

FAQ

How much is spent on children's education in India?

What does a recent report by the National Sample Survey show? Why is there a divide between girls and boys?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:
Despite a recent drop in the World Economic Forum's gender gap rankings, partly due to the education category, India has made steady progress in recent years in terms of enrolling more girls in school, with government data showing that girls now make up 48% of the school population. In higher education, in fact, the gross enrolment ratio for women is slightly higher than that of men. However, data collected as part of the National Sample Survey earlier this summer show a more insidious gender gap that remains in education – the differing amounts of money that families spend on their sons as opposed to their daughters for their education.

What are the differences in expenditure?
The recent report on the Comprehensive Modular Survey on education, which collected nationwide data between April and June as part of the 80th round of the NSS, shows that the per-student expenditure on girls is lower than on boys during all stages of school education, from pre-primary to higher secondary, as well as across the rural-urban divide. The survey covered 52,085 households in 2,384 villages and 1,982 urban blocks across the country, with education-related information collected for 57,742 students currently enrolled in school.

In rural India, families spent ₹1,373 or 18% more on boys than girls in terms of course fees, textbooks, and stationery, uniforms, and transportation to school. In urban India, the per-student expenditure on girls was ₹2,791 less than on boys. In urban India, by the time students are in higher secondary school, there is almost 30% more being spent on education for boys than girls. When course fees alone are considered, the gap widens, with families paying on average 21.5% more on fees for boys than for girls across the country.

This prioritising of boys' education is also clear in the type of schools that Indian families choose for their children. About 58.4% of girls are enrolled in government schools, which are usually free of cost in terms of course fees, with only 29.5% of them having access to more expensive private school education. However, 34% of boys are enrolled in private unaided schools. The gap goes beyond the school classroom, and extends to private tuitions that many families consider essential for a quality education. Tuition classes now supplement school teaching at all stages of education, and overall, 26% of girls and 27.8% of boys are enrolled in such classes. When it comes to expenditure, however, the gap widens, especially in higher classes. By the higher secondary level, families are spending on average 22% more in terms of tuition fees on their boys in comparison to girls.

How does this vary by State?
States differ widely in terms of the gender gap in education. When it comes to enrolment of girls and boys in government schools versus private schools for instance, the biggest gaps can be seen in States/UTs such as Delhi, where almost 54% of boys go to government schools, compared to more than 65% of girls. On the other hand, almost 38.8% of boys go to more expensive private schools, compared to 26.6% of girls. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Punjab also have gender gaps of more than 10 percentage points. In Gujarat, the gender gap is striking in urban areas, but narrower in rural areas. In States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, boys and girls go to government and private schools in almost equal ratios, while several northeastern States have flipped the script, sending more girls to private schools. Expenditures are more nuanced, especially in the higher classes. In higher secondary education, for instance, families in Telangana, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal spend vastly more on boys than girls, though they spent more on girls at the secondary level. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, the average education expenditure on girls at the secondary level is ₹23,796 compared to ₹22,593 on boys. In higher secondary, however, the expenditure on boys in the State has shot up to ₹35,973, compared to just ₹19,412 for girls. Part of this can be attributed to girls dropping out at that stage, though subsidies for girl students could also account for some of the difference. States like Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Kerala also spend more on higher secondary girls, especially in urban India, where data shows that transport costs become a major factor, with parents intent on safety of the girl. Expenditure on private coaching also varied by State, especially at the higher secondary level. In Himachal Pradesh, for instance, there was a stark gap between the ₹9,813 spent per boy student in higher secondary school enrolled for private tuition in comparison to the ₹1,550 spent per girl. Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu were among other States which showed significant gender gaps in this regard.

Will the GST rate cuts boost the economy?

Which sectors will benefit from the sweeping changes? Which sectors are disgruntled about the change? How long has the rationalisation process been going on? Did the imposition of 50% U.S. tariffs weigh on the decision? What about revenue implications? What lies ahead?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:
On September 3, the GST Council authorised a new paradigm in the indirect tax regime. There will be fewer rates, and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on most items have been reduced. While this has been welcomed by most sectors, there are some which are somewhat disgruntled. There are also concerns over the revenue implications.

What prompted these changes?
The rationalisation of the multiple rates in GST has been on the anvil for a long time. The Council had in September 2021 constituted a Group of Ministers (GoM) to look into rate rationalisation. This GoM began its work, but seemingly little progress was made. The GoM was composed entirely of representatives from the States, with no representative from the Centre. So, in order to nudge it in the direction it wanted, the Union government had to make a proposal to the GoM. The Ministry of Finance on August 15, 2025, announced that it had submitted its proposal to the GoM. Earlier that same day, in his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced that these “next-generation” GST reforms would be a Deepavali gift to the nation. By August 21, 2025, the GoM – following a briefing by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman – had accepted the proposals and forwarded them to the GST Council. The Council then deliberated on these proposals on September 3 during a 10.5-hour-long meeting, following which it announced its decisions.

What are the changes?
The existing GST structure has multiple rates,

The States will have to look for their own sources of revenue to make up any losses

even when considering only the main ones. The main rates comprise 0%, 5%, 12%, 18%, 28%, and a compensation cess over and above the 28% slab. This has been reduced to main slabs of 0%, 5%, 18% and 40%. The compensation cess for most items has been removed. It is still levied on tobacco products, but even that will be removed by the end of this calendar year, when the Centre pays back the loan it took to compensate States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from this, many items have been moved to lower tax slabs. According to an analysis by the State Bank of India's economics research wing, of the 453 items that saw a change in their GST rate, 413 (or a little more than 91%) saw rates being cut, while 40 items saw rates increasing. The bulk of the rate reductions – 257 items, mostly common use products – were from the 12% to the 5% slab. Out of the 40 items that saw their rates increase, 17 were moved from the 28% slab to 40%. Here, it is important to note that the actual tax incidence might not have increased. For example, once the compensation cess is added, the effective tax rate on luxury cars and SUVs is 45-50%. That will go down to 40%.

Why were they necessary?
There are several reasons why the GST rate cuts make sense now. The first is that the legal period for the GST compensation cess will likely be coming to an end this calendar year. It can be levied up to March 31, 2026 or till when the Centre pays off its loans, whichever is earlier. Ms. Sitharaman said she expects the loans to be repaid this calendar year. The removal of this cess, without raising the base rates on tobacco products, would mean that these ‘sin’ goods would have suddenly become significantly cheaper. This is something the Union government could not be seen to be condoning. That set a time limit by when the new rates had to be implemented. The other reason is that the government expects some sort of detrimental impact from the 50% tariff imposed by the U.S. on imports from India. This is clear from the fact that, despite a strong 7.8% GDP growth in Q1 of this financial year, the government has not changed its 6.3%-6.8% growth estimate for the full year, implying it expects growth in the subsequent quarters to be significantly slower. The boost from the GST rate cuts is expected to offset this hit. The government, however, has officially denied any such connection, saying the GST changes were part of an overall reforms push and not related to the tariffs.

Which sectors were happy with the reforms?
The healthcare industry voiced its approval of

the changes, saying the decision to reduce GST in the sector from 12% to 5% on a wide range of medical products would directly benefit patients. The renewable energy sector, too, praised the decision to reduce taxes on renewable energy components from 12% to 5%, saying this was a progressive step towards accelerating India's clean energy transition. Consumer appliance makers were also upbeat about the cuts, saying it would boost demand, especially in the run-up to the festive season. The real estate sector said that bringing down the GST rate on cement from 28% to 18%, and on other building materials such as granite slabs, would reduce costs for the sector and be a big boost. Auto manufacturers said the reduction of GST on cars and non-luxury bikes from 28% to 18% would spur demand.

Which sectors voiced reservations?
The textile industry welcomed the downward revision of GST rates for both man-made fibre and cotton sectors to 5%, but also voiced its disappointment over the 18% duty for garments priced above ₹2,500 each. They said that woollens, wedding apparel, and traditional Indian wear would become more expensive. While auto manufacturers welcomed the rate rationalisation, dealers voiced some worries about consumers postponing their purchases until September 22, when the new rates come into force. They also called for greater clarity on what happens to the cess on vehicles they have bought from manufacturers but not yet sold. The insurance sector will likely also see a mixed picture from the GST rate cuts. The exemption of personal life and health insurance from GST will increase insurance penetration, but the simultaneous removal of input tax credits might increase costs for insurers, thereby eating into their profits. Airlines have collectively slammed the higher GST on non-economy seats, while vegetable oil producers said the Council could have resolved the inverted duty structure on edible oils – something it did for fertilizers and man-made textiles. The increase in the GST rate for labour charges from 12% to 18% has also led to some resistance from representatives of the MSME sector, who said their costs would increase.

