



Competitive populism

The BJP is promising Delhi's voters what it had earlier dismissed as AAP's culture

As campaigning intensifies for the Delhi Assembly elections, scheduled for February 5, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress are raining promises of welfare schemes on every section of voters. The BJP, which was critical of the ruling AAP's unrestrained populism as "revdi", or a freebie culture, has not only promised that the schemes that are already in place in Delhi will continue but has also promised more. The sum of ₹2,100 that AAP has promised to women every month has seen the BJP and the Congress offering ₹2,500 instead. In the speeches of Chief Minister and AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal, there is an attempt to instil fear in the electorate that if they vote for the BJP, the free electricity, water, health care and education available to the poor would stop. He is also promising to extend the gravy train to the middle class; more specifically to sections of society such as dhobis, *pujaris*, residents' welfare associations and autorickshaw drivers. But he has also made a public admission that three guarantees, namely, cleaning the Yamuna river, ensuring that Delhi's roads meet European standards and providing 24x7 clean drinking water to all, have not been fulfilled, and that if re-elected, will have the AAP government focus on the issue of unemployment.

The BJP's campaign has centred around the promise of a double-engine government if it is elected to govern the National Capital Territory. It is also making an all-out effort to tarnish AAP's claim of incorruptibility. Allegations of corruption in the allotment of liquor licences and the exorbitant amount of public money that was spent on the official residence of Mr. Kejriwal are the BJP's talking points. The AAP government has not tabled 14 reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General in the Delhi Assembly that the BJP and the Congress say highlight proof of AAP's corruption. The BJP has promised to put out these reports in the public domain and constitute a probe. The central pitch of the Congress, which has seen its Chief Ministers, current and former, from other States campaigning for it, is that Congress governments have been more efficient and prompt in delivering welfare schemes. The Congress is also trying to invoke the past, highlighting the infrastructure development in Delhi that was carried out under former Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit. The party has sensed that the late leader still evokes some nostalgia in the Delhi electorate. The party has criticised Mr. Kejriwal's silence on the demand for a caste census. The BJP is fielding Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath as his appeal may influence migrant voters from U.P. and Bihar, now the fastest growing voters' segment in Delhi.

Further south

Archaeologists must look for more iron-specific sites in south India

The Iron Age in India has been a subject of fascination and discussion. In the rest of the world, the Iron Age succeeded the Copper-Bronze Age or bridged the gap between the Bronze Age and the Early Historic period. But the situation in India is different: when the region north of the Vindhyas belonged to the pre-Iron Chalcolithic or Copper Age, the south, with over 3,000 sites, was associated with iron. Many archaeologists have, generally and conservatively, placed the Iron Age to be in the second millennium BCE. Given this backdrop, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's recent statement, that the origin of iron in the State could be traced to the first quarter of the fourth millennium BCE, is significant as this pushes the antiquity of iron further. After excavations in the mid-Ganga Valley of Uttar Pradesh about 25 years ago, early evidence of iron technology was dated to 1800 BCE. But now, the work in Sivagalai in Tamil Nadu, which was carried out between 2019 and 2022, has made authorities attribute the introduction of iron in the country to the early part of the fourth millennium BCE, even though the period of 2500 BCE-3000 BCE is taken as a mid-range value. This forms the highlight of a study by the State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), titled "Antiquity of Iron: Recent radiometric dates from 'Tamil Nadu'". The TNSDA had the scientific dating results of its study validated by renowned institutions such as the Beta Analytic laboratory in the U.S. Mr. Stalin's observation was made keeping the findings in mind. Early this month, he announced a \$1-million prize scheme for deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation.

The work by the TNSDA should spur new thinking with regard to the strategies to be adopted by archaeologists who are working on the Iron Age of India. They may have to look for more iron-specific sites than copper-cum-iron sites, which will save time, energy and resources. Even though the Tamil Nadu government supports research projects on a wide range of themes in other States, the TNSDA has its constraints with regard to territorial jurisdiction. This underscores the need for complementing Tamil Nadu's efforts with those of other southern States. The Archaeological Survey of India should take the initiative of bringing the entire southern region under a common fold and enabling well-designed and coordinated work. After all, the idea is to share available resources and expertise in the country to arrive at more reliable findings. At a time when certain forces are increasingly using history and culture as powerful instruments to pursue their political agenda, credible and concrete evidence on the antiquity of the country will naturally put to rest any claim based on baseless assumptions.

At 75, constitutional justice and personal liberty

As we mark 75 years of the Constitution of India, I urge everyone to remember the ways in which the core values of the Constitution flounder in a deep ethical and moral crisis, trapped as we are in reductionist, mechanical readings of the constitutional value of personal liberty and human dignity. In the midst of the celebration, we need to step back and take a sober look at the right to personal liberty, which is a core constituent of an idea of justice.

Reinstating dissent as constitutional ethic
The Supreme Court of India reinstated Justice S. Fazl Ali's dissenting opinion in *A.K. Gopalan vs State of Madras*, unanimously in *Puttaswamy vs Union of India* (2017), a case about the fundamental right to privacy. The preventive detention of the communist leader, A.K. Gopalan, by the government of independent India and the Supreme Court's majority ruling on constitutional interpretation in that case, in the inaugural year of the Constitution, (1950), have now been effectively declared as a judicial wrong. The resurrection of this dissent (which, in effect, upheld Gopalan's right to political dissent) and two later ones (all three on the question of personal liberty), saw the majority judgments truncating liberty as being flawed from the standpoint of constitutional ethics. Within a broader framing of justice, the technicalities of the interpretation of a fundamental right were seen as inseparable from the centrality of personal liberty to constitutional ethics.

It can scarcely be forgotten that Article 21 (the right to life and personal liberty) is "designed to assure the dignity of the individual as a most cherished human value which ensures the means of full development and evolution of a human being" (Justice R.F. Nariman in *Puttaswamy*, paragraph 42). How and on what basis might we piece together memories that render the Constitution 'workable', 'flexible' and 'strong' (in the words of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar)? How may we discover pathways through which the Preamble lights up ways to 'hold the country together' at a time when the dominant political discourse reduces and degrades politics to the fractured banality of shards – such as the 'tukde tukde' narratives?

Preventive detention, arbitrary arrests, denial of fair trial through the impunity that is guaranteed statutorily in anti-terror laws, and demagogical-domicil violence enact 'rituals of



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In the midst of marking 75 years of the Constitution of India, India needs to take a sober look at the right to personal liberty being a core constituent of an idea of justice

humiliation' – to use Sunder Boopalan's words – and impose indescribable wrongs on conscientious resisters in India today. I posit a juxtaposition that is instructive – there is the case of A.K. Gopalan (1950) challenging the inauguration of constitutional contradictions and being detained at one end, and Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam, Gulfsha Fatima and several other anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) resisters in prison (2025) challenging the CAA 2019 and living with bulldozers, disposessions and the partition prison complex, at the other end.

By 2017, when the *Puttaswamy* judgment came, preventive detention and prolonged custody without bail had proliferated under the aegis of constitutional courts; there was an escalation in arrests and the prolonged detention of dissenters under the spiralling list of laws (State and central) that, by now, authorised detention and custody with scant regulations. Over the years, the process has become the punishment. We witness young and spirited dissenters who courageously challenged the CAA 2019, now trapped in the talons of anti-terror laws. There is an impenetrable opacity of procedure and an endless deferment of decisions on the vital issue of personal liberty.

Dissent is criminalised even while dissent is reinstated; this is the deep paradox of our times that courts must reflect on in the 75th year of the Constitution.

A.K. Gopalan and today's resisters

In his memoir, *In the Cause of the People: Reminiscences* (1973), A.K. Gopalan gives us a fine-grained account of his imprisonment along with several others 'by Indians', and of the numerous trials he faced and the petitions he filed to secure liberty from British courts and Indian courts thereafter, but to no avail. Deciding to celebrate Independence day in jail on August 15, 1947, he led a small procession in jail and hoisted the national flag. He was arrested for this 'crime' on a treason charge for stirring enmity against the emperor under Section 124A, and produced before the ADM Calicut in independent India (p.274).

He filed affidavits and wrote letters to the court 'as a matter of course' and was unwilling to 'remain quiescent'. Gopalan himself argued in another writ petition filed in Madras, in a hearing that saw large crowds: 'The court set me free on

the last day of the hearing. I was re-arrested after release at the door of the court and escorted once more to Cuddalore jail. I filed another writ petition which was heard two days after my re-arrest. The court released me again. The judges specially ordered the police not to touch me. The police did not dare to disregard this injunction. I had been imprisoned in December 1947 and released in 1951. Four years in jail!'

This account has a familiar contemporary ring to it. The anti-CAA resisters have spent roughly four years in custody, but the difference is that the courts have not yet moved with a sense of urgency to set them free. The Preventive Detention Act, 1950, belonged to free India's 'rule of law' regime.

K.G. Kannabiran, while reflecting on the travails of civil libertarian lawyers and their petitions in courts over five decades, observed that the Gopalan judgment "is our own. It is the first 'Indian-made foreign judgement'" which upheld an Indian-made colonial law. To this, 75 years later, we have now added more Indian-made colonial laws. But will the courts hold the *Puttaswamy* view of dissent and dignity in place and extend their reach as constitutional values that further the cause of personal liberty as the ultimate expression of justice under the Constitution?

No room for retrospective regret

The case of the 16 arrests made in the Bhima Koregaon case (writers, intellectuals, cultural activists, poets, performers, teachers), the 19 arrests made in the Delhi riots case of anti-CAA protesters (most of them community leaders and student leaders and activists, of whom 17 are Muslim), and the anticipation of violence, arrest and domicile as a 'clear and present danger' confronted especially by Muslims who dare to challenge unlawful state action, must make us pause. They call for a slew of interventions by constitutional courts in the exercise of 'creative constitutionalism' (to use Professor Upendra Baxi's phrase) in the cause of the right to personal liberty as justice. This is needed so that India does not end up waiting 'another seven decades and four generations' to discover that we were again on the wrong side of the Constitution. Or that we understood and worked the Constitution in its seventh decade in ways that negated its ethical spirit, instead of upholding and furthering the idea of justice embedded within.

Foundational values, the journey of the Indian state

On the 75th anniversary of the coming into effect of the Constitution of India, it is imperative to evaluate the journey of the Indian state from the perspective of its foundational values before we plan the course ahead. After nearly three years of debate and deliberation, the Constituent Assembly of the newly independent India adopted its founding document, the Constitution of India. Two months thereafter, the Republic officially came into force with the Constitution being given effect to. When Dr. B.R. Ambedkar delivered the closing address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, he characterised the complex challenges ahead. He anxiously wondered whether Indians would place "the country above their creed". Today, we realise that the words from the closing address carry meaningful lessons for the next 75 years and propel us to guard the Constitution.

The federal republic

Many of the constitutional issues that have been keenly debated in recent times have been around the interpretation of India's federal structure. Tussles between State governments and some of the State Governors have made their way to the Supreme Court of India. Pitched battles are being fought within and outside Parliament on the issue of simultaneous elections. The neglect of 'regional languages' such as Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, Marathi and so on is being argued from the vanguard of multilingual equality and State autonomy. Fiscal federalism has been a major sticking point for States that are suffering under the dual regime of the Finance Commission and the Goods and Services Tax Act. The next delimitation exercise, which will determine the democratic future of India, is set to result in a showdown between the Union and States that have controlled their population.

It is strange that given how integral federalism has been to the constitutional discourse over the last 50 years or so, the word 'federal' is nowhere to be found in the text of the Constitution.



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Rather than reinventing the wheel of the Constitution, there has to be a strong defence of India's democratic principles

Criticism of the Constitution in the early days, and one that was well anticipated by Dr. Ambedkar, was that the document is anti-federal and tilts the balance in favour of the Union.

Addressing this complaint while speaking in 1949, Dr. Ambedkar explained that the 'Centre and the States are co-equal' in matters of legislative and executive authority. He clarified to the Constituent Assembly that the overriding powers for the Union are only placed "to be used in an emergency". As such, the regular conduct of democratic business in India is within a federal framework and not to be mistaken for a unitary one. On this count, constitutional courts have confirmed the proposition by car-marking federalism to be a part of the basic structure of the Constitution, beginning with the judgment in *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* (1994) and continuing to the *Government of NCT of Delhi vs Union of India* (2024).

An unequal democracy

Another question of contemporary interest is on whether and how India has matured over the 75 years, into a social democracy that is guided by the constitutional values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The argument put forth by many critics of the government is that it has become a police state. The offence of sedition along with stringent special statutes such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act supplement this position. Similarly, whether the country has been able to achieve a degree of equality among various cohorts, and whether it is truly democratic are questions that merit introspection.

With tremendous foresight, Dr. Ambedkar explained that the country must strive to remove social and economic inequality before they become a threat to democracy itself. He went on to underline the importance of fraternity for the fledgling republic. Terming the idea of an Indian nation as a delusion, Dr. Ambedkar asked how

people divided into several thousands of castes can be a nation.

Seventy-five years hence, can we fairly claim to have fostered fraternal feelings through social and political movements? Have we succeeded to some degree in neutralising the significance of caste in determining merit and success in society? The answers must be in the negative. But, that does not necessarily imply that the Constitution has failed. It is an indication of how much farther the country must travel.

The need for constitutional guardians

Of late, there has been some noise about revamping the Constitution, as the accusation is that it has evolved from an European colonial perspective. It has become a common trope among the social right to suggest replacement of

the present day Constitution with an 'Indic' constitutional document drawing from Hindu *dharma* concepts – there can be no greater insult to the combined intellect of the Constituent Assembly than this. There can be no greater disservice than this to the three years of the Constituent Assembly and the 75 years of nation-building that have made India what it is today.

Rather than reinventing the wheel of the Constitution, the country must respond to Dr. Ambedkar's calls to defend our democratic principles and preserve the Constitution. For it is not the document that makes the nation but the people who are called to govern.

What is required today is clear-headed guidance on the future of our constitutional philosophy. In Plato's *Republic*, he argues the case for a class of guardians who are philosopher-kings. India today needs guardians who can place the country above their creed more than ever; they need to be guardians in the form of judges, bureaucrats, politicians, activists, journalists and citizens. Only then can we truly aspire to fulfil the promise of the Constitution.

GROUND ZERO



A Kinnar akhoda procession on its way to the Triveni Sangam during the Maha Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj. SANDEEP SAREENA

Gods, gurus, and glass turtles

Millions of pilgrims and tourists have congregated at the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj for different reasons — to seek salvation, to pray for worldly comforts, to sustain livelihoods, or to simply soak in the moment. **Ishita Mishra** wanders around the tent city and reports on the scale and grandeur of the Maha Kumbh Mela and its religious, social, economic, and political significance

In a cloudy day in January, millions of saffron-clad people stand on the banks of the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna and the mythical river Saraswati in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. They wait patiently to immerse themselves in the icy waters. The pilgrims believe that taking a dip at the Sangam during the 45-day-long Maha Kumbh Mela (great festival of the sacred pitcher) will cleanse their souls of all negativity and help them attain *moksha* (freedom from the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth).

The swarm of saints, *sadhus*, ash-smearing Nagas (a sect of Hindu ascetics), pilgrims, and tourists is so large that not even an inch of the ground is visible at the river bank. People enter and move out of the ghats from all directions, but in an orderly fashion. Pilgrims take turns to bathe. Many of them also help strangers, some of who look dazed in this sea of humans.

At one of the ghats, Prince Pandey, 19, has spread a bedsheet on the floor so that his 80-year-old grandmother, Leelawati, can rest for a while. Leelawati has travelled 150 kilometres from Chandauli district to Prayagraj on Pandey's bike to take a dip in the river. She says she has done this against the advice of her doctor. But Leelawati was determined to make the journey. "My father would often tell me that bathing at the Sangam during the Kumbh Mela would purify the soul," she says.

Leelawati explains one of the origin stories of the Kumbh Mela told in Hindu mythology. "During the Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean), the devas (gods) and *asuras* (demons) were seeking *amrit* (the elixir of immortality). As they churned the ocean for *amrit*, a battle broke out between them. Worried that the *asuras* would trick them, the devas entrusted Lord Vishnu with the *kumbh* (urn) containing the *amrit*. As Lord Vishnu travelled with it, drops of *amrit* spilled from his *kumbh* at Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik," she says.

While the Kumbh Mela is held every three years by rotation in these four cities, the Maha Kumbh Mela is held once in 12 years. The belief is that Lord Vishnu's journey with the *amrit* lasted 12 days, which is equivalent to 12 years.

This year, until January 23, up to 10 crore people had visited the Maha Kumbh Mela, which began on January 13. The Uttar Pradesh government estimates that by February 26, the last day of the festival, 45 crore people would have visited the Mela, making this among the largest religious events of the world.

In the land of babas and astrologers

Hundreds of loudspeakers are placed atop poles in the temporarily erected tent city, which is spread over 40,000 hectares, on the banks of the

India follows the caste system. But at the Kumbh Mela, you won't find any Dalit, Thakur, or Brahmin; everyone is a devotee.

JEETENDRA
Boatman

Sangam. Chants blare from some and hymns from others. Near the ghats, loudspeakers are mostly used to call out the names of missing people. This happens every 2-3 minutes. "Aye Rajesh, hum kyo gaye hain. Aa ke le jao (We are lost, come and take us from here)," screams a voice on a loudspeaker.

According to the Uttar Pradesh government, there are 41 bathing ghats connected by 30 pontoon bridges. Religious organisations have erected 1.6 lakh tents. There are police stations, hospitals, lost-and-found centres, banks, and other institutions numbering 10,000 in this micro city. Thousands of security cameras and drones have been set up.

Baidyanath Mishra, 75, hired a cab to travel 500 km from Bilhar's Darbhanga to Prayagraj for the Kumbh Mela. Mishra had travelled across the south with his wife, Neelam Devi, but had never explored north India.

"I wanted to travel across the north and also take a dip in the Sangam with her. But she died before we could fulfil that dream," he says. Mishra, a mathematics teacher, lowers himself into the river while holding a picture of his wife. He believes that she is watching him from heaven.

After taking a dip at the ghat, Prince buys *khi-chadi* (rice, dal, and vegetables cooked together) for breakfast from a couple distributing langar (free food) to the pilgrims near a parking area. He and his grandmother then get ready to visit the ashrams of 13 *akharas*, the ancient sects of warrior saints.

"You will find unique ascetics who come here to attend the Mela before vanishing into the deep forests or the Himalayas. The Kumbh pilgrimage is not complete until you bathe, provide charity, and take the blessings of ascetics," says Leelawati. She is especially eager to meet Digambar Diwakar Bharti, a *baba* (saint) who has reportedly

kept one hand lifted in the air for about 10 years.

Some ashrams are gigantic; they belong to *sadhus* who are millionaires. There are also tiny huts that belong to Nagas, a sect of ascetics who believe in renouncing all material possessions, including clothes. Inside the ashrams, these men, many caked in ash, sit around fires.

The *babas* are of all kinds. 'Rudraksha baba' wears a crown weighing 40 kilogrammes. It is made of *rudraksha* beads (dried seeds from the *Elaeocarpus ganitrus* tree), which symbolise the tears of Lord Shiva. Another *baba* wears leopard prints and aviator shades during the day and night. Yet another wears gold jewellery weighing 5-6 kg and costing ₹2.5 crore-3 crore. Abhay Singh, popularly known as 'IT baba' as he had studied at the premier educational institution, is this year's sensation at the Kumbh Mela. Most *babas* lecture pilgrims on Sanatana Dharma, Hindu traditions, values, and the importance of charity.

There are also astrologers and palm readers everywhere. People who are desperate to find a partner, or get a job, or build a house, or have children, flock to them.

Valentino Casino, a 30-year-old Italian, wants to know how many children he will have. "I have great interest in astrology. The Kumbh Mela is where you will meet some of the best astrologers," he says.

Casino says he has visited 25 countries so far. "India is probably the only country that I have visited thrice because it's so unique," he says.

Casino also goes to the ashram of Shri Pitambar Shakti Peetham, a non-profit organisation that runs a free *gurukul* (school). The school teaches computer science, math, English, the Vedas, Upanishads, Shastras, Jyotish (Vedic astrology), and Vastu (an ancient Indian system of architecture). He learned how the schedule of the Kumbh is based on planetary alignments, mainly of the sun, moon, and Jupiter, from the founder of the *gurukul*, Manoj Chaturvedi.

"I don't see any difference between an Indian and a foreigner when it comes to the questions of life, future, cultures and ways of worship may be different, but our emotions are universal."

After the Kumbh Mela, Casino and his friend Catreane are planning to learn yoga at Rishikesh and then visit Varanasi and Ayodhya.

Antony Smith from London cut short his Delhi-Agra-Varanasi trip to visit the Kumbh Mela. A technician with a passion for photography, Smith believes that the Kumbh is a heaven for photographers. "This place is fascinating," he says. "The joy and display of faith are amazing. People are really friendly. I am overwhelmed by the sounds and smells." To fit into the crowd, Smith has bought himself a yellow kurta-pajama set.

Emma from Spain is impressed by the administration. "This is immensely crowded but so well-managed," she says.

The government also plans to take foreign diplomats to the Kumbh Mela.

On the margins

Kumbh is divided into 25 sectors. One of them is Aaral. The townships of Teliyarganj and Jhansi lie parallel to Aaral. Pilgrims from poor economic backgrounds and Kalpawasi stay here. Kalpawasi are devotees who live a minimalistic life. They stay at the Kumbh Mela for weeks, eating only once a day, bathing before sunrise, and spending their time in prayer and meditation.

Sanjay Kumar, 46, from Bhadohi, says the Kumbh has become expensive for Kalpawasi. "My parents have been visiting Prayagraj to observe Kalpawasi for the last 20 years. No one cares about poor pilgrims. This government is only focused on making the Kumbh Mela a tourism venture," he says.

This year, the government has placed a cap on



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VALENTINO CASINO
Italian tourist

the prices of ferry rides. Jeetendra, a boatman at the Sangam ghat, cannot understand the logic behind this. "The government places caps on the earnings of poor boatmen, but there are no caps on the prices charged by some of the tent owners, who are millionaires. Hotel owners have tripled the prices of rooms. Nor is there a limit on the amount charged by airlines," says Jeetendra, who admits he charges pilgrims ₹200 per head against the ₹75 fixed by the government. Policemen with bamboo sticks tell him not to be harsh on devotees.

In the boat, Lary Chan, a man of Chinese origin who lives in San Francisco in the U.S., asks Jeetendra what the significance of the Kumbh is to him. "India follows the caste system, Sir," says Jeetendra, who belongs to the 'lower caste' Nishad community. "Everyone loves these hierarchies. But at the Kumbh, you won't find any Dalit, Thakur, or Brahmin; everyone is a devotee here."

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led State and Central governments are also advertising the Kumbh Mela as a fair of *samajik samrasta* (social unity). Everywhere, there are giant posters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi washing the feet of sanitation workers who primarily belong to the Dalit community. The photos were taken during the previous Kumbh Mela in 2019. There are also billboards promoting the Modi government's social welfare programmes in the solar, health, education, and other sectors.

With Ayodhya's Milkpur Assembly constituency going to the bypolls, the BJP's Uttar Pradesh unit is also busy distributing copies of the Constitution to sanitation workers. Dalits make up around 50% of the seat's total electorate. The aim is possibly to counter the narrative built in the Lok Sabha polls in 2024 that the BJP would change the Constitution if voted back to power with 400 seats. The ruling party feels that this narrative held sway and the BJP lost Faizabad constituency, of which Ayodhya is a part.

Pyare Lal was among the sanitation workers whose feet the Prime Minister washed in 2019. However, Lal says nothing has changed for him since. "I still clean toilets for the same wage and I'm given the least respect in society," he says.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a transgender rights activist, who is the Acharya Mahamandalshwar of the Kinnar *akhada*, feels that the government and society are making an effort to eradicate discrimination. "But it is true that discrimination still prevails. It can be seen not only along caste lines, but also along the lines of gender. It can be seen not only among worldly people, but also among *sadhus* and saints," says Tripathi.

The Uttar Pradesh government's digital gallery that showcases the journey of the Maha Kumbh Mela through virtual reality installations and other digital technologies does not mention the *akhara* for transgender people even though this is among the most crowded *akharas* at the Mela. People line up to click photos with *sadhus* of the transgender community who, unlike other *sadhus*, wear silk sarees, heavy jewellery, and makeup. They bless pilgrims in exchange for rice grains and cash.

The Kumbh Mela economy

The Kumbh Mela is also a major economic driver for the State, especially for the people of Prayagraj. The government has invested about ₹7,500 crore in the Kumbh Mela this year. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath told the media that the government is expecting the Maha Kumbh to contribute up to ₹2 lakh crore to India's economy and increase the GDP of the State by more than 1%.

The fair offers all kinds of business opportunities. There are hundreds of stalls selling pizza, coffee, snacks, and agricultural products; offering bike and mobile repair services; and advertising brands, banks, and e-commerce companies. Rajesh Gupta, who lives near Triveni Sangam, has an undergarments stall. "It is common to see undergarments falling on the ground and getting dirty at the ghats. I end up selling at least 50 each day," he says.

Pankaj Kumar, 18, from Naini area of Prayagraj, sells tea. He says he will use the cash to buy books to study medicine. "My mother gave me a thermos flask and a gas cylinder, my friend gave me a folding table, and my father bought ingredients so I could start the business," he says.

Vinod Kumar, 50, from the Mumfordganj locality, decided that he would sell *dattun* (twigs of the neem tree used to clean teeth). "What if pilgrims forget to bring toothbrushes?"

Rohit Kumar, 32, sells SIM cards during the day and provides bike rides in the evening. The father of two is a post-graduate degree holder, but he does not have a permanent job. At the Kumbh Mela, he approaches anyone who he thinks can get him a job. He earns ₹800-1,000 a day. Yet, Kumar gives alms to every *baba* he sees and seeks their blessings.

When he sees a crystal turtle, and the vendor, Pappu, tells him that it will change his fortune, Kumar promptly buys it even though he thinks it is too expensive. "At the Kumbh Mela, you never know when God may appear before you in human form and bless you," says Kumar as he hands over ₹300 to Pappu.

Pappu does not fail to notice the irony in the situation. "Many people come to the Kumbh Mela to attain salvation, but there are some who have materialistic wishes," he says.

Kumar then asks Pappu how the crystal turtle should be worshipped at home. Pappu quickly responds, "Wash it with milk. And then light a diya (lamp)." Kumar takes the turtle home in the hope that better days await him.

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Foreigners take a dip in the waters at the Triveni Sangam. SANDEEP SAREENA

the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY • JANUARY 25, 2025

Revisiting disinvestment

PSU policy needs review in a changed context

The Centre's disinvestment policy appears to be at a crossroads currently. Minority stake sales in profitable enterprises have been lacklustre, and attempts at strategic sales of PSUs to private enterprises have met with little success in the last decade. In this backdrop, there appears to be a shift towards reviving ailing PSUs as seen in the ill-adviced move to infuse ₹11,440 crore into Rastriya Ispat Nigam Ltd. RINL is neither a strategic PSU nor is it a well-run undertaking.



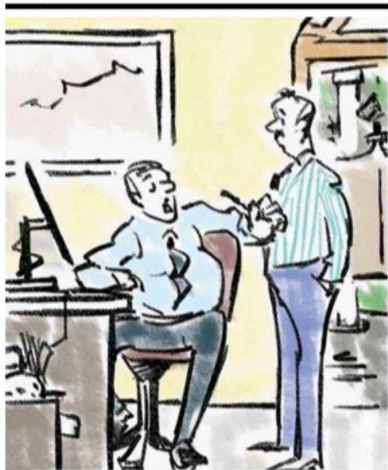
There has been a paradigm shift since the Covid years, with a global thrust in favour of protecting and creating critical domestic capacities to cope with shocks to global supply chains. While the public sector enterprises policy of 2021 says, "All PSUs in non-strategic sectors shall be considered for privatisation, where feasible, otherwise such enterprises shall be considered for closure", this seems outdated now. Instead of this broad guideline, each PSU can be individually reviewed, weighing its strategic importance and the extent of government stake needed. A recent report in this newspaper, which says that many ministers and bureaucrats are opposed to privatisation of profitable and critically important PSUs, only underscores the need for a new policy. Some large PSUs play an important role in addressing infrastructure gaps, even though they may belong to non-strategic sectors under the 2021 policy. Many of these companies pay handsome dividends to the Centre. A fresh view to identify PSUs that are indeed important can do no harm.

The disinvestment policy should be geared towards supporting key, well-performing PSUs, and improving managerial efficiency by divesting critical stake. It should not be seen as a Budget revenue item, or a means to address any fiscal gap. Minority stake sales in PSUs have generally not served any significant purpose. They have increased the ownership base and improved liquidity of the shares, but since control remains entirely with the government, operational efficiency and business prospects remain unaltered. It is well that the Centre has stopped considering such sales as a revenue generation avenue. Asset monetisation of PSUs is a better option in this regard.

As for strategic disinvestment, where the control moves from the government to a private enterprise, that too has not taken off. The sale of most of the companies lined up for strategic disinvestment in recent past, such as RINL, Shipping Corporation of India, NMDCL, CONCOR, BEML, HLL, Lifecare has been stalled. Adverse risk-reward balance for the buyer due to large debt, outdated and inefficient plant and machinery, problems with land ownership and belligerent employee unions have derailed these sales. The most successful strategic disinvestment in recent past, Air India, had to be sold at a giveaway price of ₹2,700 crore. Strategic sale roadblocks deserve attention in the event of a policy review.

POCKET

RAVICHANDRAN



"I figured it out! We may control inflation rate but not prices of things!"

VIPIN SONDHI
MEGHA SINGH CHAUHAN

Sailors historically relied on lighthouses and compasses to navigate their voyages, particularly during times of uncertainty or poor visibility. Each served a unique yet complementary purpose: the lighthouse provided situational awareness and immediate guidance, while the compass offered directional stability and long-term navigation.

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) practices can be likened to both a lighthouse and a compass for corporations, because they can embody the qualities of guidance, clarity and direction, while simultaneously enabling businesses to navigate the complexities of modern challenges. ESG can act as a moral and strategic compass, aligning corporate actions with societal and environmental goals, such as India's net-zero targets or the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Businesses in India face a complex web of regulations, market pressures and stakeholder expectations. ESG provides the directional framework to navigate these challenges systematically, ensuring progress towards sustainable and ethical operations. ESG enables companies to set clear, measurable goals, such as reducing emissions, fostering diversity or improving governance practices, while staying adaptable to evolving scenarios.

In early 2021, I recall attending a meeting virtually with CEOs, Managing Directors, Chief Financial Officers, and representatives from industry bodies such as CII, FICCI and ASSOCHAM that the then SEBI Chairman had convened. The focus of the meeting was to discuss the proposed Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) framework initially for top-listed companies. The BRSR framework aimed to enhance transparency by requiring the disclosure of material ESG information, which is pertinent to all stakeholders, including investors.

