunter

the rants of Trump and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) crowd. The "foe" list is long for the President-elect and it could include top Democrats whom he has said should be in jail; sitting and former members of Congress; and administration officials of the Justice Department and investigative agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Some say that vaccine czar like Anthony Fauci could also be targeted. On the Republican side the notables would be former Congresswoman Liz Cheney. It is difficult to draw up a list for the "likes"

of Trump could be counted in one hand, if not two, family included.

There is a bigger problem that Biden must be worried about other than making up that list of who is to be presumptively pardoned. The fact that a dossier is being prepared itself could be damaging enough to those who may not want to be considered potential wrongdoers, on criminal or civil litigations. For instance, former Democratic House Intelligence Committee chief and current Senator-elect Adam Schiff has asked Biden not to consider his name.

The biggest danger to issuing futuristic blanket pardon would come from the precedent it sets on the Presidency. The issue of Presidential pardons was one of those privileged powers of the Executive that came without any checks and balances. Now, if President Biden goes through with the idea, it opens up to calls for Congressional scrutiny, and with this another circus type environment in Washington DC.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

The fall of Assad: a tumultuous, fragile hope in Syria Bashar al-Assad's downfall came not with a bang but a whimper. The Syrian dictator reportedly fled his home in the wake of a blitzkrieg advance by a coalition of anti-government rebels. By Sunday morning he was gone — leaving armed groups as the country's dominant political players. A spirit of anti-Assad sentiment surged across Syria, manifesting itself through displays of both celebration and defiance. The question now is whether this unleashed energy — brutally suppressed by fear and authoritarian control — will become a unifying force in building a new nation or, rather, a precursor to deeper divisions. The fall of the House of Assad, which has ruled Syria for more than half a century, should be a warning to dictatorial regimes. Mr Assad's departure underscores a broader truth: societies cannot indefinitely tolerate systemic abuses, such as state-sponsored propaganda, corruption and violence. The fish rots from the head down. Mr Assad's Syrian state collapsed from within, having spent more than a decade pursuing a reign of terror that only fuelled the very unrest it sought to suppress. [LINK](#)

Rooftop solar Approves the editorial 'Warming up' (December 9), the fact that most of the rooftop solar power unit installations under PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana are confined to just four States shows that the incentives levied in other States is not up to the mark. Further, the high installation cost factor, even after subsidy, may be impeding the growth of installations. Most of the poor households require installation with capacities of less than or equal to 1 kW for their power consumption. And they cannot afford the cost of installation even with the current subsidy of 60 per cent. The subsidy component may be increased to 90 per cent for installations up to 1 kW capacity, so

as make the scheme affordable to the poor. And for those who cannot afford to bear the remaining 10 per cent cost of installation, the same may be arranged as a loan from a bank at a nominal interest rate and repayable in easy instalments. Further, awareness about the scheme needs to be increased to make people know of the advantages of having rooftop solar and the subsidised cost of installation. **Kosaraju Chandramouli** Hyderabad

Consumer spending The article 'What's changing with Indian consumers' (December 7) made for a good read. That Indian consumers are spending more on services (education, health, entertainment, etc) than food products these days clearly suggest that there is remarkable improvement in their standard of living. The increased spending on education and healthcare augers well for the country, as these are key components of human capital formation. **S Ramakrishnaaeye** Chennai

Sanitation robots This refers to 'Sanitation 2.0: Robots that do heroic battle in the gutter' (December 9). Technological inventions have both flips and flops. Start-ups engaged in designing of sanitation robots for addressing the challenges faced in sanitation infrastructure maintenance need to

be given liberal technical and financial assistance in rolling out a perfect prototype model. These sanitation robots, if manufactured on a large scale, would help thousands of water and sewage networks, by plugging leakages and removing sludge which are hitherto done manually. **RV Bakaran** Chennai

End of Assad's regime With Bashar al-Assad, who ruled Syria with an iron fist for nearly a quarter of a century, fleeing the country and taking refuge in Russia following the capture of Damascus by rebel forces, Syria now stares at an uncertain future and political instability.

The fall of Assad's government in Syria has not only signalled the end of the country's 13-year civil war but wiped out a bastion from which Iran and Russia exercised influence across the West Asia. The visual footage on television showing thousands of Syrians in cars and on foot congregating at a main square in Damascus waving and chanting "freedom" aptly reflected their deeper yearning for free rule. Rebels have freed Syria from the clutches of Assad, but they have the daunting task of trying to deliver stability to a diverse country with competing factors that will need billions of dollars in aid and investments to rebuild. **M Jayaram** Sholavandan, TN

WORDLY WISE I FOUND I COULD SAY THINGS WITH COLOR AND SHAPES THAT I COULDN'T SAY ANY OTHER WAY. — GEORGIA O'KEEFE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A point of no return

Will Syria and the wider Middle East be better off without Assad? There are no easy answers



P R KUMARASWAMY

AFTER ASSAD

Even as the world celebrates the fall of a tyrant, fingers remain crossed on whether it will lead to a more pluralistic Syria

FEW IN THE world, barring the ruling circles in Tehran and Moscow, will shed a tear for the fall of the Assad dynasty that has ruled Syria with an iron fist for more than half a century.

Adding to the massive domestic challenges is the role of external powers. It was the Iranian and Russian interventions that helped Assad stay in power at enormous cost to the Syrian people.

IN A SWIFT and unpredictable operation, rebel forces have overrun Damascus and toppled the Assad regime.

Assad became the last of the Arab leaders to be toppled following domestic unrest in the city of Daraa, closer to the Jordanian border.

During this period, some Arab countries were critical of Assad for not "listening" to the voices of Syrians and for prioritising personal survival over the larger interest of Syria.

Assad became the last of the Arab leaders to be toppled following domestic unrest in the city of Daraa, closer to the Jordanian border.

situation. However, weekend events had radically altered the situation in Syria and beyond.

The end of the Bashar regime comes against the backdrop of a volatile and highly charged Middle Eastern order following the October 7, 2023, terror attacks by Hamas against Israel.

Two, the military weakening of Hezbollah was accompanied by its unpopularity over its parallel foreign policy at the behest of Iran.

Three, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which leads the anti-Israeli forces in the Middle East under the banner of the Axis of Resistance, is internally weakened.

There are initial signs that the forces of Iranian Revolutionary Guards are already pulling out of Syria.

The writer teaches contemporary Middle East at Jawaharlal Nehru University

A HOT WINTER

Record temperature levels in 2024 signal deepening of climate crisis. Policymakers have their task cut out

IT'S ALL BUT certain that 2024 will be the warmest year on record. Latest data from the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) show that last November was the 18th month in a 17-month period when the average global temperature rise was more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-Industrial Revolution period.

Meteorologists had anticipated global temperatures to come down a tad this year after the planet heated to a record level in 2023.

Close on the heels of C3S's announcement on November temperatures, the Swiss Re Institute — the academic wing of the eponymous insurance major — released a report on the economic costs of extreme weather events.

CHOCOLATE, COFFEE, REALITY

Pantone's colour of the year for 2025 — Mocha Mousse — speaks simultaneously of indulgence and the everyday

FORGET FAIRYTALES. If there is one rags-to-riches story worth telling, it is that of the colour brown. For the first time since Pantone began its colour trend forecasting in 1999, a shade of brown — Mocha Mousse — has been chosen as its colour of the year 2025.

And yet, when Pantone began the colour of the year programme, it was meant to be educational — "to draw attention to the relationship between colour and culture" and promote the "language of colour" to describe the world.



HARMALA GUPTA

DYING WITH DIGNITY is one of the most vexing challenges we face today. The recent passage of a bill in the House of Commons in Britain highlights this concern.

Data from Oregon — it was the first state to legalise assisted dying for the terminally ill in 1997 — shows that two-thirds of those who asked for help to die last year had cancer.

It was shocking to hear that in the UK, considered the mother of the modern hospice and palliative care movement, hospices have had to shut down because they depend primarily on funds from charity.

DIGNITY AT THE END

As spectre of ageing population looms, India can no longer neglect palliative care

At CanSupport, we can testify to this. We have had a few people with terminal cancer who had suicidal intentions but once their issues were sorted out, not only did they continue to live well but they also died with dignity.

Based on our 28 years of experience looking after patients with serious health-related suffering, there is no doubt in our mind that palliative care must be universally available and made part of the public healthcare system.

Yet, this care is accessible to less than 4 per cent of those who need it. It is largely provided by NGOs that suffer from a paucity of funds and face a number of hurdles, especially procuring a licence for oral morphine, the drug of choice for unremitting cancer pain.

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lation looming large, we must act now. We can not afford to neglect this aspect of care as what are now isolated cries for assistance in dying are likely to become a chorus.

Unlike parts of the Western world, we are a highly stratified society. The potential misuse of a law on assisted dying, despite guardrails, would be immense. Marginal and vulnerable populations who are financially dependent on family members and the state are likely to be disproportionately affected.

Palliative and hospice care offer the tools to prevent serious health-related suffering. The question is, do we have the commitment and necessary foresight to use them with wisdom and compassion?

The writer is founder-president, CanSupport

DECEMBER 10, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

STILL HAZARDOUS

ALTHOUGH SEVEN DWYS have passed since the leakage of the poisonous gas that killed 2,000, the technicians and chemists working round the clock have not been able to decide on a safe method to dispose of the remaining 30 tonnes of Methyl isocyanate.

holding a Kuwaiti airline threatened to blow it up. The four Arab hijackers, who are demanding the release of 17 prisoners from Kuwaiti prisons, killed four of their hostages, including two Americans, in the earlier five days of the hijack drama.

WORKERS IN DANGER

THOUSANDS OF WORKERS in Faridabad may be dying a slow death after inhaling toxic gases continuously emitted by chemical factories in the industrial area. The Haryana government is treating the chemical factory owners with kid-gloves because they claim to have "connections" at the highest political level.

TAMIL MILITANTS STRIKE

WITH THE TAMIL militants in northern Sri Lanka stepping up their activities and the army indulging in retaliatory attacks on the civilian Tamil population, the picture is one of "slow genocide" of the Tamils. The imposition of a 42-hour curfew in three northern districts indicates that either something big, other than the hijacking of three oil tankers by Tamil militants, has happened or that the army is preparing for a major onslaught.



FIRST COLUMN
BRAIN ROT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

There is alarming cognitive decline linked to overindulgence in mindless digital content



SAKSHI SETHI

In a world saturated with endless entertainment, constant notifications and superficial distractions, the human brain faces unprecedented challenges. The term brain rot refers to the perceived decline in cognitive abilities or intellectual engagement due to excessive consumption of mindless or unproductive content. While it is colloquial and not a clinical diagnosis, it describes mental fog, reduced attention span and diminished problem-solving abilities often linked to prolonged screen time or low-value content. Studies suggest that heavy screen usage can correlate with reduced grey matter in the brain, which may impair critical thinking and memory, particularly among younger individuals.

It also contributes to mental health issues like anxiety and depression, driven by constant comparisons and exposure to idealised online content. The rise of social media, streaming platforms and short-form content has revolutionised how we consume information and entertainment.

While these platforms offer unprecedented access to global knowledge, they also foster habits of passive consumption. Endless scrolling and binge-watching also lead to mental fatigue and reduced attention spans, making it harder for individuals to engage with more complex ideas or tasks. Brain rot can also stem from a lack of intellectual stimulation. Activities that challenge the brain such as reading, problem-solving, or engaging in creative pursuits are often sidelined in favour of easier, low-effort distractions. Over time, this neglect can lead to a decline in critical thinking, memory retention and problem-solving skills.



The modern lifestyle, characterised by high levels of stress and constant multitasking, can contribute to cognitive decline. It is often said that chronic stress impairs brain function, particularly in areas responsible for memory and learning which creates a vicious cycle where individuals turn to mindless activities to escape stress, further exacerbating mental stagnation. Moreover, a sedentary lifestyle, coupled with a diet lacking in nutrients essential for brain function, can also lead to cognitive decline. In maintaining mental clarity and overall brain health, physical exercise and a balanced diet play crucial roles.

The effects of brain rot are far-reaching and can manifest in various aspects of life. A lack of focus and motivation often results in decreased efficiency and the inability to complete tasks effectively. Overindulgence in passive entertainment stifles the ability to think creatively or generate original ideas. The overuse of escapist media can lead to a disconnect from real-world emotions and experiences, fostering feelings of emptiness or dissatisfaction. Excessive reliance on digital communication can impair interpersonal relationships and the ability to engage in meaningful, face-to-face interactions. Addressing brain rot requires a multifaceted approach that emphasises mindfulness, discipline and a commitment to personal growth. Setting boundaries for screen time and being intentional about the type of content consumed can help reduce the effects of brain rot. By choosing educational or thought-provoking material over passive entertainment the mind can be stimulated; by prioritising physical health such as regular physical exercise, a balanced diet and setting goals for personal and intellectual growth learning can help foster mental resilience and creativity. They will also help reduce stress and combat mental inertia.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Addressing Hindu persecution in Bangladesh



PRASHANT TEWARI

India must take decisive action to safeguard the persecuted and assert its role as a defender of minority rights, cultural identity and regional stability



The escalating persecution of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh cloaked under the guise of political shifts and regime change, underscores an alarming resurgence of communal violence. With reports of systematic targeting and atrocities emerging over months, the role of the current regime, reportedly influenced by Jamaat-e-Islami, demands scrutiny. India, as the world's largest Hindu-majority nation and a protector of minority rights, cannot afford to stand as a passive observer.

Instead, it must respond with decisive and proactive measures to safeguard not only the Hindu minority in Bangladesh but also its own cultural and historical ethos. Reports of widespread violence against Hindus in Bangladesh reveal a pattern of calculated aggression. From desecration of temples and destruction of property to orchestrated violence, these acts are not isolated incidents but part of a broader, systematic campaign. The roots of this antagonism can be traced back to the Great Bengal Partition of 1905 when radical elements sought to establish an Islamic dominion in the region. Although temporarily disrupted by Bangladesh's liberation in 1971, the vision of Darul-ul-Islam—a dominion governed by Islamic law—has been rekindled.

Under the current regime, these historical grievances have been weaponised to erode Hindu culture and population. What makes the situation more alarming is the reported nexus between the Bangladeshi government, Pakistan's ISI, radical jihadi groups, and influential ideologues like Jamaat-e-Islami. These forces seem united in their goal of reshaping Bangladesh's demographic and cultural landscape to align with extremist ideologies.

Mohammad Yunus and the Shadow of Global Influence

Central to this crisis is the controversial figure of Mohammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate who reportedly plays a significant role in the regime's ideological alignment. While his global repu-



INDIA MUST SUPPORT THE EMERGENCE OF A FAVOURABLE AND INCLUSIVE REGIME THAT CAN COUNTER EXTREMIST IDEOLOGIES. THIS APPROACH, WHILE CONTROVERSIAL, ALIGNS WITH INDIA'S STRATEGIC AND HUMANITARIAN INTERESTS

tion as a microfinance pioneer lends him an aura of credibility, his alleged affiliations with anti-Hindu policies and his ties with external powers, including China and certain factions in the United States, raise concerns. These alignments have not only emboldened the regime but have also enabled it to criticise India under the pretext of democracy and human rights violations. This geopolitical manipulation, leveraging both soft power and hard alliances, directly challenges India's sovereignty and its role as a regional stabiliser. India must counter these narratives with truth and assert its position as a defender of minority rights. The current crisis mirrors the challenges faced by India in 1971. The liberation of Bangladesh under Indira Gandhi was driven by humanitarian and strategic imperatives—protecting millions of refugees and dismantling a regime that perpetuated genocide. Today, the targeting of Hindus in Bangladesh represents a similar humanitarian catastrophe and a strategic threat. India, home to the largest Hindu population in the world, bears a unique responsibility to safeguard its diaspora and kin. The Narendra Modi government has a historic opportunity to emulate the bold decisions of 1971, reaffirming India's role as a protector of justice and a regional powerhouse.