What is the revenue impact?
The Centre said the revenue implication would be ₹48,000 crore based on consumption patterns in 2023-24. However, the real impact will be ascertained only when new data is obtained. The SBI research team estimates it to be a much smaller ₹3,700 crore. Opposition States, however, are worried. They have voiced their demand for a cess to be levied on items in the 40% slab, the proceeds of which can be used to compensate States for the revenue hit. This was not accepted by the Council. The States will have to look for their own sources, and the 16th Finance Commission, to make up any losses.

Is a shift underway in India's foreign policy?

How productive was the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit? Did a meeting between China, Russia and India at Tianjin signal a change in relations? Did U.S. moves on tariffs and sanctions prompt this? What are the leaders saying?

Suhasini Haidar

The story so far:
Prime Minister Narendra Modi began the week in Tianjin, with a show of camaraderie with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit on September 1. A photograph of the three leaders together made headlines around the world. It also seemingly irked U.S. President Donald Trump, prompting a series of sarcastic statements, even as the U.S. doubled down on 50% tariffs, sanctions on India's import of Russian oil, and asking the European Union to do the same. By the end of the week, however, Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump appeared conciliatory.

What happened in Tianjin?
The week saw a series of high-level summits seen as a projection of power by China, beginning with the 10-nation SCO summit in Tianjin, where several other leaders including from Turkey, Nepal, Maldives, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Indonesia and Malaysia were invited. From there, the action moved to Beijing, where Mr. Xi led Mr. Putin and dozens of other leaders including North Korea's Kim Jong Un to a

India-U.S. relations have been impacted by months of tension, but official exchanges and military exercises have not stopped

massive military parade commemorating 80 years since the end of the Second World War. The statements released included a number of counter-West elements, with Mr. Xi promoting a “Global Governance Initiative” and Mr. Modi pitching for a “civilisational dialogue” between SCO countries. The SCO declaration criticised “coercive, unilateral” economic measures, believed to be aimed at U.S. tariffs and European sanctions. During a photo-shoot for the SCO meet, Prime Minister Modi was seen purposefully leading President Putin down the red carpet to where President Xi was standing. A day before that, Mr. Xi and Mr. Modi held bilateral talks that had been cordial and possibly paved the way for the tri-leader photo.

What happened at the bilateral meeting?
This was Mr. Modi's first visit to China since 2018, and his first meeting with President Xi not in a third country since the military standoff and Galwan clashes in 2020, where both sides agreed to normalise ties. China appeared conciliatory, with Mr. Xi referring to India and China as “partners not rivals”, while India appears to have climbed down from an insistence that the LAC situation be normalised before a resumption of ties in other spheres. They agreed to let the border situation be discussed between Special Representatives Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Besides revival of flights, visa facilitation and the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra, they agreed to resolve the trade issues between them.

How did the U.S. view the meetings?
In Washington, the photograph of the Tianjin “troika”, as well as subsequent images of the leaders of Russia, China, North Korea, Central Asian states, Iran, Pakistan and others, were seen as a challenge to the Western order, as well as proof that India had now “switched sides”. On social media, Mr. Trump posted a photo from the SCO summit saying that it looked like the U.S. had “lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest, China”. The White House Trade Adviser Peter Navarro, seen as one of the officials driving tariffs against India, said it was a “shame” that

India as a democracy was getting closer to Russia and China. There were a number of other comments criticising the Modi government, including calling the Ukraine conflict “Modi's war”, which the Ministry of External Affairs rejected as “inaccurate and misleading”. India will also participate in a BRICS online summit chaired by Brazil on September 8 to discuss a common response to the U.S. tariffs, which may send up more red flags. Delhi-Washington ties have been fraught over many issues, including visa, immigration and trade policies, and Mr. Trump's repeated assertions of mediating the ceasefire in Operation Sindoor. But amid the tension, came yet another turnaround. Mr. Trump on Friday said that India and the U.S. have a “special relationship” and that he would “always be great friends with PM Modi”. Mr. Modi, who had not responded to any of the statements thus far, welcomed them and said he shared Mr. Trump's “positive assessment” of the partnership.

What lies ahead?
While many foreign policy observers may have faced whiplash from the perception that Indian policy had shifted from the “west to the east” and possibly back to the west, the shifts are less perceptible if you consider India's decades-old policy of strategic autonomy and balance. The visit to China for the SCO had been expected for months, after the Xi-Modi meeting in Kazan on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in October 2024 had restarted ties. While India had put SCO on the backburner for the past two years and PM Modi skipped the Summit in Astana last year, the visit to China was considered important. In that sense, the Modi-Xi meeting was simply an attempt to normalise ties after years of serious tensions, and the Modi-Xi-Putin chat, would have been more significant if followed by a revival of formal Russia-India-China talks. India-U.S. relations have no doubt been impacted by months of tensions on a range of issues, but official exchanges and military exercises have not stopped. Much will depend on whether the U.S. and India can find a compromise over demands to cancel Russian oil imports or for India to open its agricultural and dairy sectors, and whether the U.S. reconsiders its 50% tariff on India. With Mr. Jaishankar headed to the U.S. for the UN General Assembly this month, talks about scheduling the Quad summit, where Mr. Trump is due to visit India later this year, will be closely watched.

A flashpoint in the Palk Strait

Half a century since New Delhi gave up its claim to the barren island and recognised Sri Lanka's sovereignty over it, politicians in India periodically rake up the issue, triggering tensions in ties between the friendly countries

In return, New Delhi got sovereign rights over Wadge Bank, located near Kanniyakumari, known for its rich resources

“The limited information flow behind the prison walls slows down your life as you are away from the mad rush of the outside world, which is accelerated by social media,” Mr. Bhattacharya quoted him as saying. “He doesn’t get swayed by things happening on an everyday basis, any more,” says Mr. Bhattacharya. “He knows he has to play a role.”

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Trumpian jolt to India is debilitating, but not fatal

India's destiny is not a function of the anger of one great power or the indulgence of another. It is rooted in our history and civilisation, in the values espoused by our founding fathers, in our championing of great causes

A ny serious jolt in an individual's life should ideally lead to a period of reflection, a reassessment of one's capabilities and limitations, a meditation on the way ahead. So it is for nations. In recent years, a close India-US relationship had become the central tenet of India's foreign policy. The jolt delivered to that perception by US President Donald Trump's irrational aggression is a serious one. It ranks right up with some memorable jolts of similar voltage: the Chinese betrayal and aggression in 1962, the US Seventh Fleet sailing into the Bay of Bengal in 1971, and the furious landslide of "a ton of bricks" in the shape of sanctions post the 1998 nuclear tests. But those episodes, however unacceptable, could be explained: An overly idealistic reading of China's intentions in 1962, America's desperation to create an opening to China in 1971, and Clinton's anger at the body blow delivered by India in 1998 to the inherently discriminatory nuclear non-proliferation regime. But Trump's despatch of the wrecking ball to the steadily rising edifice of India-US relations is woefully bereft of not only reason but even decency. More so since, unlike the other

situations, the attack is on a relationship that was in a particularly good place, having been nurtured by leaders on both sides, including Trump, for the last quarter century. A crisis shows up things in bold relief, like several of our assumptions that got the veneer of established fact. Space permits us to mention three. The first was the belief that India had the measure of Donald Trump — that having dealt with him with reasonable success in his first term, we would continue to coast on his safe side during the second by a judicious mix of cajoling, flattery, blandishments, and perceived chemistry. The second assumption was that Trump would follow the strategic logic of his recent predecessors and see India as a crucial lynchpin of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific: a democratic, economically strong partner against an increasingly muscular China. That logic had facilitated the Indo-US nuclear deal, a closer defence partnership and the revival of Quad, the last on Trump's watch. Encouraged by this US strategy, and impelled by Chinese aggression in 2020, India shed some of its demureness in Quad and took clearer postures on defence exercises and maritime domain awareness. The third assumption was that India had a fifth column in the US in its five-million-strong diaspora; increasingly politically active and visible, the diaspora was assumed to be a strong supporting pillar of the relationship. These assumptions have been largely belied by the current crisis and an honest reassessment is useful. First, the playbook of Trump 1.0 was outdated. He is a different force in his second