The roundtable was part of SEBI's efforts to gather feedback from many of the stakeholders on the preparedness for these disclosures before finalising the BRSR formats. The participants acknowledged the growing importance of ESG concerns in the corporate landscape and recognised SEBI's initiative as both critical and timely. The discussions centred around enhancing key ESG disclosures, with the goal of allowing market participants to better identify and assess sustainability-related risks and opportunities.

The initiative reflected SEBI's

ESG: A lighthouse and a compass for corporations



POTENTIAL TO TRANSFORM. ESG can act as a moral and strategic compass, aligning corporate actions with societal and environmental goals

commitment to aligning corporate reporting with global sustainability standards, thereby promoting sustainable investments and contributing to a sustainable economy. The BRSR framework which was formally introduced in May 2021, was initially made mandatory for the top 1,000 listed entities by market capitalisation, marking a significant step towards integrating ESG considerations into corporate governance in India. While most large companies already have established strong ESG practices for several years, if not decades — with some even having published these practices in their annual reports — the information was seldom structured, consistent and measurable across companies.

Global ESG rating agencies like MSCI ESG Research, Sustainalytics and S&P Global have been evaluating Indian companies, based on publicly available information. These ratings were, however, often not reflective of the actual extent of the progress the companies were making because the latter did not follow a globally recognised structure. The regulatory framework introduced by SEBI aimed to

ESG enables companies to set clear, measurable goals, such as reducing emissions, fostering diversity or improving governance practices, while staying adaptable to evolving scenarios

standardise ESG ratings within India, ensuring greater transparency and reliability for rating agencies and therefore investors and other stakeholders. In mid-2023, SEBI introduced a framework for regulation and accreditation of ESG rating providers in India. Consequently, some global ESG rating agencies have adjusted their operations in India to comply with these regulations, bringing about further standardisation.

ESG practices can emerge as critical pillars for sustainable and responsible business operations. In India, the adoption of ESG principles is gaining momentum as businesses recognise their strategic importance in driving long-term success, resilience and societal impact. For example, Ashok Leyland announced the formation of a board-led ESG committee, headed by an Independent Director in mid-2021. Bharat Forge did so as well. Many others expanded their existing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) committees to specifically address ESG matters as well. As of recent reports, over half of FTSE 100 companies have instituted board-level ESG committees.

With India's unique socio-economic challenges, regulatory landscape and increasing investor awareness, ESG is not just a trend but has the potential to become a transformative force for Indian businesses.

WHY IS ESG GOOD FOR BUSINESS? Enhanced brand reputation, customer and employee loyalty: Studies show that

both customers and employees, prefer brands that demonstrate a strong commitment to good governance, sustainability and social responsibility, especially Gen Y and Z, who are driven by a strong sense of purpose.

Building stakeholder trust: Strong governance processes foster transparent decision-making. Proactive internal and external communication, regular disclosures, audits and stakeholder engagement are key to building trust. Trust enables them to respond effectively to crises, such as financial downturns, supply chain disruptions or even regulatory investigations. The Tata Group comes to mind as perhaps the strongest exemplar of stakeholder trust.

Improved financial outcomes and heightened investor engagement: Implementing energy-efficient technologies, reducing waste and optimising resource utilisation reaps financial rewards, while simultaneously reducing carbon footprint. Further, global and even domestic funds are integrating ESG into their investment decisions leading to higher valuations and improved access to finance.

Effective risk management in a dynamic and intricate business landscape: ESG practices ensure transparency and accountability across the supply chain, especially in respect of labour practices, working conditions and environmental violations, extreme weather events, thereby reducing the risk of reputational damage and operational disruptions.

Fostering innovation: The shift towards sustainability requires investment in technology for renewable energy, electric vehicles and waste management systems creating new revenue streams. A good example is that of start-ups that have mushroomed in the clean tech space.

Smoothing entry into international markets: Especially in markets like the EU, in which stringent sustainability standards govern imports, businesses with ESG frameworks are better positioned to compete.

To conclude, ESG is not just a moral obligation or a regulatory requirement, it is a strategic imperative for businesses. Just as lighthouses warn of hazards, signal proximity to harbours and stand steadfast during storms, and compasses set a course, recalibrate routes in turbulent weather and enable long-term travel in uncharted territories by integrating ESG principles and practices into their core strategies, businesses will not only gain respect and public goodwill while growing profitably, but also lead the way for a sustainable and inclusive Viksit Bharat at India @100.

Sondhi is Independent Director and former MD and CEO, Ashok Leyland and CII India, Chauhan is with Policy Unit, Quality Council of India. Views are personal

Is Trump 'Making America Great Again'?

Trump's withdrawal from multilateral organisations and treaties also implies a ceding of global leadership, possibly to China

Atanu Biswas

MAGA-star Donald Trump is clearly on a mission to 'Make America Great Again' in his re-election campaign and the executive orders he issued as the 47th President of the US. Naturally, in his own way. Therefore, it could be fascinating to see how Trump defines 'greatness' in his dictionary.

In reality, a nation can attain global leadership if it possesses the most advanced technology, the largest economy, and the most powerful military. Beyond that, though, a world leader must be prepared to put aside their own short-term interests in favour of a more long-term perspective. From backing NATO to establishing global organisations like the World Bank or providing funds for others, including the UN, American actions since 1945 frequently fit that template. And America truly became 'the world's indispensable nation'.

Republican administrations have historically slashed or otherwise reduced funding for UN agencies, such as those involved in peacekeeping, human rights, and refugees. Furthermore, it's undeniable that Donald Trump is first and foremost a businessman. During his first term, Trump has been aggressively forceful in challenging the post-war spirit of

cooperation with his 'America First' credo, which has ominous echoes of the 1930s. The international accords and institutions established by his predecessors have been de-funded and abandoned by Trump one by one since the beginning of his first term, and apparently more intensely this time around. As a result, many allies might have begun to search for more trustworthy friends and partners.

Trump has seriously harmed NATO by frequently raising doubts about whether the US would honour its treaty obligation to support its allies — the cornerstone of any collective defence — unless they 'pay their bills'.

FOSSIL FUEL-FRIENDLY Trump wants to impose significant tariffs on a number of countries. His economic outlook may be the driving force behind his pro-fossil-fuel-friendly posture and commendation for 'drill, baby, drill.' But in the face of a worldwide environmental catastrophe, that may not be the best position for a nation that aspires to lead the world.

President Trump signed an executive order on his first day back in office that temporarily suspends all US foreign assistance programmes for 90 days while they are reviewed to see if they are in line with his policy objectives. These programmes support pro-democracy, health and disaster relief efforts across countries and regions. Every dollar



LEADERSHIP. Increasingly isolationist foreign and trade policies

spent, programme funded, and policy pursued by America under Trump must be supported by the answers to three straightforward questions, according to Secretary of State Marco Rubio: "Does it make America safer? Does it make America stronger? Does it make America more prosperous?"

The legitimacy and authority of America's strategic dominance have surely been undermined as a result of Trump's increasingly isolationist foreign and trade policies and the evident nationalist overtones of "Make America Great Again." Withdrawals from the Paris Climate Accord — once again — appear to be a glaring example of a loss of leadership. What's more, coinciding with the Trump administration's decision to withdraw

from regional and international trade accords, China has stated that it is prepared to fill the void and take the lead on climate change. A few days prior to Trump's inauguration, an article published in *Science* predicted the impact of Trump's possible departure from WHO on American influence in world health. It claims that "the country would lose its influential voice at the World Health Assembly, an annual meeting of member states that elects the director-general, reviews and approves WHO's budget, and sets policies on issues such as disease eradication, tobacco control, and vaccine equity." Furthermore, many people think that it only just seals the deal if the real worry is that China will capture WHO.

Gaining a position as a world leader requires a lot of work and time. However, it can be lost quickly by bullying other nations instead of cooperating with them and gradually shifting the focus to short-term goals, especially economic agendas. America, undoubtedly, has supported the "rules-based order" for more than 70 years, serving as the world's police force and moral bulwark, to quite some extent. However, that will not be the case now. And this might continue to be one of Trump's lasting legacies in the American context. Regrettably.

The writer is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

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

Improving farmers' lot

Apropos 'Budget and ease of doing farm business' (January 24), Indian farmers find it difficult to market their produce in a broadened market at fair prices. Absence of a vibrant national market and cold storage facilities force them to sell to mandi operators at non-remunerative prices. The government must provide institution based formal finance to small farmers. The upcoming Budget must announce easy finance schemes for farmers with commensurate crop insurance. Also, companies must be

encouraged to buy agri produce directly from farmers at competitive prices.
NR Nagarajan
Sivakasi, TN

US' exit from WHO

US President Donald Trump's decision to exit his country from the WHO, accusing it of failing to incriminate China for the Covid-19 pandemic, is retrograde. As a premier global health agency, the WHO not only plays a pivotal role in containing health emergencies across the world but also continues

to leverage its expertise in reducing the incidence of serious non-communicable diseases. Being one of the founding members of the WHO and its largest financial contributor, the US has the moral imperative to engage with the WHO to address the deficiencies in its governance and funding structures rather than take a myopic decision to walk out from it. The withdrawal of the US from WHO now poses a grave threat to the global health architecture.
M Jayaram
Sholavandani, TN

Importance of Vitamin D

Apropos 'Address Vx D deficiency' (January 24), when vitamin D is low there is an increased risk of bone fracture, muscle pain and even cancer. The government has to create awareness among the public and healthcare providers about vitamin D-rich foods like fish, milk and orange. Testing facilities for vitamin D levels should be made affordable and accessible to overcome this silent epidemic.
P Victor Selvaraj
Hyderabad, TN

Bridging the work divide

This is with reference to 'Teaching boys (and girls) to cook' (January 24). The idea of differentiating between masculine and feminine work is still prevalent in our society. Boys, no doubt, should be taught to cook, so that they are ready for the future when they will need to share the housework, including cooking. This will help in developing mutual understanding and respect between husband and wife and help promote gender equality in society.
Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad, TN

The end of progress?



JOSEPH E STIGLITZ

Thirty-five years ago, the world experienced an epochal change with the collapse of European communism. Francis Fukuyama famously called this moment the "end of history," predicting that all societies would eventually converge toward liberal democracy and market economies. Today, it is almost a cliché to observe how wrong that prediction was. With the

return of Donald Trump and his *Maga* movement, perhaps we should call the current era the "end of progress."

Most of us take progress for granted. But we should remember that living standards 250 years ago were little different from what they were 2,500 years ago. Enlightenment thinkers recognised that scientific experimentation and tinkering could help people understand nature and create new, transformative technologies. Such efforts required the rule of law to displace absolutism, respect for truth to prevail over obscurantism, and the elevation of expertise in human affairs. Among the most disturbing features of the *Maga* revolution is its outright rejection of these values. Can progress continue? Just as the Soviets managed to launch Sputnik, we may see Mr Trump and his followers preside over notable technological feats in space and artificial intelligence. But can

we really expect America's new oligarchy to oversee sustained, widely shared advances? Those in power now are driven wholly by the pursuit of wealth, and they have no reservations about accumulating it through exploitation and rent-seeking.

What differentiates today's American-style corruption from past forms is its sheer scale and brazenness. American oligarchs can openly "contribute" hundreds of millions of dollars to a politician's election campaign in exchange for favours. The \$465 million no-strings-attached loan that Tesla received from President Barack Obama's administration 15 years ago will look like a pittance compared to what is coming down the pike. Progress requires investments in basic science and an educated labour force. Yet during his first term, Mr Trump proposed such massive cuts in funding for research that even his fellow Republicans balked. Will they show the same willingness to resist him this time?

In any case, is progress still possible when the institutions responsible for the

advancement and transmission of knowledge are under constant attack? No country can truly prosper if large portions of the population suffer from deficiencies in education, health, and nutritious food. In America, around 16 per cent of children grow up in poverty, overall performance in international educational assessments is mediocre, malnutrition and homelessness have become pervasive, and life expectancy is the lowest of any major advanced economy. The only remedy is more and better public spending. Yet Mr Trump and his team of oligarchs are committed to cutting the budget as much as they can.

Although the US has long led the world in advancing basic science and technology, it is hard to see how this can continue under Mr Trump. I see three possible scenarios. In the first, the US finally comes to terms with its deep-seated problems, rejects the *Maga* movement, and reaffirms its commitment to Enlightenment values. In the second, the

US and China continue down the road to oligarchic capitalism and authoritarian state capitalism, respectively, with the rest of the world lagging behind. Lastly, the US and China stay on their course, but Europe takes up the banner of progressive capitalism and social democracy.

Unfortunately, the second scenario is most likely, which means we must consider how long America's growing deficiencies will remain manageable. China has massive advantages in developing technology and AI, owing to its huge market, vast supply of engineers, and commitment to long-term planning and comprehensive surveillance. But, of course, neither China nor a Trumpian America is committed to the values that have driven progress since the late 18th century. Tragically, humanity is already grappling with existential challenges. Advances in technology have given us the means to destroy ourselves, and the best way to prevent that is through international law. Some will counter that while there may

be a pause in progress, past investments in basic science will continue to yield valuable insights. Yet the optimists might add, every dictatorship eventually ends, and history moves on. A century ago, fascism engulfed the world. But that led to a wave of democratisation, with decolonisation and civil-rights movements countering racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination. The problem is that those successful movements went only so far, and time is not on our side. Will Americans enjoy continued progress in the form of shared prosperity, based on education, health, safety, community, and a clean environment? I doubt it. And will the end of progress in America have knock-on effects globally? Almost surely.

It is too soon to know what the full consequences of Mr Trump's second presidency will be. History does indeed move on; but it could leave progress behind.

The author is a Nobel laureate in economics
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ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Echoes of the 1980s



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

"Brezhnev took Afghanistan. Begin took Beirut and Galtieri took the Union Jack." Circa 1983, Roger Waters offered some incisive commentary on the geopolitical fun and games of the '80s. The Soviet Union was into the fourth year of the occupation of Afghanistan. Israel had waltzed into Lebanon, and enabled two bloody massacres in Palestinian refugee camps. Argentina under General Galtieri had occupied the Falkland Islands and the UK had recaptured the islands. Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, and Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, were doing their best to wipe each other's nations off the map. The US was trying to covertly destabilise Nicaragua and would invade Panama a few years later. India and Pakistan had the Salto Glacier. There was also the debacle of the IPKF expedition to Sri Lanka, and the successful counter-coup in the Maldives that restored an India-friendly government. India and China also had a face-off in the mountains during the 1980s. The decade was also marked by the so-called "Star Wars." This was

an American effort to bankrupt the USSR by pretending to develop space-based weapons. The weapons were science-fictional in concept and about as fantastical as the swag displayed onscreen in the eponymous movie franchises. The plan worked. The USSR did go bankrupt under the stress of fighting an unwinnable war in Afghanistan, and investing vast sums into research & development of futuristic weapons. There was also double-digit inflation in the US and much of the Western world, and there was the Black Monday crash of October 1987, when the Dow Jones fell over 20 per cent in a single session.

Four decades later, the world might be headed for another period of similar fun and games. The new US President in his inaugural speech said he wanted to end ongoing conflicts and be remembered for the "wars we never get into." But he also said he wants to take over Greenland and the Panama Canal, and Canada, and he won't rule out the use of force to further these ambitions. Go figure.

Russia is now into the 11th year of trying to annex Ukrainian territory by force. Israel has attacked Gaza, the West Bank, and bombed Syria, Lebanon and Iran. China has repeatedly reiterated its territorial claims on Taiwan, large parts of the South China Sea, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and chunks of Bhutan.

Territorial ambitions are a zero-sum game. As Mark Twain once pointed out in the context of buying real estate, "They're not making land anymore." When one nation wants to extend its boundaries, another nation usually objects on the grounds that its territory would shrink correspondingly. This can,

and often does, result in violent conflict. Unlike in the 1980s, we are at least nine nations with nuclear weapons in the game circa 2025, which increases the threat of conflict escalates.

Another thing that usually results from conflict, or the threat of conflict is inflation. Supply chains break down. Essential commodities are diverted to the military effort. Energy prices spike. If people are conscripted in large numbers, there's a shortage of labour to do normal things like farm, work on assembly lines, drive buses, or fry pakodas. During World War II, this shortage led to the emancipation of women, who had to willy-nilly do these jobs and leveraged their foothold in the workforce into gaining the vote. During World War II, it led to full employment in the US that ended the lingering effects of the Great Depression. But another round of extended inflation could have horrific effects in 2025, following a pandemic that triggered supply chain disruptions and inflation.

The US also seems to be looking to push China into a techno-economic battle by cutting off the supply of high-end chips, and imposing tariffs on Chinese imports. Unlike in the 1980s, this isn't necessarily a battle the US will win. China is an economic powerhouse. Moreover, tariffs will hurt US consumers and industry, who will actually pay the enhanced costs.

However, the global economy is collateral damage. Growth has slowed everywhere at the mere threat of more conflict, and inflation has spiked along with currency volatility. Investors have to rebust strategies and rework asset allocations. A flight to safety may be an instinctive reaction, but it's probably wrong. Debt losses over inflation periods, equity gains if investors can ride out the storm.

Middle class & Modi love

The Indian middle class seethes at the growing phenomenon of political parties taking their tax money and showering benefits on the more numerous poorer classes to buy their votes

India's economic engine is slowing and the ones hurting the most are the vast middle classes. Why the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) doesn't particularly worry about this, or why the party can still take them for granted, is something we will return to in a bit. First, the larger crisis. It isn't merely the function of one bad quarter. The central government's statistical organisation, the Reserve Bank of India, and global organisations have all scaled down this year's growth estimate to around 6.5 per cent.

There's little evidence that a turnaround is on the horizon. Economics is complex for me, it is safer for me to bat on the pitch I am more familiar with: Politics and public opinion. First of all, the air of optimism, the anti-conquering "India has arrived" spirit is now ebbing.

The *hawa* (what we say for *vibe*) has changed. Millionaires are buying assets and residences overseas or long-term visas that come with them.

There is plenty of data in the public domain about Indian millionaires shifting overseas. Over the past two years, the average is 5,000, according to the Henley Private Wealth Migration Report. You'd never hear these wealthy complainers. They are too smart to take such "pun-gas". They are simply voting with their feet.

The fact is, they have surpluses, and rather than investing in India, they're moving them overseas. It's all perfectly legal, and with so many levers, they can safely and anonymously in numbers. What about the even wealthier ones?

Let's leave the fleeing millionaires aside and leapfrog to billionaires, or even more specifically, dollar billionaires. Most, if not all of them, would be entrepreneurs. It isn't even that many people.

According to the latest data from *Forbes*, there are only 200 individuals or families. If the millionaires are quiet and leaving, the billionaires are the opposite. They are speaking, often loudly and volubly praising the government, parroting its "fifth-largest economy and third soon" and "fastest-growing large economy in the world" mantra, and staying back in the country. It is just that they are not investing — and not because they have love for India. This is despite being repeatedly chided by the finance minister. It is just that

if smart entrepreneurs see no demand, what should they invest in and why? It isn't their burden to pull out their shareholders' reserves and build assets nobody would use or goods nobody will buy. This brings us to the nub of the problem. Why the rich can't vote?

Much of the demand, ultimately, comes from that largest consuming demographic in the country: The middle class. Again, it is a tricky definition, but let's make a wide sweep and describe the middle class as anybody who would normally have some surpluses to spend on something more than basic subsistence, which includes food, children's education, housing, health and basic mobility.

It is this wide-ranging group, spanning those earning around ₹12 lakh to ₹5 crore per annum, that is simply sitting back and hurting. They aren't rich enough to emigrate legally along with assets, are taxed at high rates, and have also seen their investments lose value over the past year.

The fact is, they are not earning as much as they used to. The rich among them, say those earning ₹2 crore and above, pay almost twice as much tax by percentage of their incomes as the top corporations or multi-billionaires.

These are the self-made, usually first-generation, aspirational new-rich who were fueling the India boom of the 2000s. They are taking hits as if from a multi-barrel rocket launcher. Fuel prices continue to stay high, income taxes are oppressive, you hear from them a rising clamour that the state gives them too little in return for their taxes. Their tax breaks on mutual funds, equity, property capital gains, and bonds are vapourising. They are also hit by rising costs in areas that may not be captured in our headline inflation figures. The rising costs of private education for their children, for example.

They are the ones hurting, not buying, postponing consumption and primarily responsible for the disappearance of demand. The Prime Minister said the other day that Indians buy about 25 million cars in a year, which is more than the population of many countries. That's true. When you check out, however, who's buying—the lower end cars have inventories piling up while the premium ones have waiting lists—you know how fatigued the middle classes are. As we see how the new politics is unfolding around them, they are infuriated.

They seethe at the growing phenomenon

of all political parties, with the BJP in the lead, taking their tax money and spraying it among the more numerous poorer classes to buy their votes. Over the past 11 years, BJP governments have distributed about ₹20 trillion as straight giveaways, including free grain, and now this gravy train is running on a double engine.

That's because electoral politics in the states has now become purely transactional. This is how much I will pay for your vote. This politics is Robin Hood with a twist. At least the original robbed the rich to give to the poor. The Modi governments have been soaking the middle class and giving away to the poor. While at the same time, the super-rich, especially the richest, enjoy the lowest taxes ever.

The wide middle class is the biggest, most loyal, and vocal supporter of the Modi-BJP political. All elections since 2014 have shown the BJP sweeping major and medium-sized cities, except in the South, where the party is fundamentally weak.

In a state like Haryana, the BJP has risen from zero to hero, partly because of rapid urbanisation. And how has the BJP responded? By relegating 75 per cent of the population in India's third-richest large state by per capita income to poverty line. This, while the Centre and the BJP proudly claim that India's overall poverty rate has fallen below 5 per cent. How do you square the two?

The answer lies in today's politics. If you win elections by distributing to the poor, you have to find enough poor. Who can win by spraying tax money over a mere 7.5 per cent? That's why the states have an incentive in creating a large poor class of voters. The gentleman, income-linked poor, and the electoral poor. State after state, this is the norm now. The electoral poor are often ten times what your next Census would count as genuine poor. In this market, the political class trades middle-class tax revenues for votes.

As we have argued before, the BJP can afford to take the middle class for granted, much like the Congress and other "secular" parties do with the Muslims — a captive vote bank. That's why the BJP would see no particular need for course-correction.

The middle class will keep complaining and still stay loyal because they like Modi and his call to Hinduised nationalism too much. They are happy that Muslims are so effectively sidelined. In any case, if not Modi, who? One-sided, unrequited love isn't such a rare phenomenon. My colleague and political editor D K Singh even has an acronym for it from his years at JNU: FOSLA, which stands for Frustrated One-Sided Lovers' Association. How do we describe this obsessive middle class love? Maybe, *dil hai ke maanta nahi*.

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India & US: A study in sartorial contrasts

EYE CULTURE

KANIKA DATTA

The most interestingly dressed person at Donald Trump's depressing second swearing-in ceremony earlier this week was Democratic Senator John Fetterman, who attended in shorts, hoodie and sneakers, oblivious to the sub-zero temperatures that brought the event inside the Capitol for only the second time in 40 years. Sadly, it was the First Lady's Mafia polio-park hat and buttoned-up English Governess black suit that attracted all the comment. At the very least, she upstaged Fetterman in the comic relief department. As a former model, the inscrutable Melania's attire — she certainly played to form here — has been the subject of intense scrutiny, though in her husband's first term she proved no match to her dynamic predecessor Michelle Obama's sheer fashion nous.

With Michelle enigmatically opting out of this second Trump inauguration, viewers were left to examine Jill Biden's dignified purple ensemble, Ivanka Trump's unremarkable dark green outfit and Second Lady Usha Vance's stylish rose coloured Oscar De La Renta suit (Nancy Pelosi of the gorgeous neckpieces and Ifhan Omar with the unique headscarf we missed you!). Of the men, only Fetterman provided variety to the unrelieved sea of black and white in the Capitol and the overflow room.

Yawn. If this wasn't an event involving the world's most powerful

country, it would have been tempting to tune out. For a display of sheer colour and sartorial diversity, nothing matches Indian Parliament. To get a sense of it, watch the annual Budget session on February 1. Ignore the sonorous intonations of Finance Minister's Nirmala Sitharaman's speech — she'll be presenting her eighth Budget this year — and focus instead on the riot of colour and the outfits every time Dooradashan's camera-peep on the benches. From saris to the sarong-like fabrics of the east and northeast all in a fascinating variety of weaves and textures, from churidar-kurtas teamed with silk Nehru jackets, mundas, Kullu caps, and pagdis tied even which way, India is on display in all its multicultural infinity.

If Melania Trump and John Fetterman choose to make (contrasting) fashion statements on January 20, it's become a tradition for our finance minister to do so each Budget month more interestingly. Her sartorial choices have become as much a topic of speculation as her tax and tariff proposals. On any day, Ms Sitharaman can be relied on for her unerring good taste. Each Budget, she surpasses herself. Always avidly dressed, everyone remembers a favourite. My choice is a toss-up between the blue tussar silk sari with Kantha embroidery from West Bengal, in which she presented the Interim Budget last year, and the dramatic red silk sari embroidered with Kasuti embroidery from Karnataka and black temple motif borders in which she presented Budget 2023-24.

Pochampalli, Bomkal,

Mangalagiri, the FM's sartorial choices, designed to make a statement, reflect but a smidgen of the variety of textiles that India produces. The sartorial choices of other women MPs — Sonia Gandhi, Hema Malini, Supriya Sule, Mahua Moitra, Smriti Irani and now Priyanka Gandhi — offer an idea of the dress consciousness that makes the sartorial choices today in the style immortalised by the ladies of the Tagore household, a garment of unique variety.

In India, unlike the US, political fashion is not just a feminine concern. The men have plenty to say, from the mundas and headgear worn to underline regional affiliations to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's distinctive half-sleeve long kurtas and that famous monogrammed suit worn during a visit by President Barack Obama, which later made it to the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most expensive suit sold in an auction. For some power and pomp reason, Congress MP Shashi Tharoor is considered a style icon among male politicians, though it's hard to fathom why from his regulation churidar-kurtas Nehru jacket gear. The US is not one of the world's most multi-ethnic societies. Yet when it comes to sartorial choices, even the harshest types, both Usha Vance and Kamala Harris have been vocal about their Indian roots. It is a pity that neither had thechutzpah to highlight this at the inauguration. Even a tussar silk scarf or a Kanjeevaram stole would have added a classy touch to the conformity of the Western fashion. It is a really bad hat that got to hog all the attention.



BUSINESS & PURPOSE

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

Mahmud of Ghazni is remembered for depravity and war. Apparently, he had a Hindu army division, which he used to fight rebel Muslims, as during the capture of the Zangar fort in 1003 CE. Mahmud's capital city and tomb are now crumbling, unmarked and uncelebrated. Such is the collapse of arrogant power and pomp. What mental health is for modern young people, arrogance and ego are to boardrooms. The evidence that CEOs are increasingly affected by arrogance is anecdotal, but a sure trend. In my 2018 book, *CRASH*, I quoted researchers, who found that power intoxicates a leader and impairs the person's judgement (Professors Pamela Smith, Dacher Keltner, Sukhvinder Ohli et al.). The pressure on chief executive officers (CEOs) to constantly demonstrate energy and competence is excruciatingly intense. Paradoxically, the performance metrics are subtle and ambiguous — if you can, listen to Donald

Trump's views of Joe Biden's performance! CEOs are evaluated as if business delivery can be precisely measured. If a CEO cannot deliver growth, increase market share, or report higher profits within a time frame, the person is fired or he or she quietly resigns, like in Starbucks. Paradoxically, global and BoEing. Even in conservative Japan, the Santory CEO, Takeshi Niriama, lamented that Japan has reached a "tipping point", driven by shareholder activism. Can India be far behind?

Outsiders do not have authentic information about the company. Reasons behind CEO partings are many, including being authoritarian, arrogant, or behaving as if they are God's messenger. Investors, CEOs, civil society, and corporate boards find that trust is thinning rapidly, just as political leaders experience with their voters. Conscientious leaders earn long-term trust by doing the right things in the right way at the right time. After the death of Mahatma Gandhi, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and Manmohan Singh, it is their humane qualities — *insaniyat*, *dhadad*, and *inayat* (fairness, courtesy, and grace) — that have earned them the respect of the people. Leaders are prone to narcissism, and social media aggravates matters. The few who cross the line make big news.

People work through a mental image about their leaders. Numbers help but are prone to cherry-picking. Consider the data

on Manmohan Singh's economic record. From 2004-2013, India's economic performance was among the country's best in eight decades (based on the 2011-22 constant price series). Annual growth in gross domestic product was 6.7 per cent, gross capital formation 10.6 per cent, private consumption expenditure growth was 6.2 per cent, per capita income growth was 5.04 per cent, and export growth was 12.1 per cent. Singh, quietly and without fuss, delivered his amrit kalash with no announcements. Yet there were some blemishes. Disappointingly, *kaishadhi* has developed that it did not perform. Some incoherent voices also proclaim that India "gained independence" after 2014!

History values CEOs for performance but decries treasurers humble performance. Integrity is ascribed when words match deeds. Narcissism is the gap between leaders' words and deeds. Narcissistic leaders generate news during their tenure and are later remembered for performance, but also their self-obsession, charisma, demand for personal loyalty, and mental derangement. When narcissistic leaders have humble backgrounds, acolytes embellish that fact; for example, Nand Lal Shah, Napoleon, and Hitler, who match all the above characteristics.

Stanford researcher Charles O'Reilly says that narcissistic leaders believe that they are superstars and are meant to be followed. They lack empathy, bluff without shame, and never admit their mistakes. Think of Bernie Ebbers of WorldCom or Ken Lay of Enron. Is the opposite, the quiet, low-profile performer, even possible?

I quote published news about the CEO of DMart Avenue Supermarkets. After 22 years as CEO at DMart, he is reported to have stepped down. His team built DMart into a retailer with 380 stores, a revenue of ₹50,000 crore, and a market capitalisation of ₹2.20 trillion. Who knows, maybe after 22 years, it is a good time for the CEO to change.

The CEO is Ignatius Navil Noronha, and the promoter is Radhakrishnan. The ever-humble of them? Perhaps they are grateful to be left alone to get on with delivering their targets. Read Navil Noronha's statement upon moving on: "I believe that DMart is a business model that has a multi-decadal runway for growth. If we take the course of simplicity, efficient costs, happy employees, deep value to customers, and, most importantly, not doing anything else, we will always remain relevant for a long time to come."

Time will tell if he is right. DMart is a great company, but may still evolve as a long-lasting institution. As of now, he seems a rare, humble, self-effacing, and performing CEO, who leads from the back (refer to Ravi Kant's book *Leading from the Back*).

The writer's latest book is JAMSETHI DATA: Powerful Learnings for Corporate Leaders, coauthored with Harish Bhat. rgopal@themindworks.net

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[OUR TAKE]

Resetting ties with Beijing

New Delhi needs to balance its relations with China and the growing partnership with the US so that Indian interests are best served

Foreign secretary Vikram Misri's visit to Beijing next week is significant for two reasons — it is expected to build on the momentum created by the October 23 understanding between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping to take forward the process of addressing the border issue and overall relations through various mechanisms, and the trip is taking place against the backdrop of US President Donald Trump's return to the White House. It is noteworthy that Misri's visit will come days after the Trump administration signalled its commitment to the Indo-Pacific region by hosting a Quad foreign ministers' meeting as its first foreign policy engagement.