A Strategic Path Forward

India's response to the crisis must be multifaceted, encompassing aggression, diplomacy, and strategic recalibration. India's security apparatus must transcend reactive measures. By identifying and dismantling rogue elements within Bangladesh that orchestrate attacks on minorities, India can send a strong message. Targeted strikes, similar to Israel's precision

operations, could serve as a deterrent and emphasise India's commitment to protecting its Hindu diaspora. Bangladesh's economic reliance on India provides a powerful tool. By imposing strategic trade sanctions and mobilising international opinion, India can isolate the current regime, pressuring it to reconsider its policies. Efforts must also focus on highlighting the human rights abuses faced by minorities in Bangladesh, garnering global support for the cause. Long-term stability in Bangladesh hinges on a government that respects minority rights and values democratic principles. India must support the emergence of a favourable and inclusive regime that can counter extremist ideologies. This approach, while controversial, aligns with India's strategic and humanitarian interests. A bold proposition involves addressing the demographic realities of 1971 when Hindus comprised around 21 per cent of Bangladesh's population. Securing territories proportional to this demographic could provide a haven for minorities while addressing historical injustices. Such a solution would echo the decisive territorial realignments of 1947 and 1971, albeit adapted to contemporary challenges.

The Hindu community worldwide must unite against these atrocities. India, with its population of over one billion Hindus, should lead by example, adopting a robust stance to counter persecution. Strengthened solidarity, coupled with decisive government action, can set a precedent for minority protection globally.

Rebuilding Regional Stability

The crisis also necessitates a reevaluation of India's relationship with Bangladesh. Despite India's pivotal role in Bangladesh's

liberation, successive regimes have displayed hostility and indifference. This lack of gratitude underscores the need for a recalibration of India's foreign policy toward its neighbour. Through a combination of economic, social, diplomatic, and military strategies, India must assert its dominance in the region.

The message should be unequivocal: any violence against Hindus or hostile actions will be met with resolute action. Israel's unwavering commitment to its sovereignty and people offers valuable lessons for India. Despite being a small nation, Israel has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of decisive measures in safeguarding its citizens. India, with its vast resources and geopolitical influence, must adopt similar strategies to protect its minorities and assert its regional leadership.

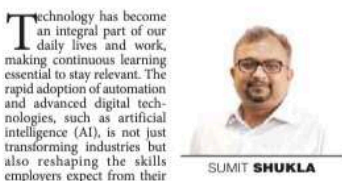
A Turning Point for India? The Bangladesh crisis represents more than a regional issue; it is a defining moment for India's foreign policy and its identity as a nation. By taking bold and proactive measures, the Narendra Modi government can reaffirm India's role as a defender of justice and humanity.

Protecting Hindus in Bangladesh is not just about addressing a humanitarian crisis—it is about asserting India's sovereignty, preserving its cultural identity, and ensuring regional stability. Instead of hoping for UNHCR intervention, the Indian government must rise to the occasion, transforming the crisis into an opportunity to redefine India's role in South Asia. With decisive action, India can prevent history from repeating itself, ensuring that justice prevails and that the legacy of protecting minorities endures.

(The writer is prominent columnist and Public Policy Expert; the views expressed are personal)

The imperative of continuous learning in India's AI-driven future

The rapid growth of AI, has intensified the demand for skilled professionals. Yet, a stark talent gap threatens this progress



SUMIT SHUKLA

Technology has become an integral part of our daily lives and work, making continuous learning essential to stay relevant. The rapid adoption of automation and advanced digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), is not just transforming industries but also reshaping the skills employers expect from their workforce. By 2027, it is projected that 80 per cent of engineering roles will require employees to undergo training and development to meet the changing demands brought about by AI advancements, according to Gartner. In India, the demand for skilled professionals in technology-driven fields, especially AI, is growing significantly. Reports by BCG and NASS

the coming years. Alarmingly, the talent gap could rise from 25 per cent to nearly 30 per cent by 2028, emphasising the critical need for skill development among both new graduates and experienced professionals.

One significant challenge is the disconnect between formal education and the practical skills required in the job market. Every year, approximately 1.5 million engineering graduates enter the workforce in India, yet only a fraction secure jobs aligned with their field of study. This mismatch is not due to a lack of opportunities but stems from the gap between the theoretical knowledge imparted in academic institutions and the hands-on skills sought by employers. Beyond technical expertise,

companies now prioritise candidates with interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, essential for thriving in collaborative and dynamic work environments.

The India Skills Report 2024 highlights this concern, noting that while some states, such as Telangana, have made strides in job preparedness among the 18 to 21 age group, critical skill gaps persist. For roles reliant on AI and emerging technologies, the gap ranges from 60 per cent to 73 per cent. These statistics underscore the urgent need for educational institutions to revamp their curricula to better align with industry demands.

Updating academic programmes is vital to bridging this gap. Universities and colleges must incorporate industry



trends and practical learning experiences into their courses. Today's workforce needs to think critically across disciplines and understand the broader implications of technology on economic, social, and cultural contexts. Flexible and continuous education plays a pivotal role in closing the divide between academic knowledge and the realities of the job market. Digital learning platforms offer

a promising solution in this context. With over 50 per cent of Indians actively using the internet, online education provides accessible opportunities to acquire new skills. Edtech platforms specialising in skill enhancement allow individuals to enroll in tailored courses and programmes, preparing them for rapidly evolving job landscapes.

The benefits of continuous learning extend beyond career advancement. Employees who are adaptable and committed to enhancing their knowledge contribute to organisational innovation and help businesses navigate shifting market dynamics. For instance, as AI becomes more integrated across industries, the demand for experts in these technologies will continue to rise.

Forward-thinking companies are already investing in employee training programs to stay competitive and ensure their teams are equipped to handle emerging challenges. Despite these efforts, many traditional educational institutions struggle to meet industry needs. Relying heavily on lecture-based teaching, these institutions often focus on theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical skills. Students have limited access to industry-standard equipment or opportunities for hands-on problem-solving, leaving them ill-prepared for the workforce. Integrating real-world applications into academic learning bridges the gap between the theoretical instruction and practical expertise, ensuring graduates are ready to meet

employer expectations. Upskilling is not just about addressing current deficiencies—it involves cultivating a mindset of continuous improvement. In a world where industries evolve rapidly and the shelf life of skills is shrinking, professionals must adapt to new technologies and methodologies quickly. Skills once considered indispensable can become obsolete within a few years, making the ability to learn and relearn critical for success in today's professional environment. For individuals and organisations alike, embracing continuous education is a strategic move to navigate the present and excel in the future.

(The writer is CEO at Scholars Merit, views are personal)

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PAPER WITH PASSION

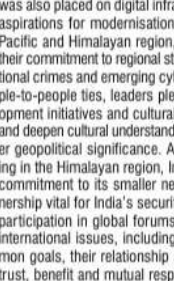
Renewed vigour

PM Modi and the King Wangchuck's meeting strengthens ties with the Himalayan kingdom and lays the groundwork for future collaboration

India and Bhutan share a relationship rooted in historical ties, cultural affinity and a deep commitment to mutual progress. This bond was reaffirmed during a recent high-level meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. The meeting underscores the enduring importance both nations place on their friendship amidst a dynamic geopolitical landscape. The foundation of India-Bhutan relations was laid with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship in 1949, which established perpetual peace and friendship, free trade and mutual cooperation. This treaty was updated in 2007 to reflect evolving dynamics. It continued to emphasise close cooperation on defence, trade and cultural exchange. India has been a steadfast partner in Bhutan's development journey, assisting in key sectors such as hydropower, infrastructure, education and health. Bhutan, in turn, has been a reliable neighbour, sharing India's security concerns and supporting its diplomatic endeavours.

The recent interaction between PM Modi and King Jigme Khesar sought to address emerging challenges and explore avenues for deeper collaboration. Hydropower is a cornerstone of India-Bhutan relations. Bhutan exports surplus electricity generated from its rivers to India, a mutually beneficial arrangement. Discussions focused on scaling up hydropower projects, ensuring sustainable energy practices, and addressing financial challenges related to project execution. India remains Bhutan's largest trading partner and the leaders explored ways to diversify trade and enhance connectivity. Emphasis was also placed on digital infrastructure and technology transfer to support Bhutan's aspirations for modernisation. Geopolitical developments, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Himalayan region, were key discussion points. Both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to regional stability and countering security threats, including transnational crimes and emerging cyber risks. Recognising the importance of fostering people-to-people ties, leaders pledged to expand scholarship programmes, skill development initiatives and cultural exchanges. These efforts aim to empower the youth and deepen cultural understanding. The dialogue between India and Bhutan holds broader geopolitical significance. As China increases its outreach in South Asia, including in the Himalayan region, India's proactive engagement with Bhutan reaffirms its commitment to its smaller neighbours. Bhutan's strategic location makes its partnership vital for India's security and regional influence. India's support for Bhutan's participation in global forums reflects its willingness to amplify Bhutan's voice on international issues, including climate change. As both nations work toward common goals, their relationship serves as a model for regional cooperation based on trust, benefit and mutual respect.

PM Modi and King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck during their meeting in Thimphu, Bhutan.



PICTALK



Farmers carry harvested cauliflower at a field on a winter morning, in Kollada

Superpower retreats and their fallout

Russians abandoning Assads is a stark reminder of the fact that promises of steadfast allegiance can falter when geopolitical will and resources wane



BHOPINDER SINGH

The Vietnam War was fought between the forces of the North (supported by the Soviet Union and China) and those of the South (supported by the United States of America). While it lasted twenty years (1955 to 1975) the direct involvement of the American troops lasted about a decade from 1965 onwards. The scars of 58,281 US fatalities and 303,644 wounded had tired the spirits, emotions and morale of the Americans, and they secretly negotiated a pull-out plan under the garb of the Paris Peace Accords that the Americans knew would not hold up.

The Americans made many insincere and knowingly immoral promises to intervene on behalf of its ally, the Southern side, but when the push came to shove, it pushed the Southern side under the bus with non-intervention or support. Later day US President Ronald Reagan was to coin the term 'Vietnam Syndrome' to suggest a reluctance to support an international military intervention, beyond a point. A similar renege of support after almost a decade of direct military intervention was to face the Soviet-propped puppet government of Afghanistan, under Mohammad Najibullah. Ultimately the political and popular will of the Soviets had waned as the human and financial cost of continuing the war in Afghanistan had waned. A few years later, exactly as it had happened in Vietnam, the Afghan government was ousted in a bloody offensive and Najibullah's corpse was dragged behind a truck through the streets of Kabul. Eventually, the Soviets left him to his fate. It was the sort of end of a regime that was far less than ideal as the land of many 'Great Games' earlier i.e., Afghanistan, had seen similar consequences of bloodlust with the British troops leaving Afghanistan in Jan 1842 (only one survivor had managed to reach the British controlled township of Jalalabad). Sadly, even Najibullah's ouster wasn't to be the last of the 'abandoning' of a regime in Kabul. In 2021, an exhausted and dispirited American force 'abandoned'



its ally i.e., the Ashraf Ghani government, in Kabul on the pretext of a deal signed between the Taliban and the US in Doha. Everyone knew that the deal would not hold up and lo behold the Taliban stormed into Kabul, soon after. The 'longest war in US history' with a two trillion financial cost, a no-win situation, and mounting pictures of 'US body bags' had yet again forced the Americans to push their ally under the bus. By blindsiding its purported ally, the Americans had unilaterally let down its ally after making promises to defend the same. Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh was left mocking the US on its pusillanimous stand, "when a superpower decided to become a mini power". Recently, and yet again, it was the decisive reluctance of a major power and ally i.e., Russia and Iran, that left the beleaguered Syrian Government of Bashar Al Assad, to its inevitable fate and within days of some token support, the Syrian capital of Damascus fell to rebels, who routed the Russia-Iran supported Bashar Al Assad regime. To be fair, the 'abandonment' of Bashar Al Assad cannot be compared to the Vietnam or Afghanistan situations, as the principal power

after the Syrian rebels had taken over Idlib and were dashing the next profile target of Homs, the Russian fighter planes did bomb some rebel strongholds, but it simply wasn't enough. Soon, the Syrian rebels made the kill for Damascus, and the isolated and unsupported forces of Bashar Al Assad simply couldn't hold on. History repeated itself and in the face of supporting foreign allies failing the regime, it was tantamount to pushing the same under the bus! The lessons are substantial for other regions facing similar belligerence or circumstances i.e., counting on declared allies cannot be assumed, definitely and certainly not, infinitely. When there were grave tensions on Indo-Sino borders in 2020, then President Donald Trump (author of a book aptly titled, 'The Art of Deal') made mean-

ingless offers to 'negotiate' between the two sides, as opposed to denouncing Chinese expansionism and aggression, unequivocally. While certain military orders with Delhi were indeed signed and expedited – the same made great transactional and commercial sense to the American defence sector. This is something that the already cornered Ukrainian President Zelensky must be fearing as President-elect Donald Trump sheepishly talks about yet another 'deal' to supposedly end the Russia-Ukraine war. History is instructive of the consequences that await when ever similar 'deals' (read, abandonments) are made by a Superpower, be it the Americans or most recently, the Russians in Syria. Reveling on the latest situation in Syria, Donald Trump tweeted, 'Assad is gone. He has fled his country. His protector, Russia...led by Vladimir Putin, was not interested in protecting him any longer' – while it is true, it has been no different for the US, throughout history. 'Trump too has the blood of letting down Afghanistan on his hands. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WEST ASIA IN TURMOIL
Madam — This refers to the editorial on the developments in Syria (December 9). In West Asia, mostly countries are dominated by Muslims, the people have hardly anything to feel elated about. The hate against the subjects of the same religion is dominating the scene in most of the countries there. Each group is in constant war against the other not for economic benefits but for an upper hand over the other group. In the process the struggling groups have taken the path of terrorism forgetting that the one who wins is not the permanent winner and victories are purely ephemeral. In Syria also the number of such groups divided by sub-divisions of the same religion, culture, etc., is too many, and this makes it clear that whoever has won now is only for a temporary period, as the deprived groups will always be waiting to take revenge and capture power. In this entire game, the real beneficiaries are the developed nations whose main plank of economy is weapon trade. Selling weapons to every terrorist and warring group is a flourishing trade. Therefore, either of the groups is provoked, promoted, and equipped with enough weapons and the fire is kept alive. In the case of Syria, though Assad has fled the country, bowing to the rebels, the civil war will always continue to be there. But all the groups call it a jihad meaning I am killing you to satisfy the same God whom we both worship piously. Terrorism knows no economy, no logic, no rationality, and no ideology, and it is simply a mental affair capable of destroying anything and nothing constructive.

A G Rajmahon | Anantapur

World Meditation Day declared
Meditation is a timeless element that connects the soul's depth, offering humanity a path to mental peace, physical health, and spiritual growth. Recognising December 21 as World Meditation Day honours this ancient practice and symbolises global recognition of India's cultural heritage. In modern life, meditation has evolved as a science for holistic development, offering hope to those grappling with stress and spiritual unrest. The winter solstice, marking the start of Uttarayan in Indian tradition, is especially sacred for meditation, as the flow of energy in nature fosters spiritual awakening. Amid personal, social, and economic challenges, meditation offers mental stability, reduces stress, and enhances concentration while alleviating disorders like anxiety and depression. Its benefits extend to physical health, stabilising blood pressure, heart rate, and boosting immunity. World Meditation Day, endorsed by the UN, reflects India's cultural strength and influence.

R K Jain | Barwani

Madam — PM Modi's Saturday-X post, stating the Cabinet decision to open the 85 new Kendriya Vidyalayas and 28 Navodaya Vidyalayas across the country and make accessible school education maximal, is a top-notch contribution. From the vantage point of the present, it seems that, ostensibly, rural students are still under scrutiny over facilities as compared to urban. There are far fewer schools, poorly qualified teachers, and miserable schools, grinding the little students' study zeal and future immeasurably. The government must consolidate the correlation of urban development with rural. Pull up its socks to upgrade the situation of being more adept.

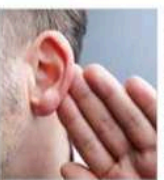
Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Be receptive to contrary point of view!