coming: uninhibited, unguided, and vengeful. His advisors are primarily loyalists. Strategically inexperienced, none of them has emerged as a champion for the India-US relationship; the sycophancy of the Washington court would make Kim Jong Un envious. There are countries that pay tribute with gifts, Nobel Prize recommendations, crypto deals and real estate franchises, all a sort of high-level *hafta* or protection money. We have done our bit, but his ego proved to be larger than the rallies we organised. Indian corporates may buy more or invest more if that helps, but more patently transactional offers, personal blandishment, or ego massages would be demeaning and against India's dignity. In any case, there is no guarantee that this would work. Second, making common cause against China is not critical for Trump. Chances are that he would blithely go over our heads, given the opportunity, to cut a beautiful deal with President Xi Jinping; after all, Xi's military parade has proved to be brilliantly superior to the rag-tag walk-along that Pete Hegseth organised in Washington on Trump's birthday. Our democracy too doesn't mean a thing for Trump, even less than America's does. Our China+1 possibilities will be happily sacrificed: Remember his admonishment of Apple's Tim Cook (Trump had called him Tim Apple in his first term as President) for daring to manufacture iPhones in India. And third, our approach to the diaspora needs a rethink. The majority of Indian-Americans pursue their dreams, their comfortable lives, and their successful careers; some occasionally dabble in politics by funding Congressmen. We should wish them well



Navtej Sarna



Making common cause against China is not critical for Trump. Chances are that he would blithely go over our heads, given the opportunity to cut a beautiful deal with President Xi Jinping. AFP PHOTO / INDIAN PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU (PIB)

and welcome their attachment to India. When the going is good, they also serve, to borrow from TS Eliot, to "swell a progress, start a scene or two," and this makes for good optics. But a fifth pillar they are not. What has been disappointing is the near total silence of the Indian Americans in positions of power — in the Trump administration, the US Congress, the India Caucus, the top tech industry. Here too there lies a cautionary tale. Let us stop going to absurd levels every time an Indian name rises in America. There is no reason to perform *havans*, or search out long lost uncles and long forgotten *chithhis* in our towns and villages and drag them before television cameras. When the chips are down, none of this means a thing. By celebrating these Americans as "sons, daughters, or sons-in-law" of India we actually handicap them, open them up to charges of split loyalties. The Trumpian jolt has been debilitating

but not fatal. Yet more pain in the shape of tariffs or restrictions on legal migration may come. It is true that trust — that ephemeral colouring of the safflower — has crumbled, but the relationship with the US is too consequential to give up on. Tuning down our expectations, discarding our assumptions, we need to approach it realistically through hard-nosed, patient and professional diplomacy. Get the best trade deal we can, blunt Trump's aggression with tact and dignity, and continue with process-driven engagement. Develop champions for the relationship, find whisperers in high places and nurture constituencies in the US Congress, media, and universities. It may not take long for the wheel to turn. Meanwhile, as Tianjin has shown, there are other partners on the dance floor. But they too hide a stiletto or exchange side glances. Dance we must, but the floor is getting ever smaller and the atmosphere increasingly

antagonistic: Trump has already consigned us, along with Russia, to the camp of "deepest, darkest, China"; his subsequent positive overture, to which we have correctly responded politely, only serves to highlight the need to insure ourselves against his pendulum like mood swings. India's destiny is not a function of the anger of one great power or the indulgence of another. It is rooted in our history and civilisation, in the values espoused by our founding fathers, in our championing of global concerns. Let us take comfort in that belief and reach out to constituencies that need us as a beacon and a voice for their causes: The Global South awaits. India needs to play to its strengths and not to its ambitions; the invitations to the high table will come.

Navtej Sarna is a former ambassador of India to the United States. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Monsoon in Delhi, summer in London

I have decided to write about an odd subject this Sunday. It's not political, but it is topical and it is certainly important. More than anything else it fascinates me. And, truth be told, we all spend a lot of time talking about it. In fact, it is usually the core of our casual comments. Most of us refer to it unthinkingly. Now have you guessed what I'm referring to? Probably not. Here's the answer: The weather! It has taken me decades to realise how my attitude to the weather has changed not just as I've grown older but also as I've changed countries. This monsoon I love the sound of the falling rain. I find it comforting, re-assuring and calming. Bright sunny days in July and August have disconcerted me. Dark clouds presaging a downpour have eased the tension. And I breathe an audible sigh of relief when blue skies at breakfast convert to grey

clouds by tea time and prolonged steady rain at night. But I wasn't always like this. I used to be a very different sort of person. Just a decade ago the arrival of the monsoon would depress me. I'd miss the blistering heat of May and June, the clear blue sky and the hot loo. I'm a child of summer, I'd say to myself, in explanation. In summer you're free to do what you want. The monsoon incapacitates, restricts and constraints. My spirits would sink right through July and August. Not till the restored sunshine of October would the world feel right. The explanation for this was simple. I'd returned to India after decades in Britain where grey skies and the constant pitter-patter of rain is depressing. A blue sky over London is a blessing you often don't see. When you do, it's thrilling. Rain and cold wintry clouds are the norm and all

you want to do is stay in bed. But you can't and I would resent getting wet walking to work, shoes squelching and glasses fogged up. When I returned to India thirty years ago, I brought with me my attitude to the weather. It was misplaced. It belonged to another continent. But it was difficult to shake off. Instead, it made me think of India's weather in alien and, even, ridiculous ways. My response this year is so different. For me it's the surest sign I've changed. I'm not the person I was when I returned to Delhi in the 1990s. I've become a different being. Maybe a better one too? Of that, funnily enough, I am not so sure. The paradox is London has changed too. This year, summer temperatures have rivalled Delhi's, often making London hotter. The BBC says it has experienced five separate heat waves since June. How different was the London I remember. A surprise heatwave in 1976, whilst I was at Cambridge, led to a series of severe measures. First, the use of garden hoses was strictly banned even if that threatened "England's green and pleasant land". More quixotically, my barber forbade his wife a second cuppa! That freak summer was talked about for years. There hadn't been anything like that in living memory. Now it seems commonplace. Who knows heat waves in summer could be the new normal? So this December will the winter rains

THE PARADOX IS LONDON HAS CHANGED. THIS YEAR, SUMMER TEMPERATURES HAVE RIVALLED DELHI'S, OFTEN MAKING LONDON HOTTER. THE BBC SAYS LONDON HAS SEEN FIVE SEPARATE HEAT WAVES SINCE JUNE

in Britain be welcomed rather than resented? I doubt it. Attitudes don't change so easily and quickly. But if summers like that of 2025 repeat themselves for a decade I'm sure that could be the case. The "truth" I want to leave you with is, perhaps, already apparent. We are, no doubt, creatures of habit but those habits are often conditioned by the weather. We little realise it and often fail to give it credit, but the weather determines how we view the world and our own state of happiness within it. Oh well, ho-hum. So much for my wisdom. Enjoy the monsoon whilst it lasts! Karan Thapar is the author of Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story. The views expressed are personal

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Why India's judiciary needs more women

Finally, the Supreme Court is working at its full strength of 34 judges. Only one of them, Justice BV Nagarathna is a woman. It's as good a time as any to remember that the last time a woman was appointed to the apex court was August 31, 2021, when not one but three, Hima Kohli, Bela Trivedi and Nagarathna were sworn in on the same day. In the four years since that "historic" day, not another woman. Earlier this week, 14 new judges were appointed to the Bombay High Court. Just one is a woman. As of March this year, 105 of the 779 high court judges across the country were women, according to the Centre for Law and Policy Research (CLPR). Justice is blind, you could argue, so what's the big deal if it's also gender-blind? Yet, it can hardly be a coincidence that India's top-performing high courts, Telangana, Sikkim and Manipur are also our most gender-representative ones, finds CLPR. In Telangana, 10 of the 30 judges in March 2025 were women. And if you count the number of women in the lower judiciary, then Telangana has managed, incredibly, 50% female representation. In Sikkim, ranked second, 33.3% of the judges are women. Third-ranked Manipur has 25%. In case you're wondering, the worst-ranked — Meghalaya, Tripura, and Uttarakhand — had no women judges as of March 2025. We are a long way from 1937 when Justice Anna Chandy became India's first woman judge, appointed to the district court of Kerala. By now, women should have been more evenly represented in the higher judiciary, bringing their lived and diverse experiences into the adjudication process. Representation matters not necessarily because women are progressive and feminist and men are not. In fact, in some cases, the reverse has proven to be true. But it matters because judges from diverse backgrounds apply their lived experiences to cases, says senior advocate and CLPR executive director