India has adopted a cautious and nuanced position towards the process of rebuilding ties with China, while Beijing has sought to project a picture of normalcy already being restored, with its persistent calls for the border dispute to be de-hyphenated from other aspects of the relationship. Besides the obvious issue of the next steps for resolving the standoff on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), travel, trade, investment and resumption of people-to-people contacts through the Kalash-Mansarovar pilgrimage are expected to come up when Misri meets Chinese vice foreign minister Sun Weidong in Beijing. These talks will build on recent negotiations between the foreign ministers and special representatives on the border issue.

There has been speculation that Trump's return may have spurred efforts by India and China to find a way out of the more than four-year-long face-off on the LAC in Ladakh, and the mercurial American leader has declared his intention to weaponise tariffs to further his MAGA project while simultaneously reaching out to Xi. China, which is showing signs of a deepening economic slowdown, is in Trump's crosshairs. Beijing needs new markets and more business to shield itself from an economic knockout if Washington were to push in that direction. There is a clear attempt on the part of Beijing to regain greater access to the Indian market. The corollary is that India too needs China for low-cost imports and technology, at least until domestic manufacturing, research and development with other partners and the derailing of crucial supply chains are on a sounder footing.

The key issue now is how India can balance relations with China and the growing partnership with the US so that Indian interests are best served. From all indications given by Chinese leaders, Beijing wants to put Galwan and Doklam firmly in the rear-view mirror, separate the border dispute and focus on trade, visas and other exchanges. This is easier said than done, especially given the public sentiment in India because of the prolonged standoff on the LAC and the difficulty that the Indian government will face in selling such an approach to the people.

A reset of India-China ties will need hard work by both sides, including a concerted approach to addressing the border dispute, which continues to have the potential to flare up again. India needs to negotiate hard so that China is impressed about the centrality of peace on the LAC to any furthering of the overall relationship. At the same time, India will need to make it a win-win project without raising hackles in Washington, especially among China hawks such as secretary of state, Marco Rubio. Engagement with mechanisms such as Quad could both reassure India's western partners and help nudge China towards accommodating Indian concerns about the border and fair trade.

The right way to tell obesity is key to our well-being

BMI provided a shaky foundation for understanding obesity and related health risks. A shift to more accurate anthropometric measures must now be accompanied by a composite and committed policy response

Over the past half-century, obesity has emerged as a vexing global health challenge — both because of the several adverse health effects and struggles with understanding the nature of a body's "fatness". Even as the prevalence of obesity was rising rapidly across the world, health professionals were unclear as to whether obesity should be labelled as a disease in itself or merely as a risk factor for other diseases. A distinction was notationally drawn between "overweight" and "obesity". Recognition of amplified health risks posed by visceral or abdominal obesity, as distinct from the risk posed by general obesity, brought a new dimension to debates around obesity as an *omnibus* term.

As scientists sought to define obesity through quantifiable anthropometric measures, debates raged over whether the problem arose from personal behaviours of eating and exercise or from commercial forces that propelled changes in patterns of food consumption through their manufacturing and marketing practices. Attributing obesity to an individual's gluttony or indolence led to body shaming and social discrimination. At the same time, new weight-loss drugs emerging recently, calls to treat obesity as a disease have become louder.

Amidst these debates, the Body Mass Index (BMI), proposed by Belgian mathematician Adolphe Quetelet in 1832, became the anthropometric index considered cardinal for obesity

identification. BMI is derived by dividing weight (in kilos) by the squared value of height (in metres). In western populations, a BMI between 25 and 30 was classified as overweight and values above 30 as obese. "Normal" BMI ranged between 18.5 and 25, while BMI below 18.5 was classified as being underweight. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommended these standards for all populations.

As BMI is a crude measure for identifying excessive body fat, it is to inaccurate labelling of individuals. This is because body weight is a composite of weights contributed by fat, muscle, bones, and body fluids. A person who is very muscular or has high bone density will have high BMI, even without a high-fat mass. Such a person would be falsely labelled as obese. Similarly, a bloated person who retained body fluids due to heart or kidney failure would be improperly labelled as obese even without excess fat.

Across different populations, high BMI is associated with a high risk of several health disorders. Obesity was a risk factor for diabetes, heart attacks, brain strokes, and cancers of several organs (especially the colon and breast), apart from joint disorders and impaired breathing. Even when diseases were not clinically manifest, abnormal patterns of blood pressure, blood fats, and blood sugar were seen in many obese and overweight individuals.

However, it also became clear that the western BMI scale did not apply to Asian populations while attempting to predict the risk of health disorders. This was initially observed

WHY WAS BODY MASS INDEX AN INEFFICIENT PREDICTOR OF DISEASES ASSOCIATED WITH BODY FAT? THE ANSWER LIES IN THE PATTERNS OF BODY FAT DISTRIBUTION



K. Srini Reddy

Two death-eligible cases, and two flawed sentences

On January 20, 2025, two trial courts in different parts of the country — in Neyyattinkara, Kerala and in Kolkata, West Bengal — imposed starkly different sentences in two high-profile death-eligible cases. The Kerala case popularly known as the Greshma case involves a young woman who has been held guilty and sentenced to death for poisoning her male partner. On the other hand, the accused, a civic volunteer of Kolkata police, in the case from West Bengal was sentenced to life imprisonment for the remainder of his natural life for the homicidal rape of a doctor in the RG Kar Hospital, in Kolkata. Despite this divergence, both sentencing decisions fail to adhere to fairness and due process and flout the recent guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court in *Manoj v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (May 2022). Imposition of the lesser life sentence in the RG Kar case is not a demonstration of fair and principled sentencing. Instead, the decision is equally erroneous in law, if not more than the one in the Greshma case.

But why should this matter? More importantly, why should anyone principally opposed to the death penalty be bothered by the sentencing order in the RG Kar case that goes against the shrill public demands to "hang the rapist"? Simply put, our commitment to fairness and due process means we must care not only about the punishment but also about the

process that leads to it. Before examining the sentencing order in the RG Kar case, let us briefly revisit the law on death penalty sentencing laid down by the Supreme Court in *Bachchan Singh v. State of Punjab* (1980). In deciding between life-or-death sentences, courts must consider aggravating and mitigating circumstances relating to both the accused and the crime. In broad terms, aggravating circumstances add to the seriousness of the crime and justify a higher sentence whereas mitigating circumstances explain the crime and have the impact of reducing the sentence. In essence, it is not just the crime but the life circumstances of the accused that become relevant to a sentencing decision. So, aspects of a person that have little to do with the crime like their adverse childhood experience assume significance at sentencing.

Further, courts are also required to rule on the question of the accused's probability of reformation since there is a preference for a life sentence over Indian law and the death penalty is to be imposed only in the "rarest of rare" cases. In fact, the law casts a burden on the prosecution to show that the accused cannot be reformed. In the absence of which it is presumed that it is probable. Added to this 45-year-old decision which is the law on death penalty sentencing is the recent Supreme Court guidelines in *Manoj*. Acknowledging the pervasive problem of poor



Neetika Vishwanath

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SENTENCING ORDERS IN GRESHMA AND RG KAR CASES MAKES IT EVIDENT THAT THEY HAVE MORE IN COMMON THAN WE THINK DESPITE THE DIVERGENT PUNISHMENTS. BOTH ORDERS SIDESTEP DUE PROCESS

sentencing arguments by defence lawyers in trial courts. *Manoj* called for sentencing courts to be proactive and mandated them to call for reports regarding the jail conduct and psychiatric evaluation of the accused along with the report of the probation officer. This is in addition to a report submitted by a mitigation investigator as a part of the defence team. The requirement to call for three reports from the state has been set by the Supreme Court as a bare minimum safeguard against deficient sentencing hearings.

The sentencing order in the RG Kar case, however, did not call for the *Manoj* reports. Instead, the court held the sentencing hearing two days after the accused was held guilty while giving little time between the conviction and sentencing hearings.

The legal aid lawyer representing the accused made perfunctory arguments on sentencing and as a result, the court barely had any meaningful information about the accused while knowing a great deal about the crime. Strangely, yet, the court imposed the life sentence by holding that the probability of reformation of the accused could not be ruled out without giving any reasons backing this asser-

tion. We could say that the court made a presumption of reformation, as is the law because the prosecution produced no evidence to rule out reform. But we can only speculate about this logic since the sentencing order says nothing except to note that the probability of reform was not foreclosed.

Similar to the sentencing order in the RG Kar case, the trial court in the Greshma case overlooked the guidelines in *Manoj*. Accessible mitigating factors such as the young age of the accused were not considered and instead, outrightly dismissed by pitting it against the young age of the victim. While the probability of reformation of the accused was dismissed here unlike the RG Kar case, this sentencing order equally lacked reasons supporting this negative conclusion. Although the order in the Greshma case noted that reform is not possible due to the nature of the crime, this cannot qualify as a reason since such crime-centric backward-looking assertion ruling out the probability of reformation can be made for all death-eligible crimes given their serious nature. It requires no judicial deliberation and any real engagement with the circumstances of the accused.

In essence, a closer look at the sentencing orders in Greshma and RG Kar cases makes it evident that they have more in common than we think despite the divergent punishments. Both orders side-step due process and are arbitrary in that they carry pre-conceived notions without reasons backing the same. Such an approach to sentencing must worry us all because these two orders are by no means outliers. Instead, they are emblematic of a broken criminal justice system ridden with lawlessness and arbitrariness at sentencing.

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Accurately measuring the hip circumference is not an easy task.

among Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan immigrants in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Africa, and South East Asia. Persons of South Asian ethnicity were noted to be at a high risk of developing diabetes and coronary heart disease, even within the "normal" range of BMI. These findings were later replicated in their native countries. Similar observations came from studies on Filipinos and Chinese. The WHO then recommended lower BMI thresholds for overweight (between 23 and 27.5) and obesity (above 27.5) for Asian populations.

The objective of using BMI to identify individuals who are at a high risk of obesity-related diseases was ill-served even in non-Asian populations. Within western populations, there were individuals who met the BMI criteria for obesity but did not either manifest the disease or have the metabolic abnormalities associated with excess body fat. It also did not help that different types of fat cells (white, brown, and beige), with distinctive metabolic and inflammatory effects, were variably distributed across the body at different ages.

Why was BMI an inefficient predictor of diseases associated with body fat? The answer lies in the patterns of body fat distribution. It was observed that fat around the abdomen's internal organs was associated with a higher risk of diabetes and heart disease than fat around the hips. Pear-shaped bodies were healthier than apple-shaped bodies. This led to the use of waist-hip ratio (WHR) as a measure of visceral adiposity.

Accurately measuring the hip circumference is not easy. In recent years, the waist-hip ratio (WHR) has emerged as a better measure. This ratio was originally used in children but was later validated for adults as well. A WHR

exceeding 0.5 predicts a high risk of disease. The Roundness Index (RI), a recently proposed measure, takes into account height, weight, and waist measurements to generate computed body images. These images are compared with the ellipsoid norm of the erect human body. This measure is more suitable for research.

A recent Lancet Commission report on obesity helps us to cut through the clutter and identify clinically useful categories based on risk assessment. The report identifies obesity as excess adiposity. Endorsed by 76 international organisations, it classifies obesity into pre-clinical and clinical categories. Body fat is measured by BMI, WHR and/or X-ray techniques. Excess body fat is classified as "clinical" obesity if symptoms like breathlessness limit activity or laboratory tests show abnormalities of blood sugar, blood fats or liver function. Clinical obesity would be treated as a disease. Obesity, detected by anthropometric or radiological measures, would be classified as pre-clinical if there is no clinical or laboratory evidence of compromised organ function. Such persons would be periodically monitored to detect progression to clinical obesity. Any person with a BMI of over 40 would be treated as obese.

This classification will help guide clinical management by first identifying body adiposity and then assessing organ health. At the population level, a lot more needs to be done to promote healthy diets, regular physical activity, better sleep patterns, and less exposure to air pollution. This calls for a composite and committed policy response that goes beyond the clinic.

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How the budget can deliver Viksit Bharat

In the run-up to Budget FY26, the government held a series of consultations with various stakeholders. The need for measures against handwinds facing the economy — growth and demand slowdown — was underlined. But India's journey to becoming Viksit Bharat must remain the larger focus. Last year, PM identified four priority areas: Make in India, farm prosperity, sustainability, and women-led development. The government has already taken a series of measures in each of these areas, and we expect the upcoming budget to maintain this momentum. Let's look at what more needs to be done. There is a need to make India, the factory of the world with a strong micro, small and

medium enterprises (MSME) engine, targeting raising our share in global manufacturing from 3.1% to 5% over the next few years. Reforms focusing on lowering costs and enhancing the ease of doing business are crucial for this. The government may consider the creation of interstate platforms on the lines of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council as many reforms needed to be in the state and concurrent domains. India must evolve as a product nation, which requires a deep focus on research and development (R&D). The introduction of an R&D innovation fund with a corpus of ₹1 lakh crore is significant. To ensure the effective utilisation of this fund and other similar schemes initiated by the govern-

ment, the modalities of accessing such funds should be comprehensively reviewed through stakeholder consultations. In agriculture, continued self-reliance, raising export share and value, and building climate resilience must be made the focus. A mission to improve farm yields in the bottom 100 districts, much like the aspirational districts programme, is needed. Additionally, a national programme to develop three million farm technicians over five years, to provide new technologies and services to farmers, can be considered. Each of India's 600,000 villages could have five to six technicians who specialise in soil testing, micro irrigation, drones, sensors, farm machinery, post-harvest technologies, and in-village water supply systems. Apart from creating jobs and livelihoods, this will help improve the national average yield.

Various government policies and projects aim to drive the country towards a green economy. The recent introduction of the green steel taxonomy is a welcome step towards decarbonisation. The push being given to electric vehicles and developing carbon markets is welcome, too. The upcoming budget may consider launching a Carbon Capture Utilisation and Storage mission to accelerate industrial decarbonisation. A national vision document could lay down the path to a circular economy, through clear goals, strategies and initiatives. The government being climate adaptation and crisis mitigation activities under the Priority Sector Lending Framework.

Finally, women-led growth can be accelerated by enhancing women's participation in the workforce. The proposed setting up of working women hostels in collaboration with industry and establishing creches announced in the last Union Budget will facilitate greater participation of women in the workforce. The government could consider allowing CSR funds for setting these up. Further, the government may consider introducing a deduction from income tax up to a defined limit for working women for expenses incurred on childcare for children till the age of five. It is hoped that the upcoming budget pushes such an agenda for progress.

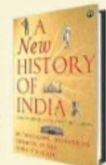
Anish Shah is immediate past president, Pricer, and group CEO and MD, Mahindra Group. The views expressed are personal

[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

INDIA THROUGH THE AGES

India is one of the oldest and most complex countries in the world. As the Indian Republic turns 75, we recommend Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Shobita Punja, and Toby Sinclair's *A New History of India*, covering the country's complexities — from prehistoric times to the 21st century. A one-volume history illustrated by maps and photographs, it covers major landmarks. The book starts with India's geological origins a few billion years ago, the migration of Homo sapiens from Africa, and traces the evolution of civilisation through epochs, personalities, and turning points. It covers the Harappan culture, Vedic society, Mahabharata, the Buddha, Ashoka, the Mauryas, the Guptas, the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal empire, European incursions, the British rule, the freedom struggle, Independence, Partition, and the modern republic. The book is a collection of essays on archaeology, caste, religion, art, architecture, philosophy, language, culture, the economy, and a plural and diverse society.



A New History of India
Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Shobita Punja, and Toby Sinclair
Year: 2023



A thought for today

What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist

SALMAN RUSHDIE

Articles Of Freedom

Court response to artworks reminds us what's constitutional

Art gallery DAG, from whose exhibition two MF Husain paintings were seized following a plea in a Delhi court alleging 'religious sentiments hurt', plans to pursue 'legal remedies against complainant for false and mala fide accusations'. It signals an appetite for a robust defence of art, and freedoms as enshrined in the Constitution. The court didn't allow a case to be filed, but the very fact it allowed a seizure of the paintings is the core problem. The trope of 'obscenity', coupled with 'religious sentiments hurt' are tools of individual peevish seeking state interference. Courts are guardians of people's constitutional rights. To that end, regardless of the subject of art or its depiction, framing of any such miffed complainant's plea must be in terms of Articles 19 and 21 – fundamental rights guaranteeing freedom of expression and right to liberty unambiguous in their breadth.

Oct last, Bombay HC ordered Customs to release Souza's works, seized in 2023, saying, "Every nude painting or every painting depicting sexual intercourse poses cannot be styled as obscene." Husain, a Padma Shri (1966), Padma Bhushan (1973) and Padma Vibhushan (1991), was forced to leave the country following death threats. The state failed to protect him. The intrinsic value of his art remains undimmed. Police found nothing to merit an FIR in DAG's exhibition of Husain's work. But the complaint survives even if the "offence" is not actionable legally.

The challenge before HCs is training subordinate courts that are quick to apply sharp narrow lines of criminal code, whether IPC or now BNS, to crack down on forms of expression – art, cinema, music, books, theatre. Subordinate courts can often be as moralistic as complainants. But courts are not private doctors. Individual moral codes must be left at the gates. Inside a courtroom, the canvas can only be that of the Constitution – Articles 19 and 21.

Turbans/Tricolour

Makeover for headgear associated with luxe Indian experience

SOBO to Soho, enter a luxe Indian store, and a turbaned gent shall beat your service. As was the case with the iconic and retired Air India Maharaja, the headgear proclaims the elite *esprit de corps*. Shelling out lakhs to travel by train? Well, on the Palace on Wheels too the staff are colourfully turbaned to ease the bespoke experience. Invited to a wedding at the Mehrangarh Fort? Romance and grandeur shall be incomplete without the hosts providing you saafa services. In scenic Lonavala, the Marathi pheta must be the fashion of choice. One turban Dajit Doshanj took to Coacchella. But the variety of them is stunning in India.

They are beginning to be seen everywhere the champagne class is buying the Indian luxury experience. Ayurveda retreat in the Western Ghats or Provence, couture studio in Khan Market or SOBO or Palo Alto, fine dining in Kyoto or Helsinki or Hyderabad, if it's branded Indian, service shall be with a turban, as likely as not. Republic Day celebration is different. It is a mass democratic experience. But here too turbans top the sea of people. So does the tricolour. Which makes one think, what if all the turbans in service of Brand India were to sport the tiranga stripes too? Swanky stores will still be selling the silks and jewels, the flavours and majesty. But with a top-up with a difference.

All Together Now, For Your Future

Elites are suspicious of crowds, which are often forces of reform

Crowds have a bad reputation. Watching the crowds at Bastille, French thinker Gustave Le Bon cast their behaviour as madness, a loss of individual good sense – and this idea remains seductive to those in power. *Multitudes: How Crowds Made the Modern World* by Dan Hancock tries to tell a more balanced story of how crowds function, how susceptible we are to being swept along by those around us, and why we may be better together.

A carnival or concert, a political protest or melee, religious congregation, different crowds have different dynamics. The joy and celebration of a national day is the crowd at play. Singing and dancing together is a vital, ancient part of who we are as social animals. Chanting in unison at a sports match is a release of collective adrenaline, a halo of energy.

The modern age is the age of the crowd. Crowds often show up as a surprise at special moments of world historic intensity – because the suffering experienced alone by its members had not been visible to those meeting it.

When we gather in a crowd, we are changed by it, and we change our history. Crowd membership gives us a freedom and strength we could not possess as individuals. Think of the French Revolution, a popular insurrection born of exhaustion and misery. It was a joyful collective catharsis, though it was misinterpreted by thinkers like Le Bon, who saw in it disorder and nihilistic violence.

These theories about crowd savagery have proven to be durable even today, among elites and thinkers. But hostility to the mob is often hostility to democracy, the book says. The 19th century was haunted by the spectre of a hostile mob: this paranoia showed up in militarised colonial policing, whether in Derry, Ireland

or Amritsar, India. Of course, not all crowds are seeking a better future, says the book, pointing to 2021 Capitol riots in US, or Brazilian demonstrations in 2023, egged on by Bolsonaro or the history of fascist and authoritarian crowds, including Mussolini's march on Rome or Hitler's beer hall putsch. These reactionary vanguards are usually a violent counterweight to a rising mass progressive movement. They are often facilitated by those in uniform, tacitly supported by corners of the establishment and punished lightly, if at all, by the right-wing judiciary. Meanwhile the vast totalitarian crowd does not look sideways at each other, but upwards at the leader.

Crowd scenes represent the density of urban life, whether Times Square in New York, Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing, or in any of our own metropolises. The idea of cities full of people, of strangers, carries a sense of menace for some, just as others appreciate the safety in numbers. Drones and cameras are another constraint on free assembly and social spontaneity. The fear of the crowd lives on in contemporary culture, with screams about 'nobs'.

We're all in it together, the book reminds us. To defend the self-assembly crowd is to defend democracy and freedom, it says.

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



75 AND GOING STRONG

The Constitution's drafters had foresight. They gave us a living document that has stood the test of time. As we celebrate its 75th year tomorrow, let's remember those whose work guarantees our basic rights

Rohan J Alva



Drawing up a simple contract can sometimes be a complicated. Imagine then, drafting a constitution for a newly independent nation. And if that were not enough, imagine drafting it at a time when the world was broken by a world war; India was partitioned; and, a migration of people on a scale that the world had never seen before was underway.

In such a situation, the founders of our Constitution could have been forgiven if they were not able to see their task through. But from the heat of these cataclysmic events emerged our Constitution, which endures to this day.

Team effort | The Indian Constitution is not the product of one mind. It is the result of careful deliberation that lasted for nearly half a decade and among hundreds of members in the Constituent Assembly. On Dec 9, 1946, members of the Assembly of India met for the first time. It was the first time in recent memory the people of India were to be the masters of their fate and decide the course of their destiny.

To appreciate just how the Constitution was made, it is critical to evaluate the process of its framing. Nothing was approved in a rush. The pillars of India's Constitution were to be evaluated at the first level by different committees.

For instance, the Advisory Committee chaired by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was tasked with providing the first draft of the fundamental rights, so that the Assembly could have an idea of the kind of entitlements that the Constitution ought to guarantee to the people.

There were separate committees that looked at protecting other aspects such as the constitutional provisions relating to the structure of govt and division of powers between Centre and states. The proposals of each of these committees were put to discussion and then a vote. This was between Dec 1946 and Aug 1947.

Then from Oct 1947, the Drafting Committee chaired by B.R. Ambedkar began working out the finer details of the Constitution. This was made infinitely easier since they in turn, relied on the Draft Constitution prepared by Sir BN Rau.

The deliberations of the Drafting Committee are a matter of public record. They demonstrate the forensic skill and the high-minded thinking of the Committee members for the way in which they sought to ensure that each of the provisions of the Constitution was developed in a nuanced manner.

The Drafting Committee's Constitution, which was called the 'Draft Constitution', was introduced in the Assembly on Nov 4, 1948. From then till Nov 1949, the Assembly debated and voted on each of the provisions of the Constitution. These deliberations lasted for a year.



After it was finalised, the Constitution was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on Nov 26, 1949.

In less than half a decade, the transformation of India from a colonial subject to an independent nation governed by a constitution was complete. Formally, the Constitution came into force on Jan 26, 1950.

Working the Constitution | Over the last 75 years, the Indian Constitution has had a whirlwind experience. The Constitution by design chose the Supreme Court of India as an institution that will decide how the Constitution is to be understood. It was then only natural that the battle to save the soul of the Constitution

would be waged in the Supreme Court.

One of the most significant outcomes of this was the battle over saving the Constitution from itself. This was the battle over the Basic Structure Doctrine.

In the early years, it was plausibly understood that Parliament had absolute powers to amend the Constitution. The effect of the amendment could not be questioned, so long as the process of amendment as laid down in Article 368 of the Constitution was complied with. After all, nothing in the Constitution expressly stated as to what the limits of constitutional amendments were. But in 1973, the Supreme Court in its judgment in *Kesavananda Bharati's* case introduced guardrails to ensure that the process of amendment did not end up consuming the Constitution itself.

Thus was born the Basic Structure Doctrine. It signifies that the essential features of the Constitution ought to be permanently endure. Features such as secularism, federalism, the separation of powers, the democratic foundations of govt, and fundamental freedoms are part of the Basic Structure of India's Constitution.

The other momentous battle waged was on the meaning of the most significant fundamental right that is cherished by all Indians – the right to life and personal liberty. This particular article had a chequered history because many in the Assembly believed it was very weakly worded. But through progressive judicial interpretations, Article 21 became one of the most crucial fundamental rights today.

The Preamble | When the Constitution came into existence it was – and still remains – the longest Constitution in the world. At that time, it had 385 Articles accompanied by 8 Schedules. Today, the Constitution stands amended over a hundred times and some 100 new articles, including brand new chapters and portions.

Yet, of all the provisions, it is the Preamble of the Constitution that best reflects what the Constitution signifies. It begins with the solemn words "We the People of India" and guarantees the nation an order built on Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. It is the people of India, who in the authentic sense, are giving themselves their foundational document.

These words and what they stand for, were the battle cry of those who fought to save the soul of India. These are the ideals upon which the Constitution is built.

The writer is an advocate in Supreme Court & Delhi HC

Why We Shouldn't Cancel Good Art By Bad Boys

Neil Gaiman, literary rock star, is accused of sexual & emotional abuse by 8 women. Truth is if we only permitted art by artists with unimpeachable moral standards, our libraries & galleries would be bare

Rashmee Roshan Lal



If Neil Gaiman's life today were a scene in one of his own stories for children of all ages, the scandal darkening his shiny global stardom would be revealed as the handiwork of the dream-eaters. But these dastardly villains, whose diet consists of the eyeballs (not to speak of the hopes and dreams) of innocent people, are defeated in the end. Our hero – the creative genius – would triumph over the fantastical creatures, aided and advised throughout the nightmare by a female friend. She will have travelled the same path as the artist because she wants to be along for the ride. Besides, she feels entirely safe with him.

Unfortunately, this plotline won't work in real life. Gaiman is a consummate master of storytelling in any medium – comics, television, film, poetry, prose fiction – but his own saga is no longer so easy to take to a successful conclusion.

Right now, he stands accused of gross sexual and emotional abuse by at least eight young women in different parts of the world. The allegations of deviant and violent behaviour as well as coercive control go back over some years and the accusers were overwhelmingly young, some 40 years his junior. Gaiman, now 64, has flatly denied the "horrible stories".

No matter what happens from here on, some of Gaiman's cult following is outraged. Horrified readers have been posting on social media the decision to tip their fallen god's books "into the recycling bin" or bag them up for the charity shop. Some have vowed to boycott the forthcoming second season of *The Sandman*, the TV adaptation of Gaiman's acclaimed comic book series. His three publishers have said they don't have any new projects planned with him, though no one is suggesting his 50 books will be taken out of print.

Overall, there is shock but little hysteria even though JK Rowling has denounced "the strange silence of the literary world" and compared Gaiman to disgraced

Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein.

There are at least three possible reasons for the tepid response. These accusations come at a hinge point in the West's culture wars. The new season is all about the Palm Beach billionaire take on trad wife, coupled with the manly-man worldview of podcast bros, crypto bros, tech bros and the bro of bros, Elon Musk.

With Donald Trump and America's MAGA right taking full control of the world's most militarily and economically powerful country, there is waning enthusiasm for the #MeToo movement's seven-year push to hold powerful men accountable for their treatment of women.

Of course, any hyperbolic reaction to the allegations against Gaiman must also acknowledge hard reality. These may be hard to prove, legally, or in any conclusive way. Gaiman's young accusers, who were once either his fans, employees, or amounts to modern-day cancella-tion, the right way to deal with phenomenal work by morally compromised creative artists?

Today it is Gaiman, a literary

rock star whose books have sold 50m copies worldwide. Yesterday, Alice Munro. The Canadian Nobel Literature laureate wrote in so nuanced a way about women and girls but her daughter says she did nothing when learning about sexual abuse at the hands of her second husband.

The day before yesterday, it was VS Naipaul, also a Nobel laureate, whose authorised biography reveals his sad, sick wife and disposable mistress, exquisite meanness, cruelty amounting to sadism and race-baiting. And further back in time there was a whole clutch of deplorable greats: John Le Carré, Cormac McCarthy, Lewis Carroll, William Faulkner.

There are faint echoes of the Gaiman affair in nearly all of these. Le Carré, a constant philanderer, picked very young women, including the one pair looking after his youngest son. The thrice-married McCarthy was 42 when he began a relationship with a 16-year-old and is said to have feared being found guilty of statutory rape as they travelled across the US-Mexico border.

For all the primness of *Alice in Wonderland*, Carroll did have his photographic model little girls. As for Faulkner, he positively relished being horrid in the name of art. When his 12-year-old daughter asked him to postpone one of his alcoholic binges until after her birthday celebrations, he famously refused, telling her: "No one remembers Shakespeare's children."

From Caravaggio, murderer and lover of a pre-pubescent boy, to Gaiman, alleged abuser, here's a truth not explicitly acknowledged: If we only permitted art by artists with unimpeachable moral standards, our libraries and galleries would be bare.

Calvin & Hobbes

I'M DOING A CROSSWORD PUZZLE. NUMBER THREE ACROSS SAYS "BIRD."

HMM...

I'VE GOT IT! "YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER!"

BUT THERE ARE ONLY FIVE BIRDS.

I KNOW. THESE IDIOTS MAKE YOU WRITE REAL SMALL.

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Sacredspace

Each nation feels superior to other nations. That breeds patriotism – and wars.

Dale Carnegie

Dale Carnegie

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SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'Politics follows a cycle'

All India Mahila Congress president Alka Lamba is set to contest the Delhi Assembly polls from Kalkaji. She had earlier served as the MLA for Chandni Chowk. The seasoned politician had begun her political career as a student activist with the National Students' Union of India (NSUI).

In a conversation with Rahul Gahlawat of The Statesman, Lamba reflects on her political journey, her stint with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and the path forward for the Congress in Delhi. She shares her insights on governance, challenges, and the pressing need for change in the national capital.

Q. You were an MLA from Chandni Chowk and contested unsuccessfully from there in 2020. This time, you are contesting from Kalkaji against Chief Minister Atishi.

A. My political journey began in 1995, when, at the age of 19, I contested the Delhi University elections, representing 80 colleges. This experience allowed me to travel extensively and gain insights into the diverse challenges. In 2003, I ran against Madan Lal Khurana from Moti Nagar, later contested from Chandni Chowk, and now from Kalkaji. Delhi is where I was born, raised, and educated, and it remains close to my heart. The development initiatives I started and implemented in Chandni Chowk will serve as a foundation for the work I aim to accomplish in Kalkaji. My dedication to the progress and well-being of Delhiites remains steadfast.

Q. Chandni Chowk witnessed significant redevelopment efforts

during your tenure. How do you view the current state of the constituency?