As social beings, our lives are deeply intertwined with communication, but the same can often become a source of conflict

We are social beings. Communication with others is as integral to us as breathing. We often find conflicting conversations blowing out of proportion, sometimes leading to even a break in relationships. Unpleasantness can be avoided if we are mindful of others. We had lived in bungalows in well-planned colonies for a better part of our lives. It was easy to be more social in such surroundings when we met only on social occasions. We, and more like us, have moved to condominium complexes only over the past few years. Private spaces are diminishing as neighbours fall over each other, literally and figuratively. This is a new life that we are still adjusting to. I noticed something different about a neighbour recently as we gathered for a meeting. We indulged in some idle banter before the start of serious business. It was a light-hearted conversation, over which we could smile or chuckle. I received his call the next day. I got the message loud and clear that he was upset over



the reference to his receding hairline. I apologised profusely for the faux pas. He does not seem to have forgiven me and has stopped greeting me when we cross each other during walks. He is the same person who does not think twice before breaking into a sarcastic verse on the community WhatsApp group, without considering the hurt he might cause to the intended victim. We have regular meetings with the governing body of our welfare association. There are arguments galore on any subject, which would not be such a bad thing, and may sometimes even be considered as a humorous interlude in an otherwise charged environment, were it not

for the seriousness with which the adversaries try to push their viewpoint to the exclusion of even listening to the other's perspective. One morning, one of the members told me that it was good that he was now a part of the management body, otherwise he would have vehemently opposed some of the proposals. I could not fathom the logic. A wrong could not have been right only by his being inside the team. In yet another instance recently, two ladies insisted that they were right in their respective contentions. As the arguments went back and forth, I could see the gradual stubborn look on the faces of both, an indication that they were no longer listening to each other. As an independent observer, I realized that both were talking the same, albeit in different words. They were not taking the time to pause and reflect before responding. There is one more incident that I may not forget easily. I felt aggrieved enough to write to the promoter of our condominium complex about the

supposed transgressions of a neighbour in handling the community affairs. The latter was still working as an employee with the builder. I was upset and did not deem it fit to consider the latter's point of view or the adverse impact that it might have on his professional prospects. I apologised to him in later years. He has moved on and continues to accord me respect. However, I could have avoided the unpleasantness had I taken the time to talk to him about my grievances. It would be good for everyone to be more respectful and less impulsive in an argument. If only we could follow the words of Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi, "We cling to our own point of view, as though everything depended on it. Yet our opinions have no permanence; like autumn and winter, they gradually pass away." (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

THREE KEY PLAYERS IN SYRIA'S PAST, PRESENT, POSSIBLE FUTURE

BASHAR AL-ASSAD

FALL OF AN IRON-FISTED LEADER
 The fall of Syria's president is also a setback for Russia, where he is currently sheltering, and Iran, Russia's bases in Syria could go, and Iran's pathway to Hezbollah could now be cut off. The shift in Damascus is seismic; a new chapter of uncertainty begins now.

ABU MOHAMMAD AL-JOLANI

EX-JIHADIST FACES COMPLEX TASK
 The leader of the rebel forces has sought to present a moderate, pragmatic face, handing out assurances of security to Syria's minorities. There is happiness in the streets about the fall of the Assad regime — but the country remains deeply divided. The principal question for the "transitional" administration: can it force the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of armed groups in Syria today?

RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN

LIKELY BIG WINNER OF THE WAR
 With Russia and Iran losing their longstanding ally in Damascus and President-elect Donald Trump announcing this isn't the US's war, Turkey could emerge as the most influential foreign actor in post-Assad Syria — with significant political and economic gains.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

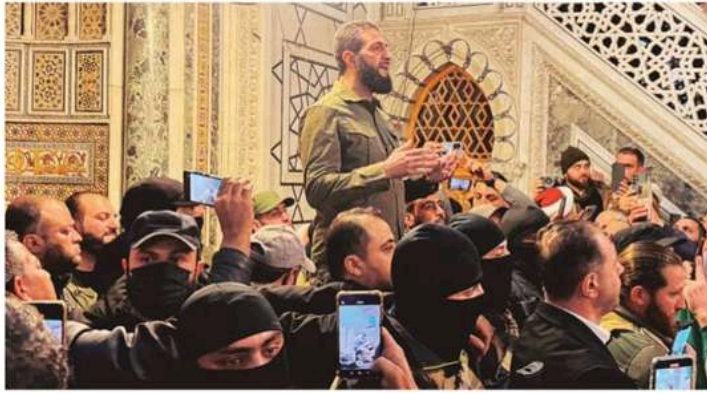
Re-ordering of W Asia chessboard

The dramatic collapse of the Assad regime in Damascus could have geopolitical consequences even more decisive than the Oct 7 Hamas attack on Israel. Iran has suffered a setback, and Turkey is now a much stronger and influential regional pole. How did all this come about, and what lies ahead for Syria and the region?

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS

AFTER MORE than a half century, an Assad — Hafez or Bashar — is not ruling Syria. Rebel fighters spearheaded by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) reached Damascus on Sunday, forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee to Russia with his family.
 Even in the Middle East's great ongoing tumult, the shift in Syria is seismic.
 Just over a year and a half ago, Assad was viewed globally as the predominant power in his fractured country. True, the HTS-led opposition lunged at the window of opportunity that opened as Assad's allies Russia and Iran found themselves under pressure — still, how did the regime that had survived for five decades collapse in less than two weeks?



Rebel commander Abu Mohammad al-Jolani speaks at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus on December 8. Reuters



What went wrong for Assad?
 On December 5, as Hama fell after Aleppo, Assad announced a \$0.8 salary hike for serving soldiers to counter the HTS call for them (including Assad's own Alawite ethnoreligious group) to defect. It was symbolic of the desperation that Assad felt, and revealed the structural and financial weaknesses of his Syrian Arab Army (SAA).
 The SAA has been infamous both for its brutality — images and videos are emerging from the now-liberated Sednaya Prison in which the regime kept political dissidents, including children — and for extracting informal taxes from Syrians to compensate for their low official pay. The financial dire straits of the army reflected the state of the Syrian economy itself — before the fall of the Assad regime, 1 United States dollar was equivalent to about 13,000 Syrian pounds.
 The stagnation of the conflict over the last five years, with a Russia-Turkey détente towards the end of the earlier phase of the war preventing the SAA from attacking Idlib, was perceived and celebrated as a victory by Damascus — which left the army underprepared for any eventual counteroffensive.
 More importantly, the SAA in 2024 continued to rely as much on Russia and Iran as it did in 2015 — even though Assad's relationship with these countries has been under strain, and Moscow has been stretched in Europe and Iran put under pressure in Lebanon.

What about Russia — and Turkey?
 The Russian air action on Aleppo and the highway to Homs ceased by December 3, with Moscow focusing on mitigating any immediate threats to its bases in Latakia and Tartus.
 While Russian constraints in Ukraine are obvious, note that Russia's earlier détente with Turkey now has the context of the dangling Damocles sword over the Bosphorus Strait, which is essential for Russian warships to link up with the Black Sea fleet.
 Turkey, on the other hand, has little to lose by cooperating with both Russia and other Arab/Gulf states to promote stability in Syria now that Assad has fallen and the Syrian National Army (SNA), the Turkish-backed armed group, can attack the Kurds in northern and western Syria more freely in the future.
 On December 7, Turkey joined its Arab and Iranian partners from the Astana Process, the formal Syrian peace process hosted by Kazakhstan, in calling for a political solution in Syria that ends military operations, an increase in humanitarian aid, and the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2254 (which laid out the process of democratic transition

in Syria in 2015). The statement neither condemned the rebels nor expressed concern over Assad's precarious position, Tehran and Moscow too, signed the statement.
 Turkey's rivalry with Syria is old and deep, going back to Syrian nationalist opposition to the Ottoman Empire. The large presence of Kurdish groups in Syria are an additional irritant. In 2004, Assad became the first Syrian leader to visit Ankara — but it was merely a brief geopolitical alignment due to shared anxieties over the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.
 When the Syrian civil war began, Ankara rushed to bolster the armed opposition to Assad, established its own military presence in Northern Syria, negotiated a freeze in the

conflict with Russia, and eventually propelled the HTS/SNA to the new reality unfolding in Damascus today — all over the span of a decade.
 Following Assad's fall, Turkey has been quick to switch to the language of "inclusive governance" in Syria — positioning itself as an enabler of stability, and projecting the rebel takeover of Damascus as a natural and inevitable outcome after a years-long struggle.
What could the rule of the HTS look like?
 HTS emir Abu Mohammad al-Jolani has worked for long, with more than just the blessings of Turkey and the US, to unify the Syrian opposition just enough to coordinate their offensives and unseat Assad.
 Jolani's actions since then reflect a broader trend in Islamist Sunni political jihad. By appointing Mohammad al-Bashir to the head of the "transitional" government, the HTS has sought to follow the example of Abdul Hakim bin Hag's Libya Islamic Fighting Group, rebranding itself as a regional, pragmatist, almost nationalist force that presents itself as an ally of the West.
 In behaviour mimicking the Taliban's promises in Doha in 2020, Jolani has personally reached out to neighbouring governments in Baghdad and Beirut, calling for good relations, even offering Syria's services to the international community in identifying Assad's chemical weapons remnants. (The Taliban were quick to congratulate Syrians after Assad's fall).
 As thousands of Syrians return to their country, rejecting in the demise of Assad's tyranny, the jihadist shadow of HTS character lingers, notwithstanding Jolani's personal overtures to the country's minority groups, including Assad's Alawite base.
 And what of the myriad jihadist and separatist militias that united tactically to oppose a common opponent who is now gone? Many of them have enduring intra-group differences — the HTS, in its earlier avatar of the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, fought some of the groups that are operating currently under the umbrella of the SNA. The principal question for the "transitional" administration is this: will it be able to force the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of the armed groups in Syria today?
 In the wider region, it is now evident that all actors in the Iranian "axis of resistance", including Iran itself, are now prioritising their own security and stability. While the Houthis continue their attacks on Red Sea shipping, Tehran's muscle in the Middle East has been weakened. However, with Turkey now emerging as a stronger pole, triggering both Arab and Persian anxieties, and Israel moving swiftly to re-militarise and occupy the Golan Heights after Assad's fall, the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East has changed even more decisively than it did on October 7, 2023.

(The author is a Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi)

LIGHTNING STRIKE THAT CHANGED SYRIA REGIME

- NOV 27 & NOV 28:** Opposition groups launched a large-scale attack on government-controlled areas in northwestern Syria. They were led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an al-Qaeda offshoot that later moved away from the parent group. The rebels took de facto control of almost all of the Aleppo and Idlib governorates.
- The attack followed weeks of low-level violence. Turkey, a major backer of the rebel groups, said the rebels began a limited offensive but advanced as the government forces of Bashar al-Assad retreated.
- NOV 29:** Rebels entered Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, for the first time since they were pushed out in 2016. At the time, Syrian government forces had the backing of Russia and Iran. This time, the rebels met with little resistance.
- NOV 30:** Rebels announced they control Aleppo and occupy the international airport. The Syrian armed forces claimed to have redeployed troops.
- DEC 1:** The Syrian military launched a counterattack in Idlib and Aleppo.
- DEC 2-DEC 5:** Russian airstrikes helped the Syrian government recapture some territory, but the rebels swept into the city of Hama, which saw massive anti-government protests in the early days of the uprising in 2011.
- DEC 6:** Opposition forces seized towns near Homs, Syria's third-largest city, and the gateway to Damascus. Its capture also meant the government was cut off from the coast, which is a stronghold of President Bashar al-Assad's minority Alawite sect. Homs fell to the rebels the next day.
- DEC 8:** State television aired a video of a group of men saying that Assad had been overthrown. HTS commander Abu Mohammad al-Jolani visited the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, and called Assad's fall "a victory for the Islamic nation". Assad and his family were later reported to have fled to Moscow.

How Saudi Arabia secured hosting rights for the 2034 football World Cup

MIHIR VASAVDA
 MUMBAI, DECEMBER 9

ON WEDNESDAY, FIFA will reveal world football's worst-kept secret: the winning bid for the 2034 World Cup. In what's expected to be a fairly drama-free affair, the sport's global governing body will name Saudi Arabia, the lone bidder, as the host.
 Football's return to the cash-rich Gulf after only 12 years — Qatar hosted the 2022 World Cup — is a study of how a nation wove a web of influence across the world through sponsorships, Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and investments to secure the biggest single-sport event.
 It is also a note for India, as to what they are up against in their bid to win the hosting rights for the 2036 Olympics. Saudi Arabia — the destination for the 2034 Asian Games apart from the football World Cup — and 2030 Asian Games hosts Qatar are India's two biggest competitors in the race.
 And how Saudi won the football World Cup rights unopposed could be an indica-

tion of the way the Kingdom would push for the 2036 Olympics, depending on how badly they want it.

Saudi's 910 sponsorship deals
 Recently, the Danish research organisation 'Play the Game' traced the football World Cup's path to Saudi. The investigation found that Saudi Arabia had 910 sponsorship deals across 28 sports, including multi-sport events like the Islamic Solidarity Games.
 Of these, 194 sponsorships were only in football. The Public Investment Fund (PIF), the country's billion-dollar sovereign wealth fund, was involved in 346 of the sponsorships.
 Further, the country entered into 48 MoUs, which 'Play the Game' noted have been "powerful strategic ties".
 "Beyond fostering goodwill, MoUs pave the way for direct access to key decision-makers within federations. Ultimately, these decision-makers play a critical role in voting on significant agendas within FIFA, including host selection and governance issues," the report said.

For instance, on October 6, 2022, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) signed a partnership with its Saudi Arabian counterpart. According to the AIFF, it included "the provision of technological support, the organization and hosting of youth competitions for both men and women on a regular basis".
 The AIFF hasn't publicly said since then how much of it has been implemented. However, on December 5, 2022, India — after spending taxpayer money on the bidding process — suddenly withdrew from the two-horse race involving Saudi Arabia to host the 2027 Asian Football

Confederation (AFC) Asian Cup. On February 1, 2023, the AFC named Saudi as the host for the showpiece event.

Partnerships with AFC
 Simultaneously, the country also enhanced its relationship with the AFC through partnerships. For instance, 'Play the Game' reported that "Neom, Saudi's ambitious megacity project, became AFC's Global Partner from 2021 to 2024", a deal that was renewed for another five years.
 Such deals were stepping stones to finding its seat on world football's highest table

in FIFA. In February 2023, on the same day when the AFC declared Saudi Arabia as the hosts of the 2027 Asian Cup, the country's football federation's president Yasser Al-Mishaal was elected as Asia's representative to the all-powerful FIFA Council, which decides on the most important matters about world football.

Aramco steps in
 Aramco, the Saudi state-owned oil and gas company, then entered into a partnership with FIFA. The deal was widely criticised, and in October, more than 100 female footballers wrote an open letter to FIFA against it. They cited Saudi's alleged human rights violations and restrictions on women's rights as the reasons.
 All this while, Saudi continued to splurge on getting the world's top footballers — including Cristiano Ronaldo — to play in their league while simultaneously acquiring teams in Europe, the nerve centre of world football. For example, Riyadh Air sponsors former Spanish league champions Atletico Madrid and the PIF owns English Premier League side Newcastle United.

Additionally, 'Play the Game' reported that Saudi royal family member Abdullah bin Mubaid Al Saud owns UAE's Al Hilal United and England's Sheffield United. In March 2021, he added India's lower division club, Kerala United, to his portfolio.
 After establishing its footprint globally, Saudi made a move to host the World Cup.

Australia pulls out
 In October 2023, FIFA set a 25-day deadline for countries to express interest in hosting the 2034 World Cup. Less than two hours after the announcement, Saudi officially declared its bid. A few days later, Australia entered the race but pulled out to focus on securing the 2026 Women's Asian Cup and the 2029 FIFA Club World Cup.
 That left Saudi Arabia as the sole bidder. Last week, FIFA gave a glowing review of Saudi's bid, scoring it 4.2 out of 5 — more than the 2026 bid of USA, Canada and Mexico, which received 4 out of 5.
 Last Thursday, Ronaldo supported the bid, writing on his social media handles: "The @Saudi2034bid is inspiring so many young footballers with the promise of #GrowingTogether..."

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OUR VIEW



Malhotra has his task cut out as RBI's next leader

As RBI governor-designate Sanjay Malhotra moves from North Block to Mint Street, he will need to tread a fine line on monetary-fiscal policy coordination in favour of India's economy

On Monday, we finally got the news that every Indian with even a passing interest in the economy had been waiting for. Ending weeks of speculation over whether Shaktikanta Das would be given an extension of an already extended term, the government announced that revenue secretary Sanjay Malhotra will take over as the next governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). This brings the curtains down on an eventful term under Governor Das, whose time at the central bank's helm was marked by many challenges, such as guiding the economy through the pandemic, new kinds of inflationary pressures and various global uncertainties. RBI was also at the forefront of innovation, whether in the field of digital finance or with an e-rupee. Malhotra steps into the shoes of someone who came into RBI as a relative newbie (a history student with a long civil-service career), but soon went on to prove himself as more than equal to the task. No doubt, the governor-designate's training in information technology, together with his long years as a bureaucrat, will help him make the transition from North Block to Mint Street.