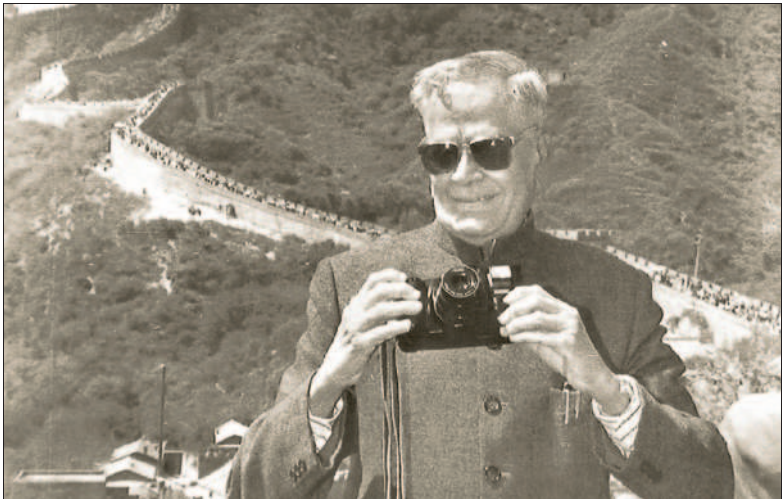
Jayna Kothari. "It leads to a better set of judicial outcomes," she said. India's male, dominant-caste, upper-class, majority-religion dominated Supreme Court has been adjudicating on some of the most significant gender issues of our time, from marriage equality to the criminalisation of marital rape. Surely, these judicial pronouncements must be more reflective of the women of this country. "All democratic institutions must respect the diversity of the country," says senior advocate Indira Jaising. And, while "representation is an end in itself, women bring to the table the unique experience of being historically excluded which gives them empathy with others similarly situated." In the 75 years since the Supreme Court came into existence, it cannot be anybody's case that there are no capable women to fill its bench. But, says Kothari, women are judged by a different standard. When the name of Sunanda Bhandare, incidentally my mother-in-law, was proposed for elevation from the bar to the Delhi High Court in 1984, then chief justice Yeshwant Chandrachud objected on the grounds that, at 42, she was "too young". And yet, Chandrachud was even younger when he was elevated to the Bombay high court at 40. Perhaps it's time to rattle a few cages and adopt a quota system — as Parliament finally did with the women's reservation Bill. Sharing power does not come naturally to men; we need an institutional policy that actively mandates that women be elevated to the higher judiciary, says Kothari. And then there's Ruth Bader Ginsburg's famous reply to when there would be enough women judges on the nine-judge US Supreme Court bench: "When there are nine." Maybe, it is time for women in India to echo that and ask for all 34.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

Behind the scenes of leaders' foreign visits

These days, India-China relations are dominating headlines. But behind the headlines that emerge from every international summit, there are days of intense planning and preparation, and inevitably, some interesting and humorous anecdotes destined to remain unknown. I was involved with two path-breaking visits to China, one by Prime Minister (PM) Rajiv Gandhi in 1988, and the other by President R Venkatraman in 1992. Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988 was the first after Jawaharlal Nehru's in 1954. I went to China as part of the team tasked with preparing for it, and then again as part of his delegation. At the time of PM's departure from the Technical Area in Delhi, I found that one suitcase had been conspicuously kept aside and not loaded. According to security instructions all checked-in baggage had to be deposited unlocked for screening. The locked suitcase belonged to foreign minister PV Narasimha Rao. The director, Special Protection Group in charge of PM's security, a fine officer, politely but firmly informed Rao's aide that on the PM's plane there is only one VVIP. Either the key should be procured quickly or the baggage would not go. I also recall that as we were boarding, a senior Cabinet minister, who had come to see off the PM, kept calling out to Mani Shankar Aiyar, who was walking towards

the plane. I was walking with Mani, but he instructed me, "Keep walking. Don't look back." At that time, Mani was part of the powerful inner coterie of Rajiv Gandhi. His power was far beyond that of his actual rank, and he could afford to ignore a Cabinet minister. Narasimha Rao's baggage was finally loaded because the key came in the nick of time. A few years later, Rao as PM became the only VVIP on his own plane. Such is the wheel of time. Rajiv Gandhi took a media team of over 60 top journalists for the visit, many of whom had egos larger than life. On the visit to the Great Wall of China, three prominent journo wandered off on their own. By the time they returned, the PM's convoy had moved. In a VVIP visit, getting separated from the convoy is a nightmare. The unnamed trio, used to throwing their weight around, managed to reach the hotel hungry and weary only late at night! President Venkataraman was the first head of State from India to visit China in 1992. I was his press secretary. Venkataraman was meticulous, highly intelligent, and a master of his brief, but his valet messed up big time. He forgot to pack the black *sherwani* he wanted to wear at the main banquet given by his counterpart, and Venkataraman was in a foul mood. Next to his suite, foreign secretary JN



President Venkataraman's valet forgot to pack the black *sherwani* he wanted to wear at the main banquet given by his Chinese counterpart, during his 1992 visit to China. The Indian embassy in Beijing came to the rescue. HT ARCHIVE

Dixit, our ambassador Salman Haider, and I were discussing what to do. Just then, H Viswanathan, counsellor in the embassy, walked in. He was wearing a black *sherwani* and was about the same height and built as the President. Salman Haider kept looking at him, and then peremptorily said, "Take off your *sherwani*." A shocked Viswanathan complied. Haider then took the *sherwani* to the President. It fitted him as if it was his own! Venkataraman beamed. The crisis was over. Another 'crisis' took place after the President's visit to Xian. I bought there a small clay replica of a statue that is part of the life-sized, hand-moulded Terracotta Army buried with China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang. On returning to the hotel, the First Lady, Mrs Venkataraman, asked to see my

souvenir, to which I naturally agreed. However, I was unprepared for what happened next. Salman Haider stormed into my room and asked me angrily why I created problems for him. Seeing my blank face, he expostulated, "Now Mrs Venkataraman wants me to procure the same statue for her too. Where, in God's name, do I get it?" I immediately offered that she could take mine. "Of course, I said that," he said exasperatedly, "but she refused." "She wants another one exactly like yours!" Ambassadors, during VVIP visits, have a tough job and I don't know how he resolved this one. But, such 'glitches' apart, the visit was a great success. Pavan K Varma is an author, diplomat, and former member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha). The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Solidarity to save the Earth

This is with the reference to, 'Saving the climate action in the age of global fragmentation' by Arunabha Ghosh (August 31). In this fractured epoch, climate action languishes, hostage to geopolitical rivalries. Only through solidarity and equitable responsibility can we salvage our fragile home

Aditya Shekhar

Silence of the expats

This is with reference to 'It is no more about trade; peoples' ties are at risk too' by Karan Thapar (August 31). Trump's trade game is surely worrying. The imposition of astronomical tariffs baffles but the silence of Indian expats in US is very worrying.