A. I take immense pride in the redevelopment initiatives we undertook during my tenure from 2015 to 2020. Around Rs 100 crore was spent on modernizing parts of this historical city, addressing long-neglected issues like outdated sewer and water lines, building community facilities, and ensuring the safety of Old Delhi residents living in crumbling houses. Today, when I interact with the residents, they acknowledge the visible contrast between my tenure and the current administration. Unfortunately, the momentum we built has been lost.

Q. You have spoken extensively about women's empowerment. What role do you see women playing in politics today?

A. Women's participation in politics is no longer a choice but a necessity. We owe our right to vote and contest elections to B R Ambedkar's vision. The Congress, through the leadership of Priyanka Gandhi, has taken bold steps. For instance, in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, 40 per cent of tickets were given to women, setting a precedent for others to follow. Women's issues are no longer peripheral; they are central to political agendas today.

Q. The AAP has been vocal about its governance achievements in Delhi. How do you compare this with the Congress-led era?

A. Let us not forget the legacy of Sheila Dikshit. Her 15-year tenure transformed Delhi into a modern,

green, and metro-connected city. Under her leadership, partnerships with market associations flourished, and infrastructure projects like flyovers and green spaces became hallmarks of Delhi.

In stark contrast, today's Delhi is grappling with pollution, water contamination, unemployment, and mismanagement. The AAP government, despite holding power in both the state and the MCD, has failed to address these issues. Their promises of a clean Yamuna, improved air quality, and governance have remained largely unfulfilled.

Q. You too joined the AAP during its early days but returned to the Congress. Why the shift?

A. I was drawn to the AAP by its promises of clean governance and transparency. However, after joining the party, I realized their hypocrisy. They spoke against dynasty politics but mirrored it within their party. They campaigned for anti-corruption but failed to uphold those values. Issues like the Jan Lokpal and Swaraj - once their core agenda - were abandoned. Instead, we saw policies that prioritized revenue from liquor shops over public welfare. Ministers faced corruption charges, and high-ranking leaders were sent to jail. Disillusioned, I returned to the Congress, a party that upholds its values even in adversity.

Q. Do you believe the Congress can reclaim its position in Delhi?

A. Absolutely. Politics, like nature, follows cycles. Sheila Dikshit's peak years gave way to the AAP, and now, the AAP's decline is



evident. People are looking for accountability, something both the AAP and BJP have failed to provide. With initiatives like the 'Delhi Nyay Yatra', we are engaging with citizens, addressing their grievances, and highlighting their struggles. The Congress has a history of delivering on its promises, and I firmly believe we will form a full majority government in Delhi soon.

Q. In a polarised political landscape, can the Congress carve out a space between the AAP and BJP?

A. The Congress has always been a party of inclusion and progress. While the BJP polarizes voters on communal lines, the AAP uses diversion tactics to cover its inefficiencies. Delhi deserves better,

and the Congress will provide that alternative. Our struggles, from Bharat Jodo Yatra to grassroots campaigns, reflect our commitment to rebuilding trust with the people. The tides are turning, and I am confident Delhi will witness a Congress government once again.

Q. What is your message to Delhiites ahead of the polls?

A. To every Delhiite, I say that this is our city and it has the potential to be a global model of progress, inclusivity, and innovation. But for that, we need governance that prioritizes the people over politics. The Congress has the vision, the leadership, and the commitment to make Delhi green, clean, and vibrant again. Together, we can rebuild Delhi.

OCCASIONAL NOTE

ON Thursday night the English cricketers and thousands upon thousands of their well-wishers, reposed, or tried to, in trembling hope. Yesterday morning hope was soon frustrated, for of the 27 runs wanted for a win only 15 were scored, and after six days of strenuous rivalry the Australians won the rubber game by 11 runs. Henceforth the doings of the M. C. C. will be watched with interest, but while they themselves will carry on with the same eager courage that they have thus far shown, the onlooker will have quieter emotions, for the thrill that goes with the undecided will no longer excite and delight his breast. To Australia are due congratulations on the brilliancy of its representatives; to Gilligan and his men admiration for all that they have done. They have proved themselves valiant and skilful adversaries and their last innings is worthy of careful study. Until its very end only one batsman failed, and he had scored a precious 92 in the first innings. Now the crucial match is over none will argue against the hope of fate, or abate a bit of courage or hope for the future.

NEWS ITEMS

BROKEN HILL SKULL MAN WHO LIVED 200,000 YEARS AGO

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.) LEAFIELD (OXFORD), JAN. 22.

PROFESSOR Sir Arthur Keith, conservator of the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, lectured to a large audience on the discoveries of human remains at Broken Hill, Rhodesia, which included a skull believed to be the oldest in existence. Sir Arthur Keith said the skull was that of a type of man unknown before the discovery of these remains. "He is of extremely primitive type, so primitive and so unlike other races living that we have to create a new species for him." The lecturer estimated that this man belonged to the prehistoric period and had lived anywhere between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago. The bones found showed that he could walk in an upright position and was 5 ft. 9 ins. or a little more in height. Although the skull had a strong resemblance to that of the gorilla, this man was not so very low down in the scale as regards human beings and was even higher than some of the low types of human beings alive to-day.

"This discovery," concluded Sir Arthur Keith, "is one of the most important ever made. It is a discovery which throws new light and strong light on our early history."

"ALFONSO DAY" IN MADRID CROWDS BESIEGE THE ROYAL PALACE

MADRID, JAN. 24.

THE recent crescendo of manifestations all over the country of loyalty to the King culminated in remarkable demonstrations to-day, which has been dubbed "Alfonso Day." A huge procession headed by Members of Parliament and Provincial Councils and Mayors from all parts of the country marched with bands and banners to the palace, on the balcony of which King Alfonso, with members of the Royal Family and Directory remained for several hours despite the intense "cold" to watch the march past.

The King earlier received shoals of telegrams of congratulations. Crowds besieged the palace for his signature in albums. In connection with the celebrations the Royal amnesty has been granted to soldiers, sailors and civilians convicted of light offences.

Generals Berenguer and Saravia, who were arrested in October, have also been released.

INDIAN STUDENTS PROVISION DURING STAY IN LONDON

LONDON, JAN. 23.

SIR Atul Chatterjee, High Commissioner for India, was given a dinner by the House Managing Committee of the Indian Students' Centre, Mr. H. A. F. Lindsay, presiding, said he hoped that Sir Atul Chatterjee, in, stead of joining the procession of meteors who had held his great office, would remain there for the full term, and help among other things to work out the solutions of the Indian student problem.

Replying Sir Atul Chatterjee congratulated the students on the better provision made by them than in the days when they came alone to that country.

At a subsequent reception by the National Indian Association Sir Atul Chatterjee said the difficulties of the Indian student problem were not such as could be removed by a magician's wand. Even if all the difficulties were removed to-day, he said, fresh difficulties would spring up to-morrow. Much the same applied to the internal Indian problems. Indeed he would think but poorly of India if all her difficulties could be removed in one day. He concluded by saying that no effort would be wanting on his part to assist in solving problems connected with the sojourn of Indian students in Great Britain.

Ideas alone can't sell Nepal to the world

SANJEEV SATGAJINIA

That Nepal is set to conduct the Sagarmatha Sambaad, a multi-stakeholder forum for discussing crucial global, regional and national issues, comes as welcome news. First announced in 2019, the event fell victim to the Covid-19 pandemic. The government has announced it will be held in March, most likely in Kathmandu, with a focus on climate change, climate justice and related issues.

According to a report, heads of state and government, along with other stakeholders working in the field of climate change, will be invited. This could be an important event, especially considering Nepal's increasing struggle to capture global attention, primarily because it has, over the years, failed to find a compelling selling point.

In the past few decades, Nepal's progress has been disturbingly slow even as the rest of the world made great strides. Efforts have either been tepid from the outset, or hugely stymied by the wrangling and power games of Nepal's myopic political parties. Hardly any significant effort has been made to revive the economy, which remains largely import-driven. With no robust industries and weak manufacturing output, Nepal lacks export-quality goods. It already runs a significant trade deficit with India, which accounts for nearly two-thirds of its third-country trade. Should the northern borders with China open fully, Nepal would likely face a similar trade imbalance, bringing even bigger challenges.

Sandwiched between the world's second and fifth-largest economies, Nepal remains one of the poorest countries globally; the irony could not be starker.

If India and China vie to expand their spheres of influence in Nepal, it is largely due to their rivalry. Nepal's geographical position as a neighbour to both is immutable—with one, it shares a long border of high

Himalayas, and with the other, an open border. Added to this is the American interest, largely rooted in geopolitics.

What is unfortunate is that Nepal has failed to turn the growing interest - regardless of where it stems from - of these major powers to its advantage.

The New York Times recently listed Lumbini among the 52 places in the world to visit in 2025. Naturally, Nepal rejoiced. But what initiatives have the government or its stakeholders taken to attract tourists to Lumbini? Without facilitation by the host country, expecting tourists to flock to Lumbini is a fanciful idea. The Gautam Buddha International Airport in Bhairahawa, which was supposed to bring in tourists to Buddha's birthplace, has remained largely inoperational. From Kathmandu, road travel is treacherous.

For far too long, Nepal has relied on selling the idea that "Buddha was born in Nepal." It's unclear how much that helped Nepal build a stronger image globally. While it is a fact that Buddha was born in what is now modern-day Nepal, a concoction whipped up by adding a superfluous nationalist spin to the narrative often leaves a bad taste. Gradually, Nepalis seem to have moved away from this rhetoric, but they have yet to find something new to offer the world.

The same is true for Mt Everest. The fact that the world's tallest peak lies in Nepal is merely a geographical accident. While there is nothing wrong with boasting about the extraordinary, over-reliance on it is impractical and unsustainable. Every country needs to continually work on finding new niches to remain globally relevant. Mt Everest has been a cash cow for Nepal for decades, and Nepal has milked it enough. Lately, calls to limit or even ban commercial expeditions have already gained traction.

As Nepal prepares to hold the Sagarmatha Sambaad with a focus on climate change, the spotlight will inevitably fall not just on Mt Everest

but the entire Himalayan range. This brings to us something that still attracts global attention. But has Nepal made a persuasive case for the Himalayas' importance to South Asia, where one-fourth of humanity resides? What work has been done to protect their significance in the strongest terms as the source of water, food and energy for billions of people in Asia?

Today's extremely competitive world presents a harsh reality: Lacking economic and geopolitical heft is one of the greatest weaknesses any country can face. "Friendship" in geopolitics is merely a facade; when interests diverge and economic leverage is missing, even bilateral relationships tend to falter. A country needs to find new ways to maintain its relevance in the global landscape.

For Nepal, 2024 ended on a positive note. The cricketing extravaganza, broadcast live on an international television channel, brought global attention to the nation. A country once fascinated with football appears to have embraced cricket seamlessly. However, the fragility of Nepal's society was exposed once again as racial slurs were hurled at a particular community as the event drew to a close. This incident underscored how Nepal, as a society, remains both deeply divided and regressive.

One of the most significant problems Nepal faces is the widespread belief that it is the "best and most beautiful country in the world." This misguided notion often fuels imprudent claims, such as boasting about anything as the "best" in the world - even the constitution. Such hubris is largely fanned by leaders with regressive mindsets, like KP Sharma Oli, the current prime minister, whose nationalist bravado often borders on the problematic.

And more often than not, Nepal's visionless politicians tend to overstate. While Nepal's tourism may hold great potential, instead of exploring ideas to promote tourism, they project Nepal as the only country people from



all over the world should be visiting. When talking about hydropower potential, they too convincingly sell the idea of making Nepal rich by selling electricity, completely ignoring the complicated - not just technical but geopolitical - process involved.

Making Nepal "a hub" has become a new fad in recent times—tourism hub, IT hub, education hub. There is frivolity and shallowness in ideas, with creativity and innovation clearly lacking.

In this context, the Sagarmatha Sambaad, touted to be like the World Economic Forum of Davos and the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, could offer an opportunity for a fresh start and help revive Nepal's global relevance. By positioning itself as a convener of critical global discussions - on climate change, Himalayan preservation, sustainable development and more - Nepal can carve out a niche identity as a small nation with big ideas.

Concerns, however, remain, as this will require more than just hosting

an event. It will require an elaborate strategic plan, building goodwill with countries around the world, and engaging with global leaders and stakeholders - a remarkable choreography in itself for which Nepal needs to pull out all stops.

A flamboyant idea does not necessarily yield the desired results unless concerted and earnest efforts are made, and this is where Nepali politicians have failed to make a mark. If executed well, the Sagarmatha Sambaad could be a launchpad for new ideas; otherwise, it would turn into nothing but another vanity project. Is Nepal willing to embrace change and build a narrative that resonates far beyond its borders? And most importantly, are Nepalis willing to shed outdated nationalist narratives?

Nepal's selling point has grown increasingly blunt: A lack of a distinctive edge means it barely cuts a swath in today's world order.

The Kathmandu Post/ANP

CROSSWORD

NO-293030

ACROSS

1 Private meeting for cabinet (6)

5 Cold disc forces rendition of Rita Ora's debut musical composition (10)

9 Harry Enfield met corruption (12)

10 Inside soccer and Pythagoras meeting spot (4)

11 Blush covers breaking news: vacuous actor reveals masculine habits (8)

12 Influence of good man caught in honey trap (6)

13 Register old design (4)

15 Due to be sold overseas - or to European Community (8)

18 Bishop on course that's short and sweet (6)

19 Completely understand the women's missing voice (6)

21 Saatchi's opening with good artist occasionally making animation (6)

23 Firm breast not completely seen - (6)

breaking the watershed - it's cheating (8)

25 Femme fatale's make up (4)

26 Ultimately you auction Dal off to the museum - happy with lack of diversity (10)

27 Fireproof top carried by online fashion retailer (8)

28 Isolated - perhaps Messi's lost one yard (6)

DOWN

2 Superior Italy in match with English (5)

3 Rowwell wanting base to take alien order without researching satellite dish (5,4)

4 Something drawn by Tician is layered (6)

6 Restyled mod band is neater - they accept change (5,7)

6 Perhaps Springbok to run off after six footer (8)

7 Beyonce first to sing once free - Put A Ring On it follows (5)

8 Raab, maybe visiting Crete - if constituents agitated, it's not ideal (9)

14 Regularly taking volleys - initially most players improve action during school games periods (9)

16 Skilled worker in boat's crew (9)

17 Hammer from ex-students with one who skipped school about to replace cape from Amazon (9)

20 Decorative strip bearing motto in small capitals on mug (8)

22 Blended pure with Indian bread (5)

24 Clearly obvious, in retrospect - expiring extreme elements of Labour (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

ACROSS: 1. MEETING; 2. BUST; 3. BUST; 4. BUST; 5. BUST; 6. BUST; 7. BUST; 8. BUST; 9. BUST; 10. BUST; 11. BUST; 12. BUST; 13. BUST; 14. BUST; 15. BUST; 16. BUST; 17. BUST; 18. BUST; 19. BUST; 20. BUST; 21. BUST; 22. BUST; 23. BUST; 24. BUST; 25. BUST; 26. BUST; 27. BUST; 28. BUST; 29. BUST; 30. BUST; 31. BUST; 32. BUST; 33. BUST; 34. BUST; 35. BUST; 36. BUST; 37. BUST; 38. BUST; 39. BUST; 40. BUST; 41. BUST; 42. BUST; 43. BUST; 44. BUST; 45. BUST; 46. BUST; 47. BUST; 48. BUST; 49. BUST; 50. BUST; 51. BUST; 52. BUST; 53. BUST; 54. BUST; 55. BUST; 56. BUST; 57. BUST; 58. BUST; 59. BUST; 60. BUST; 61. BUST; 62. BUST; 63. BUST; 64. BUST; 65. BUST; 66. BUST; 67. BUST; 68. BUST; 69. BUST; 70. BUST; 71. BUST; 72. BUST; 73. BUST; 74. BUST; 75. BUST; 76. BUST; 77. BUST; 78. BUST; 79. BUST; 80. BUST; 81. BUST; 82. BUST; 83. BUST; 84. BUST; 85. BUST; 86. BUST; 87. BUST; 88. BUST; 89. BUST; 90. BUST; 91. BUST; 92. BUST; 93. BUST; 94. BUST; 95. BUST; 96. BUST; 97. BUST; 98. BUST; 99. BUST; 100. BUST.

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



Opinion

SATURDAY, JANUARY 25, 2025

MODERN COOPERATIVES

Union home minister Amit Shah

The cooperative sector will be modernised with computerisation and data centres. Multi-modal facilities to alleviate farmers and farming are underway. We are working on huge godowns



BUDGET FOCUS

THE GOVT NEEDS TO ACT TO PROTECT INDUSTRIES AND TO FOSTER THEM TO CREATE MORE JOBS

Reduce tax disputes

As amnesties have limited utility, simplified rules and an efficient resolution mechanism will help

INDIA HAS SEEN multiple tax amnesty programmes, starting with the "Tyagi scheme" of 1951 and the "sixty-fifty scheme" of 1965. There was even a disclosure of wealth scheme (1985). Some of these, notably the Voluntary Disclosure of Income Scheme (VDIS), 1997, and Vivad se Vishwas, 2020, have shown satisfactory efficacy in persuading the taxpayers to report unreported/under-reported income, and resolve the disputes by paying reduced penalty or tax amount. However, these schemes have also constantly come under flak for the "moral hazard" involved in them and the alleged tacit encouragement they provide for non-compliance.

The legal tenability of such schemes, however, has been upheld by the courts, on the grounds that economic legislation is largely the exclusive domain of the legislature. As the moral and legal debates are thus going in a certain direction, the fact remains that amnesties over decades haven't really helped reduce pendency of tax disputes and litigation. Also, it seems their utility is increasingly on the wane, partly due to increased frequency of such gestures. The Budget FY24 unveiled Direct Tax Vivad Se Vishwas 2.0 and a goods and services tax amnesty, both of which apparently haven't made much headway since. By the way, there has lately been a crescendo of demand for a new Customs amnesty.

The backlog of appeals at various layers of tax litigation/dispute resolution is not only huge, but growing even in proportion to the tax revenues. At last count, over half a million direct tax cases were lying with the first appellate body — the commissioner of I-T appeals (CIT) — itself. It typically takes about five years for a case to proceed further from the CIT level. In a vast number of cases, especially where the stakes involved are more than ₹5 crore, the disputes escalate to the Supreme Court, and the resolution takes as long as 15 years on average. Direct tax cases locked in disputes jumped from ₹20.8 lakh crore or 8.9% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021-22 to ₹31 lakh crore (9.6%) in 2023-24. In the run-up to Budget FY26, tax experts have therefore put this issue at the forefront of their expectations from it, in the form of policy steps and robust institutional remedies.

True, at any given time, tax disputes are bound to exist, and litigation as a means for resolution is inevitable. But unresolved disputes in direct taxes alone being over 60% of the size of the Union Budget is too high and unacceptable for a country that has limited fiscal resources and a low tax-GDP ratio. At the same time, the issue of private capital getting blocked under tax disputes is eminently avoidable when all government policies are ostensibly directed at raising the investment rate. Most tax disputes are finally settled by the judicial authorities in the taxpayer's favour. Given this, the rule that 20% of the outstanding tax demand must be deposited with the I-T department before seeking a stay on it from the appellate tribunal appears as cause locking of working capital. A less aggressive and more pragmatic approach to tax assessment is called for. Field formations of the tax department must be sensitised to refrain from blind pursuit of revenue maximisation. The laws could be tweaked to facilitate settlement of disputes up to certain thresholds at the assessment stage itself, with a formal peer review mechanism.

Revive manufacturing growth

NAGESH KUMAR

Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development



ture development would help to crowd in private investment.

The Budget should bolster growth engines not only to revive the growth rate but also accelerate it from 6-7% to the 7-8% range in the medium term. The criticality of decent job creation demands that these engines focus on accelerating the manufacturing sector, particularly the labour-intensive industries.

Despite India's natural advantage in labour-intensive sectors, Indian-made goods are increasingly giving way to imported ones as evident from shopping malls which are full of goods that are not made in India — be it garments, artificial flowers, glassware, crockery, plastic ware, furniture, and decorative items, among other household goods, often sold under Indian brand names.

These rather simple technology products have been made by Indian micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and larger firms for decades. The July 2024 Budget extended the production-linked incentives (PLI) to two labour-intensive sectors, namely leather and toys, beyond the 14 sunrise sectors that were already covered. It is time to focus attention on apparel or

ready-made garments.

Why the apparel sector? Not only because apparel is among the highest employment-generating sectors, but also because India has the best chance of succeeding here. India has the advantage of a full value chain, right from growing cotton to yarn to fabrics to garments in the country, besides the cost of labour. Yet India fares poorly among the top exporters of apparel with \$18 billion

worth of exports and a marginal 3.6% share of the global market in 2022. China exported more than 10 times at \$182 billion, Bangladesh's exports were worth \$45 billion, and Vietnam \$35 billion. The ongoing restructuring of global corporations focusing on diversification on a China-1 basis, particularly in the context of the expected high Trump tariffs on Chinese exports (and in the context of

Bangladesh facing political uncertainties), may offer a great opportunity to India.

Different studies, including the India Industrial Development Report 2024-25 prepared by the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development, have pointed to the small scales of operations in India being suboptimal for the poor performance in the apparel sector. This Budget may con-

The finance minister's key priority would be to revive the growth rate of the economy by building on the momentum in the govt capex

sider extending PLI, among other incentives, to push large business houses to foster garment exports in a big way. Many large business houses, including Aditya Birla Group, Tata, Reliance, and Raymond, have been active in garment retail (often outsourced from Chinese manufacturers). They need to be pushed to not only localise garment manufacturing within the country for local and export markets, but also leverage their global alliances to create jobs and incomes. If some incentivisation like PLI helps, it would be worthwhile.

The Budget could also address the larger issue of dumping of manufactured goods from labour-intensive consumer goods to intermediate goods such as steel and machinery from China. To become the "factory of the world", China has built huge capacities for production of all manufactured goods. However, the rising protectionist backlash has affected the ability of China to export them to advanced economies. Hence, dumping their goods in India's fast-growing markets, with the expanding middle class becoming an easy target, is a convenient option. *Nikkei Asia* reported that dumping from China in Southeast Asia had led to the closure of over 2,500 factories in Thailand alone in the past year, forcing the government to take steps to protect the local industry.

The threat of dumping to destroy the local industry, especially the MSMEs and millions of jobs, is real. The government needs to act not only to protect these industries but also to foster them to create more jobs, taking advantage of growing demand. The Budget could initiate action in that direction.

Views are personal

AI videos from China are coming for the world

CHINESE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE companies are laser-focused on closing the development gap with the US. Despite Washington's efforts to hold the industry back, it's proving it can stay competitive with Silicon Valley.

I spent some time playing around with Vidu 2.0, a revamped AI video generator that has been dubbed a domestic rival to OpenAI's Sora. Released last week by Shengshu Technology — a Beijing-based start-up with ties to the backbone of Chinese AI innovation, Tsinghua University — the public platform lets anyone from around the world turn images into short videos.

There were a number of inconsistencies in some of the clips I created: wonky facial expressions, limb movements that seemed to defy the laws of physics, and other clear indications that these were AI-generated. (These limitations also seem to plague industry-leader Sora). But I was most impressed by its speed. In a matter of seconds, I was able to create fake clips of Donald Trump crying or romantically embracing Elon Musk. The company says the real breakthrough is its ability to cut the costs associated with this technology, claiming its short-form video content is produced at less than 5% of what the industry average.

Vidu 2.0's release came on the heels of another unexpected AI development from China: the launch of DeepSeek-V3 last month. Not only did this large language model score impressively on global benchmarks, but it was reportedly developed and trained at a remarkably low cost. The advancements are a timely reminder for the new US administration that now would be a good time to examine how effective its export controls and other policies have been in impeding China's AI sector. They also expose how deeply Beijing's values are being infused into this emerging technology.

Vidu 2.0 offers an English-language interface, as Shengshu Technology seems to be targeting the international and US markets amid domestic macroeconomic uncertainty. But it didn't take long for the tool to expose its roots. When I tried to make a clip of Chinese President Xi Jinping, my input photo and request were immediately denied. The platform must follow regulations, and it's not a bad thing that a tech firm blocks the images of political figures from being manipulated. It seemed odd that I could easily make Trump break down in tears, but couldn't generate one of Xi.

Then, the evidence of political views baked into DeepSeek was well. When I asked the chatbot about the Chinese Communist Party's human rights track record in Xinjiang, it spewed a response celebrating how the CCP is "comprehensively advancing the cause of human rights," and the "harmonious coexistence of various ethnic groups" in the northwestern province. It's a far cry from the views of international organisations.

As more people turn to Chinese AI tools for everything from homework help to creating social media content, how these biases play out could have unforeseen consequences. There's also a mountain of international concerns surrounding AI-generated videos, specific to tools like Vidu, that can't be overlooked. Multimedia clips could sow chaos and confusion by convincingly mimicking someone else's likeness, including public figures. Globally, there have been mounting fears about deepfakes being used to target, deceive, and harass individuals, or even to generate non-consensual pornography. There are also reports that Beijing has exploited AI video technology in the past to spread pro-China and anti-US propaganda on a massive scale.

As more companies in China and the US release these tools to the public, policymakers must keep pace with safety protections. There are myriad guardrails in place on Vidu to prevent abuse, and they seem to be improving. AI-generated videos have also quietly emerged as a top priority for the central government. State-backed *Global Times* has repeatedly signalled its stamp of approval, touting that AI-generated content is its domestic film and TV production is "about to boom".

Producing longer clips, or hyper-realistic deepfakes, is still a tedious and time-consuming process for users on Vidu. Videos are currently up to only eight seconds long. But they offer a hint at what's to come, with Beijing's blessing — so long as they adhere to its politics. It's in an increasingly crowded field, with start-ups from Zhipu AI and MiniMax to giants like ByteDance and Alibaba Group Holding also offering video-generating products. The breakthrough that makes these offerings cheaper gives them a competitive edge when trying to tap into global markets. This should put people on notice far beyond Silicon Valley.



CATHERINE THORBECKE
Bloomberg

A vision for 5 crore jobs in the heartland



TV MOHANDAS PAI
NISHA HOLLA

Respectively chairman and research fellow, Sonex Capital

INDIA HAS UNDERGONE transformative progress over the past decade under the National Democratic Alliance government, addressing two significant challenges. First, the nation has seen the largest development surge in its history, providing essential amenities such as housing, water, and electricity. Second, extensive infrastructure has been built to connect the country's diverse regions. As the world's fastest-growing large economy, India must focus on creating high-quality jobs for its burgeoning workforce, particularly in its heartland.

Economic growth and employment trends

India's nominal gross domestic product (GDP) has grown from ₹113.5 trillion in FY14 to an estimated ₹324.1 trillion in FY25, achieving a remarkable 10% compound annual growth rate and a cumulative growth of 185% over 11 years. This economic expansion has been accompanied by a rise in formal employment, as evidenced by data from the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees State Insurance (ESI) systems. These reliable databases, linked to Aadhaar, track actual contributions, reflecting genuine job creation.

Despite challenges posed by the pandemic, EPF and ESI subscriptions have rebounded strongly. In FY24 alone, the EPF recorded 1.64 crore new subscribers, rising from 1.38 crore in FY22 and 1.58 crore in FY23. Aided in FY25, from April to October, 1.1 crore new subscribers have been recorded. The ESI

recorded 1.67 crore new enrollments in FY24 following 1.49 crore in FY22 and 1.67 crore in FY23. While there is considerable overlap between the two databases, these trends indicate robust employment generation.

Data also indicates genuine employment creation rather than mere formalisation. For instance, 56,023 establishments began contributing to the EPF for the first time in FY24, formalising 11.2 lakh jobs, while the remaining 1.53 crore represent new job creation. Additionally, over 48-50% of new jobs are filled by individuals aged 18-25 years across the two databases, further highlighting genuine opportunities for young workers. It is unlikely that such a high proportion of young individuals would be accounted for if these were merely existing jobs being formalised.

However, challenges remain. Many jobs pay less than ₹20,000 per month, and a significant portion of the workforce transitioning from agriculture to industry and services requires skilling, upskilling, and access to local opportunities. Encouragingly, women's participation in the workforce has increased substantially, rising from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2022-23, driven largely by self-employment and the growth of self-help groups under the Deendayal Anty-

odaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission. Creating suitable local employment remains crucial to sustaining this trend.

The case for SEZs

The upcoming Budget 2025-26 offers a unique opportunity to address these challenges and capitalise on recent successes. Establishing special employment zones (SEZs) could serve as a transformative strategy to create five crore jobs over five years in India's heartlands.

These zones would:

Businesses registering in SEZs would benefit from tax deductions, encouraging long-term investment and sustainable growth

Provide employer incentives: Employers would receive grants of ₹2,000 per month per new employee for the first 24 months, along with coverage of EPFO and ESI contributions. These incentives would help offset training costs and productivity gains during the initial phase.

Promote labour-intensive jobs: Significant investments would establish industry clusters in 400 backward districts and 1,000 tier-II/III/IV towns, strategically located near surplus labour markets. The government can promote labour-intensive industries in these SEZs to maximise employment generation and skilling possibilities. Numerous labour markets are moving away from China due to the increase in labour and living costs there. Establishing industries that cater to

these markets will create tremendous opportunities in India.

Encourage women's workforce participation: By providing local employment opportunities and integrating the Kaushal scheme for skill development, SEZs could address commuting and relocation challenges faced by women, further boosting their participation.

Offer tax incentives: Businesses registering in SEZs would benefit from tax deductions, encouraging long-term investment and sustainable growth.

Realising the vision

Achieving this ambitious goal requires substantial budgetary allocation in 2025-26 and sustained investments in subsequent years. This funding would drive the creation of globally competitive clusters; foster complementary urbanisation to support industrial hubs; and enhance workforce skilling and ensure fair wages, verified through EPF or ESI contributions.

The establishment of SEZs would represent a visionary step toward creating five crore new jobs and empowering India's heartlands. With a robust framework of incentives, infrastructure, and skilling, these zones could transform India's heartlands into growth engines, enabling backward districts to outpace state growth averages. By addressing employment challenges strategically, India can unlock the aspirations of its workforce and ensure inclusive economic progress.