Unlike Governor Das, who had the advantage of a seasoned deputy governor in charge of monetary policy, Michael Patra, and an experienced Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) when he took over, the new governor will have to learn the ropes in a very short period, given his last-minute appointment, and with a relatively new team. Patra is due to retire and is expected to step down shortly, while the MPC was reconstituted less than three months ago. At least Malhotra has his task cut out for him. Governor Das has often spoken of the value of monetary-

fiscal policy coordination. At the Southeast Asian central banks forum earlier this year, Das said, "India's coordinated policy response in the face of a series of adverse shocks can be a good template for the future. While monetary policy worked on anchoring inflation expectations and quelling demand-pull pressures, supply-side interventions by the government alleviated supply-side pressures and moderated cost-push inflation." This is sound advice for such circumstances; both policy levers must act in unison. At other times, though, RBI has the onerous job of limiting potential damage from fiscal policy, especially if it threatens to be inflationary, if needed, by "withdrawing the punch bowl just as the party gets going," in the words of William McChesney Martin, who led the US Fed for almost two decades. This isn't always easy. The fiscal dominance of monetary policy means much of RBI's work is circumscribed by the Centre's decisions. Given their different time horizons and the vulnerability of governments to fickle electorates, differences with the central bank are par for the course. Not only in India, but the world over. Successful central bank governors are those who know how to tread the fine line between cooperating with the Centre when the situation requires it and speaking truth to power at other times. Sanjay Malhotra too must frame policy with the long-term interests of the country in mind.

Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, put it well: "Central bank independence matters for price stability—and price stability matters for consistent long-term growth. Risks of political interference in banks' decision making and personnel appointments are rising. Governments and central bankers must resist these pressures."

THEIR VIEW

Trump's victory calls upon us to reshape our globalization game

India should let in Chinese FDI and technology to make the most of its China-plus-one opportunity



MANOJ PANT
is visiting professor, Shiv Nadar University

US President-elect Donald Trump is now firmly set at the centre of the country's polity, with control on the Senate, House of Representatives and judiciary. During his election campaign, he announced some radical measures on immigration and trade relations. Importantly, with an anti-China hawk Marco Rubio as secretary of state, Trump might actually proceed on his China agenda. There is no doubt that international relations and the global geo-economic order are in for a shake-up.

A separate but not unrelated development in recent weeks is the emerging thaw in India-China border relations and a return to the situation that prevailed before the Galwan clash between the militaries of the two countries in 2020. As observers have rightly noted, this thaw is a consequence of China's declining economic fortunes in the last one year, strained relations with the US in the last few years and a desire to not fight too many external battles at this point in time. One thing is clear. Now that Trump will be firmly in the saddle, come 20 January, China's economic relations with the US and EU will not improve much for at least the coming year. Technology theft bothers the US the most, as it has been running the largest trade deficits for the last decade or, while depending on technology for a large chunk of its exports. On the other

hand, the EU finds its eastern borders unsettled in Ukraine and is forced to support America's anti-China stance.

So, how do these geo-economic realities affect India? The first takeaway is the increasing role of economics in determining international tensions and even conflicts. Consider the Ukraine issue. When the Ukraine War started in early 2022, a major worry was the disruption in world supplies of food grain, as Ukraine and Russia account for almost 30% of world exports. The Russians were quickly persuaded by all countries not to block Ukrainian exports, as that was in nobody's interest. Similarly, the US embargo of Russian hydrocarbon exports allowed exceptions for crude oil so long as its export price did not exceed \$60 per barrel.

This was greatly beneficial to Russia's largest trade partner, the EU, while India was able to build a good stockpile of oil for domestic inflation control. Finally, despite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's resolve to keep the Gaza War going till the Hamas was wiped out, he was asked by his principal ally, the US, to leave Iran's oil depots and nuclear facilities alone in any retaliation to Iranian missile attacks.

How does this impact India? All indications are that post-covid pent-up demand is winding down. In addition, personal consumption financed by liberal bank loans (one striking example of which is real estate) is now also winding down. There is a limit to how long government expenditure can keep the economy going. One silver lining for India, though, is the export growth of mainly electronic items, as a few companies such as Apple have chosen to diversify their supply chains away from China. Regardless of who is president of the US, its best inflation control strategy has been to import cheap manufactured goods from China. No US president can change this strategy without risking higher domestic retail prices.

In here is where India comes in. The terms of large assembly states, the

only alternative to China is India. But it is also clear that India is not ready yet in terms of labour skills or technology to replace Chinese exports to the US. The next best strategy is to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) to India.

As the *Economic Survey* noted, it might be time to consider Chinese FDI in India with all the necessary security exclusions. I have written extensively in these columns that FDI and trade are two sides of the same coin. FDI, in fact, tends to promote trade in the long run. In the case of Apple, its entry to India had to be facilitated by allowing a Chinese investor whose parts were critical to the final assembly of the iPhone.

On the one hand, India worries about its burgeoning trade deficit with China, but is unwilling to allow Chinese companies to produce here. At the same time, whenever it negotiates a free trade agreement (FTA), its primary concern is over Chinese shipments sneaking in via that route. We know that FDI (which entails setting up or acquiring producing units in any country) does not exit quickly. Investors can't pick up and take their factories away. Xiaomi products are everywhere (phones, air purifiers, fridges) anyway. How would FDI hurt?

As far as India is concerned, traditional exports like oil, jewellery, machine tools, etc, are unlikely to drive an export boom, which is more likely to be led by electronic products. Incidentally, China's principal exports are electronics and office machines.

A China-plus-one strategy is India's best bet in the next few years. But this cannot work on Apple exports alone. A more broad-based strategy would be to let Chinese technology in for some time. This means letting in Chinese FDI.

Whatever the US leader says about tariffs and domestic production, Americans wouldn't want their cheap imports to stop, the Chinese need to keep their export engine going and Indians need 8-9% GDP growth. It would make little sense to let politics get in the way of an economic trivium.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man.

THOMAS MALTHUS

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

Demography is destiny: It's a law that cannot be shaken

AJIT RANADE



is a Pune-based economist

Earlier this year, Singapore's government noted with alarm that the country's total fertility rate (TFR) in 2023 had fallen to a record 0.97. TFR is the average number of children born to a woman during her lifetime. For several years, it has been falling, while the share of the elderly, those above 65 years, has been rising. From 11.7% in 2013, it hit 19.1% in 2023 and is expected to reach 24.1% in 2030. In Singapore, the pendulum of population policy has swung from one extreme to the other. In 1966, a Family Planning and Population Board was set up to encourage birth control. There was a 'Stop-at-Two' programme, with disincentives for families having more than two children. Sterilisation was rewarded. By the early 1980s, the government became pro-natalist, launching a 'Have-three-or-more' campaign in 1987. Its population control policies had been too successful and needed reversing. But despite baby-bonus schemes and cash incentives, the fertility rate keeps falling. Hence, immigration pol-

icy is being relaxed. Roughly 40% of Singaporeans are immigrants and 39% are non-citizens. The current policy seems to aim simply to stabilise the population rather than raise or lower the TFR.

Just like Singapore, almost all major countries have tried social engineering and population control. As per the *United Nations 2021 World Population Policies* report, nearly two-thirds of all countries had policies on fertility: 69 governments to reduce, 35 countries to increase and 19 to maintain it. Half the countries trying to reduce TFR are developing, implying that they think that high TFR hurts economic development.

India too has traditionally subscribed to that Malthusian view. In 2022, a private member's bill was introduced in Parliament, proposing incentives for limiting children in a family to two. More than six states have the two-child norm as mandatory for panchayat members. Policies to limit family size are being pursued in India even as nearly half of all states have reached a TFR of 2.1 or below. That is the 'replacement rate' that leads to a stable population. It is a little over two progeny from two parents to account for factors like mortality, infertility and often also a gender ratio in favour of males.

In a sign of reversal, Andhra Pradesh has scrapped a 30-year-old law barring those with three or more children from contesting local elections. It has a TFR of 1.6 and is worried about an ageing society. Many other southern states will follow suit in relaxing the norm. Echoing this sentiment, RSS chief

Mohan Bhagwat recently said that India should aim for a TFR of 3. With a lower TFR, "a society can gradually fade away on its own," he said. That may be too alarmist, but clearly the sentiment in India is shifting to tackling a low TFR, not high fertility.

The actual relationship between population and economic growth has not been settled. Does high population growth cause growth to slow down or the reverse? As per the research of Angus Maddison, continued as the Maddison Project after his death in 2010, there is strong evidence that the long-term link between population and economic growth was stable for about 1,000 years before the industrial revolution. For instance, in England from 1,000

CE to 1820 CE, the average annual population growth rate was 0.29% and annual per capita income growth was 0.12%, so that overall economic growth (the sum of the two) was 0.41%. But in past two centuries, this relationship has broken. Per capita GDP in England has risen 11-fold since 1820.

Between 1820 and 2010, the average population growth was 0.57%, whereas per capita income was rising at 1.28%. During this phase, agricultural output outpaced population, disproving the gloomy food scarcity forecast of Malthus.

Technological innovation seemed to be winning the race against resource scarcity. But Malthus followers have not given up. Paul Ehrlich, a contemporary Malthusian, and Julian Simon had a famous bet on commodity prices in 1980, in which the latter said that "brains would solve the mineral scarcity problem." Simon won the bet, as by 1990, the world's population had risen by nearly one billion but commodity prices had fallen. Such techno-optimism still drives policy-

makers who argue that human capital is the ultimate resource critical for economic growth. Population growth, which parallels growth in productivity, wages and family incomes, is required. India's predicament is that despite being one of the fastest growing economies, its per capita income at around \$3,000 is the lowest in the G20. In the early 1990s, the economies of India and China were of comparable size and shared a similar rank by per capita income. Three decades later, China's economy is six times bigger, and its per capita GDP rank is 70 compared to India's 141. Growth in China has been more inclusive than India's.

Demographic changes are driven by multiple factors. Declining mortality and rising fertility both lead to population growth, but have opposite effects on economic growth. Rising family incomes tend to increase the opportunity cost of raising children, leading to a lower TFR. There is a high correlation between female education and incomes on one hand and family size on the other.

Controlling TFR is doomed to fail. We need policies that raise per capita income, enhance human capital and encourage technological innovation; and state policies that are immigrant friendly and compensate for inter-state TFR differentials.

SCIENCE

Antimatter idea offers scientists clue to cracking cosmic mystery

If the universe started off with equal amounts of matter and antimatter, where has all the antimatter gone? Nobody knows for certain and the best current theory to explain the world fell woefully short of satisfying three crucial conditions, until a new study pointed out a caveat

Nirmal Raj

One of the most astonishing facts about the natural world is the existence of antiparticles. Theorised by the English physicist Paul A.M. Dirac in 1928 and observed in cosmic rays by American physicist Carl Anderson in 1932, an antiparticle is a 'partner' of a particle type that has the same mass but opposite charge. For example, the antielectron is the antiparticle of the electron; it has the same mass and is positively charged.

Antiparticles are an inevitable consequence of describing the world in terms of quantum mechanics and special relativity.

An antiparticle is a particle travelling backward in time. This is not an oversimplification. If it sounds eerie, that's because it is.

O antimatter, where art thou?

But where is all the antimatter made of antiparticles? It is certainly scarce, or we would have discovered it a long time ago. Still, antiparticles are detectably numerous. Our own bodies make one antineutrino every 20 seconds from the decay of potassium-40. Cosmic rays raining down on us supply antiprotons, antineutrons, and even antinuclei. Every proton and neutron — constituents of the nuclei that make up all the matter we can touch — is teeming with antiquarks.

But it is when we look out at the universe as a whole that antimatter's scarcity becomes clear. All galaxies are made of matter, not antimatter. Even in the infant universe, there had to have been a small dissimilarity between the populations of protons and antiprotons for our predictions about the outcomes of the synthesis of nuclei in the early universe and the features of the cosmic microwave background (radiation leftover from the Big Bang) to hold.

That is, for every 1.7 billion proton-antiproton pairs, there should have been an extra unpaired proton.

Presumably the universe started out with equal amounts of matter and antimatter, before something happened to distort this symmetry. That's a good thing: otherwise matter and antimatter would have mutually annihilated to fill the universe with nothing but a fog of radiation — no raw material to make stars, planets or us.

But what spoiled the symmetry? Put differently, why is there something around us rather than nothing (but that fog)? Nobody knows for certain. What we do know is that any theory attempting to explain it must satisfy three conditions, called the Sakharov conditions. The best current theory to explain the world, the Standard Model of particle physics, falls woefully short of meeting all of them.

At least this was the lore until the authors of an August 2024 preprint paper pointed out an interesting caveat.

They showed that one of the conditions can be satisfied by the Standard Model alone, provided some new particle species helps with the process of making matter.

An unsettling discovery

Look at the world in a mirror. Does it look the same? Apples would still fall and moons would circle planets because gravity would be unchanged. Protons and neutrons would cling to form nuclei



Cosmic puzzle: This composite image pieced together by data from multiple telescopes shows a part of the Milky Way galaxy's central region. The bright white portion hosts a supermassive black hole as well as energetic particle reactions that produce antimatter. PUBLIC DOMAIN

because the strong nuclear force would be preserved. But atomic nuclei won't undergo radioactive fission because that happens via the weak force. And the weak force, like a vampire, vanishes in the mirror-world.

The discovery of this fact in 1957 was profoundly unsettling because it struck at cherished notions of symmetry in nature. A parity transformation (denoted P) — the act of swapping left and right — appeared to eliminate the weak force. But soon physicists found that if they replaced a particle with its antiparticle in the mirror-world, the weak force reappeared. This action is called charge conjugation (C). It seems the universe didn't conserve P and C separately but did so when they happened together. This is called CP symmetry.

But in 1964, American physicists James Cronin and Val Fitch found that even CP symmetry is violated. And it wasn't

violated all the time — which made it more nagging. They found that it was violated around once for every thousand times a process involving the weak force happened in nature. Nine years later, Makoto Kobayashi and Toshihide Maskawa in Japan found that if there were at least three variants of every quark species — with all properties the same except for the mass — CP symmetry violation is unavoidable. And all fermion particles do come in three variants, a.k.a. generations. For instance, the up quark has two other variants: the charm and top quarks. (Around the same time, physicists also found that the strong nuclear force — involved in fission and fusion — ought to violate CP symmetry strongly but doesn't. This is called the strong CP puzzle.)

Now, as soon as CP symmetry violation was confirmed, the Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov realised it's actually an essential condition to create a

matter-antimatter asymmetry in the early universe. Unfortunately, the amount of CP symmetry violation the Standard Model allowed for (the -1 in 1,000 rate) proved insufficient to explain the magnitude of the asymmetry. This is where the authors of the August paper have pointed out a loophole. We have known for some time that processes involving mesons — particles made of quark-antiquark pairs — violate CP symmetry, which is just how Cronin and Fitch made their discovery. Now, if a meson could decay to particles not contained in the Standard Model, the matter-antimatter asymmetry could be controlled by the product of two quantities: the amount of standard CP violation and the fraction of decays into the non-standard particles. This fraction can't be too large: otherwise we would have detected the non-standard particles in particle colliders.

The study's conceit, then, is to introduce a mechanism that ensured this fraction was large just in the early universe but evolved to a smaller number today. This can be done if the masses of the new particles vary over time, which is possible to arrange in quantum field theory.

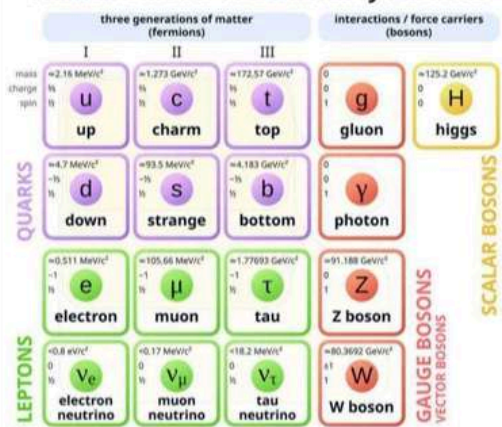
Hard-won progress

This mechanism has thus brought one of the three Sakharov conditions within the reach of the Standard Model five decades since these conditions came to light.

The other two conditions are: (i) A large violation in a type of charge carried by particles, called the baryon number. For example, protons and neutrons have a baryon number of 1 and their antiparticles carry a value of -1. (ii) Interactions must occur out of thermal equilibrium, meaning that particle processes in the forward and backward directions do not occur at the same rate.