Anuradha Bisaria


Need to crack down on dowry

This is with reference to "How the wedding market perpetuates dowry culture" by Nishtha Gautam (August 31). Holding extravagant weddings for the sake of grandeur and meeting dowry demands is a waste of money. It's time to eradicate dowry.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across
THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM

Website: pchidambaram.in
Twitter @Pchidambaram_IN

It is clear that Mr Modi is not calling the tune anywhere. He is caught between India's largest export destination (USA) and largest import country-of-origin (China). He is caught between tariff threats and trade dependence. He is caught between QUAD and SCO/RIC. Mr Modi, like Mr Trump, believes his political instincts are *always* right

inside
TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



EVOLVING RSS

The RSS's changing ethos was very visible at its centenary celebrations in Delhi. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat fielded questions from journalists for nearly three hours. His media team, modelled on corporate lines, invited both Indian and foreign journalists. Unfortunately, beat reporters who cover the Sangh daily were relegated to the back and foreign correspondents were seated in front. Translations of speeches into English, Spanish and French were available on headphones. Some 50 representatives from the diplomatic corps attended, including the ambassadors of China, Israel and Switzerland. In the last century, RSS supremos kept a low profile, with major ideological statements mostly limited to stray remarks on Vijayadashami. It was K Sudarshan who, during A B Vajpayee's tenure, broke with tradition by appearing at the swearing-in ceremony of Vajpayee's first Cabinet and reportedly influenced the choice of finance minister. While sleepy Nagpur still remains the Sangh's official headquarters, most RSS key functionaries have started moving to the huge new complex in Delhi, with security checks and high-tech gadgets. Last year, the ban on government officers joining the RSS, never enforced except during the Emergency, was formally lifted. Bhagwat's main message was to counter the narrative of the RSS's detractors, that it is anti-minority and regressive in thought, an image that has harmed the BJP government in the Middle East and the West. Bhagwat stressed the RSS's inclusive nature, and said caste and religion were not barriers, adding that he did not object if people preferred to speak in English. Muslims too were Indians who deserved respect, but he was against conversion, he said. Interestingly, a day later, US President Donald Trump's hatchet man Peter Navarro tweeted a photograph of PM Narendra Modi taken during his 2024 campaign in Kanyakumari, meditating as a seer in saffron robes, with vibhuti and tilak smeared on his forehead, as if to reinforce an image of Hinduism as retrogressive. Navarro's mischievous propaganda continued with him referring to New Delhi's ruling elite as Brahmins.

AN UNUSUAL DELAY

Bhagwat denied a common perception,

On the
LOOSE



LEHER KALA

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IN *THE Thursday Murder Club* on Netflix, four senior citizens residing in a quintessential English (retirement) country home solve cosy murder mysteries, the kind where the camera doesn't linger on a corpse, rather, on the gold enamelled floral teapot placed nearby. The formidable cast of a former James Bond and Ben Kingsley, who played the Mahatma in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* in 1982, suggests, hearteningly, that wrinkles and gait don't matter when there's stellar acting and a good storyline. In one scene, the suave and sophisticated ex-007 Pierce Brosnan is in a water aerobics class with aged ladies, perfectly buoyant, it seems, even about the circle of life. This de-

Who is singing, who is dancing?

TWO PEOPLE are preparing to dance. There are faint sounds of music. The singer is not visible yet, but from the outlines it is clear that the singer is not India's prime minister.

Mr Narendra Modi has come a long way since Mahabalipuram, the gentle sway of the *jhoola* that he shared with China's President Xi Jin Ping, the clash between PLA and the Indian Army at Galwan on June 15, 2020, the death of 20 Indian *jawans*, and Mr Modi's famous clean-chit at the All-party meeting on June 19, "No outsider has intruded into Indian territory nor is any outsider inside Indian territory".

MINISTERS CONTRADICT PM

Within weeks, the defence minister and the foreign minister contradicted the prime minister and laid down the red lines: any unilateral attempt to change the *status quo* was unacceptable, and 'peace on the border' and restoration of the *status quo ante* are the pre-conditions for normal ties with China. In commanders' level talks, India spelt out a three-step process: *disengagement, de-escalation and demobilisation*. China engaged India in the talks, and *disengaged*, but brushed aside de-escalation and demobilisation. All the evidence, including satellite images, point to the opposite: heavy mobilisation of soldiers and military equipment on the border, installation of 5G network, air strips, new roads

and new settlements for troops and common people. China has most certainly changed the *status quo*.

Galwan is not the sole friction point. Depsang and Demchok have not been resolved. According to *The Hindu*, the Chinese military remains on India's side of the LAC at these points. As recently as December 2024, India's foreign minister said, "Our ties have been abnormal since 2020."

The worst blow was during the four-day war between India and Pakistan in June this year. Chinese aircraft (J-10) and Chinese missiles (PL-15) were allowed by China to be deployed by Pakistan. There was evidence that the PLA strategised for Pakistan and guided the Pakistan armed forces in the conduct of the war.

ATTACK & COUNTER ATTACK

The Indian government talked about 'decoupling' from China, but it is proving difficult. India's merchandise trade deficit with China has mounted year after year and in 2024-25, the deficit stood at USD 100 billion. India is almost wholly dependent on China for several key goods. 174 Chinese companies are registered in India. 3,560 Indian companies have Chinese directors on their Boards (*source: Lok Sabha Q&A, 12-12-2022*).

After the India-Pakistan war, India banned over 200 Chinese mobile apps like TikTok. It imposed restrictions on investments from China (as a country

'sharing land borders with India') and stalled investments by Chinese companies. Non-tariff barriers were raised. Chinese participation in Delhi-Meerut RRTS and some road and power sector tenders were cancelled. On its part, China stopped the export of critical minerals and fertilisers. It also severely disrupted the supply of intermediate goods that are required by solar, EV and other manufacturers.

Mr Xi has invested vast political capital in Shanghai Co-operation Organization. At SCO summits in-person mode (2019, 2022 and 2024), there was no bilateral meeting between Mr Modi and Mr Xi. Hence, the bilateral meeting at the 2025 summit in Tianjin was historic. Going forward, it is unlikely there will be a breakthrough on the border conflict, but progress could be made on differences in trade and investment that have been aggravated by both sides in recent months. If that happens, it will be a U-turn for both India and China.

ON THE REBOUND

We must carefully analyse the causes and reasons why both countries seem inclined to turn around. India got a bitter lesson in bilateral relations when President Trump rebuffed Mr Modi despite Mr Modi's over-the-top *dosti* with Mr Trump. It learned a brutal lesson from a transactional President whose private commercial interests and narrow political interests prevailed over sound economics, and he imposed the *highest* tar-

iffs on India (and Brazil).

India is on the rebound like a rejected lover and seeks to find comfort in mending its relations with China. Likewise, China wants to do business in the world's largest market for both trade and investment that is undoubtedly India. It also wants to expand its sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific region and will therefore do a few things to humour its sole rival. But the reality check is that China will *never* yield on its claims on the India-China border or on Pakistan which is its Belt and Road Initiative partner and large purchaser of military hardware. Recall that Mr Xi cleverly avoided the two issues that Mr Modi emphasised in the bilateral meeting at Tianjin — trade and terrorism.

At present, Russia alone seems to be in a safe space. President Putin can continue to sell oil and gas to India, China and Europe, and sell military equipment to India. He can continue his war against Ukraine with the help of North Korean soldiers.

It is clear that Mr Modi is not calling the tune anywhere. He is caught between India's largest export destination (USA) and largest import country-of-origin (China). He is caught between tariff threats and trade dependence. He is caught between QUAD and SCO/RIC. Mr Modi, like Mr Trump, believes his political instincts are *always* right. Hence, his style of personal diplomacy. After suffering setbacks, he should abandon *dosti* diplomacy, hugs and hand-in-hand strolls, and heed the advice of the Indian Foreign Service and seasoned diplomats.

that the RSS was responsible for the delay in the selection of a new BJP chief. Party president J P Nadda has overstayed in his post by over 1.5 years, and the buzz is that there is no consensus between the RSS and the party over the choice of his successor. The BJP high command is keen on younger ministers, with whom it has worked closely in recent elections; the RSS would prefer an older, seasoned hand who would keep the Sangh in the loop. Bhagwat, while denying any RSS involvement, confirmed that there was an unusual delay. If the RSS had to decide, "it might not have taken so long", he observed. He conceded that while the RSS office may make suggestions, the BJP makes up its own mind. He cautioned recruits that the RSS should not be looked upon as a stepping stone to the BJP. But the presence of advisers or officers with an RSS background in most Central government ministerial offices in recent years is noticeable. An RSS connection also helps for appointing governmentors and educational institution heads.

YO-YO POLICY

The dramatic ups and downs in our foreign policy is such that most who deplore the end of the "Namaste Trump" bonhomie years with Modi, forget that in fact China under Xi Jinping was the first foreign power to perceive the political importance of Modi, when he was still Gujarat CM and unwelcome in the West, with the US denying him a visa. In contrast, the Mayor of Shenzhen, a Chinese SEZ zone, felicitated Modi. In 2011, a reception was held in Modi's honour at the Great Hall of the People. Similarly, Xi was the first major foreign dignitary to be hosted by Modi on the banks of the Sabarmati after taking over as PM in 2014.