—Bal Govind, Noida

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A mockery of democracy

Apropos of "It's raining handouts" (FE, January 24), the election campaign in Delhi has become a soap war between parties that are competitively offering goodies in cash, kind, and services to gullible voters. Election manifestos are promissory notes now, not statements of future plans and policies. The Reserve Bank of India has repeatedly cautioned against fiscal

repercussions of such giveaways, highlighting how they erode states' ability to invest in long-term development. Many states, already burdened with high deficits, are resorting to increased borrowing to fund these schemes. Maharashtra is the latest example. The freebie culture is not only vitiating the electoral process but also making a mockery of Indian democracy. The Election Commission should take notice of this. —Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

'Revdi culture' not going anywhere

Although Prime Minister Narendra Modi had asked to end the 'revdi culture' in Indian politics, his party is not walking the talk. Instead, in the national capital it looks like that all three major parties — Aam Aadmi Party, Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party — are trying to outdo each other by offering various kinds of sops to Delhi voters. What is ironic is

that despite seeing how Himachal Pradesh and Punjab are struggling with their finances after promising various freebies to their voters, none of the three parties have learnt their lessons. They ought to be more pragmatic and reasonable in their approach. It is certain that the freebie culture is not going anywhere, however sad it is. —Bal Govind, Noida

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Loans and liabilities

SC tells banks to fix property title checks

THE Supreme Court's ruling on improper loan sanctions by banks underscores a crucial flaw in India's banking practices — the lack of robust title verification for mortgaged properties. This oversight jeopardises public funds, risks fraudulent transactions and compromises financial stability. Highlighting a specific case, the SC pointed out that loans sanctioned on properties with unresolved title disputes could have been avoided with rigorous title searches. Currently, banks rely on empaneled lawyers for these reports, but the absence of standardised guidelines has resulted in inconsistencies and errors. The judgment has rightly directed the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to collaborate with stakeholders to establish a uniform mechanism for title clearance reports.

The SC's proactive stance emphasises three significant aspects. First, it recommends criminal liability for bank officials who approve loans based on defective title reports, ensuring accountability within the sector. Second, the RBI must standardise the fees and quality benchmarks for title reports, discouraging cost-cutting measures that compromise accuracy. Lastly, banks are urged to prioritise diligence, preventing fraud and safeguarding public interest.

The directive also acknowledges practical challenges, such as the status of older or under-construction properties that often lack certificates. These grey areas necessitate legal clarity to balance regulatory compliance with operational feasibility. As loans against property represent a significant portion of banking portfolios, especially for small and medium enterprises, the sector must act swiftly. The RBI's adherence to the SC guidance is essential not only to restore public trust but also to fortify the financial system against vulnerabilities. In implementing these reforms, India's banking sector has an opportunity to set a precedent for due diligence and accountability in property-backed lending. The message is clear: public funds cannot be collateral damage in the race for profit.

Curbing cacophony

HC takes tough stand on use of loudspeakers

THE Bombay High Court has said that the use of loudspeakers is not an essential part of any religion. This is music to the ears of every Indian who is assailed by the not-so-divine din on almost a daily basis. Plaguing noise as a major health hazard, the court has directed law enforcement agencies to take prompt action against owners/users of loudspeakers that breach the decibel limits. Though the case pertains to Maharashtra, the public nuisance is prevalent countrywide. Loudspeakers or public address systems are brazenly used at places of worship, sometimes without even taking permission from the authorities. Fearful of hurting religious sentiments, the police are often reluctant to take action on complaints lodged by irate citizens. At times, even aggrieved persons shy away from informing cops as they are afraid of being targeted in the neighbourhood.

The Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules were framed 25 years ago with the objective of "maintaining ambient air quality standards in respect of noise". However, their enforcement has left a lot to be desired. Ironically, violators cite Articles 19 (freedom of speech and expression) and 25 (freedom of religion) of the Constitution to justify the disturbance caused by them. However, the Bombay HC has made it clear that these rights are not infringed upon if the go-ahead for installing loudspeakers is denied in public interest.

In these polarised times, public address systems have become instruments of religious one-upmanship. They played a role in the communal clashes that broke out in several states after Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti processions in 2022, prompting the UP Government to launch a crackdown on unauthorised loudspeakers at religious places. Such strict action needs to be taken across the country to save hapless people from becoming a forced audience. Their health and wellbeing depend a lot on a good night's sleep. As far as the priests and devotees are concerned, they should realise that loudness isn't next to godliness.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JANUARY 25, 1925

The unity conference

WE are as far from being pessimists as any human could be, but we confess that from what we have read of the preliminary deliberations of some of the sectional committees, we have no high hopes of an immediate solution of the communal problem being found as the result of the meeting of the Unity Committee at Delhi. The first essential thing for such a solution, the existence of the necessary atmosphere, seems to be wanting. In the first place, it is still imagined in some quarters that self-government is of more vital importance to one community than to another, hence the tendency on the part of some advocates of the supposed interests of the latter to exploit the zeal and earnestness of the former in the matter of self-government for their own communal purpose. The position taken up by those persons is different only in form from that which, in the days of the Khilafat agitation, was tensely summed up in the course of private talk, by more than one Muslim public man in the phrase, "Our Swaraj or our Khilafat". It was forgotten then that apart from its equal intrinsic importance to all communities, Swaraj was essential for the Muslim community in India acquiring that political power which alone could give it an effective voice in international affairs. It is equally forgotten now that Swaraj is essential for the Muslim community having that effective voice in national and communal affairs that is its birthright. Today, in spite of the advantages which majority communities have in some minor matters, in all matters of major importance, all communities are in the same position.

Better to jaw-jaw than to war-war

The bigger message to everyone is that Naya America has no problems talking to anyone

THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

IN the merry-go-round world of global politics, here's how the cookie is crumbling this week.

US President Donald Trump has told *Rox News* that he spoke to Chinese President Xi Jinping last week, just before his inaugural, on "Tiktok, trade and Taiwan" and that the conversation was friendly. Now we know that Trump had invited Xi to his inaugural too, but Xi sent Vice-President Han Zheng instead. Moreover, Trump has since both called off his proposed ban on TikTok as well as his campaign harrumph on imposing tariffs (as high as 60 per cent) on China. We also know that Indian officials in the embassy in Washington DC had requested the Trump transition team, on the eve of the inaugural, for an invite for Prime Minister Modi to attend. But Trump's men remonstrated, saying there was too much happening and not enough time — some such excuse.

Instead, they gave External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar a front-row seat to all the goings-on that afternoon. (No one knows where Han Zheng sat.) The Americans, keenly aware that perception is half of any foreign policy success, also organised a Quad meeting the day after — it sent a message to the Chinese that you may be snapping at our heels, but hey, we have India, Australia and Japan in our pack.

The bigger message to everyone, especially India, is that Naya America has no problems talking to anyone — it's enough to look around you and notice how nations are changing friends faster than the flow of the Ganga



OUTREACH: It's a good thing that PM Modi is seeking an early meeting with Trump. m

at the Maha Kumbh. One month ago, Trump was threatening hell or high water with Xi — he is now purring like a Siamese cat. And earlier this week, a team from Pakistan's ISI establishment flew to Bangladesh, for the first time since 2009 — mere days after a Bangladesh military delegation led by Lt Gen SM Kamrul Hassan, the Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division, flew to Islamabad.

In the middle of this churning, the only bond that has remained steadfast is the one that both sides define as being "higher than the mountains, deeper than the seas and sweeter than honey" — the one between Pakistan and China.

So dear Reader, as you watch the earth turn on its axis, watch also the shrivelling of old alliances and the thrill that comes with building new ones. In Punjab, you cast off the old and the unwanted at Lehri, because at Makar Sankranti, when the month of Magh unveils itself, a new world awakens.

See what Magh has heralded for the world so far: New friendships between the US and China, an underlining of old ties between China and Pakistan as well as an unusual intimacy

ling once again in South Asia.

India may be on the back foot in Bangladesh — which is why it's a good thing it is standing by its old friend, Sheikh Hasina. And since the ISI is back in Dhaka, you can bet your last taka that the attempt to destabilise India's North-east will be the new game in town.

The problem with New Delhi is that it allows emotion to come in the way of the games big nations play.

between Pakistan and Bangladesh — they were part of one country, after all, once upon a time, until the world shifted in 1971 and a new nation was born.

Now the world is shifting again. It's clear that the ISI is in charge of Bangladesh. Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus has turned out to be a 'mukhtad' who has played his role as saviour to the hilt — it doesn't matter if and when he moves on, Pakistan has won the latest round in the great game unfold-

2020, it is still unclear where the buffer zones lie and whether both sides are returning to a pre-April 2020 position.

Meanwhile, it's a good thing too that PM Modi is seeking an early meeting with Trump — he will understand the extent of the US-China tango that is currently unfolding, with Elon Musk in attendance as Chief Liaison Officer. Clearly both Trump and Musk want to rebalance the highly unequal trade that is currently in China's favour, but they have no problem talking to the enemy.

It's what Putin is also currently doing — circling, fencing, jousting with Trump. Let's talk, he's saying, what is it exactly that you want? Even as Putin rained destruction on his blood brothers in Ukraine these last two years, it is clear he has prepared for a conversation with Joe Biden's successor.

The problem with New Delhi is that it allows emotion to come in the way of the games big nations play. Unlike Trump and Putin and Xi — who are always willing to negotiate with their enemies because the first rule of thumb in all politics is to keep your friends close and your enemies closer — PM Modi won't talk to Pakistan for a number of reasons. Cross-border terrorism, anyone?

But then again the news is that Delhi is unhappy with Nepal PM KP Oli because he dared to first travel to Beijing instead of coming to Delhi, and so an Oli visit to Delhi is being forever postponed. It's another matter that the prime beneficiaries of both Pakistan and Nepal are China — so the mystifying question, why is India punishing the peoples of these countries even if it doesn't agree with their governments?

Ever wondered what prevents this incredibly diverse, ancient nation that has always followed its own rhythms from achieving greatness? In this month of Magh, the answers beckon, you just have to know where to look for them.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Good relations with our neighbours are essential for peace, stability and prosperity in the region. —Mamohan Singh

A grandfather who became a godfather

SOM DUTT VASUDEVA

I was born in Sultanwind village of Amritsar district in 1928. Few people know that Sultanwind residents played a significant role in the freedom struggle. Many of them were killed or injured in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Recently, I had a life-threatening accident, which left my left leg and shoulder fractured. As I reflect on my life, my thoughts turn to my late grandfather, who was the embodiment of simplicity, humility and love. A pure Brahmin who rectified *Bhajans*, he wore a simple *dhoti* and *khaddar kurta*. His life was marked by devotion not just to God but also to those around him. He was deeply revered in our village for his selflessness and kindness. Living a life of quiet dignity, he was always willing to help those in need.

A simple man running a modest shop, he made our lives rich in ways money could never measure. When my father abandoned me and my sick mother, it was my grandfather who took us in. Despite his meagre means, he provided shelter and care with a heart full of grace.

To make ends meet, he took up a job as a postman. At his age, this was no small task, yet he delivered the mail with unwavering dedication. Later, he became the village's branch postmaster, earning a modest Rs 6 a month. Despite his lack of formal education, he performed his duties with incredible efficiency, even though most postal records were in English, a language he was not familiar with.

With his small income from the shop and the post office job, he ensured that my mother and I had food, shelter and most importantly, the opportunity for me to pursue my studies.

Every day, he would set out for the Upper Bari Doab Canal before dawn, a bag in hand, followed by a pack of dogs. Whether it was the scorching summer heat or the winter chill, he carried on with his routine, sleeping in the shop without so much as a fan. He loved animals, especially cows. When one of his cows, entrusted to a friend for care, died, he wept like a child. Yet, even in his grief, he continued to care for us.

Before the Partition, he had earned a petition writer's licence; he served villagers by writing petitions in Urdu. When the language of administration was changed to Punjabi, he learned Gurmukhi, despite being over 70 at that time. His willingness to learn and adapt was remarkable — an example of perseverance that I carry with me to this day.

Amid every hardship, he believed that good days were ahead, and he instilled this hope in me. When I completed my law degree and became an advocate, he organised *langar* to celebrate my success. His pride in my achievements was a treasure that still fills my heart.

He lived to the age of 100. Had it not been for his love and support, my ailing mother and I would not have survived. He was like a demigod to us. He was not just a grandfather; he was a godfather, a beacon of strength and compassion. I will forever be indebted to him for his sacrifice, love and unwavering faith in me.

To those who are fortunate enough to have such elders, cherish them. The moral is simple: care for your elders and respect them. Do not abandon them in homes for the elderly at the mercy of strangers. They are the true pillars of our lives.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Look beyond freebies

Refer to 'The freebie race'; the BJP aiming to regain power in Delhi after nearly three decades, has unveiled a slew of promises that echo the strategy adopted by its main rival, the Aam Aadmi Party. Political parties generally try to woo the poorest sections with money. They sidestep critical issues such as poverty, environmental sustainability, urban planning and public health, which require urgent attention in cities like Delhi. India's progress hinges on balancing immediate welfare needs with the pursuit of long-term economic and social goals. A government's role is to ensure equality for all, besides freedom from hunger, disease and poverty, instead of doling out money to beneficiaries.

SS PAUL, NADIA (WB)

ECI a mere spectator

Apologies of 'The freebie race'; the main culprit behind the mad race to offer freebies to voters is the Election Commission of India (ECI), which is a toothless tiger devoid of preventive and punitive powers to stop political parties from making short-term, economically ill-conceived policies to grab votes. The ECI should be vested with powers to delist parties making a mockery of democracy. Freebies announced by national parties has skewed the playing field to the detriment of smaller parties, besides promoting a no-work culture.

ANIL VNAYAK, AMRITSAR

Proactive steps a must

Refer to 'Dog bite crisis'; the media is doing well to build public opinion and spur various stakeholders, especially the government, to initiate proactive steps to curb the dog bite epidemic. India has acquired the dubious distinction of being a haven for stray dogs. Animal lovers need to clarify whether animal rights take precedence over human rights. Experts believe that mass vaccination and sterilisation of dogs is not feasible in a resource-deficient country like ours. Any method that is adopted has to cover more than 80 per cent of the dog population to be effective.

VITULL K GUPTA, BATHINDA

Tackle canine menace

Apologies of 'Dog bite crisis'; stray canine bite cases are rising not only in Punjab but also across the country. Pet dogs, too, don't lag behind. Schoolchildren and senior citizens are the soft targets. Attacks by dogs disrupt children's studies, and their parents have to bear hefty medical expenses. However, it is worrisome that neither Central nor state governments are very serious about tackling this problem. Apart from launching awareness campaigns and conducting sterilisation drives, collaboration between the governments and municipal authorities concerned is the need of the hour to curb the menace.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Maha Kumbh phenomenon

The Maha Kumbh Mela figures on the UNESCO list as the largest peaceful religious congregation of pilgrims on earth. It is a festival of positivity and spiritual harmony. From Naga Sadhus to Aghoris and other pilgrims, the Maha Kumbh offers all of them a platform to achieve inner peace and connect with divinity. A dip in Triveni Sangam — the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati — is considered beneficial for washing away one's sins. A congregation of 450 million, including Indians and foreigners, in Prayagrah (Allahabad) is a one-of-a-kind phenomenon.

KIRTI WADHAWAN, KANPUR

Few takers for museums

Refer to 'India's museums reflect govt apathy to heritage'; for all the pride we take in the glories of the past, our indifference towards their preservation shows us in a poor light. Most of our museums are poorly maintained. Perhaps the general disinterest of the people, who avoid visiting museums, is mainly responsible for the state of affairs. Ironically, a religious symbol or idol found buried somewhere is likely to draw greater attention than a relic of outstanding historical value.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI



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

— Rammath Goenka

REFORM TAX LAWS IN BUDGET TO REDUCE COST OF COMPLIANCE

THE Union Budget is just round the corner and expectations are peaking over cuts in the personal income tax rates. While presenting her seventh budget last July, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had offered limited tax relief, which failed to improve individuals' purchasing power. The decline in wages and persistent rise in prices have tightened household budgets, which is reflected in private consumption steadily going south. If consumption grew at a mere 7.45 percent in the first quarter of 2024-25, the growth further slowed to 5.96 percent in the second quarter. So the upcoming budget needs to focus on boosting consumption—and one simple way is through tax cuts. Sitharaman had announced an overhaul of income tax laws last July; reports suggest the government may introduce a bill for it in the forthcoming parliamentary session. While such a legislative change takes its own time, Sitharaman might want to consider a partial rollout of tax reforms when she presents the budget next week.

The Income Tax Act 1961 has been amended almost every year. The countless deletions and additions have rendered the Act incomprehensible to an average taxpayer, and have increased the cost of compliance and administration. They have also emerged as the biggest cause for litigation. Despite repeated attempts to rewrite it, the 1961 Act remains an unfinished agenda. Every effort to overhaul only makes one thing clear—that the old law is way too complicated, with provisions that are sometimes overlapping or contradictory, and even inconsistent with basic tax principles. It fails to deal with routine transactions, allowing for tax avoidance that has serious revenue consequences. In short, the current law goes against the goal of ensuring a reliable, equitable and non-distortionary source of revenue.

Tax reform is a complex economic and political process. Any proposed change must remove distortions and minimise the cost of compliance and administration. Importantly, it must include Adam Smith's doctrine of equity, economic efficiency and simplicity. While overhauling the tax laws, the government must remember that the purpose of taxation is not to encourage growth; rather, it should be designed to be revenue-neutral. Income tax laws must be such that they are easy to obey, but hard to disobey.

PLOT SKILLS MAP BEFORE REFORMING HIGHER EDU

NDIAN students studying abroad are getting increasingly caught in geopolitical crossfires. A few years ago, the speed at which tens of thousands of students could be repatriated from places as farflung as Beijing and Kyiv depended on the diplomatic levers India could pull. Then an unseemly spat with Justin Trudeau's Canada furrowed the brows of lakhs of Indian parents whose kids study there. When Donald Trump won his second term with a hard message against immigrants, many Indian students started looking elsewhere as they realised staying back to earn dollars after getting the degree would be tougher. So it's no surprise that France is now trying to get a larger slice of this lucrative market. The director of Paris's Sciences Po recently dinged his global competition when he said that, unlike other countries, France would not make it difficult for Indians seeking student visas.

The food fight is over a massive pie. Last year, the government informed parliament that more than 13 lakh Indian students were studying abroad and that the total had grown by about half in a decade. This outflow costs Indian families a lot—by one estimate, the forex outflow for studying abroad was almost \$50 billion in 2022. It also reflects a changing India. The richest fifth of the Indian population can now afford the costs that would have been out of reach for most of them even a decade ago. The number of seats in India, on the other hand, has not kept pace; nor has the number of top institutes. The latest Times Higher Education World University Rankings by Subject, released Thursday, accommodated only one Indian institute in its top 100 for the first time—the Indian Institute of Science, at the 99th spot.

Given this recent surge in outflow and increasing geopolitical uncertainties, the government might want to reorient a few plans beyond the weather-beaten demand-supply analysis. First, it should formulate curricula for the future economy as China did more than a decade ago. Second, it should map the skill requirements across industries—a plan more spoken of than acted upon. And then, it must incentivise universities to ramp up infrastructure and faculty to fit the new map. It's easier said, for sure. But the changing reality says the urgency to act is greater than ever before.

QUICK TAKE

QUIET, PLEASE

AT times, we might feel thankful that the holiest tenets of the largest religions were set before man harnessed electricity. So the rules for using modern-day equipment are left to interpretation by the judiciary. On Thursday, the Bombay High Court ruled that the use of loudspeakers is not an essential part of any religion. Directing the Mumbai police to strictly implement noise control rules, Justices Ajay Gadkari and Shyam Chandak rightly observed, "Noise is a major health hazard on various aspects." All religions make our air more hazardous in this manner. If we want our cities to be more liveable, we must apply the rules without fear or favour.

ON April 3, 1950, law minister B R Ambedkar announced the formation of an unofficial advisory committee for drafting the Hindu Code Bill. On hearing this, Congress leader and Constituent Assembly member

Ammu Swaminathan created a storm while seeking the participation of women's organisations in the talks. When she mentioned that the bill would affect women more than men, the male-dominated House erupted in laughter.

Instead of being silenced, she called out the blatant display of sexism in the country's highest law-making body, the provisional parliament: "Every time that any question of women's rights comes up in this House, there is general laughter as if it is a joke. I don't mean it as a joke. I would like the law minister to tell us whether, in view of the fact that the Hindu Code really affects women very largely, and there are several women's organisations in India, they have been asked to send representatives to this advisory committee." She didn't drop the questions till Ambedkar gave her a clear reply that women's organisations were indeed invited.

This was just one of the many instances of sexism I came across while researching a book on the women in India's Constituent Assembly. Women had to continuously battle patriarchy in their fight for progressive laws and political representation. Most of the rights that Indian women enjoy today are a result of their visionary thinking, perseverance and advocacy. Unfortunately, their achievements are often attributed to prominent male leaders and their names remain invisible.

Whenever I talk about feminist leaders from pre-independent India, I make it a point to mention the decades of struggle they endured to give Indian women the most basic of rights—the right to vote. It is important to highlight this fact against misinformation that often paints a false image of Indian women getting the right easily, without struggle.

In 1917, a delegation of women activists from across India led by Sarojini Naidu made a representation to the Montague-Chelmsford Commission demanding women's suffrage. The British government formed the commission to recommend how to introduce self-governance in India; it was to be the basis for the Government of India Act 1919.

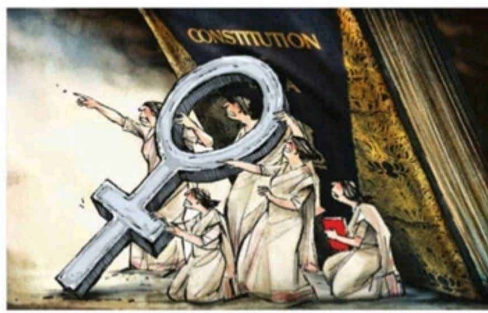
The suffragists decided to adopt a multi-pronged approach. In 1918, some of them travelled to Britain to consoli-

date support, while Naidu moved resolutions at the Congress sessions in Bijnor and Bombay.

THE FOUNDING MOTHERS OF OUR CONSTITUTION

ANGELICA ARIBAM

Lead author of 'The Fifteenth Founder of Future First Foundation'



date support, while Naidu moved resolutions at the Congress sessions in Bijnor and Bombay.

They won a monumental victory when the 1919 Act allowed the provincial legislatures to enfranchise women if they deemed it fit. Over the next few years, women leaders agitated in the provinces and secured the right to vote in Madras, Bombay, United Provinces and Bengal. But only a fraction of the women population could vote, as it was granted conditionally on property ownership, income or other criteria.

The leaders expanded their advocacy and fought for universal adult franchise. To galvanise international support, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Ammu Swaminathan and a few other women

leaders travelled to the League of Nations in Geneva. This move received widespread coverage at home and abroad. Soon after, the Government of India Act 1935 was passed. It enabled as many as 6 million Indian women to contest and vote in elections. Through their activism, these women leaders created widespread acceptance of the idea of universal adult franchise, culminating with its inclusion in the Constitution.

Their work was not limited to political rights, but also included social reform. Most of the women in the Constituent Assembly were also members of the All-India Women's Conference, a prominent organisation formed in 1927. It fought to ban polygamy, outlaw child marriage, raise the age of consent, and give prop-

erty rights to women. Their social reform agenda was often at odds with religious practices, and it was felt that the only way to ensure gender parity was with the adoption of secular civil codes.

In the Constituent Assembly, Hansa Mehta and Amrit Kaur fought to incorporate uniform civil code as a fundamental right. On November 22, 1949, Mehta appealed, "We have too many personal laws in this country and these personal laws are dividing the nation today. It is therefore very essential if we want to build up one nation to have one civil code." It was seriously deliberated upon and included in the directive principles of state policy because of their efforts. Kaur and Begum Qudsia Rasul's passionate pleas led to the removal of religion-based special privileges.

Naturally, the women leaders were ardent supporters of the progressive Hindu Code Bill. But they faced stiff opposition from the male members who considered provisions such as the right to divorce and daughters' right to inherit as Western influences. The women spoke vehemently against this line of argument. G Durgabai said, "The smritis themselves have recognised the share of the daughter." Kamala Chaudhri invoked traditional folk songs.

The orthodox members didn't budge. Displeased, Durgabai and Renuka Ray complained to Jawaharlal Nehru. He assured that the laws would be passed after the first elected government was formed—and he kept his word. The rest, as they say, is history.

Though they were only a mere 5 percent of the 299-member Constituent Assembly, the women leaders were a force of nature. Their contributions weren't limited to the Constitution. They took on prominent roles in the newly independent democratic country.

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit scaled heights in diplomacy. Kaur was the first woman to be a Union minister and was instrumental in establishing the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. Durgabai was a founding member of the Planning Commission. Annie Mascarene and Renuka Ray were ministers in their respective state governments. Sarojini Naidu went on to become the first female governor, and Uchcheta Kripalani, the first female chief minister.

As we celebrate our 76th Republic Day, let us remember these firebrand leaders. And reflect for a moment—what would the status of Indian women and girls be without their hard work? (Views are personal)

TECH US TO THE FUTURE

DONGAL in Tamil Nadu is the time during which people in several other parts of India serenaded the late winter winds by bringing kites to celebrate the Sun's movement northwards. But this season, we saw flights of a different kind in Tamil Nadu—of drones.

Tamil Nadu's first batch of women trained under prime minister's Drone Didi scheme are much in demand to help farmers spray fertilisers and pesticides. They even wear headsets by remotely navigating the heavy machines. So much is the promise of the scheme that a Drone Didi has been invited to attend President Draupadi Murmu's Republic Day party in acknowledgment of a new league of entrepreneurs.

From robotics to genomics and 3D printing to artificial intelligence, emerging technologies require a new kind of imagination, skill sets, institutional behaviour and policy measures. Unsurprisingly, both excitement and disorientation over these new technologies are high at present. The good news is that grassroots measures like Drone Didi signal a heightened sensitivity and sensibility around them in our policy circles. Drone education, in particular, is mushrooming across India.

That's not all. Last week, advertisements for robotic surgery from a local hospital stared at me from newspapers, while a small industrial shed in my neighbourhood started offering 3D printing services.

At about the same time, from the other side of the world we saw images of four tech titans—Sundar Pichai of Google, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Elon Musk of Tesla and Mark Zuckerberg of Meta—photographed together as Donald Trump took office for his second term at the White House. These four gents are today among the planet's richest and the most influential, with age still on their side, thanks to their ability to spot and ride new technological waves.

The next wave may well wash ashore an entirely new bunch. And for all we know, the global high tech talent shift to another country by then as technology alters the geopolitical landscape. And all waves start with a ripple.

The Drone Didi can be part of one start ripple being set off. The drone schools of today can learn from the air hostess academies that had sprung up two decades ago, when the now-defunct Air Sahara, Kingfisher Air, Air Deccan



MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

REVERSE SWING

and Jet Airways had boosted demand for in-flight crews. These airlines may have shuttered, but the business of flying has expanded. That's precisely the lesson for the drone schools—new technologies can create new winners in manner that's not easy to envisage and a little faith in the underlying business proposition goes far.

Technology dominated the headlines in other ways, too. Trump's announcement of a \$500-billion plan for invest-



The Drone Didi scheme can transform agriculture as well as train a new generation of grassroots workers. As new technologies throw opportunity-driven threats and threat-driven opportunities at us, we may get to nurture a new generation of entrepreneurs

ments in AI infrastructure found an echo in the Swiss Alps, where global leaders discussed AI at the World Economic Forum. At Davos, Tata Consultancy Services chief K Krithivasan saw a clear possibility that his company would need to hire much more for AI work. Mohit Joshi of Tech Mahindra talked about explosive AI-led growth in this corner. Cognizant's Ravi Kumar said nearly a third of software code—the bread-and-butter for Indian IT companies till a few years ago—is now written by machines. But the overall tech spend is such that it has started spelling more opportunities than threats.

Inspired by the tech talk, I asked an AI engine to help me chapterise a book

on new technologies and their practical applications. Its themes included 'interdisciplinary connections in technology' (picture a drone aided by AI to chase a fleeing criminal after spotting him in a crowd), 'prosthetic development' using 3D printing, and 'ethical considerations'. From medicine to public policy and art installations, the new possibilities seem endless.

As I see it, each of these fields can do with its equivalents of Drone Didi, if only the education system and entrepreneurial flourish are matched by government push. Some of that seems to be happening. We need to augment that with a paradigm shift in the way education is delivered. Some of the new technologies are both users and enablers of new ways of learning. Imagine 3D-printed lab models that make learning easier, with remote teachers using interactive videos.

Earlier this month, India volunteered to fund a study on mapping skills gaps—something G20 leaders had agreed on during India's presidency of the group in 2023. At home, the National Skill Development Corporation has partnered with a research firm for data-driven insights to map the gaps across industries, so that new policies can be precisely targeted. Andhra Pradesh is carrying out a 'skill census', assisted by IT leader Infosys.

It is not for nothing that 'ecosystem' continues to be a favourite term in Silicon Valley. That's because each new technology needs an ecosystem—involving everything from education to execution and ethics—to thrive.

So the new technologies involve both opportunity-driven threats and threat-driven opportunities. To make the vision more palatable, we can imagine a latter-day James Bond who has to tackle new-age villains without having to stir from his seat—assisted by Drone Didi or AI Annas. Such a reverse swing might leave Bond shaken and stirred, but the match-up would be worth a watch.

(Views are personal) (On X @madversity)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Ancient alloy

Meteorite iron, a natural iron-nickel alloy, was used by various ancient peoples thousands of years before the Iron Age. The earliest known meteorite iron artefacts are nine small beads dated 3300 BCE, which were found in tombs in Gizeh in Egypt. We must study whether the articles found in Tamil Nadu are made from this material. Kopalle Murali Krishnamurthy, email

Legal philosophy

Ref: Why common law is sceptical of philosophy (Jan 24). The article adds to the wisdom of legal luminary K Parasaran. As a nonagarian, Parasaran delved into our ancient scriptures and affirmed that dharma and law were two sides of the same coin. Dharma protects laws as a part of it. It is for the judiciary to protect both for fair justice. Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Munambam land

Ref: MP's support to Munambam protest upsets UID balancing act (Jan 24). The Farook College is legally occupied by those holding a registered title deed and transaction documents. The ownership eligibility is also irrevocable by Kerala land laws. Then how can the waqf board directly confront the tenants? It can only take up the matter with the college. Sulaiman Ambalath, Thrissur

Health screening

Ref: Citizens in all Tamil Nadu districts under CM health insurance soon (Jan 24). The health minister said these facilities can be availed of under the state health insurance scheme without having to pay cash. This will surely help the rural poor and help screening for cancer. Sella Selvaraj, email

Immigrant rights

Ref: Pentagon deploys 1,500 troops along US-Mexico border (Jan 24). The decision raises concerns. What will happen to the US-born children of immigrants and lifelong immigrants who face these sudden changes? Such abrupt changes risk separating families and destabilising communities. It's fair to say that the rights of these immigrant families have been compromised with the recent provisions in the US. Astha Jha, Delhi

Youth icon

Ref: Honouring Netaji's legacy (Jan 23). Dharmendra Pradhan's article was an interesting read, as it shined light on the moral standards of today's youth. Netaji's life and contribution to the freedom struggle should bring a transformation in their lives. Aj S Sivan, Bhubaneswar

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, JANUARY 25, 2025

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

CONSTITUTION IS NOT A MERE LAWYERS' DOCUMENT, IT IS A VEHICLE OF LIFE, AND ITS SPIRIT IS ALWAYS THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE. — B R AMBEDKAR

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

DELHI & JAKARTA

As Indo-Pacific becomes a principal arena of global contestation, India and Indonesia need to reboot ties

FEW NATIONS in the world outside the Subcontinent are closer to India in terms of geography, history, culture, and modern political orientation than Indonesia. Yet, the relationship has never acquired the quantitative intensity and qualitative salience that it deserves. The visit of Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto this week to Delhi as the chief guest at this year's Republic Day celebrations will hopefully help lend the much-needed strategic content to the bilateral relationship. Indonesian leaders have been among the most frequent guests at the annual R-Day celebrations. Indonesian leader Sukarno was indeed the chief guest at the very first such celebrations in 1950. Hopes for a productive bilateral relationship and a shared leadership of post-colonial Asia as the founding members of the non-aligned movement never really materialised as Delhi and Jakarta drifted apart during the Cold War. It was only since the 1990s, when India sought to reconnect with South East Asia, that the relationship with Indonesia has begun to grow. Despite India's Act East Policy and the importance Delhi attaches to the Indo-Pacific, India's partnership with Indonesia remains well below its potential.