While the Standard Model does not meet these conditions adequately, the work discussed here serves as an important step towards understanding why matter overwhelmingly dominates over antimatter in our universe today. (Nirmal Raj is an assistant professor of theoretical physics at the Centre for High Energy Physics in the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru. nrj@iisc.ac.in)

Standard Model of Elementary Particles



The (current) crop of fundamental particles making up matter as we know it and the different ways they can interact. The W and Z bosons mediate the weak force. PUBLIC DOMAIN



More than three-quarters of the world's land experienced drier conditions from 1970 to 2020 than the previous thirty-year period AP

UN talks in Riyadh keep focus on land degradation

Associated Press

Much of the earth's lands are drying out and damaging the ability of plant and animal life to survive, according to a United Nations report released Monday at talks where countries are working to address the problem.

The report was released at the UN summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on combating desertification — once-fertile lands turning into deserts because of hotter temperatures from human-caused climate change, lack of water and deforestation. It found that more than three-quarters of the world's land experienced drier conditions from 1970 to 2020 than the previous thirty-year period.

"The drier climates now affecting vast lands across the globe will not return to how they were," said Ibrahim Thiaw, chief of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which is facilitating the Riyadh talks. "This change is redefining life on earth."

At the talks, which started last week and are set to end on Friday, nations are discussing how better they can help the world deal with droughts — a more urgent lack of water over shorter periods — and the more permanent problem of degrading land.

If global warming trends continue, nearly five billion people — including in most of Europe, parts of the western U.S.,

Farming is particularly at risk, with drier land being less productive and hurting both yields and the availability of food for livestock, the report said

Brazil, eastern Asia and central Africa — will be affected by the drying by the end of the century, up from a quarter of the world's population today, the report warned. UNCCD's chief scientist Barron Orr warned drier land could lead to "potentially catastrophic impacts affecting access to water that could push people and nature even closer to disastrous tipping points," where humans are no longer able to reverse damaging effects of climate change.

Sergio Vicente-Serrano, one of the lead authors of the report, said that as the atmosphere heats up because the burning of coal, oil and gas spews planet-warming emissions, it leads to more evaporation on the ground. That makes water less available for humans, plants and animals, making it harder to survive.

Farming is particularly at risk, with drier land being less productive and hurting both yields and the availability of food for livestock, the report said. That can lead to food insecurity for communities worldwide.

Aridity also leads to more migration, because erratic rainfall, degrading land and frequent water shortages make it harder for regions or nations to develop economically, the report said. It said the trend is especially noticeable in some of the world's driest areas such as southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa and southern Asia. Negotiators in Riyadh are mainly discussing how best the world can respond to more frequent and damaging droughts.

Jes Weigt, of European climate thinktank TMG, said it's still a sticking point because countries can't agree on whether rich nations should be forking out funds for drought responses around the world. Any money pledged would go towards better forecasting and monitoring systems as well as creating reservoirs and other water-management structures.

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

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

The storied lives of hormones

Yasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1
On December 10, 1907, the Brown Dog riots in London saw around a thousand medical students clash with police over what the students perceived to be a threat to their ability to conduct _____, a procedure in which a live animal is dissected. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 2
The Brown Dog riots were a part of the overarching Brown Dog affair, which began when two people in the audience complained that a dog being dissected (as in Q1) by X didn't seem to be sufficiently anaesthetised. Name X, who is credited with the discovery of hormones using one such procedure.

QUESTION 3
Hormones are molecules that are transmitted across a body, like messengers, to regulate physiological changes. Name the plant hormone that was also the first known gaseous hormone used to control when flowers open, when fruits ripen, and when leaves are shed.

QUESTION 4
When a hormone reaches a target cell, it binds to a receptor and launches a series of reactions that allow a signal borne by the hormone to reach the cell's protein-making factory. What is the technical term for this series of reactions?

QUESTION 5
There are four broad ways in which a hormone can transmit its effects: endocrine (released into the blood and acts on cells), paracrine (acts on nearby cells), _____ (acts on the cells that secrete it), and intracrine (acts within a cell without exiting). Fill in the blank.



A 3D model of the hormone melatonin. GETTY IMAGES

- Answers to December 3 quiz:**
- Gas responsible for Bhopal disaster – Ans: Methyl isocyanate
 - Chemical ingredient used to manufacture Sevyn – Ans: 1-Naphthol
 - Compound France used as a chemical weapon in World War I – Ans: Phosgene
 - Property of methyl isocyanate that makes eyes water – Ans: Lachrymal
 - Substance added to methyl isocyanate leading to disaster – Ans: Water
- Visual: 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko
- First contact:**
K.N. Viswanathan | Jose Joji | Shankar Priyavrat | Basavara| Meti | Anmol Agrawal
- Answers to December 6 quiz:**
- Year when WHO embraced primary healthcare as the basis of universal care – Ans: 1978
 - Year when British National Health Service was launched – Ans: 1948
 - US president who tried twice to establish universal care – Ans: Franklin D. Roosevelt
 - US medical insurance schemes – Ans: Medicare, Medicaid, TRICARE, Children's Health Insurance Program
 - Second component of Ayushman Bharat scheme – Ans: PMJAY
- Visual: Launched Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare)
- First contact:**
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Basavara| Meti | Jose Joji

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

Indians need the right to disconnect

Soon after death of an EY employee in September, allegedly due to work pressure, MP Shashi Tharoor had said that he would raise the issue in Parliament. He said that "inhumanity at the workplace must be legislated out of existence." A recent report by *The Hindu* reveals that Indian women in professional jobs, such as auditing, Information Technology, and media, work more than 55 hours a week. The working hours vary for those who belong to the marginalised sections of society and work in the unorganised sector. According to a study by ADP Research Institute, 49% of Indian workers said workplace stress negatively impacts their mental health. As French politician Benoit Hamon said, "Employees physically leave the office, but they do not leave their work. They remain attached by a kind of electronic leash like a dog. The text, the messages, the emails colonise the life of the individual to the point where he or she eventually breaks down".



Rajesh Ranjan
Lawyer and researcher and former co-convenor, Constitutional Law Society, National Law University, Jodhpur

Digital Rights in Spain, "Public workers and employees shall have the right to switch off devices in order to guarantee that, outside of legal or conventionally established working hours, their time off, leave and holidays are respected, in addition to their personal and family privacy, with the aim of promoting a good work-life balance". This year, the Australian Parliament passed the Fair Work Legislation Amendment, which gave employees the right to disconnect from work outside of working hours. Ireland has also recognised the right to disconnect for employees.

Where does India stand? India does not have specific laws recognising the right to disconnect from work. However, the Constitution, the Directive Principles of State Policy, and various judicial pronouncements have spoken of the right to work in a conducive and healthy environment. Article 38 of the Constitution mandates that "The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people". Article 39(e) of the Directive Principles of State Policy directs the state to direct its policy towards securing the strength and health of its workers. The Supreme Court, in *Vishaka v State of Rajasthan* (1997), ruled that sexual harassment at the workplace violates fundamental rights, recognised the right to dignity at the workplace, and issued guidelines to ensure that there is a safe working environment for women and gender equality. In *Ravindra Kumar Dhariwal and Ors v Union of India* (2021), the Court read Article 14 to include ideas of inclusive equality to reasonably accommodate persons with disabilities. Justice D.V. Chandrachud said that an employer must consider an employee's individual differences and capabilities. In *Pravesh Pradhan v State of Uttaranchal* (2012), the High Court of Uttarakhand held that "under the pretext of administrative control

and discipline, a superior officer cannot be left to enjoy extreme liberty to make the intense humiliation and scolding inhumanly in front of all the subordinate staff members for a little lapse". Despite the clear recognition of the right to dignity at the workplace and a direction for employers to be sensitive towards mental health concerns, and also laws that fix accountability in the case of breaching working hours, violating dignity is unfortunately common in Indian workplaces.

Prolonged working hours In 2018, MP Supriya Sule introduced a Private Member Bill in the Lok Sabha, which delineated the right to disconnect from work after working hours. The bill included the provision of a penalty of 1% of the total remuneration of all employees to be paid by companies for non-compliance with its provisions. However, in recent years, there has been no significant legislative effort to recognise employees' right to disconnect from work outside working hours or to impose a duty on employers to be mindful of employee well-being and avoid overworking them. Research by *Harvard Business Review* shows that working prolonged hours causes stress, coronary heart diseases, and impacts overall health. Contrary to the widespread belief that overworked human beings bring in productivity, research by the University of Oxford in collaboration with British multinational telecoms firm BT found a conclusive link between business and productivity. Therefore, employers need to take into account psychological factors while dealing with employees. In its march towards becoming the third largest economy by 2030, India must recognise that the right to disconnect will increase productivity and ensure the growth and well-being of both employees and employers.

India must recognise that the right to disconnect will increase productivity and ensure the overall growth and well-being of employees and employers

Right to disconnect laws Such tragic incidents, research, and statements highlight how the right to disconnect is an important right. It allows employees to disconnect from their employer outside of working hours. The Labour Chamber of the French Supreme Court ruled in 2001 that an employee is under no obligation to work from home or take home files and working tools. This decision was subsequently confirmed by the Cour de Cassation (the highest court in the French judiciary), which said, "The fact that [the employee] was not reachable on his cell phone outside working hours cannot be considered as a misconduct". Portugal has a Right to Disconnect law, which makes it illegal for employers to contact employees outside working hours, except in emergencies. Similarly, according to Article 88 of the Organic Law 3/2018 on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of

An onerous task in Odisha

After the initial euphoria, the BJP government confronts legacy problems

STATE OF PLAY

Satvasundar Barik
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The Mohan Majhi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government aspired to power with the promise of transforming Odisha's image, which has long been associated with poverty and backwardness. During the election campaign earlier this year, the party had accused former Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik of failing to uplift a large section of population living below the poverty line.

Some events in the State in recent months show that promises are easier made than implemented. In November, three women died after consuming gruel made of mango kernel, a traditional food preserved by tribal communities for times of food scarcity, in Kandhamal district. In the last month or so, four women have sold their newborns, unable to provide for them amid acute poverty. These are stark examples of why Odisha is often cited as an underdeveloped State and remind the new government of the challenges that lie ahead.

These incidents have been reported in the past too. In 2001, in Rayagada district, 24 tribal people had died after eating gruel made of mango kernel. In the 1980s, Odisha had grabbed international headlines when a woman in Kalahandi district sold her 14-year-old sister-in-law to buy food, signalling the State's deep-rooted poverty.

Since the oath-taking ceremony on June 12, the new BJP government has fulfilled four major poll promises: initiating payment of ₹50,000 to every woman between the ages of 21 and 60, increasing the mini-

session of the State Assembly, the Odisha Chief Minister slammed the previous government saying jobs were provided in lieu of bribes. Six months have passed since the party came to power, but the new government has not ordered an investigation into any of the corruption cases that the BJP had highlighted. On the contrary, two Indian Police Service officers who were accused of meddling in the Assembly elections on behalf of the BJP were swiftly reinstated. Political observers point out that this shows lack of decisiveness on part of the new government.

There has also been no significant shake-up in the bureaucracy, which would help the BJP move away from the governance model of the previous BJP government.

The BJP government faces an uphill task in improving many key indices. The latest report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India states that the overall vacancy of specialist doctors in the State was 49% and 40% for medical officers as of March 2022. In the case of staff nurses and nursing officers, 30% posts were vacant. The human resources available in hospitals across the State did not meet the Indian Public Health Standards. The doctor to population ratio was 1:1,622 against the World Health Organization requirement of 1:1,000.

Steering a government on the path of development is far more difficult than shouting slogans from the gallery. The BJP government faces the difficult task of overturning Odisha's unfortunate legacy of poverty, unemployment, and terrible public infrastructure. It is important that it stays focused on ensuring steady and effective governance in the State.

India used 114 mg of antibiotics for every kg of meat in 2020

Of the 190 countries for which the data was collected, India ranked 30th in terms of antibiotic usage in animals

DATA POINT

Hannah Ritchie
Fiona Spooner

For humanity, antibiotics are a huge blessing. Antibiotics have saved millions of lives from bacterial infections. However, there is growing concern that these bacteria will become resistant to the drugs we use against them.

When we think about antimicrobial resistance, we often focus on what drugs humans take. We might not even consider the use of antibiotics in livestock, but they also pose a threat.

In fact, much more antibiotics are given to livestock than to humans. Researchers previously estimated that, in the 2010s, around 70% of antibiotics used globally were given to farm animals. While there hasn't been an update of these figures in the last few years, it's likely that more antibiotics are still used in livestock than humans. Overusing antibiotics in livestock increases the risk of disease in animals and humans in several ways. First, antibiotics are often used as a cheap substitute for basic animal welfare practices, such as giving animals enough space, keeping their living environments clean, and ensuring that barns are well-ventilated. A failure to maintain hygienic conditions on farms increases the risk of disease for both livestock and humans.

Second, the overuse of antibiotics can also increase the risk of bacteria that are resistant to treatment. That threatens the health of the animals but can also be a risk for humans for crossover diseases. Finally, humans can be exposed to resistant pathogens by eating contaminated meat and dairy products.

One of the key challenges in understanding the extent and risks of antibiotic resistance in livestock is the lack of transparent data sharing from countries. Of course,

comparing the total amount of antibiotics given to cows, sheep, pigs, and chickens would be unfair. Cows are bigger than chickens, so we would expect them to need more antibiotics for the same impact. So, researchers compare antibiotic use in units adjusted for the size of animals – usually as the number of milligrams used per kilogramme of meat product.

Chickens tend to receive the least antibiotics. You can see this in **Chart 1**: they receive about seven times less than sheep and five times less than pigs. Cows also receive less than pigs and sheep.

Antibiotic use is measured in milligrams per kg of animal product. Sheep have the highest usage at 243 mg, followed by pigs at 173 mg, cattle at 60 mg, and chickens at 35 mg.

One of the reasons why antibiotics are used in lower quantities in chickens is that they are killed at a much younger age. Fast-growing breeds reach their "slaughter weight" at around 42 days, so they are often slaughtered when they are just 40 to 50 days old. Since their lifespan is shorter, they consume fewer antibiotics. Pigs are usually slaughtered when they are around five to six months. The fact that intensive livestock get far more antibiotics than animals raised outdoors is one reason why cows tend to get less antibiotics than pigs.

Of course, the exact amount of antibiotics given varies across countries. Researchers Ranya Mulchandani and colleagues estimated antibiotic use across the world based on the best available data, as well as extrapolations for those countries that don't release data.

Map 2 shows antibiotic usage in livestock per kg of meat in 2020. Asia, Oceania, and most of the Americas use a lot of antibiotics. Europe and Africa, in blue, tend to use less than 50 mg per kg. For instance, India used 114 mg of antibiotics in livestock per kg of meat in 2020, compared to 4 mg in Norway – 30 times less. Of the 190

countries for which the data was collected, India ranked 30th in terms of antibiotic usage in animals. There are a few reasons why these differences are so large.

The first one is affordability and access: farmers in Africa, for example, have less access, just like they have less access to other farming inputs, such as fertilizers.

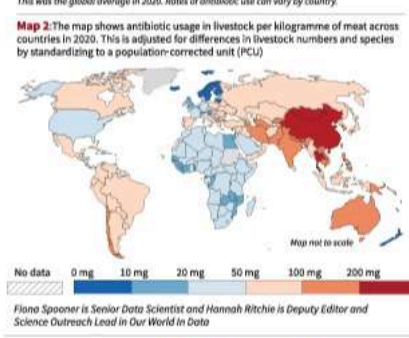
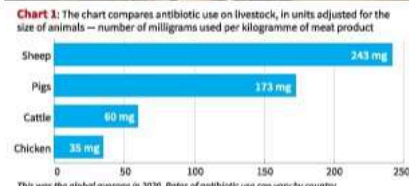
Another reason is the differences in regulatory and industry norms regarding antibiotic use. Antibiotic use has dropped significantly in Europe, partly due to regulation.

Finally, the most popular types of livestock make a difference. As we saw earlier, sheep and pigs tend to receive far more antibiotics than cattle or chickens, even after adjusting for their size. That means countries that raise many pigs would tend to use more antibiotics. More than half of Thailand's meat supply is in the form of pig meat. In China, it is two-thirds. That's more than the global average of one-third.

Some countries have reduced antibiotic use a lot. Antibiotics can play an important role in preventing disease and illness in animals. This is no different from humans. So, removing them completely is not necessarily the best option.

The key is to use them more effectively: changing farming practices to reduce antibiotic use where it's in excess or using antibiotics in smaller quantities when it is needed. Many antibiotics given today are not used to prevent disease but to promote growth and produce meat more efficiently.