ROOMS WITH VIEW

The opinion of Central officers who were shifted from their old headquarters to the new lookalike six-storey Kartavya Bhavan on Kartavya Path depends on where they have been relocated from. Those working in 1960s-era buildings, such as Shastri Bhawan, see it as a change for the better, with glass windows, wide corridors and clean walls, in comparison to the deteriorating infrastructure of their old offices. But for those formerly lodged in the British-era North and South Blocks, with high ceilings, majestic staircases and a historic background that impressed visitors, it is a case of lese-majesty. The Intelligence Bureau, shifted to the top floor of Kartavya Bhavan 3, has additional handicaps. Supposedly secret sources are visible through the glass partitions and there is no space for the steel almirahs, which store crumbling paper files dating back to the Raj. The files cannot be digitised because of security concerns.

History
HEADLINE

RISHIKA SINGH



PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi recently visited Tianjin, China, in what was his first trip to the country in seven years. Several commentators viewed the uncertainties brought on by the Donald Trump administration as having pushed the two nations to deepen their relationship. While not the only factor, the global political context becomes difficult to ignore when countries deal with one another, even when they are neighbours.

This was witnessed even in the first official visit by an Indian Prime Minister to China, where the Communists had come to power in 1949. Amid the emergence of Cold War rivalries, India was the first non-Communist nation to accord diplomatic recognition to China in 1950.

It was perhaps natural, then, for Jawaharlal Nehru to visit Mao Zedong in China in 1954, becoming the first non-Communist foreign leader to do so. *The New York Times* then quoted Nehru as saying that he regarded the trip "as the most important foreign mission of his life".

Nehru arrived in China on October 19. In his book, *Nehru's Bandung*, author Andrea Benvenuti wrote that Indira Gandhi also accompanied her father.

"Anxious to project an image of a peaceful, friendly and dynamic China, CCP (Chinese Communist Party) leaders rolled out the red carpet... Chinese leaders viewed Nehru's visit to China as part and parcel of their charm offensive towards the Third World," he wrote.

Mao and Nehru engaged in wide-ranging discussions about colonial rule (Britain in India, and China witnessing unequal European trade treaties and Japanese rule), Asian politics, the United States, and more.

On October 19, their first meeting was held at the Zhongnanhai, a complex in Beijing that houses government offices. Mao began by underlining their commonalities: "China was bullied by Western imperialist powers for over 100 years. Your country was bullied even longer, for more than 300 years... In spite of differences in our ideologies and social systems, we have an overriding common point, that is, all of us have to cope with imperialism."

He noted that several problems were yet to be addressed: "Taiwan is still in the hands of the US" and "the level of our industrial development is lower than that of India...". Nehru concurred on the subject of colonisation and reiterated the need to fol-

On Nehru's China trip, a shared concern: The US

low the Five Principles (Panchsheel) on mutual respect for sovereignty and non-aggression. The agreement had been signed just a few months before their meeting, and was also invoked in Tianjin recently.

While he had a more positive view of Europe than Mao, Nehru shared his critical assessment of the US. Mao said, "It (the US) has advanced its defence lines to South Korea, Taiwan, and Indo-China, which are so far away from the US and so close to us. This makes our sleep unsound."

Nehru said, "The US is not mature. It is very difficult for the US to understand the many things that it dislikes and, at the same time, are happening in the world."

In the meeting on October 23, another point of divergence emerged on the question of future global wars, which Mao viewed according to Communist principles: "If another war is fought, the bulk or whole of West Asia and Africa and the whole of Latin America will shake off imperialism."

Nehru argued, "Sometimes the result of a war is good, such as leading to people's liberation and testing people's capacities for endurance. But it can also cause human beings to become more brutal and thus downgraded. Therefore, on every count, war has to be avoided by every possible effort."

Finally, Mao said, "There is no tension between China and India. Our two coun-

tries do not wage psychological warfare...".

The October 23 meeting was also attended by V V Paranjpe, who served as an interpreter during the visit and would later be appointed as an Indian diplomat. Decades later, he recalled the difficulties of the job, given the complexities of the Chinese language and his unfamiliarity with Mao's "very strong" regional accent.

During the visit, the Mayor of Shanghai held a special musical evening in Nehru's honour, where the announcer spoke of a "young and talented musician who had returned from the US".

Paranjpe wrote that the announcer referred to the musician by the Chinese third personal pronoun "Ta", which is the same word used for "he", "she" or "it". "Not knowing the musician, I translated 'ta' as 'he', but soon the curtain went up to reveal a very pretty female musician. Nehru, hardly able to contain his anger, turned to me and said, 'You have been referring to the musician as a man, actually it is a woman. What kind of Chinese do you know?'"

Paranjpe also wrote about his "most unforgettable memory" — when Mao bid Nehru farewell. "We were in Zhongnanhai... Mao escorted Nehru all the way to his car. While shaking Nehru's hand, he suddenly came out with two lines from the Chinese classical poet, Qu Yuan. Quoting him, Mao said: 'There is no greater sorrow than the sorrow of departing alive. There is no greater joy than the joy of (a) first meeting.'"

"Upon Nehru's return to India it (the visit) created a cloud-burst of friendly feelings for the Chinese... During his return visit to India in 1956, (Chinese Premier) Zhou Enlai received a tumultuous welcome with skies reverberating with the lilting notes of "Hindi, Chini Bhai-Bhai". This was perhaps the golden period of India-China relations," he wrote.

It was not to last. An uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet led to the 14th Dalai Lama fleeing and seeking refuge in India in 1959, emboldening Chinese suspicions of India attempting to influence Tibet. The 1962 war further dealt a major blow, with Nehru criticised for not anticipating the threat from China. After 1954, the next visit by an Indian PM to China would only happen more than three decades later, with Nehru's grandson Rajiv Gandhi.

The writer is Deputy Copy Editor, The Indian Express

forming atrocities on behalf of the Empire. Thoroughly engaging, it was time well spent, but it was with great relief that I turned my attention from the perils of colonialism to the happily formulaic British mystery next. Much as I value literary fiction, I find reading it exhausting. Undoubtedly, heart-rending stories of wars, racism and inequality can be unputdownable too but all those tragedies that keep one awake till 3 am feel less like a "transcendental experience" (a favourite term of book critics), and more, like a guarantee of crankiness the next day. I was presented *The Vegetarian* after Han Kang won the Nobel for literature last year. Reviews praised "her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of life". It sits unopened on my bookshelf, likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

It would be a pity to go through life without the perspective critically acclaimed books and movies have to offer because cheesy as it sounds, they can be transcendental experiences. However, there's an age to appreciate David Lean and Dickens, it's when you're young and curious for information while forming a world view. Youth means there's still some pressure to prove one's smarts; there's nothing brag-worthy about bingeing the latest Lee Child (my favourite). Ideally, in literature like in politics, a range of opinions should be continuously sought but we become jaded and more committed to leisure. Books shouldn't feel like work. In this age of distraction, anything that holds one's interest is good enough. And who knows, there's always a chance we'll end up learning something new.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

Fifth
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

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A parade of political princes

THE PARADE of political princes we saw travel through Bihar in the past two weeks made a compelling spectacle. I found both mesmerising and a reminder that democratic feudalism goes from strength to strength. The first two princes on parade were Rahul Gandhi and Tejashwi Yadav and soon, they were joined by Akhilesh Yadav and Stalin. They stood together in an open jeep and drove through the narrow streets of small towns lined with cheering supporters, who joined happily in the slogan of the moment, "*Vote chor, gaddi chhod*". Stealer of votes, step down. The words do not rhyme in English, but have resonance on account of the angry campaign to discredit the Election Commission that the heir to our most famous political dynasty has led.

This yatra, like the others, was about Narendra Modi. In the exercise to malign him, a mystery man appeared at a public rally and used a famous word of abuse that has mother in it. The Prime Minister responded in churlish and childish tones. His dead mother was being insulted, he complained, and the complaint was taken up by BJP cadres and amplified. This overreaction left me feeling that perhaps the BJP and its fellow travellers (this time) are worried that there is real anti-incumbency against Nitish Kumar's endless reign in Bihar. But, to benefit, the Opposition is going to need to offer a convincing new narrative instead of catchy slogans, insults and lies.