President Subianto's visit should help the Indian establishment and the foreign policy community to better appreciate the strategic significance of Indonesia. It is the fourth largest by population in the world. With its economy at \$14 trillion, Indonesia is well poised to power its way into the top 10 economies of the world by 2030. As a large archipelagic nation, the thousands of Indonesian islands are the bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The sea lanes of communication traversing the Indonesian waters form the lifeline of global commerce between East Asia, India, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Rich in natural resources, Indonesia is vital for the economic growth of India and the rest of Asia. Indonesia also forms the backbone of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations at the centre of regional economic integration as well as political and security consultations.

As he arrives in India, the popular approval of Subianto, who took charge of the nation last October, is soaring beyond 80 per cent. Coming to Delhi quite early in his tenure, the Indonesian President is well placed to give a big boost to the bilateral relationship. Delhi and Jakarta need to accelerate the trade relations currently at a paltry \$30 billion, make a vigorous effort to deepen the interaction between the two economies, enhance connectivity, bring together the tech communities, intensify maritime security cooperation, step up military exchanges, and launch defence industrial collaboration. At a time when great power relations are in a flux and the Indo-Pacific has become the principal arena of global contestation, Delhi and Jakarta need to rediscover the logic of bilateral and regional cooperation that brought them together in the middle of the 20th century. Delhi, however, will be wise to avoid viewing the relationship with Jakarta through the lens of China or a crude geopolitical prism. Indonesia has a strong tradition of following balanced relations with all the major powers. Delhi should focus on advancing the partnership with Jakarta to realise the full potential of bilateral cooperation and promote peace and prosperity in Asia.

BUDGET'S CONTEXT

Not-so-impressive results of India's largest consumer goods seller, cement maker and private lender tell a larger story

HINDUSTAN UNILEVER HAS posted a 1.8 per cent year-on-year sales revenue growth in October-December 2024. That makes it a sixth consecutive quarter (from July-September 2023) of sub-4 per cent top-line growth for the fast-moving consumer goods bellwether. Moreover, volume growth has been flat with "downtrading" or sales of small packs outgrowing large packs. UltraTech Cement's domestic sales volume grew 10 per cent annually during the last quarter, but revenues were up by just 2.9 per cent, reflective of pressures from a demand slowdown. HDFC Bank's gross bad loans have risen by 16.1 per cent, and from 1.26 per cent to 1.42 per cent of its total outstanding advances, in the last one year. The not-so-impressive results of India's largest consumer goods seller, cement maker and private lender tell a story of a struggling economy.

This is the sobering context against which the Union Budget for 2025-26 would be presented next week. US President Donald Trump's threats of import tariff hikes, visa crackdowns and other immigration-related actions, in addition to capital outflows from a strong dollar and rising treasury yields, may be immediate sources of worry. But the rupee has stabilised somewhat since mid-January — actually strengthened to 86.2 to the dollar, from all-time lows of 86.7 — and the dollar index, too, has fallen from 110 to just over 107 levels. The Trump factor could well settle into an equilibrium, with the world and India learning to deal with it. The real worry is not external, but internal to India: Has its long-term growth story — which was never in doubt during the 2008 global economic crisis or even the 2013 taper tantrum and the 2020-21 pandemic — soured?

The coming budget should present an opportunity for the Narendra Modi government to unequivocally convey that India's growth story is intact and the country remains a compelling place for investors, both domestic and global, to put their money. A rationalisation of GST rates, which are clearly choking demand, is long overdue. So are unproductive expenditures, including on fertiliser and food subsidies, that can be redirected towards less market-distorting income support transfers and much-needed physical as well as social infrastructure. Consumption demand will return only when there are investments that create jobs and incomes. And those investments will come with demonstrable government commitment to macroeconomic stability, policy predictability and ease of doing business. The Modi government must send out one message from the budget — it means business.

ACTION REPLAY

In a world of highly competitive broadcasting rights, Australian Open's animated streaming is democratising access

IMAGINE WATCHING A high-stakes tennis match where the players cease to be human — not because adrenaline is pushing them to super-human feats — but because they are actually digital avatars, zipping across the court like they have had one too many cups of coffee. The Australian Open's latest experiment has given match broadcasts a twist — free, and streaming straight to YouTube, but overlaid with animation and playing after a lag of two minutes to avoid breach of broadcast contracts. The result has been an almost-audacious match experience: The New York Times reports, "Viewership has increased from 2,46,542 in the first six days of last year's event to 17,96,338 in the same timeframe this year." In a world of tightly-controlled and highly competitive television and streaming rights, the democratisation of access has been a game-changer.

The integration of animation, live data, and creative storytelling is a glimpse into the future of sports media, where accessibility, fan engagement and AI are likely to play a big role. Sports leagues such as NFL have already begun dabbling with the format. At the Australian Open, the broadcasts, conceived like video games, cover the three main courts, using data from the Hawk-Eye system (a technology that relies on high-speed cameras to track movement) before turning it into an animated transmission.

The Australian Open had begun the experiment in 2023, slowly scaling it up to its giddy popularity this year. But what's a blockbuster without some snags? In its first-round match, Carlos Alcaraz pumps his fists in the air after hitting a winner. The next moment, he disappears from his court, his racket and tennis ball doing a ghostly jig by themselves. Free, live (almost) and funny — even the glitches seem to enhance the game.



S RAVINDRA BHAT

EMERGING FROM COLONIAL rule, India that is Bharat saw its people transform into empowered citizens, putting together its Constitution, a full-fledged democracy with universal adult franchise. This bold assertion of the nation's democratic identity was in the wake of unparalleled sectarian violence. Thus, did we "step out from the old to new" with hopes in our hearts, and a resolve to succeed. Many were the prophets who predicted the quick collapse of our carefully drafted Constitution — a finely balanced system of governance, democratic freedoms to its citizens, a guarantee of equality in form and substance, assurance of dignity and fraternity to everyone, and universal adult suffrage, at a time when western nations did not provide such guarantees of equal participation or universal suffrage. The Constitution also held out the promise of social justice, of distribution of material resources for the good of the greatest number. Our birthright, our swaraj, was not only independence from the external ruler, but also the resolve to economically and socially emancipate our citizens.

At this 75th anniversary of our republic, there is much to celebrate. From 32 years, the average life expectancy of citizens is now 75 years. India has become one of the largest producers of foodgrains. Literacy rate has increased from 12 per cent to 75 per cent. In power generation, road and infrastructure development, we have made major strides. In size, our nation has the fifth largest economy globally. Our forays into space have shown spectacular success, with the soft landing of Chandrayaan-3's Vikram. Our election system and polity have shown a stability that stands in stark contrast with our neighbours, and even puts other democracies to shame.

The 75th anniversary of our Constitution is an opportune moment, also, for sombre reflection. What does our Constitution, and governance system mean to the weakest, most disempowered people, whose voices are mostly unheard? Our country has a starkly unequal distribution of wealth and income among its citizens. A tiny minority of our population earns the major share of its income.

Reflections on the eve of the 75th Republic Day

Assuring dignity involves going beyond providing basic human needs. It entails a commitment by the state and society to ensure what we have not achieved — the complete elimination of caste discrimination and caste stigmatisation involving performance of tasks such as manual scavenging by a section of the weakest, most vulnerable section of people. True dignity and fraternity means practice of an attitude which we have not yet displayed: That every human being is capable of doing everything; that the poorest and the weakest are equal in worth and as secure with full rights as citizens as any other.

Gross wealth of the nation no doubt has increased, but the spread and share of income is a matter of concern. Gender disparity is stark.

The Constitution guarantees dignity, justice (including social and economic) and fraternity, besides liberty. This guarantee of dignity and fraternity constitutes the essence of our basic rights, where individuals are bound to value each other's worth. This places greater responsibility on the state to ensure that each policy and law achieves the objective of meaningful access to education, public health, employment and a basic standard of living assuring self-worth and dignity to each citizen.

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The legal world, which has been a part of, needs to be reimagined. There is much to be desired in terms of realising the goal of quick and inexpensive justice. The oft-repeated refrain is that the legal system is inordinately slow. To the user, just that is true. But that fact alone should not obscure the crying need to address infrastructural and manpower issues that plague the courts.

For an estimated population of 1.4 billion or 140 crore people, the sanctioned strength of judges overall is just 25,081. There are a significant number of vacancies at any given time and for the available judges, there are a little over 20,000 court rooms. The case-loads which most judges are expected to handle is crushing and perhaps the world's largest: It could range from 60 to 150 cases each day. Most judges have little time to reflect, and their day is spent on managing the cases, getting on with trials and long hearings, piling over

masses of documents, and finally even after court hours, spending long hours, analysing facts, the law, and writing judgments.

There is an urgent need to develop long term plans to address the systemic challenges of the court system, be it infrastructure, identification of causes for case arrears, optimal caseload of judges. The legal system needs to evolve, and ensure quick, affordable justice delivery. Reforms in procedure and processes require cooperation with other wings of governance; an ongoing public dialogue, for achieving the goal of access to speedy justice. India is currently experiencing its own digital revolution impacting everyday life — from petty transactions or access to banking facilities, to online retail marketplaces and access to education. What has undoubtedly propelled the nation in terms of progress, also carries with it the perils of exclusion — exacerbated by geographical limitations, limited individual spending capacities, and low levels of digital literacy. This "digital divide" has rendered millions vulnerable, with regards to their rights, entitlements and access to essential services.

Lastly, efforts towards mitigating the disastrous impact of climate change on our geographically diverse and vast territory is the need of the hour. Experiencing an intensely warming climate, changing rainfall patterns, causing both droughts and flooding in equal measure across India, we face an imminent struggle that continues to adversely affect the state of public health, agriculture, nutrition, and public safety, the devastating impact of which will continue to be disproportionately felt by the marginalised.

Prosperity and well-being cannot be measured by gross national wealth, but the net feeling of well-being of each individual. Existing barriers, "narrow domestic walls", have to go. The challenge is how swiftly we as a nation can achieve equality, and justice — social, economic and political, assuring dignity of each individual.

The writer is a retired judge of the Supreme Court



GURJIT SINGH

A KEY OUTCOME of Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's visit to India is likely to be the establishment of a broader and more strategic partnership between the two nations. This is expected to encompass greater depth and diversity, reflecting Prabowo's aspirations to position Indonesia as a significant player on the global stage, beyond the confines of ASEAN. Prabowo's vision suggests an emphasis on greater strategic autonomy while navigating the complexities of the international order. In this, his perspectives align more closely with India.

During the second terms of Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, their respective foreign ministers, Retno Marsudi and S Jaishankar, forged an underplayed yet effective working relationship. Regular foreign ministerial consultations between the two nations gained momentum under them. This was further bolstered by India and Indonesia's consecutive presidencies of the G20 in 2022 and 2023.

While India and Indonesia do not always share identical worldviews or voting patterns in forums such as the United Nations, their increasing engagement has paved the way for a more coherent partnership. Prabowo, like Modi, is determined to elevate his country's global stature. A critical challenge lies in how Jaishankar builds a rapport with Indonesia's new foreign minister, Sugiono. A successful partnership could enhance the prospects of a high-profile Modi-Prabowo relationship — something the Delhi-Jakarta dynamic could not fully achieve.

BEYOND THE CHINA FACTOR

Indonesian President's visit could be a new turning point for an old partnership

While Indonesia is unlikely to deviate significantly from Chinese preferences due to its deep economic ties with Beijing, Prabowo's autonomous policymaking tendencies provide room for cooperation that transcends the 'China factor'. Prabowo has already made two trips to China — once as President-elect and another as President — highlighting the challenge of aligning Indonesia's stance with India's perspectives on China.

Indonesia's membership of BRICS, granted in 2023, presents another avenue for collaboration. Much like India and Brazil on BRICS platforms, India and Indonesia can leverage their partnership to bring strategic heft to this bloc. While Indonesia is unlikely to deviate significantly from Chinese preferences due to its deep economic ties with Beijing, Prabowo's autonomous policymaking tendencies provide room for cooperation that transcends the "China factor". Prabowo has already made two trips to China — once as President-elect and another as President — highlighting the challenge of aligning Indonesia's stance with India's perspectives on China.

India and Indonesia must also identify areas of collaboration beyond the China factor. The Indo-Pacific is one such domain. Indonesia, which initially displayed reticence on the Indo-Pacific concept, has evolved its stance significantly. Under Jokowi, Indonesia played a leading role in crafting ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This was instrumental in aligning the AOIP with India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) through a joint statement. Indonesia has committed to supporting the maritime resources pillar under the IPOI. By collaborating on projects within this pillar, the two nations can promote a pro-regional agenda beyond ASEAN, aligning with Prabowo's vision of creating an "ASEAN Plus" policy.

Another potential area is the development of trilateral partnerships. India and Indonesia, alongside Australia, already have a trilateral framework, though it lacks substantial content. Prabowo's visit to New Delhi, following

his engagement with Australia, could energise this. It can build upon the IPOI and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), with India set to assume its chairmanship this year. India and Indonesia can also engage more directly on how the ASEAN-plus-one, East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meetings progress. Both should have prior consultations to make a meaningful impact on such regional architecture. Myanmar, for instance, is an issue on which India and Indonesia have different views but have stayed in touch. This should expand. Indonesia should be invited to join the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to integrate it better with India's eastern neighbourhood.

Prabowo's visit to India also follows a successful visit by Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba to Jakarta. Japan has recently expanded its Official Security Assistance (OSA) policy to include Indonesia, providing defence-related support. This opens the door for a potential India-Japan-Indonesia trilateral partnership.

Leveraging platforms such as BRICS, the IPOI and trilateral frameworks with Australia and Japan, both India and Indonesia can forge a deeper partnership. While differences in perspectives, particularly regarding China, persist, the focus must remain on areas of convergence. A robust India-Indonesia partnership has the potential to shape the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

The writer is former Indian ambassador to Germany, Indonesia, Ethiopia, ASEAN and the African Union



JANUARY 25, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

ANTI-DEFECTION BILL

THE MUCH PUBLICISED anti-defection bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha. Under the provisions of the bill, a member of a political party elected to Parliament or a state legislature would be disqualified on the ground of defection if he voluntarily relinquishes his membership of his party or votes or abstains from voting in the House contrary to any direction of the party or is expelled from the party.

17 FISHERMEN FREED

SRI LANKA HAS dropped charges against 17 Indian fishermen accused of fishing illegally

in its territorial waters last October. The foreign minister, informed Parliament that the 17 fishermen were released following an understanding reached with the Indian government over the release of a Lankan naval boat and seven Sri Lankan naval personnel.

SECRET REPORTS LEAKED

ASHOK KUMAR, PERSONAL assistant to K C Singh, joint secretary in the President's secretariat, was picked up by the investigating agencies in connection with the espionage case. Sources said it was now feared that very important secret reports were being leaked from the President's secretariat, too, apart

from those pertaining to the offices of the prime minister, home minister, defence minister and other key officials. The prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, sources said, was stunned when the top investigating officials briefed him about the extent of the espionage ring and the type of top secret documents that were being leaked from various high offices.

NO TALKS WITH AKALIS

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi clearly indicated that unless Akali leaders condemn terrorism and swear by the Constitution, there is no likelihood of any negotiations with them on the Punjab issue.

Polarised political climate overshadows outcomes from WEF

THE Davos World Economic Forum (WEF), held annually in Davos, Switzerland, is one of the most significant global gatherings of political leaders, business executives, academics, and other influential figures. Since its inception in 1971, the forum has served as a platform for addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges, fostering dialogue and collaboration across diverse sectors.

The WEF plays a crucial role in shaping the global agenda. By bringing together thought leaders from around the world, the forum provides an opportunity to discuss and prioritise issues such as climate change, economic inequality, technological innovation, and geopolitical stability. The insights and commitments made at Davos often influence policy decisions and corporate strategies.

The unique strength of the WEF lies in its ability to convene leaders from various sectors. Governments, businesses, non-governmental organi-

sations (NGOs), and academic institutions use Davos as a venue to form partnerships, share ideas, and align solutions to global challenges. For instance, initiatives related to sustainability and public-private cooperation have often been launched or strengthened at the forum. The forum also showcases innovative ideas and technologies that can address global issues.

However, while the WEF is widely regarded as an influential platform, it is not without criticism. Some argue that the forum is elitist, catering primarily to the interests of wealthy nations and corporations. Others question the tangible outcomes of the discussions, suggesting that the event often focuses on dialogue rather than actionable results. Furthermore, concerns about sustainability have been raised, given the environmental impact of hosting such a large-scale event.

In India, the WEF often becomes a point of contention between political parties. Governments frequently use

the forum to highlight their success in attracting investments, while opposition parties criticise these claims, often labelling them as exaggerated or misleading. This dynamic is particularly evident in the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

In Telangana, Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy has claimed that the state secured Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) worth ₹1,78,950 crore at the WEF. Meanwhile, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has made significant efforts to promote Andhra Pradesh as a prime investment destination.

Naidu's efforts included meetings with top executives from over 15 companies, including Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, who had reportedly agreed to meet only two leaders—Naidu and Devendra Fadnis, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Naidu's leadership at the forum also included representing India's strengths as a hub for foreign direct

investment through a Government of India program.

Back home, however, these claims often face criticism from opposition parties. In Andhra Pradesh, the YSRCP has questioned the validity of the investments touted by Naidu, forgetting the fact that when they were in power, neither did AP get the kind of attention it did this time nor the then CM succeeded in attracting investments as the image of brand AP had suffered serious setback during their regime. Similarly, in Telangana, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) leaders, including K. T. Rama Rao, have faced criticism for allegedly inflating claims of success at the WEF. The opposition parties frequently accuse ruling governments of prioritising optics over tangible benefits, further fueling a cycle of political blame games.

This trend highlights a broader issue in Indian politics, where parties often focus on undermining each other

rather than engaging in constructive dialogue. The polarised political climate detracts from the potential long-term benefits that events like the WEF can bring to the country. Instead of leveraging the forum's outcomes to drive sustainable growth and development, political rivalries often overshadow meaningful progress.

While the WEF provides a valuable platform for collaboration and innovation, its true impact depends on how effectively its discussions translate into actionable policies and projects. For India, a more unified approach—one that transcends party lines and prioritises national interest—could maximize the benefits of participating in global events like Davos. By focusing on collaborative efforts rather than partisan conflicts, Indian states could better position themselves as attractive destinations for global investments, ultimately contributing to the country's growth and development.

LETTERS

Iron Age: older than thought

It is a significant new finding that iron usage was in existence in Tamil Nadu over 5300 years ago. The finding of the 'antiquity of iron' was reached based on the study of samples of iron objects excavated from Sivagali in Thoothukudi district and a few other archaeological sites in the state. The Oxford Advanced Dictionary defines the Iron Age as "the historical period about 3000 years ago when people first used iron tools". This meant pushing back the dawn of the Iron Age by over two millennia. The discovery of iron smelting technology dating back to the first quarter of the 4th millennium BCE goes to buttress the claim that Tamil Nadu was home to an advanced civilization. The "revised Iron Age" predated the migration from the Central Asian Steppe between 2000 BCE and 1000 BCE. It adds to the mountain of evidence that we are a composite civilization. Findings like this will contribute to more rigorous debate on the multiple civilizations that flourished in different parts of the Indian sub-continent since the arrival of Out of Africa migrants in India 65,000 years ago. Archaeology, linguistics, epigraphy and "population genetics" make anthropology a fascinating subject to study; gain a better understanding of our descent, our ancestors and how they lived, penetrating through the mists of time, and ourselves too and broaden the mind. If you find something to be proud of, it is an added bonus.

G. David Milton, Maruthanode, Tamil Nadu

Manipur Mayhem

Over 873 Myanmar migrant Kuki-Chin persons were arrested by Manipur police for illegal paddy cultivation and drug trade in the last seven years. Similarly, a release by the Manipur home department stated that at least 1083 workers were arrested during the same period for illegal paddy cultivation and drug trade. Manipur is feeling the heat of Myanmar migrant and it is a perpetual problem. Migrants is the main problem in Manipur.

M R Jayanthi, Sion East Mumbai

Garnering the truth in Saif's case

THE various reports describing Saif's case all appear to be far from the truth, as the CCTV photo captured of the attacker shows a young person with a thin, v-shaped face, while the arrested person has a comparatively mature face with a U-shaped cut. This has also been confirmed by the Bangladesh father of the arrested individual regarding the haircut. If the tests, based on scientific evidence, prove both to be the same individuals it may undermine the credibility of all those involved in the investigation, including those conducting the necessary tests, which would require a higher-level investigation by a more prestigious agency to resolve the matter.

Col RS Narula Retd, Patiala

Set policy for turning trash into clean energy

THIS is with reference to the article on 'Should we care about turning trash into gold'. It is true that all will pay attention for in-house safety and cleanliness. But, our country produces more than 62 million tons of waste every year including plastic waste. Technology has been developed and made available globally. There are several professionals in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change across our country. All of them together can create a policy of converting all the waste into electricity and other forms of energy. Thus we can create clean and green environment and infection less India.

G Murali Mohan Rao, Secunderabad

Cynicism undermining democracy

NOT just Delibates but the general public is growing cynical about elections. Except for the committed members of the parties and their die hard support bases, nobody believes that it would make any difference to their lives, whichever party comes to power. This is a dangerous growing trend in large pockets of urban India. It begs the question whether democracy has failed India or India has failed democracy? This is true not just of India but the entire India sub continent. Perhaps the western concept of democracy is not compatible with Indian ethos and sensibilities which tend more to mai baap concept where the citizens have no major role to play in the affairs of the nation and those in power have a free hand until the next elections!

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

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BENGALURU ONLINE

MUDA case: BJP questions Lokayukta probe

BENGALURU: The BJP on Friday questioned the credibility of the Lokayukta probe into the MUDA scam in the wake of media reports saying that the police wing of the ombudsman has given a clean chit to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his family. Siddaramaiah, his wife Parvathi B M and brother-in-law Mallikarjun Swamy are accused in a case registered by the Lokayukta police on the direction of a special court here.

Sharing a report appeared in a Kannada daily with a headline "MUDA case: Lokayukta clean chit to Siddaramaiah", the Leader of Opposition in the Karnataka Assembly R Ashoka said the investigation by Lokayukta is a sham and the report submitted by it is merely a report to save Siddaramaiah. "It is not a Lokayukta report, but 'Siddaramaiah Rachao report', he said.

Siddaramaiah, who had weakened the Lokayukta institution in his first term and was later reprimanded by the High Court, has now made the Lokayukta institution his puppet in his second term," Ashoka said in a post on X.

Citing media report, the BJP state chief B Y Vijayendra too slammed the Lokayukta police. "While the High Court is yet to deliver its verdict on the MUDA case, a report has emerged that the Lokayukta has given a clean chit to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. The clean chit was given under pressure from the Chief Minister," Vijayendra said on X.

Read more at
<https://epaper.theansindia.com>

We the people, the real custodians of the Constitution

RAJA SADARAM SOMA

THE Indian Constitution, is the groundnorm, the fundamental law, from which all authorities derive their power. It is the paramount law of the land and all laws must conform to the Constitution. The Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary derive their power and authority from this supreme legal, social and political document. After successfully completing 75 years, the Indian Constitution is now celebrating the diamond jubilee. The credit for this goes to 'the people of India' who gave the Constitution to themselves.

The Constituent Assembly which came into existence in accordance with the Cabinet Mission of 1946 met for the first time on 9th December 1946. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India, moved the Objective Resolution on 13th December, 1946. The resolution is to frame a Constitution for a Sovereign, Independent Indian Republic. After detailed discussion and debate, the Resolution was adopted on 22nd January, 1947. It ultimately took shape as the Preamble, which declares India as the sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic. The Preamble is most aptly described as the key to the Indian Constitution.

The strength of Indian Constitution lies in its flexibility. Though the Indian Constitution is the lengthiest of all the written Constitutions, the framers never intended it to be rigid. Their foresight and vision made the Indian Constitution not only living but a growing document keeping in view the hopes and aspirations of its masters, the people. The Parliament of India, in exercise of its constituent power has amended the Constitution 106 times so far taking the number of Articles from 395 to 448, number of Parts from 22 to 25 and Schedules from 8 to 12. However, the fundamental and basic characteristics of parliamentary system of democracy re-

mains the same. The Supreme Court of India, the final arbiter in dispensation of justice, has clearly held as long back as in 1973 in Kesavananda Bharati case that though the Parliament has the power to amend the Constitution, the basic features of the Constitution are not amendable under art. 368. Several such features are identified as basic by the Supreme Court in number of cases, which are only illustrative and not exhaustive. On this historic occasion of diamond jubilee of Indian Constitution, it is most appropriate to remember certain important Constitutional amendments effected to strengthen the democratic and federal foundations of the country.

Amendment of Art. 3 effected in 1955 is very much crucial for Indian federalism. It has facilitated the formation of the State of Telangana. Art. 3 deals with the formation of new States and alteration of areas, boundaries and names of existing States. This Article as originally envisaged, did not lay down the time limit for expression of views by the concerned States on the Reorganisation Bill referred by the President of India. This could hold up or even hinder the reorganisation legislation by Parliament. The Constitution 56th Amendment empowered the President of India to lay down the time limit to the concerned State Legislature to express its views. At the time of reorganisation of the State of Andhra Pradesh into Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the President of India had given six weeks to the Andhra Pradesh Legislature to express its views on the AP Reorganisation Bill, 2014. On the request of the State Legislature, the same was extended by one more week. The Legislature of the undivided State of Andhra Pradesh expressed its views and the Parliament of India passed the AP Reorganisation Bill paving way for the formation of Telangana as a State in the Indian Union. In the absence of the Constitution 56th Amendment, expression of views on the provisions of the Reorganisation Bill in limited time



would not have been possible because of the prevailing situation in the State at that time.

The Constitution 73rd and 74th amendments in 1992 enabled the decentralisation of decision making and strengthened the democratic process at the grass roots level ensuring timely elections to the panchayat raj institutions and urban local bodies. These amendments have added new Articles 243 to 243GG and Schedules XI and XII to the Indian Constitution making provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the local bodies for preparation of plans and implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice in relation to the matters mentioned in the newly added Schedules. 12769 gram panchayats, 540 mandal parishes and 32 zilla parishes in Telangana have become more vibrant by virtue of these constitutional amendments directly impacting the lives of more than two crore rural population. The people living in 13 municipal corporations and 129 municipalities of Telangana are also enjoying better civic amenities.

The Constitution 52nd Amendment concerns the Members of all the legislative bodies in India. It is intended to put an end to the scourge of defections from one political party to another for selfish interests of lure of office. They have become rampant and likely to

undermine the very foundation of our democracy negating the verdict of the people. It is popularly known as the 'anti-defection law'. It is for the first time 'political party' has found a mention in the Indian Constitution with this amendment. This amendment inserted a new clause in Art. 102 and 191 and a new Schedule X to the Constitution. A member of a House shall become disqualified if he voluntarily given up his membership of the political party on which he has been elected, or if he votes or abstains from voting in the House contrary to the direction of the political party on which he has been elected. Disqualification shall not apply in the case of splits of 1/3rd of members and merger of party. The Supreme Court in Kihota Hollohan case has ruled by majority that this provision is not in violation of the basic structure of the Constitution and the privilege of freedom of speech guaranteed in the House guaranteed to the Members in the Constitution. However, in 2003, the Parliament has deleted the exemption provided for the split of political party by virtue of 91st amendment in view of the criticism that the anti-defection law is trying to punish the individual defectors leaving on the bulk. This amendment had also laid down maximum ceiling on the Council of Ministers both at the Centre and in the States. This anti-defection law has become a hot topic for criticism as it has stirred up more controversies than putting an end to it. Another landmark amendment concerning the parliamentary system of democracy in India is reservation of seats for women in Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assemblies. According to the 'Men and Women in India 2023' released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, women constitute 48.5 percent of total population of India, but the women representation in Legislatures is a meagre 10 percent. Though there is a slight improvement in the number of women members in the 3rd Assembly of Telangana

than the 2nd House, the representation of women stood at staggering number of 10. The situation is comparatively better in Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly as women constitute 13 percent of total strength of the House. In general, women were left behind in the democratic process of the country despite equal status given to them in the Constitution. The Constitution 106th Amendment Act 2024 with a view to ensure gender equality in politics, provides for reservation of 33 percent of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies by insertion of Art. 330A and 332A. It is a revolutionary step in the direction of empowerment of women. The only drawback is its implementation has been linked to the delimitation of the Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies after next census.

The Constitution has provided the best possible checks and balances to ensure that no authority oversteps its powers and encroach upon the functions of others. This should not make the people lax and rest on their oars. It is very apt to recall the observation of the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the father of Indian Constitution in his concluding speech in the Constituent Assembly on 28th November, 1949, "However good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it, happen to be a good lot. The Constitution can provide only organs of State such as the Legislature, the executive and the Judiciary. The factors on which the working of those organs of the State depend are the people and the political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their policies." It is for the people to be ever vigilant to preserve and protect the ideals enshrined in the Constitution and shape their destiny.

(The writer is former State Chief Information Commissioner)

PNF stretching provides a faster way to be flexible

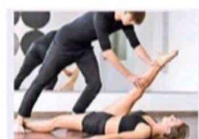
LEWIS INGRAM/
HUNTER BENNETT
ADELAIDE

WHETHER improving your flexibility was one of your new year's resolutions, or you've been inspired watching certain tennis stars warming up at the Australian Open, maybe 2025 has you keen to focus on regular stretching. However, a quick Google search might leave you overwhelmed by all the different stretching techniques. There's static stretching and dynamic stretching, which can be regarded as the main types of stretching. But there are also some other potentially lesser known types of stretching, such as PNF stretching.

So if you've come across PNF stretching and it piques your interest, what do you need to know? What is PNF stretching? PNF stretching stands for proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation. It was developed in the 1940s in the United States by neurologist Herman Kabat and physical therapists Margaret Knott and Dorothy Voss. PNF stretching was initially designed to help

patients with neurological conditions that affect the movement of muscles, such as polio and multiple sclerosis. By the 1970s, its popularity had seen PNF stretching expand beyond the clinic and into the sporting arena where it was used by athletes and fitness enthusiasts during the warm-up and to improve their flexibility. Although the specifics have evolved over time, PNF essentially combines static stretching (where a muscle is held in a lengthened position for a short period of time) with isometric muscle contractions (where the muscle produces force without changing length). PNF stretching is typically performed with the help of a partner.