We know countries can reduce antibiotic use while maintaining healthy livestock sectors because some countries have already achieved rapid reductions. Between 2011 and 2022, sales of veterinary antibiotics fell by more than half across several European countries. The use of antibiotics considered critically important in human medicine also fell by half, with some specific drugs falling by 80% to 90%.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The ~~Old~~ Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO FROM THE DECEMBER 9, 1974 EDITION AS THERE WAS NO EDITION ON DECEMBER 10, 1974

Thant laid to rest in mausoleum built by students

Rangoon, Dec. 8: The body of U Thant, former U.N. Secretary General, was buried this afternoon at a site chosen by students in defiance of his relatives who wanted him buried elsewhere in the city.

U Thant, who died of cancer in New York on November 26 at the age of 65, was laid to rest in a hastily-constructed mausoleum near the former Students Union Building, demolished during student riots in 1962.

Earlier in the mornings, the body, draped in a U.N. flag, was taken from the convocation hall in a procession of monks and students in the burial site. While people shuffled past the coffin, placed on a specially erected dais topped by golden umbrellas, the students decided by voice vote to go ahead with their burial plans.

In a final mark of respect the students observed a minute's silence and then raised the coffin over their heads for the mourners to see amid shouts of "victory, victory".

While the body was being buried, thousands of Burmese had lined another funeral route to a mausoleum which the Burmese leader's relatives had built near the Shwedagon Pagoda, the country's most sacred Buddhist shrine, in the heart of Rangoon.

The mausoleum, built by the relatives with the help of the Burmese authorities, lies beside the tomb of Burma's grand old man of politics, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing.

The students had seized U Thant's body on Thursday in front of 50,000 mourners, shortly before it was due to be buried at a public ceremony because they wanted a more fitting funeral and a special mausoleum in his honour.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 10, 1924

The Amrit Mahal cattle

It was from a Paleang conqueror that Tippu Sultan obtained the Amrit Mahal breed of cattle in Mysore, and that warrior prince maintained the purity of the breed with the greatest care till Seringapatnam surrendered to the British. The cattle in Mysore were so excellent that the British military authorities were not altogether oblivious of the breed for purposes of dragging cannons and stores over difficult country.



THEIR VIEW

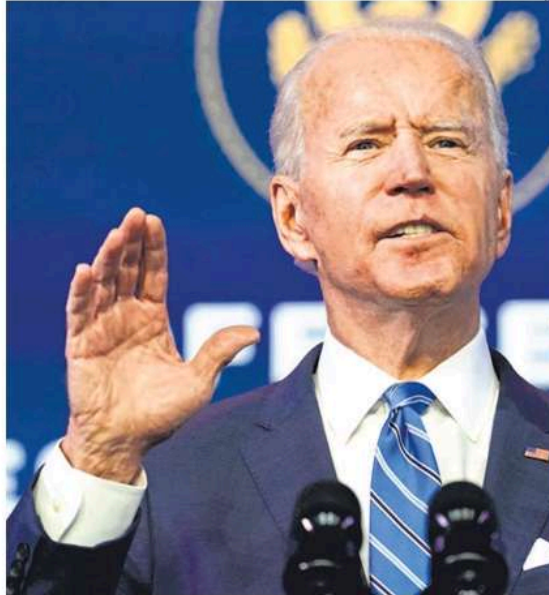
MINT CURATOR

Why Bidenomics did not deliver in spite of its working class focus

Joe Biden's policies failed to recognize the changed nature of the US economy and so they were unable to achieve their aims



DANI RODRIK
is president of the International Economic Association and author of 'Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy'



As US president, Joe Biden charted a new economic path for the Democrats by sidling unashamedly with the working class and introducing a wide range of industrial policies to reinvigorate US manufacturing, reshore supply chains and promote the green transition. Most of these new policies made economic sense, and like many other progressives, I thought they made political sense as well. What, then, accounts for Vice-President Kamala Harris's disappointing electoral performance, especially with working-class voters?

Donald Trump's appeal, like that of right-wing ethno-nationalists elsewhere, owes much to rising levels of economic insecurity, which many regard as the result of deregulation, increased corporate power, globalization, deindustrialization and automation. As the traditional champions of the underdog, centre-left parties could have benefited from these developments. But they had come to speak more for educated professional elites, and they were slow to alter course. Faced with the growing perception that they'd abandoned their working-class roots, Biden's move toward economic populism seemed like the right strategy.

One interpretation of Trump's re-election is that economic populism was a mistake, implying that the Democratic Party should have moved more forcefully to the centre-ground instead. But Harris's apparently fruitless efforts to woo middle-of-the-road Republican voters was not much of a success either.

There are at least three other possibilities. The first is that Biden's strategy did work, but not enough to win the election. Inflation and the increased cost of living produced a generalized backlash against governments everywhere. A widely circulated chart in the *Financial Times* shows that incumbents have fallen short of their previous share of the vote in every election in 2024. To Bidenomics' credit, Democrats did much better by comparison.

The second possibility is that it takes time for new policies to show effect and result in new political coalitions. Bidenomics is still new, and it faced the daunting challenge of dislodging more than three decades of voter experience with Democratic centism. Perhaps it was too much to expect Biden's pro-worker rhetoric and strong manufacturing construction numbers to overcome the cleavages that have emerged (and deepened) since president Bill Clinton's administration. It takes more than a few years of well-designed policy to engineer a political realignment.

The third, and least discussed, possibility is that Bidenomics was economic populism of the wrong kind. By focusing on manufacturing, old-style union power and worker organizations, and geo-

political competition with China, it paid too little attention to the changing structure of the US economy and the nature of its new working class. In an economy where only 8% of workers are factory employed, a policy that promises to restore the middle class by bringing manufacturing back home is not only unrealistic; it also rings hollow, because it does not align with workers' aspirations and everyday experiences.

The typical US worker today is no longer rolling steel or assembling cars. Rather, s/he is a long-term care provider, food preparer or someone running an independent small business (perhaps via gig work). Addressing the problems of low pay and precarious working conditions in such services requires a different strategy than manufacturing incentives or import tariffs. Class solidarity also needs to be built differently than through appeals to unions or bargaining power. Biden had the right idea, in this view, but failed to hit the right targets.

Our new economic structure requires a 21st-century version of 'industrial policy' that focuses on creating good jobs in services. Such a strategy entails organizational and technological innovations to upgrade work in low-pay activities and improve the provision of inputs such as digital tools, customized training, and credit. One can find local and national examples of such initiatives, but they remain small-scale and largely incidental to federal programmes.

New technologies that help workers rather than displace them are critical to this effort. Green industrial policies show that innovation can indeed be redirected from carbon-intensive activi-

ties to more sustainable ones. Now we need a similar push for labour-friendly technology policies to promote innovation that enables workers with less than a college education to perform more complex tasks in care and other personal services. By developing new visions of economic specialization and mobilizing the needed resources, cross-sectoral coalitions, often led by public agencies, can foster local job creation in regions that have been scarred by long-term unemployment.

It is worth noting that in one poll taken before the election, Hispanic voters in Texas said that their biggest problem with Democrats is that it is "the party of welfare benefits for people who don't work." While social transfers to the poor—those who either cannot work or face temporary unemployment—are a necessary and integral part of the contemporary welfare state, parties of the left cannot allow themselves to be defined exclusively in such terms. They need to be seen as advocates for those who want to contribute to their community through decent work, and as facilitators for those who face obstacles in doing so.

Reconnecting the Democratic Party with its roots must start with the recognition that today's working class has changed and has different needs. The provision of social insurance and countervailing power against business interests will always remain important elements of the progressive left. But these goals must be augmented with a revamped set of 'good jobs' policies that neither fetishize manufacturing nor view it through the lens of geopolitical competition with China.

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The HPV vaccine saves lives: The US must not mess with it

Anti-vaxxers in charge of public health might endanger women



LISA JARVIS
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering biotech, health care and the pharmaceutical industry.



Data shows that the HPV vaccine is playing a useful role in women's health

New research has again shown the enormous value of the HPV vaccine, which protects against the virus responsible for more than 90% of cervical cancer cases. Studies had already shown that the vaccine dramatically reduces rates of HPV infections and cervical cancer. Now comes evidence of what has long been suspected: The vaccine also saves lives. This message needs reinforcing in the US, where vaccination rates continue to lag behind pre-pandemic levels—which were already behind health officials' targets for population-level coverage. Officials will not contend with a new administration that is stacking US public health agencies with leadership like Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who is well known for his scepticism of vaccines, including the HPV shot.

In a letter published in *JAMA*, researchers narrowed in on cervical cancer deaths among women who were younger than 25 between 2016 and 2021—the first group with widespread uptake of the vaccine as adolescents following its approval in 2006. While cervical cancer deaths among young women had been steadily dropping for years, thanks to screening, researchers found a sharper decline among this group, leading to 26 fewer deaths over that period.

The number may sound small. But consider that the vaccine hasn't been around long enough for researchers to comprehensively assess its long-term benefits. Most women are diagnosed with cervical cancer when they are older—typically in their mid-30s to mid-50s. That means we won't see the larger impact of vaccination until five to 10 years from now, says Ashish Deshmukh, a professor at the Medical University of South Carolina who led the study.

Cervical cancer isn't the only disease linked to HPV, and women aren't the only ones affected. The virus is also implicated in oral, anal, vaginal, vulvar and penile cancers. Imagine if vaccination against HPV eventually allowed the US to cut the 4,000 annual deaths from cervical cancer to zero—or dramatically reduce or even eliminate the nearly 38,000 HPV-related cancers diagnosed in the country each year.

Both are achievable goals, but it means propping up vaccination rates. Tweens are first eligible for the shots at age 9, yet recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show the number of 13- to 17-year-olds who had completed the series of shots (two doses if initiated by age 14 or three doses if initiated at 15 or older) dipped to 61.4% in 2023 from 62.6% in 2022. Health experts weren't surprised that routine vaccination rates were

affected by covid shutdowns, but getting HPV rates back to pre-pandemic levels—let alone to officials' goal of 80% of adolescents vaccinated by 2030—has been a slog. Efforts have been focused on addressing disparities in coverage, such as improving access and uptake among people living in rural areas or without insurance, helping paediatricians make more effective pitches for vaccination, and clearing barriers to starting the shots during early adolescence when protection can be achieved with two rather than three doses.

Yet, there's reason to worry all this work could be unravelled by President-elect Donald Trump's picks to lead public health agencies. The HPV vaccine is among those aggressively targeted by Children's Health Defense, a non-profit known for its anti-vaccine rhetoric and misinformation. It was founded by Kennedy, Trump's nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. Kennedy has been involved in multiple lawsuits related to the HPV vaccine, including one filed in 2022, claiming Merck's Gardasil has caused injuries to teens. Numerous studies have shown the side effects are mild.

Meanwhile, Dave Weldon, Trump's pick to head the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has been embraced by anti-vaccine groups. Most of the former representative's problematic proposals while in Congress focused on the debunked link between MMR vaccination and autism. But he did criticize the HPV vaccine as lacking long-term safety data. In fact, at the time of its approval, Gardasil had been tested in thousands of women. They were followed for up to four years, but not the time when a safety issue would likely emerge—something Weldon, a physician, should know.

The new leadership combo could undermine vaccine access and uptake (the number of people vaccinated with a certain dose in a certain time period). Beyond the reasonable worry that Kennedy might publicly question the benefits or safety of vaccines, the CDC also plays a significant role by providing recommendations on tax schedules, which influence insurance coverage. The HPV vaccine prevents unnecessary suffering and deaths from HPV-related cancers. What a colossal shame it would be to go backward—the cost of women's lives.

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MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

Data brokers pose hidden dangers that must be tackled

SIDDHARTH PAI



is co-founder of Siana Capital, a venture fund manager.

In the US, a multibillion-dollar industry thrives on an invisible commodity: personal data. This sector, dominated by data brokers, collects, processes and sells vast amounts of information on individuals, often without their knowledge. It is an opaque ecosystem with far-reaching implications for personal privacy, financial security and national interests. Despite its outsized influence, the industry remains largely unregulated, raising urgent questions about the need for oversight and consumer protection. Data brokers operate as intermediaries, aggregating information from sources like online browsing histories, credit applications, social media interactions and public records. This data is packaged into detailed profiles of individuals with sensitive information such as credit scores, financial history, health conditions and behavioural patterns. These profiles are sold to advertisers, corporations, political campaigns and sometimes foreign entities. While these practices enable tailored advertising, marketing and

individually targeted services, they also pose dangers. Commodifying sensitive data—such as financial or health records—opens a Pandora's box of ethical, legal and security concerns. There are many risks associated with data brokering. Armed with detailed personal information on us, criminals can craft sophisticated phishing scams, defraud individuals and even steal identities.

Beyond personal harm, there are broader implications. Unregulated data flows can exacerbate systemic inequalities. Errors in aggregated data, such as incorrect credit information, can unfairly deny individuals access to loans, housing or employment. These errors often go uncorrected as we have few accountability mechanisms for data brokers. Selling personal data to foreign entities can undermine national security. For example, foreign adversaries could buy detailed demographic and psychographic data to manipulate public opinion, identify vulnerabilities in government personnel, or sow discord through misinformation.

By analysing behavioural patterns, they could craft campaigns to widen societal divisions, manipulate elections or erode trust in institutions—all without any need for hacking or direct espionage. Consider a scenario where a foreign actor legally purchases

data-sets with details on US military personnel or government employees. This data could be used for blackmail.

The US's lack of comprehensive federal data privacy laws contrasts sharply with frameworks like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which mandates transparency, consent and accountability, giving individuals significant control over their data. In the US, however, data privacy is addressed in a fragmented manner, with state-level initiatives such as California's Consumer Privacy Act offering piecemeal protection. The US needs a unified regulatory framework that addresses transparency, consumer control and broker accountability.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) has emerged as a key player in addressing the darker side of data brokering, particularly in the financial domain. Established in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, it is tasked with safeguarding consumers in the financial services sector. In recent years, it has acted

against credit reporting agencies that are closely tied to the data broker ecosystem. For instance, the CFPB has issued fines for mishandling consumer data and failing to address inaccuracies in credit reports. It has also initiated probes of how credit reporting agencies share data with third parties.

While all this marks progress, the CFPB's reach is limited by existing legislation, such as the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA), which primarily governs the financial aspects of data handling. This leaves a regulatory gap for non-financial data brokers, which operate with even fewer constraints. The CFPB's head Robert Chopra has just announced new steps to expand the FCRA and let his agency police data brokers (*fortune.com/27660*).

While the CFPB's focus is on financial data, it has the potential to spearhead broader regulatory efforts. Its work in holding credit reporting agencies accountable could serve as a model for overseeing other data brokers. But it would require legislative

backing to expand the CFPB's mandate beyond its current financial scope. Collaboration between the CFPB and other agencies, such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), could create a more comprehensive oversight framework. The FTC, which has jurisdiction over unfair business practices, could complement the CFPB's efforts by keeping the data broker industry in check. However, where such regulation might go after Donald Trump takes office is unknown. It appears the proposed Department of Government Efficiency may have the CFPB in its cross-hairs (*fortune.com/27660*).

Whatever course the regulation of data brokers may take in the US, public awareness is critical. Consumers must be informed about the data broker risks and empowered to demand greater control over their personal information. Advocacy groups, journalists and tech companies can play a pivotal role in pushing for transparency and accountability. Without regulation, the risks will only multiply, spanning personal harm, financial exploitation and threats to national security. As we grapple with challenges of the digital age, reining in the data broker industry should be a priority. After all, in the hands of the unscrupulous, your data isn't just a commodity—it can be a weapon.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



In remembrance: Priest Olivier Ribadeau Dumas leads the Eucharist during a mass open to the public at the Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral, in Paris, France, on December 8. REUTERS

A dialogue with our fragile past: the importance of historical memory

The world needs to look differently at its historical memory and the cultural heritage which embodies it. The large fire that broke out in Paris and which consumed a part of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in 2019, is a grim reminder that centuries of heritage can be destroyed in minutes

Ramin Jahanbegloo

On December 7, the Notre Dame de Paris or the Cathedral of Notre Dame was re-opened after a massive fire destroyed its roof and spire five years ago in 2019. In this article, dated April 20, 2019, Ramin Jahanbegloo explains the importance of historical memory and why it is imperative to preserve it, however fragile.