Rahul Gandhi was liar-in-chief. He said that first it was people's votes that would be stolen, then their ration cards would be taken away and their land. There is not the slightest sign that any of this is going to happen. But if you can accuse Modi of having stolen elections right from 2014, then why not throw everything at him.

Especially at a time when he has been humiliated internationally by his ex-best friend, Donald Trump, forcing him to scurry off to that coalition of despots and warmongers that constitutes the membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Mercifully, Modi had the good sense to leave before the military parade in Beijing. On the home front, his personal image has been tarnished by the Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR), which seems to have the singular objective of weeding out Muslims, Dalits and some of Bihar's poorest castes.

It is not a matter of dispute that these have not been '*acche din*' for Modi, but the hurdles that his main challenger faces remain huge. By coincidence the *India Today* Mood of the Nation issue arrived on my desk as the Voter Adhikar Yatra was ending. This poll showed that 52% of Indian voters see Modi as the best man to lead India. Rahul Gandhi came in second with 25% of those polled seeing him as an alternative prime minister. In September last year this poll showed him in a slightly better position at 29%.

This should worry him and the Congress party. It means that he remains unable to convince the electorate that he is a serious contender for prime minister with a real political message. This worries me personally because as a dedicated liberal democrat, I would love to see liberal democracy win against the birdbrained ideas we hear too often from Modi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. A recent example came from the RSS chief's lectures in Delhi to commemorate the centenary of the Sangh. Shri Mohan Bhagwat advised Indian women to all have at least three children, but no more than three. It came as a reminder that the motherhood of the BJP will never accept that it has no right at all to tell people what they should eat and drink or who they should marry and how many children they should have.

There is no question that the Congress party wasted the many decades they had in power on economic policies that failed to bring mass prosperity to our ancient land. There is no question that the party's claims to being secular became suspect because of the thousands of Muslims killed in riots under Congress prime ministers. And the more than 3,000 Sikhs killed in the 1984 pogrom organised by the Congress party.

But there is also no question that the Congress party did stand for the kind of inclusive, liberal democratic policies that India needs now more than ever. As someone who remembers well those old days when we were so proud that India was a Hindu version of Pakistan, it has saddened me to see India change in the past ten years into that Hindu version of Pakistan. If a political party emerged that could base its political ideas on liberal democracy and its economic ideas on free markets, I have no doubt at all that it would be able to take on Modi's BJP.

As our oldest political party and the only Opposition party today with a national footprint, it should shame the Congress party that after three lost Lok Sabha elections it is still unable to rebuild its organisation. Rahul Gandhi has become very skilled at wandering about on yatras and showing himself as a prince who has the common touch. But when the yatra ends, it leaves nothing behind because party workers seem to believe their only job is to burnish the image of the prince, and then go home and rest till the next yatra comes along.

WHAT'S INSIDE



LEISURE, P7

Transcending tradition

From wheelchair ramps at pandals to medical kiosks and biodegradable decorations, Durga Puja is evolving into a more inclusive celebration

WORDS WORTH, P4

When the machines rise

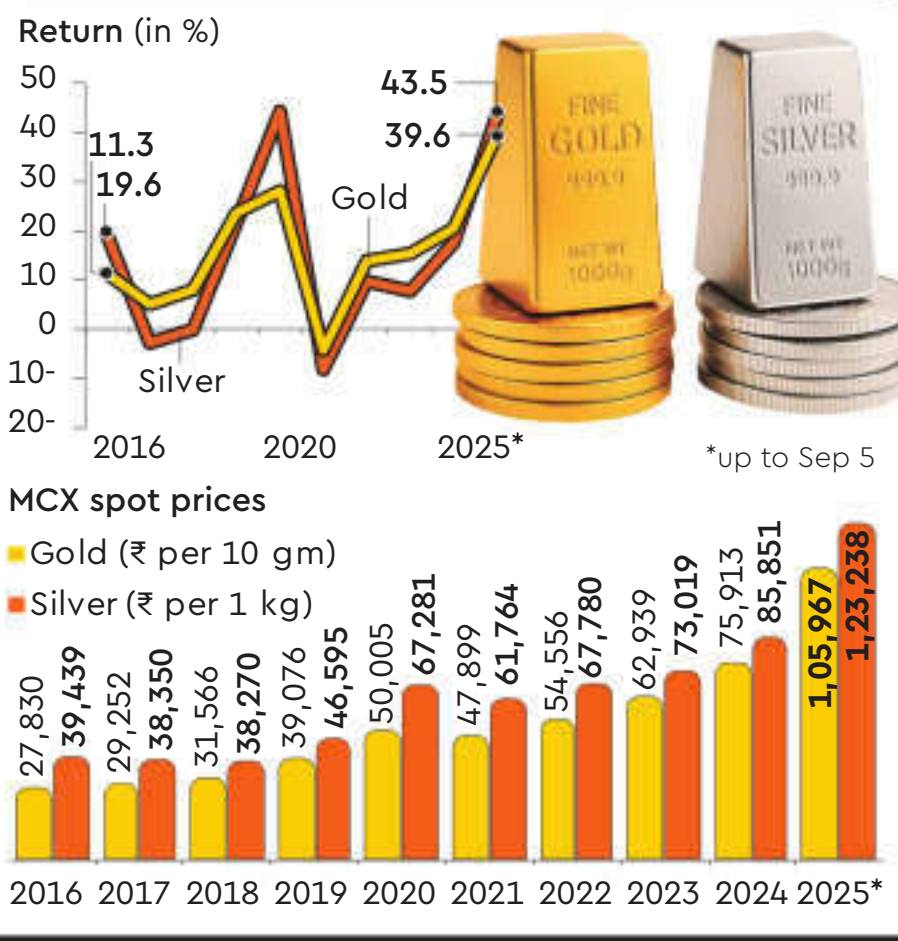
An argument for the need for humans to reinvent themselves in the age of AI



Gold returns hit 40%, highest in 25 years

WITH GOLD PRICES hitting record highs almost every day, returns from the yellow metal have surged 40% in 2025 so far—the highest in 25 years. Silver has also delivered strong gains, with returns touching a five-year high of 43.5%.

Compiled by Kishor Kadam



What's on menu for India Inc? Food with a thought

Office lunch is serious biz, with tailored offerings

VAISHALI DAR
New Delhi, September 6

FOR YEARS, THE Indian office lunch break was defined by *dabba* services, hurried canteen meals, or the occasional takeaway. But that landscape is rapidly transforming. With India's growing corporate workforce demanding healthier, faster, and more

HAPPY MEALS

Swiggy launches DeskEats, curated specifically for working professionals

Massive Restaurants, which operates Farzi Cafe, launches cloud kitchen Salad Life to offer healthy eats

Elior India takes majority stake in tech-led cafeteria management company Platos to elevate institutional dining

Rebel Foods leveraging cloud kitchens to deliver variety & novelty to office-goers

Razorpay partners with Manipal Hospitals to transform employee meals from nutritionist consultant



personalised food experiences, both tech disruptors and traditional food services giants are racing to redefine what and how professionals eat at work. Swiggy recently launched DeskEats, a curated food experience designed specifically for working professionals across 30 cities, spanning 7,000 tech parks and business centres. From curated collections such as Value Combos, Stress Munchies, Deadline Desserts, Sip-tastic

Fuel, to One hand Grabbies, Healthy Nibbles, and Team-work Bites, the platform promises meals that fit seamlessly into the workday, offering nearly 7 lakh items from over 2 lakh restaurants. What users need is to type 'office' or 'work' in the Swiggy app to access this offering. "Today's corporate professionals are more time-strapped and choice-rich than ever before," said Deepak Maloo, vice-president, food strategy, customer experience & new initiatives, Swiggy.

Continued on Page 2

SIGNALS HOPE FOR THAW ON TRADE FRONT

Modi, Trump warm up to 'special relationship'

Fully reciprocate positive assessment of ties by Potus: PM

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, September 6

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi on Saturday reached out to US President Donald Trump through social media, their first direct contact after the much discussed phone call of June 17 that led to strained ties between the two leaders. The PM replied to a media report on 'X' about Trump's comment on his friendship with Modi and the special relationship between India and the

NARENDRA MODI
PRIME MINISTER

India and the US have a very positive and forward-looking Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partnership



US. "Deeply appreciate and fully reciprocate President Trump's sentiments and positive assessment of our ties," Modi said. "India and the US have a very positive and forward-looking Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partnership," the PM added. At a White House briefing late on Friday, Trump had said, "India and the United States have a special relationship. There is nothing to worry about." A few hours before this statement Trump had posted on

"Truth Social": "Looks like we've lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest, China. May they have a long and prosperous future together!" Following this, US commerce secretary Howard Lutnick had remarked, "So I think, yes, in a month or two months, I think India is going to be at the table and they're going to say they're sorry and they're going to try to make a deal with Donald Trump."