There are 2 main types: The two most common types of PNF stretching are the "contract-relax" and "contract-relax-agonist-contraction" methods. The contract-relax method involves putting a muscle into a stretched position, followed immediately by an isometric contraction of the same muscle. When the person stops contracting, the muscle is then moved



up and to improve their flexibility. Although the specifics have evolved over time, PNF essentially combines static stretching with isometric muscle contractions.

into a deeper stretch before the process is repeated. This technique was based on the premise that the contracted muscle would fall "electrically silent" following the isometric contraction, and therefore not offer its usual level of resistance to further stretching (called "autogenic inhibition"). The contract-relax method attempts to exploit this brief window to create a deeper stretch than would otherwise be possible without the prior muscle contraction.

The contract-relax-agonist-contraction method is similar. But after the isometric contraction of the stretched muscle, you perform an additional contraction of the muscle group

opposing the muscle being stretched (referred to as the "agonist" muscle), before the muscle is moved into a static stretch once more. Again, if you're trying to improve hamstring flexibility, immediately after trying to push your leg towards the ground you would attempt to lift it back towards the ceiling (this bit without partner resistance). You would do this by contracting the muscles on the front of the thigh (the quadriceps, the agonist muscle in this case). The contract-relax-agonist-contraction method is said to take advantage of a phenomenon known as "reciprocal inhibition." This is where contracting the muscle group opposite that of the muscle being

stretched leads to a short period of reduced activation of the stretched muscle, allowing the muscle to stretch further than normal.

What does the evidence say? Research has shown PNF stretching is associated with improved flexibility. While it has been suggested that both PNF methods improve flexibility via changes in nervous system function, research suggests they may simply improve our ability to tolerate stretching. A 2018 review found static stretching was better for improving flexibility compared to PNF stretching. But other research has found it could offer greater immediate benefits for flexibility than static stretching. At present, similar to other types of stretching, research linking PNF stretching to injury prevention and improved athletic performance is relatively inconclusive. PNF stretching is best done after exercise or as a part of a standalone flexibility session.

How much should you do? It appears that a single contract-relax or contract-relax-agonist-contraction repetition per muscle, per-

formed twice per week, is enough to improve flexibility. The contraction itself doesn't need to be hard and forceful – only about 20% of your maximal effort should suffice. The contraction should be held for at least three seconds, while the static stretching component should be maintained until the stretching sensation eases. So PNF stretching is potentially a more time-efficient way to improve flexibility, compared to, for example, static stretching. In a recent study we found four minutes of static stretching per muscle during a single session is optimal for an immediate improvement in flexibility. Is PNF stretching the right choice for me? Providing you have a partner who can help you, PNF stretching could be a good option. It might also provide a faster way to become more flexible for those who are time poor. However, if you're about to perform any activities that require strength, power, or speed, it may be wise to limit PNF stretching to afterwards to avoid any potential deficits in performance.

(The Conversation)

The Statesman

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Peace Gamble

The second inauguration of Donald Trump has brought with it a dramatic shift in American rhetoric on the war in Ukraine. By threatening severe economic penalties against Russia and urging President Vladimir Putin to negotiate an end to the conflict, President Trump has thrust himself into the global spotlight as a would-be peacemaker. However, while his approach is undeniably bold, it raises questions about the feasibility of his ambitions and the complexities of achieving peace in such a deeply entrenched war. Mr Trump's ultimatum to Russia centres on leveraging economic sanctions and tariffs to compel Moscow to the negotiating table. His framing of these actions as a "favour" to Mr Putin adds a strategic twist, painting his proposed deal-making as mutually beneficial rather than purely punitive. This posture reflects Mr Trump's signature style of negotiation – confrontational yet couched in rhetoric that appeals to the self-interest of his counterpart. For a Russia grappling with economic strain and an increasingly protracted conflict, the pressure could be significant. However, the core issues that have perpetuated the war remain unresolved. Russia insists on the recognition of its territorial gains in Ukraine and demands that Kyiv forego any thoughts of Nato membership. Ukraine, on the other hand, refuses to accept the loss of sovereignty over its occupied territories, even temporarily, while demanding guarantees of security. These starkly opposing positions underscore the challenges of brokering any deal, regardless of external pressure. Peace, as history has often shown, cannot be dictated; it must be built on mutual concessions, a scenario that currently appears distant.

Ukraine's leadership, while welcoming tougher stances against Russia, has expressed scepticism about whether rhetoric will translate into meaningful action. The Ukrainian government has called for tangible support, such as robust sanctions, military aid, and even peacekeeping forces that include US troops. For Kyiv, strength and deterrence are paramount, as past peace deals with Russia have often been short-lived or poorly enforced. Meanwhile, signs of shifting narratives within Russia suggest a potential, albeit slim, opening for dialogue. Discussions in Moscow hint at a readiness to halt fighting along current frontlines, though such proposals remain controversial among hardline factions. If this internal debate evolves, it could create an opportunity for the new American President's approach to gain traction. However, any concessions by Russia would likely be framed as temporary, complicating the prospects for lasting peace. Ultimately, Mr Trump's intervention may succeed in raising the stakes for Russia, but true peace will require navigating a minefield of geopolitical realities. A sustainable resolution must address the legitimate security concerns of both Ukraine and Russia while ensuring mechanisms to enforce any agreement. As Mr Trump's tenure unfolds, the world will watch closely to see whether his threats and promises translate into substantive progress – or remain another chapter in the rhetoric of war. Europe, although reduced to a tangential role in Mr Trump's scheme of things, must hope that any peace formula takes on board its security concerns.

Everest Dilemma

Nepal's decision to increase permit fees for climbing Mount Everest signals a critical shift in its approach to managing the world's tallest peak. While the hike in fees – from \$11,000 to \$15,000 during the peak season – will undoubtedly bolster Nepal's revenue, it also raises pressing questions about sustainability, overcrowding, and the ethics of commercialisation on one of the world's most revered natural wonders. For Nepal, the economic stakes are significant. Mountaineering and trekking form a crucial pillar of its economy, contributing over 4 per cent to the national GDP. The revenue generated from climbing permits supports infrastructure, local livelihoods, and development in remote regions. By raising fees for the first time in nearly a decade, the government aims to ensure a fair return on the resources and risks involved in facilitating these expeditions. However, this increase must be paired with a broader strategy to address the mounting challenges facing Everest. Overcrowding on Everest has become an alarming issue, with hundreds of permits issued annually. This influx of climbers has led to dangerous bottlenecks at critical points on the mountain, turning the summit into a high-altitude traffic jam. These delays not only jeopardise lives but also exacerbate the environmental toll. Everest, often referred to as the world's highest garbage dump, has suffered from years of mismanagement, with climbers leaving behind tons of waste and even human remains. Despite periodic clean-up drives, the scale of the problem remains daunting, with an estimated 200 bodies still scattered across the mountain. A higher permit fee could act as a deterrent for less serious climbers, potentially reducing congestion. However, it is unlikely to curb the aspirations of wealthy adventurers or commercial expedition companies. What is needed is a more comprehensive regulatory framework that caps the number of permits issued each year, ensures climbers meet stringent experience requirements, and enforces strict waste management protocols. The recent order from Nepal's Supreme Court to respect the carrying capacity of its peaks is a step in the right direction, but its implementation remains uncertain. The increased fees also raise ethical considerations. Mountaineering has long been a pursuit of passion and endurance, but the commercialisation of Everest risks turning it into a luxury experience accessible only to the elite. This exclusivity undermines the spirit of exploration and raises questions about whether Nepal's iconic mountain is being reduced to a mere commodity. Nepal faces the dual challenge of preserving Everest's sanctity while maximising its economic potential. The new permit fees, though necessary, must be part of a larger effort to protect the mountain's fragile ecosystem, ensure climber safety, and honour the legacy of the countless mountaineers who have risked their lives to stand on top of the world. By balancing revenue with responsibility, Nepal can set an example for sustainable tourism on the world's most iconic peaks. Evidence, though, suggests that may be a forlorn hope.

Pillars of Caste ~ II

When a country has developed and perfected an elaborate system of segregation and discrimination against a large group of its own people, it is only natural that another regime seeking such marginalisation against another group would draw lessons from it. In the early days of the Third Reich, Franz Gürtner, the Reich minister of justice was chairing a meeting of 17 legal luminaries to finalise a legal framework to turn their ideology into law for an Aryan nation. The first item on their agenda was what they could learn from the United States in this regard

The fifth pillar of caste, according to Isabel Wilkerson, author of "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" is the division of labour based on one's place in the hierarchy. We are very well aware of the reality in India, where we still find a majority of the lower caste people employed in low-skill, labour intensive jobs, and the situation is no different in America, where the range of occupations for the blacks still remains very narrow. But where she brings new insight into the process of systematic and institutionalised prejudice is in the next pillar, dehumanisation and stigmatisation of the people belonging to the out-groups – Dalits, Blacks, Jews.

Underlying this is the belief that an ordinary human – even a soldier obeying his orders – cannot inflict unspeakable atrocities on another being he considers a human like him. But then Nazis, Whites and dominant castes have inflicted such atrocities upon millions of humans without a shred of guilt.

For that they had to dehumanise them first, not as individuals but as a group – to reduce each to a nameless, identity-less, undifferentiated member of a group carrying a permanent, indelible stigma. Once the group is dehumanised and thus quarantined from all others, every individual in it is automatically dehumanised.

Thus, in the Nazi concentration camps, individuals were no longer individuals, but a number, all of them similarly dressed, heads shaved, every distinguishing feature like a moustache ruthlessly removed. Stripped of their clothing and all accoutrements of their former lives, they were no longer humans one needed to engage with, no different from a herd of animals on which any atrocity can be inflicted without remorse. In America, enslaved Africans were given new names by their masters to make to forget their own, thus stripping them of their past identities.

In India, untouchables were given surnames that would remind themselves of their lowly status. Once dehumanised thus, they could be subjected to any cruelty. So, horrific medical experiments can be conducted on them, and public lynching and violence against them often served the purpose of amusement and entertainment of the dominant caste members. It was also used to desensitise the less inclined ones among the dominant castes against such cruelty so that it seemed mundane and harmless for everybody.

Cruelty can easily be used as a means of control, which is what constituted the seventh pillar of castes, according to Ms. Wilkerson. In America, the whip was the most common instrument of control for breaking the caste rules that demanded that the lowest caste was to remain low in every way at all times, that "submission is required of the Slave, not to the will of the Master only, but to the will of all other White Persons," and that "They must obey at all times, and under all circumstances,

ISABEL WILKERSON



cheerfully and with alacrity." Slavery has long been over, but the rules and the consequences for breaking them remain little changed.

John Dollard, a white anthropologist from Yale, went south to the Mississippi Delta in 1935 for researching into the Jim Crow caste system there and was rather surprised to notice how subservient and docile the black people were, stepping aside for him, taking their hats off, and calling him "sir" even if they were much older.

When he told his driver that Negroes there were so polite, the reply he got was "They have to be." In another incident described by her, in the early 1970s, in a small town in East Texas, a black family had moved in and their daughter was admitted to a public school that had just opened its door to black students. The principal was vexed with the girl and was questioning her.

At the end he said, "I knew you weren't from around here. Know how I know? You looked new in the eye when I was talking. Coloured folks from around here know better than to do that."

Ms Wilkerson described many instances of personal humiliation she had to suffer in public just because she was black. This inherent superiority of the upper castes against the inherent inferiority of the lower ones is the eighth pillar of caste. The low caste people are constantly reminded of their position of inferiority and servility at every station – while travelling, at work, in restaurants, in seminars and conferences, by the attitudes of the dominant caste members. In a town in Alabama, in 1961, a white man won the Mayoral race just by paying a black man to shake the hand of his opponent, another white, in public as a photographer laid in wait, and having the handshake photo splashed in the newspapers.

Caste is a structure that reinforces its fixed boundaries in incidents like this to reinforce that subordination is the place where the Negro belongs. Just like in 21st century India, in the USA also, "Caste is a living, breathing

entity". Caste and race are so interwoven in America that it is hard to separate the two.

When a country has developed and perfected such an elaborate system of segregation and discrimination against a large group of its own people, it is only natural that another regime seeking such marginalisation against another group would draw lessons from it.

In the early days of the Third Reich, in June 1934, Franz Gürtner, the Reich minister of

justice was chairing a meeting of 17 legal luminaries to finalise a legal framework to turn their ideology into law for an Aryan nation, something that would eventually turn out as the Nuremberg Laws. The first item on their agenda was what they could learn from the United States in this regard. They discussed the American

purty laws governing intermarriage and immigration and "how to institutionalise racism in the Third Reich," for which, as the Yale historian James Whitman wrote, "they began by asking how the Americans did it." They copied the American system of segregating children in the schools and adults elsewhere, "in waiting rooms, train cars, sleeping cars, street cars, buses, steamboats and even in prisons and jails."

This came "The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour" announced by Hitler in September that year, banning intermarriages between Germans and Jews, and Germans working for the Jews.

The laws would be expanded in ever-tightening restrictions against the Jews, stripping them of their citizenship and finally deporting them lawfully to their deaths in the Nazi concentration camps. As another historian wrote, "American laws were the main foreign precedents for such legislation." The Nazi system also imbibed all the eight pillars of castes.

Both India and USA have abolished the laws that defined their caste systems or untouchability and framed their constitutions that guarantee equality and justice to every citizen. Both have taken positive steps

to correct the historical wrongs through "affirmative action" in the USA and "reservations" in India. But in both the countries, as Ms. Wilkerson contends, "caste systems live on in hearts and habits, institutions and infrastructures. Both countries still live with the residue of codes that prevailed for far longer than they have not. In both countries and at the same time, the lowest castes toiled for their masters – African-Americans in the tobacco fields along the Chesapeake or in the cotton fields of Mississippi, Dalits plucking tea in Kerala and cotton in Nandurbar."

Constitutional and legal remedies have proved inadequate to address the existing discriminations, and political rights have proved ineffective to stop the brutalisation of Dalits by upper castes in India and of African-Americans by the white police in the USA.

Governments in both the countries have not done, and are not doing, enough to correct the distortions, discriminations and humiliations that dominant castes heap on the subordinate castes through words, actions and attitudes on a daily basis. It is a wonder of wonders that still a few somehow manage to escape the clutches of a system designed ruthlessly to keep its boundaries sacrosanct and unbreachable by the lower castes.

"Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire," Dr Ambedkar had said. No one escapes from its clutches. It imprints into the subconscious the unambiguous message that some will always be more equal and more deserving than the others. That is a script handed over to us by history, like a computer program that has been installed into the subconscious of every one of us. And, high or low, without intervention or reprogramming, we act out the script we were handed."

During the First World War, in 1918, American troops were sent to fight for the French who were badly in need of reinforcements. There the white soldiers refused to fight in the same trenches as black soldiers or to salute their black superiors.

The American military asked the French commanders not to develop camaraderie with them and not to "commend too highly the black American troops, particularly in the presence of (white) Americans." If all they have to be praised, it must be only "in moderate terms".

In hiring black teachers for segregated schools in the US, the Jim Crow era in southern US states, the principle applied was to "take the least competent" of the Negro teachers who had applied. A hundred years have since passed, but the mind-set remains much the same, without even a small dent. If it was not, we would have a casteless society by now. Ms. Wilkerson says in the end that "A world without caste would set everyone free", but it is not our fate to see that world anytime soon, not before I die.

(Concluded)

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

Dirty and dangerous

It is no secret that fossil fuel-powered vehicles pollute the air and harm public health. They spew noxious greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, as well as air pollutants like carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, particulate matter and volatile organic compounds. These emissions add to Nepal's mounting air quality crisis, particularly in the Kathmandu Valley, which often tops the global ranking of the most polluted cities.

This is evident from a preliminary test of diesel vehicles conducted by the traffic police in coordination with the Department of Environment and the Department of Transport Management (DoTM) in the Babarmahal area in Kathmandu last Monday.

Of 20 vehicles tested, only 14 passed the test, while the rest released black smoke beyond permissible levels. But it is not as easy as it seems to phase out these chemical-spewing vehicles off our roads.

Since the DoTM mandated vehicle emission testing in 2017, aiming to curb air pollution through its 19 offices nationwide, efforts have been made to take random on-the-spot and other annual tests. Starting the same year, the vehicles that passed the tests were rewarded with green stickers, while those that failed were penalised.

The KMC office developed pollution control guidelines as per its Environment and Natural Resources Protection Act 2021. Nepal likewise has 2003 Vehicle Emission Standards,

THE KATHMANDU POST

which mandate that four-wheelers registered before 1980 must limit carbon monoxide to 4.5 per cent of total emissions and hydrocarbons to 1,000 ppm.

Those registered post-1981 must cap carbon monoxide at 3 percent and hydrocarbons at 1,000 ppm. Likewise, two-wheelers are restricted to 4.5 per cent carbon monoxide and 7,800 ppm hydrocarbons. On paper, these sound like strong provisions.

But the reality is that these regulations aren't making a dent. Many vehicles flout the standards, and the testing process itself is unclear and inconsistent. For instance, in Kathmandu alone, there are more than 1.2 million two-wheelers and over 300,000 four-wheelers, and conducting 20 random tests per day in a certain area doesn't bode well for the air.

Moreover, the annual pollution tests have proven far from fruitful, as many vehicle owners easily bypass the system by either buying green stickers from illegal sources or bribing emission inspectors. The authorities have failed to phase out older, more polluting vehicles and raise fines for rule breakers, which could deter violators.

Nepal perhaps needs a policy-level overhaul to cut vehicle air pollution. For instance, Nepal's South Asian counterpart, for example, has a carbon tax policy for owners of multiple vehicles to reduce carbon emissions and encourage the use of public vehicles.

The country should try to emulate such practices, which have proven effective in reducing carbon emissions. We as a country also must be clear on our energy policies and encourage the use of electric vehicles.

It is dangerous that Nepal, while claiming to promote sustainable energy, imports LPG, fuel and petrol from India. Such policy ambiguities will only confuse vehicle owners and the general public and will be ineffective in combating air pollution.

Nonetheless, this is not possible only through government efforts. The public must be mindful of their actions and get their vehicles regularly tested and serviced. Vehicular emissions are within our control, and if both the government and the public act decisively, we can make the air a little more breathable – especially during winter, when pollution levels rise due to both vehicle emissions and wildfires.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Regulation needed

SIR, This refers to the article, "Under the Gignomics" (January 20). The gig economy in India has experienced exponential growth, with a rising number of gig workers contributing significantly to the workforce.

This trend is indicative of the evolving employment landscape in the country at a time when the job crisis is looming large.

Although the gig sector has grown in popularity in recent years, challenges persist for gig workers, including the lack of job security and benefits such as health insurance.

Most gig jobs offer little to

no protection for workers, with uncertain income streams and no clear career pathways.

Depending on local labor regulations, many gig workers are not protected against unfair practices, abuse, or injuries while working. Gig work also raises challenges for managing data security and privacy.

The Central and State governments should therefore invest in education and training programmes to support gig workers and ensure fair treatment and work-life balance for them by introducing clear regulations and policies.

Flexible work arrangements, and regulatory challenges underscore a critical need for a balanced approach that respects the rights and addresses the vulnerabilities of gig workers.

While the gig economy presents opportunities for innovation and economic empowerment, its sustainability hinges on ensuring that the rights and welfare of gig workers are adequately protected.

India's journey towards a comprehensive regulatory framework must prioritise inclusivity, fairness, and the promotion of decent work for all, regardless of employment arrangement.

Yours, etc.,
Ranganathan Sivakumar,
Chennai, 20 January.

VALID

SIR, Apropos the report "Kejriwal calls middle class victims of tax terrorism"; puts 7 demands before Centre" (January 23), I think all the demands of Kejriwal are justified.

The middle class people, particularly senior citizens, are getting frustrated paying a huge amount of tax that is devouring their hard earned savings.

All appeals to the Government for reduction of taxes went in vain. It has now become a challenge for them to maintain their livelihood with minimum support.

The AAP chief has asked the government to increase the education budget from a meagre 2 per cent to 10 per cent, together with capping of private school fees.

If PM Modi is serious about ameliorating the sufferings of common people, he should not hesitate to accept Kejriwal's suggestions.

Yours, etc.,
Arun Gupta,
Kolkata, 23 January.

How our betis are faring, 10 years on



SHAILAJA CHANDRA
FORMER SECRETARY,
HEALTH MINISTRY

As the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) initiative becomes 10 years old, an evaluation of the programme leading to the ideal child sex ratio and promoting the empowerment and education of the girl child is fitting.

According to the government press note issued on the 10th anniversary of the BBBP, the sex ratio at birth (SRB) has improved from 918 in 2014-15 to 930 in 2023-24. Also, the girls' enrolment in secondary education has improved from 75.5 per cent to 78 per cent during the same period. Additionally, women have been empowered through skilling, economic initiatives and widespread community engagement.

While saluting these achievements, one must step beyond to understand how much women's lives have changed, for the better or worse. Comparisons need data and India relies on different surveys and data bases. They include the civil registration system, the sample registration system

(annual) and the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS). The NFHS surveys (2015-16 and 2019-21) are the most reliable sources to compare and comment on wider issues as they provide a rich source of information. Because, after all the numbers are crunched and digested, ultimately, the true barometer of women's progress is their status in society.

While measuring this, some things matter more than others. One of the important determinants is her age at the time of marriage. This is because it is her health and her understanding of both childbearing and child-rearing that has an impact on generational health.

The first questions that should stem from BBBP is whether the age of marriage of girls has gone up and whether teenage pregnancies have come down. This is because girls who marry young remain socially isolated and are denied the fruits of education.

Despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the practice of child marriage remains widespread. Though the NFHS data reveals a decline in child marriages, their number remains high. Child marriages have reduced from 47 per cent (in 2005-06) to (26 per cent) in 10 years and in the next five years, to around 23 per cent. Given the size of our country, 23 per cent is still unacceptable.



STILL FAR: The true barometer of women's progress is their status in society. ANI

ably high.

While more girls may have been saved from being aborted, the benefits of potham (nutrition) and potham (education) would have eluded most girls who were married before 18. Because, among other factors, it is in the teenage years that anaemia is at its peak and has cascading effects on the patient's health.

The second important goal that BBBP has rightly focused on is curbing the practice of female foeticide. What is the status on that? The ideal child sex ratio, according to the WHO, is 950 girls to 1,000 boys. As per the latest NFHS-5 data, the ratio has gone up from 919 girls to 929 girls for every 1,000 boys

More attention needs to be paid to enforcing the legal age of marriage and incentivising births after 20 years.

born. This is good progress, but the data for many states remains far from satisfactory.

According to figures released by the Government of Haryana, the sex ratio was recorded at 905 girls for 1,000 boys in the first 10 months of 2024. The districts of Gurugram (859), Rewari (868), Charkhi Dadri (873), Rohtak (880), Panipat (890) and Mahendragarh (896) were the worst performers, all recording a below-900 sex ratio. Despite economic progress, many Haryanvis still want sons. Exhortations alone will not change the overall picture of saving the girl child.

Declining sex ratio means that female foetuses are being killed in the womb. Several other states also

have a child sex ratio less than 932, as per the NFHS-5. They include Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Punjab, Telangana, Maharashtra, Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. Delhi and Chandigarh, too, have adverse sex ratios.

It shows that education and wealth, if anything, exacerbate the demand for sex determination, underscoring the craving for sons.

At the same time, there has been a perceptible improvement in states like Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. They are hovering nearer the WHO ideal. It indicates how much of the progress rests with the state leadership. A right-thinking chief minister can do wonders by giving primacy to BBBP and related health programmes.

It is a matter of comfort that the Health Ministry has extended the National Health Mission by five years. Started in 2005, the NHM has done more to improve the health indicators of women than any other programme.

Among the achievements relevant in the context of women's status is the decline of India's fertility rate to below the replacement level. Though it is cause for fresh worry about what will happen to the states that are aging, the plus side is that except for the identified districts — mainly in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar — the

days of unwanted and repeated child births are over. It is a great blessing for women.

Side by side, institutional births, that is births under medical supervision, have increased phenomenally. An institutional birth benefits women hugely as it ensures that they undergo antenatal check-ups and are sensitised and skilled in spacing out children, which also staves off unwanted pregnancies. As a result, maternal and infant mortality have reduced substantially.

The increase in poorer households' access to clean drinking water; improved sanitation (toilets) and clean cooking fuel have also impacted women's lives for the better. Though they may not be directly related to BBBP, they give much reason for satisfaction.

Taking the important indicators into account and without making BBBP a separate vertical silo, it is apparent that women's status has improved. The question is how much and in what respect.

More attention needs to be paid to enforcing the legal age of marriage and incentivising births after 20 years. These two measures will greatly impact the health of both women and children and enable them to get educated and become economically independent.

The day that happens, India would have come into its own.

Why markets are failing the green energy transition



JAYATI GHOSH
PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

THE international community has long recognised the urgent need to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and shift to renewable energy, and in recent years, many governments have pledged to reach net-zero greenhouse-gas emissions, albeit over extremely long timeframes. But they will never get there so long as they treat electricity, which is central to the clean-energy transition, like any other market good.

The green transition is driven by several factors, such as energy intensity, investment flows, consumption patterns and distribution systems. But its success hinges on humanity's ability to move away from "dirty" fossil fuels toward clean, renewable energy sources, particularly solar and wind. And that requires a profound transformation in how electricity is generated, distributed and consumed.

Economists and policymakers have long framed the energy transition as a question of relative prices. In

recent decades, wind and solar costs have plummeted, driven by technological advances — especially in China, where government interventions have helped scale up green industries and drive down the so-called levelised cost of energy (LCOE). According to this widely used metric for comparing power sources, renewables have consistently outperformed fossil fuels, even before external shocks like the Ukraine war sent oil and gas prices soaring.

In theory, these developments should have expedited the global transition away from fossil fuels. In practice, however, renewable-energy sources merely supplement the total power supply. Meanwhile, both developed and developing countries continue to increase fossil-fuel production and invest heavily in exploring new reserves.

The discrepancy cannot be fully explained by market forces or relative prices. Over the years, many have blamed political leaders for the lack of climate progress, especially after climate-change denials rose to power in countries like the US and Argentina. But this explanation, too, is incomplete.

As economic geographer Bert Christophers argues in his book *The Price is Wrong: Why Capitalism Won't Save the Planet*, the real problem lies in the failure to confront two fundamental truths about the limitations of open mar-



REALITY: The power sector still depends heavily on various forms of state intervention, subsidies

kets. First, the driving force behind private-sector investment and production is not output prices but relative profitability. Second, the nature of electricity makes it ill-suited to being "governed by the market," inevitably leading to sub-optimal outcomes in the absence of massive government intervention.

Electricity, Christophers notes, aligns with economic historian Karl Polanyi's definition of "fictitious commodities." In his seminal work *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi argues that land, labour and money were not intended to function within market systems. Unlike conventional goods explicitly produced for trade, the commercialisation of fictitious commodities leads to inefficient and unstable market transactions and inevitably results in economic and

Achieving true decarbonisation requires governments to adopt a more proactive approach.

social distortions.

To operate, these markets rely on extensive public intervention in the form of laws, regulations, social norms and subsidies — both explicit and implicit. Such interventions create the illusion of a functioning market, even though prices and profits are ultimately shaped by public and social mechanisms.

Re much of its existence, Christophers notes, electricity was treated as essential public infrastructure, with its production and distribution operating outside the market. In recent decades, the pursuit of profits has fuelled a global push to unbuckle and commercialise generation, distribution and consumption. But, despite the facade of competitive markets, the sector still depends heavily on various forms of state intervention.

Electricity's unique charac-

teristics pose significant challenges for the clean-energy transition. Wind and solar power are inherently intermittent, resulting in fluctuating output and price volatility. Compounding the problem, public subsidies for "green" investments can lead to overcapacity during periods of low demand, while their withdrawal often causes investors to exit the sector.

Moreover, although renewable energy has become cheaper than fossil fuels, the profits it generates are low and unreliable. Christophers vividly describes this self-cannibalising dynamic, highlighting how it has played out across different economies, from the US and Norway to India.

Instability undermines the "bankability" of green projects, making it harder to secure financing for renewable energy. It should be no surprise, then, that the much-hyped Glasgow Alliance for Net Zero, launched in April 2021 at COP26 and championed by former Bank of England Governor and UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance Mark Carney, has already begun to falter after the six largest US banks withdrew from it in quick succession. This was before Donald Trump's return to the White House further disincentivised such investment by issuing an Executive Order that effectively termi-

nates efforts to achieve a Green New Deal in the US.

But the solution is not to subsidise green capitalism by derisking investments, although such measures are unavoidable if renewable energy is to remain viable. Instead, the key is recognising that electricity is not a commodity. Consequently, we must restructure all aspects of energy production and distribution, encompassing renewables and fossil fuels alike.

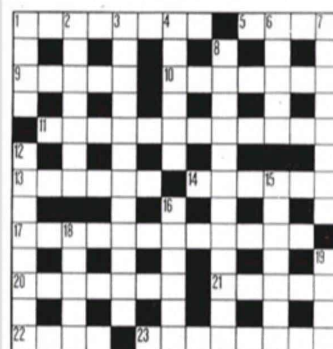
Most importantly, achieving true decarbonisation requires governments to adopt a more proactive approach. Instead of acting as behind-the-scenes market facilitators, policymakers must take direct responsibility for producing and distributing renewable energy.

Such an approach is far from radical. Before the rise of neoliberalism, governments played a pivotal role in building and managing critical infrastructure, including energy systems. To facilitate the green transition, they must reclaim that responsibility.

The expected private-sector profits from renewable-energy generation are simply not sufficient to drive the necessary transformation, despite the "urgent global demand. Until policymakers come to terms with this reality, their efforts to accelerate the shift to renewables will continue to fall short.

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QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 A culinary herb (8)
- 5 A shellfish (4)
- 9 Giver (5)
- 10 Mechanical malfunction (7)
- 11 Become suddenly wealthy (6,2,4)
- 13 Dutiful reverence (6)
- 14 Mismanagement (6)
- 17 Screw up courage (5,7)
- 20 Opposite (7)
- 21 Indolent person (5)
- 22 Instead (4)
- 23 Resist stubbornly (5,3)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Scapegoat, 8 Agree, 9 Calling, 10 Silver, 11 Hector, 12 Alarmist, 15 Heedless, 18 Output, 20 Obust, 21 Runaway, 22 Salvo, 23 Mare's nest.

Down: 2 Craze, 3 Politic, 4 Generate, 5 Tailor, 6 Prevail, 7 Ferret out, 11 High horse, 13 Absolute, 14 Textile, 16 Lissom, 17 Strain, 19 Urals.