It is only after our heritage is destroyed, in natural disasters and conflicts, that we realise how fragile historical memory is – even for a globalised period of history like ours. The large fire that broke out in Paris on Monday and which consumed a part of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, is a grim reminder that centuries of heritage can be destroyed in minutes. Of course the French people can rebuild the physical structure and in this enterprise they will be certainly supported by the vast wealth of Europe, America and others, made possible by centuries of industrialisation and capital accumulation. But rebuilding the Notre-Dame de Paris does not mean that we can necessarily renew its original spirit – of blocks of sandstones which narrate their own geological and social history. Undoubtedly, for over 800 years, the cathedral has been the driving force behind the eternal return of Paris as the ‘Heart of the World’.

Repository of history
As a powerful spiritual symbol of

Christian faith, it counts many treasures, such as the crown of thorns, which are believed to have been placed on Jesus Christ’s head. Joan of Arc was beheaded in the cathedral in 1909, after her execution for heresy in 1431.

And, for more than three centuries, Notre-Dame has stood as a symbol of political change in France. During the French Revolution, its treasures were plundered.

However, as seen in the famous painting of Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself emperor of France at Notre-Dame in 1804. Other famous political ceremonies of the 20th and 21st centuries in France, such as the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation in 1944, the farewell to Charles de Gaulle in 1970, and a requiem mass in tribute to François Mitterrand in 1996, took place in the Notre-Dame Cathedral.

Last but not least, for nearly nine centuries, Notre-Dame has been at the centre of French and world literature. We all remember Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) with the cathedral as its centre plot. Hugo’s multiple references to the architecture of the Cathedral are breathtaking and stupefying.

Strangely, it is as if Hugo was present at the fire, when he described flames in the cathedral (when Quasimodo uses fire and stones to attack Traudans in order to save Esmerelda): “All eyes were raised to the

top of the church. They beheld there an extraordinary sight. On the crest of the highest gallery, higher than the central rose window, there was a great flame rising between the two towers with whirlwinds of sparks, a vast, disordered, and furious flame, a tongue of which was borne into the smoke by the wind, from time to time.”

Even for those of us who are not religious and yet believe in the cathedral as a spiritual home and a monument in glory of the human creativity, the horrific fire destroying this Gothic edifice has been a moment of tragedy and despair. Time might have been the devourer of Notre-Dame as Hugo wrote in his novel, but humanity has long been the enemy of its own heritage.

Spirit of freedom

As a matter of fact, what was important for Hugo, as for many other writers and intellectuals of his time, was the spirit of freedom represented by Notre-Dame.

As he put it clearly, “There exists in this era, for thoughts written in stone, a privilege absolutely comparable to our current freedom of the press. It is the freedom of architecture.” Hugo is right. To feel the spirit of Notre-Dame, as that of Paris, one needs the freedom of a flâneur.

One needs to allow one’s gaze to be further absorbed by the play of light upon a meaningful stone that remained alive after a catastrophe.

Without the stones of Notre-Dame,

these aesthetic compasses, we would never be able to take our responsibilities in the world. If we want to be at home in this century, even at a price of living in a topsy-turvy world, we must try to take part in a dialogue with our fragile past. We need to educate our senses and to look differently at our historical memory and the cultural heritage which embodies it.

For centuries, humanity has witnessed the destruction of its historical memory, and each time a new door to our common fate is closed forever. We all believe that this should not happen anymore. But it does happen, and we cannot reconcile ourselves with it. None of us can.

However, within this horizon of despair, which manifests itself in the fragility of human history, there is a moral horizon that expresses a love of humanity in spite of its brokenness. Heritage, therefore, expresses a joy of witnessing the past despite the sadness of historical destruction. It is this joy of witnessing the past that becomes an awareness of our landscape of memory. This awareness is the strongest evidence of the victory of peaceful coexistence between the past and the present. Those who fail to see it, forget to make a prayer that one day the organ pipes of Notre-Dame of Paris will once again reverberate through the sanctuary.

Ramin Jahanbegloo is Director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace, Jindal Global University, Sonapat

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on computer programmes on the birth anniversary of Ada Lovelace, the first computer programmer

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

- QUESTION 1**
What is Lovelace’s algorithm commonly called?
- QUESTION 2**
What is Lovelace’s algorithm used to calculate?
- QUESTION 3**
Which unfinished device was Lovelace’s algorithm written for?
- QUESTION 4**
While Lovelace wrote the first computer program, who is the first person to programme an electric computer?
- QUESTION 5**
What is the first computer virus?



Visual question: How is this comedy troupe related to computer programmes? GETTY IMAGES

- Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:**
1. This military leader of Iran’s elite Quds Force played a major role in training fighters in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. **Ans: Qassem Solaimani**
 2. The name the Syrian Kurds call the de facto autonomous region in northeastern Syria. **Ans: Rojava**
 3. Name the rebel force that was trained by the U.S. and is composed of Syrian Arab Army defectors. **Ans: Syrian Free Army or Revolutionary Commando Army**
 4. The ethnoreligious group Bashar al-Assad is affiliated to and the stream of Islam it is an offshoot of. **Ans: The Alawites: Shias**
 5. This intellectual is considered a major influence in the development of the Ba’athist movement. **Ans: Michel Aflaq**
- Visual:** Name this individual. **Ans: Abu Muhammad al-Jolani**
- Early Birds:** K.N. Viswanathan| Basavaraj Metji| Tita Shiladityaj| Bharati Viswanathan| Jose Joji

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



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
& Upendran

“Why do the Australians call the English ‘limeys?’”
“Because the English drank a lot of lime juice.”
“Lime Juice! Oh stop joking, I want a serious answer.”
“I am giving you a serious answer. You see, during the late 18th century, the British navy made its sailors drink a lot of lime juice.”
“But why?”
“As protection against scurvy.”
“What’s that?”
“It’s a disease which is due to lack of vitamin C. You see during the early days of sea travel, sailors didn’t get a balanced diet. Since it wasn’t possible to store things like fruit and vegetables on ships, many sailors had vitamin C deficiency.”
“So in order to increase the vitamin C intake, the British navy asked its sailors to drink lime juice. Is that it?”
“That’s right. And since all English sailors drank the stuff, the Australians contemptuously referred to them as ‘lime-juicers’. Later, it was reduced to ‘limey.’”
“So the word ‘limey’ originally referred to an English sailor?”
“Yes, but later on it began to be applied to all Englishmen.”
“I see. So the people of a country are called something because of something that they drank?”
“Happens all the time. Just look around you. People are often called something because of what they eat or drink. The Germans, for example, are contemptuously called ‘krauts’. The ‘au’ in the word is pronounced like the ‘ou’ in words like ‘out’ and ‘bout.’”
“Kraut! I think I’ve got that. But what does it mean?”
“It’s a German word meaning ‘cabbage’.”
“A German is referred to as a ‘cabbage’? But why?”
“Because they eat a lot of ‘sauerkraut’, that is ‘sour cabbage’. The Germans love their sour cabbage. And as for the French...”
“... ah, yes! The French. They are supposed to love good food. I’m sure they’re called something that... that tastes delicious.”
“Do you think ‘frogs’ tasted delicious?”
“The French are called frogs! That must make them hopping mad. But why, frogs?”
“Because the French have a great reputation for eating frogs. Similarly, the Latin American has a reputation for eating beans, so he’s often called a ‘bean eater’ or ‘beaner’. The Italian is called a ‘macaroni’, the Dutch ‘butter box’...”
“... Stop! Stop!”
“You don’t like any of these culinary insults?”
“I don’t. Can we change the topic?”
“Certainly. But don’t you want to know what Indian women are sometimes called in America?”
“Is it another culinary insult?”
“No, it isn’t.”
“Then tell me.”
“The Indian woman is sometimes referred to as a ‘dot head.’”
“Dothead! Why? Because some of our women wear a bindhi?”
“Exactly.”
Published in *The Hindu* on May 10, 1994.

Word of the day

Fulgent:
shining intensely

Synonyms: blazing, blinding, dazzling, glaring

Usage: The fulgent starlight cast hard shadows on the landscape.

International Phonetic Alphabet: /fʌlɪdʒənt/, /fʌlɪdʒənt/

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

[OUR TAKE]

On the road to Damascus

Assad's fall and the rise of Islamists in Syria is a momentous event for West Asia

The Arab Spring found its moment in Syria a decade and half after it had bloomed (and died) on Sunday when the Baathist regime fell and President Bashar al-Assad fled Damascus with his family to Moscow...

The geopolitical implications of this regime change are significant. One, it marks the end of a five-decade authoritarian rule by the Assad family. Two, it signifies a shift in power balance in the region. The Assad regime was aligned to Russia and Iran...

The transition from one regime to another is a complex and risky process as evident from the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Assad regime, very much like Saddam Hussain in Iraq, held together a country that was born in the ruins of the Ottoman Empire after the first World War...

Speech that doesn't befit a judge's office

When they're sworn in, high court judges take an oath to bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India. Their work, and words, are supposed to be directed not just by the letter of India's founding document but also its spirit...

This cannot stand. The judiciary has helped this Republic defy the odds and thrive. Its majesty is undermined by sectarianism and hate speech. In addition to questions of propriety that arise when a sitting judge of a constitutional court attends an event organised by a Right-wing group...

Arab Spring in Syria marks a power shift

The collapse of the Assad regime has far-reaching consequences. There is genuine fear that Syria could become a safe haven for extremist groups

In a stunning turn of events, the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad collapsed without any resistance after a lightning offensive by rebel forces spearheaded by the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on Sunday...

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or the Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant is a Sunni Islamist political and paramilitary organisation involved in the Syrian civil war since its inception in 2017. It was originally established in 2011 as Jabhat al-Nusra, a direct branch of al-Qaeda...

While it is difficult to fathom how the regime, which claimed to have controlled 70% of the territory of Syria, succumbed to such a sudden collapse, many factors seem to have contributed to it. Years of conflict left the Syrian armed forces fragmented and significantly weakened...

The last ditch effort by the exasperated Syrian regime to solicit military support from Iran, Iraq and the Iraq-based Hezbollah units failed to elicit any favourable response when talks among foreign ministers of Syria, Iran and Iraq in Baghdad on December 6, amidst the rapidly evolving situation in Syria, concluded that it might be too late to address many of the developments on the ground or to swing the balance in favour of the Syrian regime forces...

The fall of Assad's regime has opened the whole world by surprise. The Biden administration is closely monitoring the situation without plans for direct intervention...

Israel is particularly concerned about the situation along the Syrian-Israeli border. It is also worried about the possible landing of lethal chemical and strategic weapons that were possessed by the Assad regime in the hands of Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies in Lebanon. In an unprecedented move, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) entered the UN-monitored buffer zone along the Syria-Israel border in the Golan Heights for the first time since 1974...

Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations including Qatar and Jordan have issued joint statements warning of the risks of further instability and sought greater international humanitarian aid for the Syrian people. Turkey officially denied any involvement but is believed to have given tacit approval for the rebel offensive...



Hayat Tahrir al-Sham taking control of Syria is cause for concern

India has maintained cautious neutrality in the Syrian conflict, but is believed to have given tacit approval for the rebel offensive. The collapse of Assad's regime represents a seismic shift in West Asia's geopolitics with far-reaching consequences. It has significantly affected Russia and Iran's influence in the region, severely weakening and disrupting Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'...



Arafat Sayeed



Md Touhid Hossain

Why children in schools take to physical violence

What made a 12-year-old struggle with his classmates over a minor incident in school? In an incident, a class monitor, in his enthusiasm to maintain discipline in the classroom, kicked a student in the groin who had succumbed to his injuries on the way to the hospital. A child was hospitalized by his schoolmate following a minor fight. Two students killed several classmates and a teacher in another part of the world.

Children involved in these incidents may be geographically far apart, yet the desire for violence among them seems identical and alarmingly on the rise. From no-holds-barred movie and book scenes to acts of violence viral on social media, from aggressive role models to facing aggression at home, schools, or the playground, there are many factors through which society has normalised violence. We have helped desensitise our young to the pain of others and the fallout of conflict occurring around them.

Was brutality a part of the childhood of the perpetrators of violence? These acts and more throw a spotlight on fragmented family structures and the lack of educational institutions' investment in the well-being of their students. Today, social integration, mental health and emotional well-being have to be integral to schooling, but, for too many boys and girls, school is where they experience violence, bullying, harassment, verbal abuse, and sometimes exploitation, at the hands of peers or teachers or even the inscrutable school authority. Every child has the right to go to school free from fear. In the best circumstances, schools should put children on the path to a promising future.

The learning landscape in metros is dotted with steel, glass, and concrete structures with manicured lawns and centrally air-conditioned environs that can put a five-star hotel to shame. If the brand has worked in the eyes of the parent, what usually happens behind the walls is seldom examined. At the heart of all schooling lies shared meaning, engagement, and understanding. This is the collective dialogue which the child internalises and turns into a personalised monologue of empathy and compassion.

School is where a child builds an internal monologue of empathy and compassion. While it is difficult to fathom how the regime, which claimed to have controlled 70% of the territory of Syria, succumbed to such a sudden collapse, many factors seem to have contributed to it. Years of conflict left the Syrian armed forces fragmented and significantly weakened...

As parents and educators, we must remember that challenging behaviour does not happen overnight. Children cannot identify or communicate disruption in the manner that adults do. Their anger often rises from fear, defiance from manipulation, and violence from anxiety, a result of a damaged connection between the adult world and that of our children.

Education has become extremely aspirational. This has resulted in ghettoisation in schools as classrooms become challenging spaces with students from varying social, cultural and economic backgrounds, sometimes with the baggage of single/divorced parents, domestic violence, or some other familial factor. A plethora of behavioural issues result from such social contexts. This has created both inter-dependence and insecurity. It has led to the strong and weak, the majority and minority, the rich and poor feel equally threatened by the other.

We continue to focus on embedding the three R's: Reading, Writing, Arithmetic because we intrinsically believe that this will get our children the livelihoods that we desire. We never stop to worry that our children can't relax, cope with anxiety, or express their emotions. We are unable to express tenderness and trust, and have no understanding of who they are or even that they have a self to find. If the basics skills are not empathy, resilience, compassion, relationship building, and reflection, then schooling is doing nothing for a child's health, happiness, sanity or survival.

The recent incidents are not merely tragic; they are a loud alarm that we can't silence. Schools and homes have to go much beyond the 'three R's' and ensure that every child is trained to identify early signs of aggression and distress so that they can intervene before violent emotions manifest themselves. Social-emotional learning needs to be integrated into every aspect of the curriculum, and not be offered as just an optional extra. Homes need to be spaces of understanding with healthy responses and active listening to nurture emotionally resilient children.

We need to engage children through the dignity that is in them. Our basic mission as parents and teachers is to acknowledge and work with it. Most children at any age seem challenging and disruptive at times. We need to understand the reasons behind their behaviour. The lack of a robust emotional vocabulary robs children to express frustration through physical means. Without tools to articulate their struggles or a safe space to share their pain, they lash out. This raises what they are today. Teachers have to be trained to identify early signs of aggression and distress so that they can intervene before violent emotions manifest themselves.

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Arneeta Mulla Wattal is chairperson and executive director - Education, Initiatives and Training, DLF Foundation Schools and Scholarship Programmes. The views expressed are personal

Advertisement for MD Touhid Hossain, Bangladesh Foreign Affairs Adviser. Text: 'We expect that we will be able to overcome this impasse... mutual communication and meeting each other is very important to overcome any such stalemate'. Includes HT logo and contact information.

Can ICJ deliver climate justice to Global South?

After the battle at the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP29) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague has now become the battleground for the developing and the developed world to face off on the climate issue. The ICJ is hearing on this over December 23, and the focus would be on determining the obligation of developed-world States with respect to the climate crisis and the legal consequences of these obligations.

The origin of this case before the ICJ lies with a youth group from Vanuatu, called the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change. This organisation had taken up the matter with the government of Vanuatu, which, in turn, discussed it with a core group of countries and made a reference to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2021. 132 countries in the UN, except the developed world, supported the matter and the matter was referred to the ICJ in April 2023. The resolution relied upon other documents to bolster its case. For example, the UN Charter, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and of course, the Paris Agreement.

This climate crisis case is the biggest such before the ICJ, where there are 91 written statements and 62 written comments on the statements; 97 States and 11 international organisations (including the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, World Health Organisation and the European Union) are participating in the proceedings. It has not been easy for States like Vanuatu to pursue this matter given the limited resources and logistics at their disposal. The plight of the other small island States involved in the process is much the same as Vanuatu's and quite a few of them are participating with pro bono assistance.