Ties between the two countries are already stressed because of a stalled bilateral trade agreement (BTA), where India has stood its ground on protecting its farm sector.

Continued on Page 2
New US tariff orders just impact \$15 mn exports: P3

Adani, Druk Green Power sign ₹6k-cr hydro power deal

ADANI POWER and Bhutan's state-owned generation utility, Druk Green Power (DGPC), on Saturday signed an agreement to set up a 570-MW hydroelectric project on the river Wangchhu. The project will see investment of about ₹6,000 crore. **PAGE 3**

Six dead as wire of cargo ropeway snaps in Gujarat

SIX PERSONS died after the cable wire of a cargo ropeway snapped at the renowned Pavagadh Hill temple in Gujarat's Panchmahal district on Saturday. Rescue and relief effort are underway.

Monsoon spurs sales ahead of festive season

SUGANDHA MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, September 6

ABOVE-NORMAL RAINFALL this monsoon has fuelled a sharp rise in demand for rainwear, household products, automotive accessories and water purifiers, with e-commerce platforms and retailers reporting significant seasonal shifts in consumer spending.

Between June 1 and September 3, India received 780.8 mm of rainfall, compared with a normal of 721.1 mm, according to the India Meteorological Department. The surplus of nearly 8% has coincided with increased sales of umbrellas, raincoats, ponchos, mop sets, car covers and water purification systems.

On Flipkart's quick-commerce service, one in every

RAINING DEMAND

Flipkart

1 in 5 orders had monsoon products

Umbrellas & raincoats: 5X

Mop sets: 2.5X

Amazon

Rainwear: 30% YoY

Kids' rainwear: 35% YoY

Car & bike covers: 30% YoY

Myntra

Umbrellas: 1.6X (Jun-Aug)

Rain suits saw healthy growth

Croma

Water purifiers: 32% during monsoon

35% of annual sales in monsoon months

five orders included a monsoon-related product. The company reported umbrellas and raincoats recording a fivefold rise in sales, while mop sets grew 2.5 times.

Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai led in order volumes, with younger shoppers aged 25-35 most active.

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FM thanks states for GST support

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, September 6


UNION FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday said she had written to finance ministers of all states, expressing gratitude for their support and active role in helping implement the landmark overhaul of the goods and services tax (GST) regime.

In an interview with *PTI*, Sitharaman said the states presented their views on proposals to rejig tax rates, but ultimately agreed that it was for the benefit of the common man, which helped reach a unanimous decision at the GST Council meeting earlier this week.

The overhaul, effective September 22, will see price cuts in a wide swathe of products, and was agreed at a meeting of the GST Council on Sep-

NIRMALA SITHARAMAN
FINANCE MINISTER

Ultimately everybody came together for a good cause, and I'm truly very grateful



tember 3. The panel is headed by Sitharaman and includes representatives of all states and Union territories.

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Vietnamese EV maker VinFast made its debut in India with the launch of VF6 and VF7 (above) on Saturday. Prices start at ₹16.49 lakh & ₹20.89 lakh, respectively. Seen in pic: CEO Asia Pham Sanh Chau & chief engineer Vincent John Pendlebury **P20**

M&M cuts prices before deadline

Renault, BMW, Toyota announce revised rates

SWARAJ BAGGONKAR
Mumbai, September 6

FOLLOWING THE GOODS and Services Tax (GST) rate reduction announced earlier this week, more carmakers declared price corrections on Saturday to pass on the benefit to consumers.

While most companies said the new prices will be applicable from September 22 when the new GST rates take effect, sports utility vehicle major Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M) said the benefits will be available to its customers on the internal combustion engine portfolio starting September 6.

M&M claims to have passed on the full GST benefit to the consumer, resulting in a price correction of up to ₹1,56,000.

GST BENEFITS

Mahindra

Up to ₹1,56,000

Renault

Up to ₹96,395

BMW

Up to ₹8,90,000

Toyota

Up to ₹3,49,000



Its Bolero/Neo, XUV3XO, Thar, Scorpio Classic, Scorpio-N, Thar Roxx and XUV700 will see the price change. Three of its models have moved to the 18% GST slab, while five others have moved to the highest GST slab of 40%.

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Master of nonchalance, Diwan Nanda dies

An influential ad professional, he co-founded Rediff

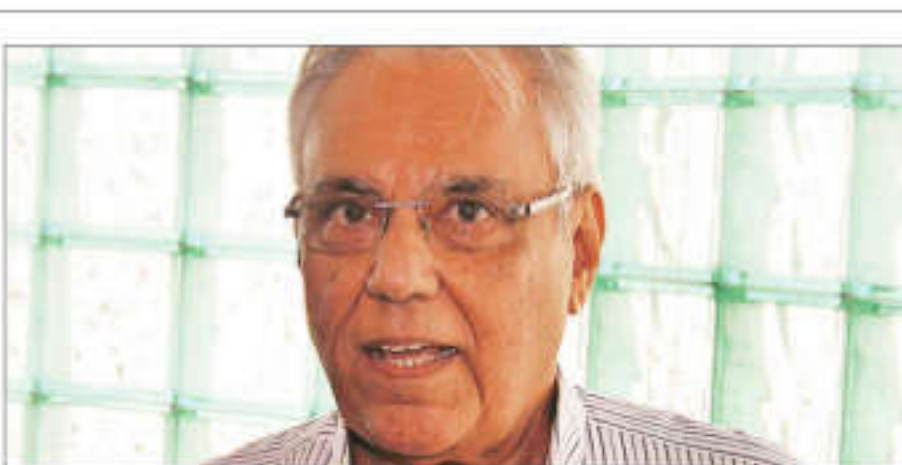
ALOKANANDA CHAKRABORTY
New Delhi, September 6

ALL HELL BROKE loose because of one flippant comment from the client team. Diwan Arun Nanda told Ruchira Raina—now executive director at advertising agency Rediffusion, and a rookie servicing hand back then in the 90s—who had accompanied him for a presentation in Kolkata, to pack up. As Raina organised the huge A2 sheets of

work in her portfolio bag, Nanda told the client team, in their face, they probably didn't know what they wanted.

"You can't build relationships with unending dinners and lunches—that's an unsustainable business model," he explained some months later. "It boils down to the creative product and the expertise an ad agency brings to the table."

This precept of the client-agency relationship and his respect for the creative product were to be Nanda's statement of purpose as an advertising professional. Nanda, co-founder of Rediffusion (1973), and among Indian advertising's most influential figures, passed away aged 76 on Saturday.



DIWAN ARUN NANDA

1948-2025

Born in 1948, Nanda obtained his undergraduate degree from Loyola College in Chennai, and later joined IIM Ahmedabad, where he was a gold medalist as part of the very

first batch of 1966. He began his career at Hindustan Lever in the late 1960s, when he joined the company's pioneering management trainee programme. He stood out for his ability to

connect consumers and brands with simple cues or elements, such as the lightning bolt for Rin detergent, which became a permanent fixture of the brand's advertising.

That principle of simplicity also became the hallmark of the agency he co-founded with Ajit Balakrishnan and Mohammed Khan. Rediffusion was a Camelot of advertising, say former colleagues, where talent was encouraged not by design, but the simple cultural ethos of giving a free hand. "When I joined a fledgling RediffPR in 1996 at a time when there were a handful of PR agencies and 360-communication was the language of agencies, Rediffusion allowed me to set up offices

independent of the advertising agency," remembers Supriyo Gupta, founder & MD, Torque Communications.

Nanda combined the flair of a creative engineer and the forensic attention-to-detail of a P&L head, running the agency that would produce some glorious advertisements such as 'Gimme Red' for Eveready, 'Whenever you see colour, think of us' for Jensen & Nicholson and the more recent 'Isko laga dala, toh life jhingalala' for Tata Sky.

He will be remembered, say his colleagues, for representing the best of advertising culture—urbane, sharp, entrepreneurial, creative, risk taker, and with an inherent pride in the work his agency produced.