The need for the transfer of resources from the developed nations to the developing ones has been a bone of contention in several COP meetings in the past. COP29 was to function as the 'finance COP', but the deliberations only allowed for a transfer of \$300 billion a year by 2035. This is the total quantum of funds that can be expected from the developed nations. The multilateral development banks, the private sector, and also transfers between developing nations themselves, all put together. Further, this is expected to take care of the mitigation and adaptation needs of the developing world. What the small island States are crying for is the immediate transfer of resources to compensate for loss and damage already experienced. They certainly can't wait till 2035, given the risks of inundation they face. To take care of this, the Loss and Damage Fund was set up during COP27 in 2022 and operationalised during COP28 in 2023. The finer details of this fund are yet to be worked out. The biggest challenge, however, is that there is hardly any corpus in this fund, and, as of date, less than \$700 million has been committed. The biggest historical polluter, i.e., the United States has committed only \$17.5 million — a mere 2.5% of the total.

Somit Dasgupta is senior visiting fellow, Arav, and former member (economics and environment), the Central Electricity Authority. The views expressed are personal

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR PEACE IN SYRIA

IN a world which has lost appetite for detroning dictators and despots...

pass on to an Abu Mohammed al-Qaedi...

Assad, who secured asylum in Russia, literally waged a war on his own people...

geopolitics in the region? A western-backed regime could be unsettling for Russia...

ment liberal aid for the reconstruction of Syria, a nation ravaged for over five decades...

LETTERS

Human rights under grave threat

SINCE 1948, December 10 has been observed as World Human Rights Day by the United Nations...

Team India at a loss to recover its wits

IT refers to 'India crash to 10-wk defeat in Adelaide'...

Women rights being eroded

HINDU ELIHANNAY

FROM Iraq to Afghanistan to the US, basic freedoms for women are being eroded as governments start rolling back existing laws...

Just a few months ago a ban on Afghan women speaking in public was the latest measure introduced by the Taliban...

The Taliban's ministry for the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice, which implements one of the most radical interpretations of Islamic law...

In the past three years in Afghanistan, the Taliban has taken away many basic rights from women who live there...

From 2021, the Taliban started introducing restrictions on girls receiving education, starting with a ban on co-education...

Women can no longer attend universities or receive a degree certificate nationally, or follow midwifery or nursing training in the Kandahar region...

Afghanistan is ranked last on the Women, Peace and Security Index and officials at the UN and elsewhere have called it 'gender apartheid'...

Many diplomats discuss how important it is to 'engage' with the Taliban...

In the past three years in Afghanistan, the Taliban has taken away many basic rights from women who live there...

Meanwhile, in Iraq on August 4 2024, an amendment to Iraq's 1959 personal status law which would possibly lower the age of consent for marriage to nine



The UN agency, UN Women, says it could take another 286 years to close the global gender gaps in legal protections. No country has yet achieved gender equality, based on the gender pay gap, legal equality and social inequality levels

years-old from 18 (or 15 with permission from a judge and parents) was proposed by member of parliament Raad al-Maliki...

The law would have the potential of having matters of family law - such as marriage - adjudicated by religious authorities...

Iraq already has a high rate of underage marriage, with 7% of girls married by 15 years old, and 28% married before the legal age of 18.

Unregistered marriages, not legally recorded in court but conducted through religious or tribal authorities, prevent girls from accessing civil rights...

Many women's groups have already mobilised against the law. But the amendment has passed its second reading in parliament...

ward in protecting children's rights and gender equality.

Abortion rights in the US. Meanwhile, in the US, women's access to abortion has been eroded significantly in the past few years...

Republican US congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene suggested, in May 2022, that women should stay celibate if they did not want to get pregnant...

seconds. One in every five American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape. From 2009-13, US Child Protective Services agencies found strong evidence indicating that 63,000 children per year were victims of sexual abuse...

These developments reflect a troubling pattern. There is evidence from Donald Trump's first term that there could be further erosion of women's rights...

Fragility of women's rights

If the world can tolerate the Taliban's abuses, Iraq's restrictions on abortion and US restrictions on abortion access...

The UN agency, UN Women, says it could take another 286 years to close the global gender gaps in legal protections...

In fact, in the US a sexual assault occurs every 68

GRAND victory in first cricket test match by Indian team is completely shadowed by the great win by Austrian team in the second test match...

CM Revanth's creditable performance

A PROPOS of 'Revanth carves out a niche as CM of Telangana' (Dec 7). Greenhorn Revanth Reddy, though inexperienced, has completed a year in office as the CM of Telangana creditably...

Allies should jolt Rahul back to reality

RE 'INDIA bloc, not constitution is facing 'Khatri' (Dec 9). Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's frequent outcry that the Constitution is under siege by a small handbook everytime is nothing but a veiled attempt to manipulate political narratives for political gains...

THE knives are out in Opposition INDIA bloc, especially after the drafting suffered by the Congress-led Maha Vilas Aghad...

A TALE OF OBLIGATIONS DILUTED

Developed world performed 'great escape' from finance obligations at COP29

NEW DELHI: 'At COP 29, we lost an opportunity -- without a meaningful agreement on climate finance...

2020. Says Avantika Goswami, programme manager, Climate Change, CSE. 'An ambitious NCGG out-come at COP 29 would have been critical for supporting the increasing climate needs of the Global South...

What the COP29 presidency deal did was to gavel a climate finance deal of US \$300 billion per year for developing countries...

The 29th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change ended November 24 in Baku, Azerbaijan. The headline issue of the conference was the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCGG) on climate finance...



To begin with, the deal dilutes the legal obligation of developed countries to provide the entirety of the finance under the new goal, as per Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement...

9.1 of the Paris Agreement. The ambiguities of the goal make it clear that there will be little accountability and traceability of funds...

which was to come from developed countries only? In the amount, the timeframe of achieving the goal by 2035 is also problematic...

Moreover, the US \$300 billion quantum is not specified as grants-based or concessional, which leaves scope for debt-worsening modes of financing...

mate finance. This casts serious doubts on achieving the scaled scale of US \$1.3 trillion annually.

Carbon markets adopted. After close to a decade of deliberations, Article 6 of the Paris Agreement was finally adopted at COP 29...

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

'Bring disputed Belagavi border areas of Karnataka Under Central rule'

MUMBAI: As the Maharashtra-Karnataka boundary flared up afresh, the Shiv Sena (UBT) has demanded that the Centre should declare the disputed border areas in and around Belagavi (Belgaum) as separate flag states...

Shiv Sena (UBT)'s Group Leader Aditya Thackeray protested against the injustice meted out to the Marathi-speaking people in and around Belagavi as the border dispute awaits a long-term solution.

'Now there's a Bharatiya Janata Party government both in the state and the Centre. Why can't they solve the matter? Prime Minister Narendra Modi must intervene immediately and ensure that injustice is not done to our Marathi brethren there,' urged Aditya Thackeray.

He added how the Karnataka government not only refused permission for a conference of the Maharashtra Ekkam Samiti (MES) in Belagavi and did not allow leaders from there to travel there, but the local authorities imposed a curfew there. 'The borders are being shut. Belagavi is and will remain an integral part of the Marathi people. We strongly condemn this injustice to the Marathi people. I appeal to the Karnataka government to ensure this immediately,' said Aditya Thackeray, speaking to the media outside the Assembly.

Read more at https://epaper.thehansindia.com

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of new faces in AAP's second list of candidates

18 The Aam Aadmi Party released its second list of 20 candidates for the upcoming Delhi assembly polls, dropping 18 sitting MLAs and moving two others, including senior leader and former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia, to new seats. Mr. Sisodia will now contest from Jangpura. **11**

Retail inflation for farm workers in the month of October

5.96 In per cent. Retail inflation for farm workers and rural labourers eased to 5.96% and 6%, in October from 6.36% and 6.39% in September. The All-India Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers registered an increase of 11 points in October. **11**

Bihar's abysmal sex-ratio at birth in 2022-23

894 The Bihar government is alarmed over the State's abysmal "sex ratio at birth" (SRB), and has decided to strictly implement measures for checking female foeticide. The SRB — the number of female births per 1,000 male births — has been declining in the State. **11**

Number of people killed in Haiti's capital due to gang violence

184 The UN rights chief said that 184 people had been killed over the weekend in the Haitian capital, rocked by a spike in gang violence. The violence was orchestrated by the leader of a powerful gang in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, in the Cite Soleil area. **11**

The increase in India's copper demand in building the fiscal year of 2024

13 In per cent. India's copper demand grew by 13% annually to hit 1,700 kilo tonnes in FY24, driven by the rapid pace of infrastructure development and building constructions, the International Copper Association India said on Monday. **11**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On reforms in merchant shipping

Have the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, and the Coasting Vessels Act, 1838 failed in addressing the contemporary needs of the merchant marine sector? What are some of the international maritime conventions that India has ratified? Will the new Bills address maritime training and education as well?

EXPLAINER

Amitabh Kumar

The story so far:

The Government is preparing to introduce several significant bills aimed at driving much-needed reforms in the shipping industry. Key among them are the Merchant Shipping Bill, 2024 and the Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024, both of which promise to bring transformative changes to boost the sector.

Why a new bill?

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, and the Coasting Vessels Act, 1838, which the new bills aim to repeal, have become outdated and fail to address the contemporary needs of the merchant marine sector. Significant regulatory gaps exist, particularly for vessels operating in the offshore sector which comprise nearly 50% of Indian-flagged vessels. Furthermore, maritime training was liberalised allowing private sector participation, yet there is no legal framework in the existing Act to regulate their activities effectively.

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, also restricts seafarers' welfare provisions to Indian-flagged ships, despite 85% of the 2,80,000 active Indian seafarers working on foreign-flagged vessels. Additionally, the Act lacks enabling provisions for implementing certain international conventions that India has signed or plans to ratify. Crucially, the outdated, license-era provisions of the Act have become a roadblock to modernising maritime administration, which needs to transition from being a mere regulator to a regulator-cum-facilitator, thereby promoting the 'ease of doing business.'

What are the features of the Merchant Shipping Bill?

The Merchant Shipping Bill introduces significant changes to modernise India's maritime framework, drawing upon the best practices of leading maritime jurisdictions like the U.K., Norway, and Singapore. Some of the key reform measures include:

i) Ease of registration: the existing law restricts vessel registration to entities with 100% Indian ownership. The new Bill proposes significant reforms to attract foreign investment. It also reduces the ownership threshold for Indian citizens/entities from 100% to 51%, enabling more flexibility. It allows Limited Liability Partnerships (LLPs), Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), and Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs) to own and register Indian vessels. This is in line with the law of the U.S. where Green card holders are permitted to own American flagships or Singapore law where permanent residents can own ships of their flags. It also permits foreign entities to hold shares in Indian vessels while ensuring majority ownership remains with Indian entities, NRIs, or OCIs.

Additionally, the Bill allows the registration of vessels chartered by Indian entities under the bareboat charter-cum-demise, enabling entrepreneurs to acquire ownership of vessels at the end of the charter period. This provision, particularly beneficial for capital-deficient entrepreneurs, facilitates entry into the shipping industry without upfront investment.

India is the second largest ship recycling centre after Bangladesh, and the ship recycling industry practises the concept of cash purchase of the vessel before it is brought for demolition. Often



Quick change: Catamaran boats pass by a merchant navy ship anchored off Visakhapatnam. FILE PHOTO

it becomes difficult for cash buyers to register the vessels for their final voyage, as they no longer remain 'seaworthy'. To address challenges faced by the ship recycling industry, the Bill introduces provisions for temporary registration of vessels destined for demolition. This measure is expected to bolster activities at India's ship recycling hubs like Alang.

ii) Enlarging the scope of vessels: the existing Act regulates only mechanised ships (engine-fitted vessels) above a certain size, leaving smaller mechanised vessels and all non-mechanised vessels outside its ambit. This regulatory gap has allowed many vessels to operate without adequate oversight. India's offshore drilling sector gained prominence in 1974 when Sagar Samrat, a merchant vessel designed for exploratory offshore drilling, drilled the first well in Bombay High. Since then, the offshore sector has employed a diverse range of mechanised and non-mechanised vessels, such as accommodation barges, work barges, submersibles, and drones. However, these vessels remain either unregulated or inadequately regulated under the current framework, exposing the sector to operational and safety risks.

The new Bill seeks to address this issue by expanding the definition of 'vessels' to uniformly include a wide range of crafts, including submersibles, semi-submersibles, hydrofoils, non-displacement crafts, amphibious crafts, wing-in-ground crafts, pleasure crafts, barges, lighters, Mobile Offshore Drilling Units (MODUs), and Mobile Offshore Units (MOUs), whether mechanised or not. This definition is expected to enhance transparency and ensure comprehensive regulatory oversight in the offshore sector.

Furthermore, the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, which exploited gaps in maritime security, underscored the urgent need for stricter regulation of all categories of vessels. By empowering authorities to issue instructions to all types of vessels, the new Bill aims to strengthen coastal

security, making India's coastline safer and more secure.

What about marine pollution?

The Government has recently undertaken several initiatives to minimise pollution from shipping activities. Some of the measures include reducing the sulphur content in marine fuel from 3.5% to less than 0.5%, banning the use of single-use plastics on Indian ships, and launching the online portal 'Swachh Sagar' to facilitate the proper disposal of ship-generated waste at Indian ports.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has adopted several conventions aimed at preventing and combating marine pollution, such as the Civil Liability Convention (CLC), the Convention on Limitation of Liability on Maritime Claims (LLMC), the Bunker Convention, the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL), and the Wreck Removal Convention. The existing law, however, has either omitted or partially implemented these conventions. The new Bill fully incorporates these international conventions, aligning India's maritime regulatory framework with global standards. This comprehensive approach reinforces India's commitment to combating marine pollution and safeguarding the maritime environment for sustainable shipping practices.

What are provisions for seafarers?

The remarkable growth in the number of Indian seafarers employed on foreign-flagged ships over the last 7-8 years stands out as one of the biggest success stories in Indian merchant shipping. The workforce has grown from 1,16,000 in 2015-16 to 2,85,000 today, with nearly 85% of these seafarers serving on foreign-flagged vessels.

However, the existing Act lacks provisions for the welfare and safety of this vast workforce working on foreign-flagged vessels. The proposed Bill addresses this gap by extending the scope

of welfare measures initiated by the Union government to include Indian seafarers working on foreign-flagged ships as well. Furthermore, it seeks to extend the protections and benefits outlined in the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) to all Indian seafarers, ensuring better working conditions, safety standards, and support systems for those contributing to the global maritime industry.

What about maritime training?

Under Entry 25 of List 1 (Union List) of the Constitution, the Union Government is responsible for the education and training of the mercantile marine and the regulation of such education and training provided by States and other agencies. In the past, maritime training was primarily conducted by government-run institutions directly under the administrative control of the maritime regulator, the Director General of Shipping. Consequently, there was no need for a specific legal framework to regulate these institutions.

However, following economic liberalisation, maritime training was opened to the private sector. Today, over 160 maritime training institutes operate across the country, yet their activities are governed solely by rules, government orders, and notifications rather than an enabling legal framework. This regulatory gap has allowed unauthorised institutes to operate without obtaining proper approvals, making it challenging for the maritime administration to take action against offenders.

The proposed Bill seeks to address this significant anomaly by introducing clear legal provisions for regulating maritime training in line with the constitutional mandate. This step is expected to eliminate illegal maritime training institutes and associated fraudulent practices, which often exploit unsuspecting rural youth, while ensuring the delivery of high-quality, standardised maritime education nationwide.

Is there a focus on coastal shipping?

The Government has taken a significant step by distinguishing between the technical regulation of ships and the commercial utilisation of Indian coastal waters, removing provisions related to the latter from the Merchant Shipping Act. These aspects, including licensing, permissions for operations along the Indian coast and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), creation of a coastal plan involving the Union and States, and the integration of inland and coastal shipping, have been incorporated into the proposed Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024. This focused approach aims to foster growth and development of the Indian coastal sector.

The move aligns with the Government's flagship 'Sagarmala' program, which emphasises the promotion of coastal shipping through initiatives like dedicated berths for coastal vessels and enhanced hinterland connectivity for coastal cargo movement. Infrastructure development and a robust regulatory framework must progress simultaneously, making the introduction of the Coastal Shipping Bill both timely and essential.

Maritime development, like any developmental initiative, should remain bipartisan and above party politics. By fostering investment, enhancing safety, combating marine pollution, and supporting seafarers' welfare, the proposed reforms promise to unlock the true potential of India's maritime sector.

Amitabh Kumar is Former Director General Shipping, Government of India. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

The Merchant Shipping Bill, 2024 introduces significant changes to modernise India's maritime framework, drawing upon the best practices of leading maritime jurisdictions like the U.K., Norway, and Singapore.

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