DOWN

- 1 Roughly made (4)
- 2 Person's private den (7)
- 3 A flowering twining plant (7,5)
- 4 For choice (6)
- 6 Jewish religious leader (5)
- 7 Fellow monks (8)
- 8 Debatable issue (4,8)
- 12 Castigate (8)
- 15 17th-century Italian astronomer/physicist (7)
- 16 Determined (6)
- 18 Underside of projecting roof (5)
- 19 Be visibly worried (4)

SU DO KU



MEDIUM

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 25, 2025, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Mugh Shaka 5
- Mugh Panvishit 12
- Hijri 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 11, up to 8.32 pm
- Dhanu Yoga up to 4.38 am
- Jyeshtha Nakshatra
- Moon in Scorpio sign

FORECAST

CITY	SEMI-MAX	SEMI-MIN	5-DAY MAX	5-DAY MIN
Chandigarh	21	09		
New Delhi	23	09		
Amritsar	21	04		
Batinda	23	06		
Jalandhar	21	05		
Ludhiana	23	07		
Bhawan	23	06		
Hisar	24	07		
Sirsa	22	08		
Dharamsala	21	06		
Manali	14	02		
Shimla	17	07		
Srinagar	14	-03		
Jammu	23	06		
Kargil	-01	-13		
Leh	00	-14		
Dehradun	—	—		
Mussoorie	17	05		



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Love is space and time measured by the heart
Marcel Proust

Gang rape: Need to introspect and connect the dots

The gang rape of a mentally unsound woman in Margao—an act of shocking brutality committed by a group of young men—has triggered a wave of anguish and anger across Goa. Five youngsters from Vasco, four of which are in the age group of around 18 years, gang-raped the woman at a guest house at Cansaulim after abducting her from the Margao KTC bus stand on Wednesday evening.

This heinous crime highlights an alarming reality: violence against women in Goa is not just a sporadic incident but a systemic issue that requires urgent attention. The details of this case—the age of the accused, their method of enticement, and the failure to protect a vulnerable individual—paint a worrisome picture of the safety and security of helpless women in the State.

The circumstances surrounding this crime reveal layers of manipulation and coercion. The initial enticement of the victim, followed by her abduction, showcases premeditated actions that betray a calculated mindset. It begs the question—what drives young individuals to view women as mere objects of gratification? This case depicts the desperation of the youth that they picked and exploited a woman of an unsound mind. It speaks about insecurities and safety and the psychological impact on the people of the State, especially vulnerable women.

This heinous crime highlights an alarming reality: violence against women in Goa is not just a sporadic incident but a systemic issue that requires urgent attention

When fear pervades people, it can cripple the very spirit that makes Goa unique. The world knows Goa as a place of warmth and hospitality, but incidents like these threaten that narrative, casting a long shadow over its reputation. The Goa police may have swiftly apprehended the perpetrators and initiated an investigation, demonstrating a commitment to justice, but that doesn't settle everything.

This heinous act of gang rape exposes not only moral bankruptcy but also a broader sense of desperation permeating the psyche of certain sections of our youth today. Given the ages of the accused, these youngsters are in their formative years; a time when dreams are built and futures are envisioned. Yet, their actions paint a starkly horrible picture. Their choice to exploit a vulnerable woman rather than uplift themselves reflects an alarming disconnect. Instead of embodying the progressive spirit that Goan society has shown so far, these youths have succumbed to a horrifying sense of depravity.

We need to also look at the element of insecurity that might be at play here. In a rapidly changing State where economic prospects may seem bleak, and societal pressures rising, some young Goans might be grasping at straws, seeking validation through reckless and violent means. The need to assert dominance, especially over a vulnerable person, could stem from feelings of inadequacy. This incident compels us to introspect on the socio-economic landscape in which our youth operate. Are they feeling abandoned? Are they searching for belonging in the most destructive ways?

The narrative surrounding the incident could be a moment of introspection. It is not just about punishing the perpetrators but understanding the societal fractures that allow such heinous acts to occur. We must collectively confront the deeper issues of desperation and insecurity, ensuring that future generations rise above such barbarity. It's time for Goa to reaffirm its commitment to being a haven for all, emphasizing moral responsibility, empathy, and resilience in the face of adversity.

A cocktail of freebies & manipulation

As political parties turn to freebies for securing votes in polls, the freebies culture has fallen to greater depths, with the EC turning a blind eye



NEELU VYAS

>The writer is a senior television anchor and digital content creator

Not long ago, Prime Minister Modi dreamt of wresting more than 400 seats in the Lok Sabha and this was when he scornfully described the budgetary allocations to the economically weaker sections and women as "revadis".

CHANGING PERCEPTION

After the Lok Sabha debacle, PM Narendra Modi has become a champion of revadis because he has realised that brand Modi is no longer a crowd puller. Modi's journey in welfare schemes began with loans from PSUs and LIC. Then he switched to state funding.

Now, his major focus is Modi guarantees. The battle of guarantees was at its zenith during the Karnataka polls and now PM Modi has become a full-fledged, competitive promoter of poll-freebies.

The Maharashtra elections saw 146 freebies being rolled out by the NDA. During the Haryana elections, too, the BJP had announced Rs 2100 monthly allowance for women, scooters for girls, free dialysis for patients, and two lakh government jobs.

With the Delhi elections round the corner, the electoral air is reeking with a competitive freebie culture.

AAP'S POLL PROMISES

AAP freebies in Delhi include the Mahila Samman Yojana for women ranging from Rs 1000 to Rs 2100 per month and Sanjeevani health care scheme for people above 60 years.

AAP has claimed that so far 1.3 million people have registered. AAP has also promised accidental and life insurance for auto rickshaw drivers to the tune of Rs 15 lakh, a uniform allowance of Rs 2500 and Rs 1 lakh as welfare expenses for their daughters. Kejriwal has also promised Rs 18000 as an allowance to the grantees and priests.

CONGRESS' POLL PROMISES

Congress has promised Rs 8500 for skill training of the unemployed, Rs 2500 under the Pyari Didi Yojana and Rs 25 lakh insurance under the Jeevan Raksha Yojana.



Freebie culture has acquired seemingly treacherous levels now, with Kejriwal claiming that the BJP is distributing gold chains, sarees, shoes, and jackets to lure voters.

Recently, BJP leader Praveesh Verma was caught on camera distributing shoes to voters in the New Delhi constituency.

Despite this, the EC seems to be blind to any violation of the model code of conduct.

BJP'S POLL PROMISES

In fact, the BJP released its second manifesto in Delhi with a long list of freebies again.

Needy students will receive free education from KG to PG in government educational institutions. Needy aspirants, willing to appear for competitive exams, will also be provided Rs 15,000 lump sum financial assistance.

The BJP said it will form a SIT to adopt a "zero tolerance" policy against mis-governance and corruption done by the AAP government in Delhi.

SC students to get a monthly stipend of Rs 1,000 under the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Stipend Yojana. The party has promised to set up a welfare board for auto-taxi drivers, life insurance of Rs 10 lakh, accident insurance of Rs 5 lakh and vehicle insurance along with scholarships for their children.

A welfare board for domestic workers will be created, providing life insurance of Rs 10 lakh, accident insurance of Rs 5 lakh, scholarships for their children and 6 months of paid maternity leave. The number of beneficiaries of PM Swasthi Yojana to be doubled.

The BJP is outdoing every other political party as far as doling out freebies is concerned. Revadis have become a political compulsion and a mantra for survival for Modi and the BJP.

How it will fulfil its promises is a serious question, given its poor track record of fulfilling them.

PM Modi, while commenting on revadis, had said that political parties in various states are spending recklessly without any thought for future generations.

FISCAL PLANNING

The same Modi has somersaulted and taken a sharp U-turn on revadis. In 2022, then CJI NV Ramanna had said that freebies should not be dealt with politically but with fiscal planning.

The Fiscal Responsibility Management Act clearly states that fiscal deficit cannot go beyond 3 percent. This time, Delhi alone is running into a deficit. Kapil Sibal had suggested to the CJI then that the freebies matter should be taken up by the Finance Commission.

However, not much work has happened in that area, and the battle of freebies gets uglier with each passing day, indicating how casually political parties take the suggestions of the Apex court.

The political reality is that when governments want to divert from the main issues, freebies become a bankable plank.

Modi's volte-face on freebies is a realisation of his declining charisma and popularity, which is why the Delhi election has become a cocktail of freebies and manipulation for the BJP.

As far as manipulation is concerned, several stories have surfaced about rampant deletions and additions in voters' list, and how Form 7 is being used as a weapon by booth-level officers along with panna pramukhs.

Can freebies help the BJP come back to power in Delhi after a long hiatus of 25 years?

FFJ



Freebie culture has acquired seemingly treacherous levels now, with Kejriwal claiming that the BJP is distributing gold chains, sarees, shoes, and jackets to lure voters

THE INBOX >>

Disastrous handling of Panaji's roads

Many of my friends and colleagues, including newspaper editors based in Panaji, have written in their publications that the city is deteriorating. They say that instead of being treated like a gem, Panaji is now in such bad shape that it feels almost beyond repair. Some writers have even suggested that Panaji should be permanently closed, and a new capital city should be built outside its jurisdiction. While relocating government offices to ease the city's burden might help, I believe the better solution is to preserve and revive the unique charm of Panaji's everyday life. We Panjimites have a deep affection for our city, and it's not just us—foreign visitors also love to include a day in Panaji in their plans. For many, a trip to Goa feels incomplete without a visit to Panaji. Let us come together to save Panaji and bring back the beautiful riverside ambience that makes it special. The city offers so much within a short distance: beaches, greenery, trees, beautiful historical homes, and scenic spots—from the heights of Altinho to the shores of Campal. If we repair the basic infrastructure and manage traffic properly, locals can enjoy their city again, and tourists will keep coming back.

STEPHEN DIAS, Dona Paula

Why notices aren't needed for demolishing illegal shops

Along highways and roadsides, people are building shops and running businesses on government property without any permission. Despite knowing that the land belongs to the government, they continue these activities. When government authorities arrive with machinery like ICBs to demolish these illegal constructions, they demand prior

Why no drive against car drivers not wearing seat belts?

It is learnt that in the first 20 days of 2025, the Goa traffic police issued over 15,000 challans for various traffic violations. The most common offences include entering non-entry zones, dangerous parking and riding without helmets. However, for some unknown reason, no action is forthcoming against car drivers who do not wear seat-belts. Section 194B of the Motor Vehicle Act 1988 mandates the use of safety belts. Violation of the rule is punishable with a fine of Rs 1,000.

If car drivers in Goa were pulled up for not wearing seat-belts, the number of traffic violations would have been much higher. At higher speed those sitting in the front seat, including the driver, can be thrown through the windshield onto the road. Use of a lap and shoulder belt reduces the risk of fatal injury by 60%. Wearing a seat belt by occupants of a car is as vital as wearing a helmet by a two-wheeler rider.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

notice from the authorities. Why should government officials issue notices when the property is already marked as government land? These illegal structures across Goa should be demolished immediately to ensure such activities are not repeated. Additionally, people conducting businesses, such as selling fish and other goods, on main roads should be addressed by the local village Panchayat and municipality offices. These activities create a mess and pose safety risks for citizens. The media should stop sensationalising these issues and taking both sides when the truth is clear. Supporting illegal activities only encourages more violations.

RONNIE DSOUZA, Chondor

It's raining freebies

The election campaign in Delhi has become a sop war between parties that are competitively offering goodies in cash, kind, and services to gullible voters. Election manifestos are treated as

promissory notes now, not statements of future plans and policies. The ruling AAP, as well as the two main Opposition parties, the BJP and the Congress, are pulling out all the stops in this high-stakes battle. Their special focus is on women, who have emerged as a make-or-break vote bank in recent years. The powerful BJP is bent on beating AAP at its own game, conveniently forgetting that PM Narendra Modi had recently criticised rival parties for promoting the freebies culture.

The RBI has repeatedly cautioned against the fiscal repercussions of such giveaways, highlighting how they erode states' ability to invest in long-term development. Many states, already burdened with high deficits, are resorting to increased borrowing to fund these schemes. Maharashtra is the latest example. The freebie culture is not only vitiating the electoral process but also making a mockery of Indian democracy. The Election Commission should take serious note of this.

GREGORY FERNANDES, Mumbai

Train tragedy raises safety concerns

A tragic train accident in Maharashtra claimed 13 lives and caused widespread grief. Chaos erupted after false rumours of a fire aboard a train, prompting passengers to disembark onto an adjacent track. Tragically, another high-speed train struck the group, resulting in the devastating loss of lives. This incident highlights the need for effective communication and robust safety measures in India's public transportation system. The spread of unverified information and poor evacuation protocols contributed significantly to this avoidable tragedy. The Maharashtra incident underscores the urgent need to address vulnerabilities in railway safety protocols.

SAGAR SHIRODKAR via email

OPEN SPACE >>

Current CM vs State's first CM Dayanand Bandodkar

In the past week, there has been a significant debate in Goa regarding the comparison between the current Chief Minister, Pramod Sawant, and Goa's first Chief Minister, Dayanand Bandodkar. While my major grievance with the late Bandodkar was his push for the merger of Goa, which could have potentially led to the loss of Goa's unique identity, I have also come to appreciate his contributions. These include uplifting the lower sections of society, providing free and widespread education, and maintaining corruption-free governance.

I believe that if he were alive today, he would have spoken out and taken action against the rapid conversion, destruction, and sale of Goa's valuable land, environment, hills, water bodies, and trees. Such actions, which cater to specific lobbies and crony capitalists, including real estate developers and land sharks, would not align with his vision.

Therefore, the current government under Dr Pramod Sawant cannot be compared to the government of the late Dayanand Bandodkar. Corruption and scams under the present administration have reached unprecedented levels in Goa—something that would have been unthinkable during Bandodkar's era.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

Court, TikTok & a President

A US Supreme Court case shows how social media is the new oil



OPENING ARGUMENT
BY MENAKA GURUSWAMY

THE GREATEST SOCIAL and political capital of our time is human attention, and the challenge for politicians today is how to capture it using social media. It was, therefore, no surprise that the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) heard *TikTok Inc et al v Merrick B Garland, Attorney General* on an expedited basis and even declared a verdict on January 17. The case demonstrates how the discipline of law confronts major technological advances—a highly popular app resulting in judges diving into the world of social media regulation.

First things first. TikTok was launched in 2017, has 170 million users in the US and one billion worldwide. It's a rather extraordinary number given that the population of the US is around 344 million. You can imagine how desirable the app is for all groups that vie for human attention in a high-value market like the US.

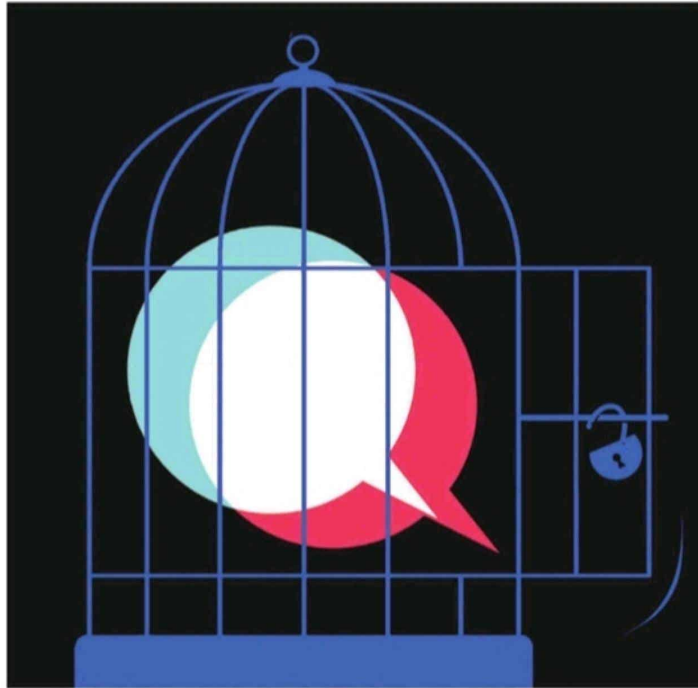
As SCOTUS neatly explains, "In 2023, US TikTok users uploaded more than 5.5 billion videos, which in turn were viewed more than 13 trillion times around the world." It further noted, "TikTok is operated in the United States by TikTok Inc, an American Company incorporated and headquartered in California. TikTok Inc's ultimate parent company is ByteDance Ltd, a privately held company that has operations in China."

This prompted the security concerns of the US government given that data pertaining to 170 million Americans is in the hands of a Chinese company. SCOTUS summarised the problem as follows: "ByteDance Ltd owns TikTok's proprietary algorithms which are developed and maintained in China. The company is also responsible for developing portions of the source code that runs the TikTok platform. ByteDance is subject to Chinese laws that require it to 'assist or cooperate' with the Chinese government's 'intelligence work' and to ensure that the Chinese Government has 'the power to access and control private data' the company holds."

The TikTok saga spanned both Donald Trump's first (2017–2021) administration and Joe Biden's administration (2021–2025). President Trump issued an executive order in August 2020 finding that the "spread in the United States of mobile applications developed and owned by companies in China continues to threaten national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States."

Subsequently, the US Congress enacted the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, 2024 ("the Act") that made it unlawful for any entity to provide services to distribute, maintain or update a "foreign adversary controlled application" in the country. Meanwhile, if the app undergoes a "qualified divestiture", one where the president determines that it is no longer controlled by a foreign adversary, then it will be allowed to function. TikTok was allowed to function with its existing ownership structure till January 17, 2025—the date of the judgment.

In a judgment upholding the Act, the court ruled that the divestiture requirement



C R Sasikumar

"for purposes of preventing a foreign adversary from accessing the sensitive data of 170 million US TikTok users is not a subtle means of exercising a content preference," adding that "speakers' distinctions such as this are not presumed to be invalid under the First Amendment". Free speech is protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

"The government's TikTok related data collection concerns do not exist in isolation," explained the court. "The record reflects that China has engaged in extensive and years-long efforts to accumulate structured data sets, in particular on US persons to support its intelligence and counterintelligence efforts. Even if China has not leveraged its relationship with ByteDance Ltd to access US TikTok user data, the petitioners offer no basis for concluding that the government's determination that China might do so is not at least a reasonable inference based on substantial evidence."

While deferring to Congress and the government, the court asserted, "We are mindful that this law arises in a context in which national security and foreign policy concerns arise in connection with efforts to confront evolving threats in an area where information can be difficult to obtain and the impact of certain conduct difficult to assess." Finally, SCOTUS concluded that the regulations promoted a "substantial governmental interest" and that the regulation "did not burden substantially more speech than is necessary" and hence, the law did not violate First Amendment rights. Meanwhile, Justice Sonia Sotomayor in her concurring opinion con-

On January 20, President Trump signed an executive order halting the TikTok ban for 75 days to permit his administration "an opportunity to determine the appropriate course of action." A resource so valuable for the human beings whose attention it captures that constitutional courts vie to regulate it and presidents strive to emancipate it. TikTok's case must also be read for how deftly the court navigated concerns of free speech and national security, alongside the nuances of social media.

cluded that the Act in question did implicate freedom of speech by "imposing a burden on TikTok's speech in the United States". Given the majority decision, however, TikTok went off the air for 12 long hours and its 170 million American users had no access to it.

But the story doesn't end here. On January 20, President Trump signed an executive order halting the TikTok ban for 75 days to permit his administration "an opportunity to determine the appropriate course of action". The president has the power to delay the ban for up to 90 days. Meanwhile, urged on by Trump, an American investor group is putting together a bid to buy the social media app from ByteDance. At an election victory rally, Trump had told his supporters, "We have no choice but to save it (TikTok)," while suggesting that the US will own 50 per cent of the company.

The case of TikTok demonstrates how social media is the new oil. A resource so valuable for the human beings whose attention it captures that constitutional courts vie to regulate it and presidents strive to emancipate it. This case must also be read for how deftly the court navigated concerns of free speech and national security, alongside the nuances of social media. The case poses questions that will undoubtedly arise in other countries as well: When an alleged foreign adversary owns a substantial swatch of a country's citizens' data, how must a government secure it?

Guruswamy is Senior Advocate at the Supreme Court

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The state cannot absolve itself of the responsibility to protect Hindu citizens and assure them of safety. The key factors behind their exodus need to be addressed, while those Pakistani Hindus that have left for India should be given an amnesty, and allowed to return home." —DAWN

The 75-year milestone

Constitution has served us well. Cultivating constitutional morality is a work in progress



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

THIS YEAR MARKS 75 years of the adoption of India's Constitution. The government has planned year-long programmes with the slogan "Hamara Samvidhan, Hamara Swabhiman"—our constitution, our pride. At a grand inaugural event held in the Central Hall of Parliament on November 26, 2024, President Droupadi Murmu called the Constitution the "holiest book of our country".

The making of the Constitution was an inspiring saga every Indian should be proud of. Four aspects of our Constitution should invoke that pride—the struggle that preceded its making, the making itself, the content, and the journey in the last 75 years.

The struggle for having our own Constitution began at least 25 years before the formation of the Constituent Assembly. The first ever Government of India Act of 1858 came after the 1857 War of Independence. No Indian was involved in that process. Six decades later, came a new version, the Government of India Act 1919. By then, the Congress had emerged as a rallying point for all nationalists. It raised a strong voice against the Act, demanding that not the British government but the Indian legislature should have the authority to draft its own constitution.

The Swaraj Party, the parliamentary wing of the Congress, raised the issue in the Legislative Assembly in 1924 demanding that a roundtable conference be convened to negotiate constitutional reforms. Instead of giving a sympathetic ear to the demand, Secretary of State for India, Lord Birkenhead, challenged Indian leaders to "produce a constitution which carries behind it a fair measure of general agreement among the great people of India." He also decided to further taunt them by appointing an all-British Simon Commission for the review of constitutional measures needed for India.

The Congress leadership accepted the challenge. Motilal Nehru led an all-party conference to draft a constitution that also had Subhas Chandra Bose, Annie Besant, M R Jayakar, Jawaharlal Nehru and a couple of Muslim League representatives. It came out with a draft constitution in 1928, popularly known as the "Nehru Report". It contained 22 chapters and 88 articles and dealt with important subjects like fundamental rights, a bicameral parliament, division of powers, judicial independence and centre-state relations. It unequivocally declared that universal adult franchise will be the model for India with every citizen 21 years of age and above securing voting rights. A leading newspaper exclaimed that while Birkenhead got a better reply, "... we have drawn the Magna Carta of our liberty." A call was given at the Lahore Congress session in December 1929 to celebrate the "day of independence" on January 26, 1930. It was to commemorate that occasion that January 26, 1950 was chosen for the adoption of the

Indian Constitution. The Swaraj Party passed a resolution in May 1934 demanding that a Constituent Assembly be convened to frame an "acceptable constitution". The Indian people heard about the Constituent Assembly for the first time then.

The next decade saw the Congress waging battles both in the streets as well as on the constitutional front. Jawaharlal Nehru was categorical that the Constituent Assembly would function as a "completely sovereign body". The British finally submitted to that through the India Independence Act, 1947.

The Constituent Assembly met for the first time on December 9, 1946. The Draft Constitution was placed before it on February 21, 1948. A revised version was placed on November 4. Its second reading happened clause-by-clause, and the final draft was approved on November 26, 1949.

Unlike today, there were no time limits to the speeches of the Assembly members. In total, the members spoke 3.6 million words. A total of 7,635 amendments were moved, of which 2,473 were discussed. The Constitution that came out of this hard work contained 395 articles and eight schedules. Ambedkar had to shoulder much of the burden of drafting it and incorporating thousands of amendments. Rajendra Prasad, chairman of the Assembly, acknowledged this, saying, "I have realised as nobody else could have, with what zeal and devotion the members of the Drafting Committee and especially its Chairman, Dr Ambedkar, despite his indifferent health, have worked."

While moving the Objectives Resolution in December 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru passionately appealed that it was more than just a resolution but a "declaration", a "firm resolve", a "pledge", and finally, a "dedication". That was what the 299 members of the Assembly did through the 35 months of the Constitution's making. The journey of the last 75 years witnessed many important constitutional reforms like the Hindu Code Bill, the incorporation of Fundamental Duties, the introduction of decentralisation and the Panchayati Raj system, ending centralised planning, and the abrogation of Article 370.

Some criticise it as a "colonial constitution". However, a closer look reveals that the Constitution contained most elements of the Nehru Report of 1928. President Murmu called it "the outcome of our long freedom struggle". The Constitution has served our country efficiently and effectively for 75 years. While allegations and counter-allegations about who was a protector and who was a detractor abound due to political expediency, the social and religious minorities and other marginalised people see it as a great guarantor of their rights and freedoms. Our Constitution has been successful in building the spirit of "One Nation, One People".

Ultimately, the Constitution is only a statement of intent. The constitutional morality—acting in its spirit—of those who manage it is critical. Ambedkar warned that "constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It needs to be cultivated." On this occasion, let the nation dedicate itself to the task of cultivating that morality.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal



D RAJA

"ON JANUARY 26, 1950, India would be a democratic country in the sense that India from that day would have a government of the people, by the people and for the people... What would happen to her democratic constitution? Will she be able to maintain it or will she lose it again?" B R Ambedkar voiced his fear in these words on November 25, 1949, during his last address to the Constituent Assembly.

As we celebrate the 75th year of our republic while also observing the hundredth year of the foundation of the CPI, it is a moment for deep reflection. Today, we are confronted with serious threats to the very principles that define the republic and shape our collective future.

The CPI has always been at the forefront of defending the core values of the Constitution and had a significant influence on its drafting. It was a firm proponent of a secular state, a vision shared by many of the Constitution's framers. Ambedkar warned that "Hindu raj" would be "the greatest calamity for the country". At the same time, socialism was a key aspect of our vision, and the Directive Principles of State Policy, which call for the reduction of inequalities in income and wealth, were in-

Threats to the Republic

Constitutional principles of freedom, equality, dignity need to be safeguarded

fluenced by socialist ideals. The aim was not just political independence but also economic and social justice.

Considering India's diversity, the framers of the Constitution gave us a federal polity. The CPI was also in the lead here by raising the demand for linguistic states and the decentralisation of power. The principles of secularism, welfare and federalism were woven into the fabric of the Indian state. But today, we find that these principles are increasingly under threat.

The rise of religious majoritarianism is one of the most serious threats to the republic today, undermining the foundational idea of India as a pluralistic society. Ambedkar had warned: "If there is anybody who has in his mind the project of solving the Hindu-Muslim problem by force, which is another name of solving it by war... in order that the Muslims may be subjugated... this country would be involved in perpetually conquering them." The horrific lynching incidents of recent years show how Muslims face such a warlike situation today, and the most recent example of this assault on secularism is the repeated violation of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991.

Another equally pressing threat to the republic is the increasing economic inequality. The vision of a welfare state, as enshrined in the Constitution, called for a system that would ensure not only political but also economic democracy. Yet today, we are witnessing the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. This is also a social and political issue: The marginalised are increasingly being excluded from the benefits of growth, leading to heightened unrest and creating fertile ground for communal politics, where the poor are pitted against each other based on religious identity rather than class interests.

Under the Directive Principles of State Policy, the responsibility of providing means of livelihood to all and minimising the inequalities of income and status were squarely with the state. However, the economic policies of the current government—the privatisation of public assets, the weakening of labour rights and a pro-corporate agenda—have exacerbated these issues. The CPI, which has always stood against such policies, calls for a complete restoration of the welfare state, a core tenet of the Constitution.

Further, India's federal polity faces significant challenges under the BJP-RSS regime. Article 1 of the Constitution declares India a Union of states, but the centralisation of power, manifested in the Centre legislating on state subjects and misusing the colonial office of the governor to undermine democratically elected state governments, erodes the essence of federalism. This centralisation is coupled with efforts to impose cultural, linguistic, and religious uniformity, and the push for "One Nation, One Election", which would further dilute the autonomy of states.

Today, we face a crisis where right-wing, communal politics and crony capitalism are undermining the core values of the Constitution. The CPI calls upon every citizen, every progressive force and every true patriot to join the struggle to regain the Republic for the betterment of the people of India. Let us draw inspiration from the vision of our Constitution and work to ensure that it remains a living document that guarantees freedom, equality and dignity for all.

The writer is general secretary, CPI

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP AND WHO

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A weaker shield' (IE, January 24). It is obvious that the WHO could not meet the standards required to keep the world free of dangers such as COVID-19. However, the presence of such a platform will always provide opportunities to discuss health issues at the international level. Instead of abandoning it, Trump should make all possible efforts to redirect and revitalise the WHO to make it a more result-oriented, inclusive and R&D based organisation, to ascertain ground realities in more coherent ways. He should understand that removing the US from its role of patronage would put a question mark on the existence and sanctity of the WHO. Trump should revisit his decision in the wider interest of humanity.

Devendra Awasthi, Lucknow

TRADE OPPORTUNITY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The new trade' (IE, January 24). This situation presents a rare opportunity for India while developing a curriculum challenging the existing social norms, which have inadequate and archaic moral models.

increase production for domestic and global markets. Even if there's a recession in the global market, the domestic market provides abundant opportunities for Indian producers, provided there is an increase in the purchasing power of Indian consumers. This would require reforms in the direct tax structure. Hopefully, the finance minister won't miss the opportunity in the upcoming Budget.

Shishir Sudekar, Nashik

THE WAY FORWARD

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A moral failure' (IE, January 24). It is admirable for the author to express genuine concern while challenging the zeitgeist. The sensitive issue at hand is not resolved by the immediate gratification of capital punishment; rather, it is a deeper problem rooted in the ignorance perpetuated by our lacking education system. The way forward requires measures including a more liberal system which removes the stigma associated with sex education, while developing a curriculum challenging the existing social norms, which have inadequate and archaic moral models.

Shashwat Jena, Guwahati

HNIs Leaving Poor Little Great Britain

Tax policy overhaul needed to get money home

In an effort to make Britain great again, the island state's chancellor of the exchequer—which sounds better than 'finance minister'—Rachel Reeves announced this week at Davos that plans are afoot to abolish 'non-dom' status—those whose permanent home or domicile is outside Britain for tax purposes—will be amended to allow a more generous phase-out of tax benefits. A flight of millionaires—some 9,500 in 2024 alone—is indeed a matter of concern. The tax changes are designed to take away the incentive to seek domicile abroad—primarily to places like Dubai, Italy, Malta and Switzerland. But there is the danger of swelling the numbers of the wealthy leaving the country. London may widen the transition window. But that may not be good enough. Since most non-doms are of foreign origin, they could just wait out the transition period before finalising their plans to migrate.

Britain wants to move to a residence-based tax regime and expects to convince HNIs holding wealth overseas to bring it 'home'. There is legitimate concern over the flight of capital as witnessed by delisting of companies from London Stock Exchange. British HNIs are earning a big chunk of it overseas and may not want to get it into the country's inheritance tax regime. The government says it is heading the concerns of non-doms. But it may have to go in for a comprehensive overhaul of tax policy to convince them to bring their money onshore. The longer the issue plays out, the British exchequer stands to lose more revenue through 'HNIXits'.

Since Brexit, Britain has lost the pulling power of investor visas for HNIs to settle in the country. This is at a time when other developed economies are ramping up their investment-immigration programmes. The international wealthy community is highly mobile and the British government's rethink may be a futile rearguard exercise. It has introduced uncertainty over taxation that reinforces migration decisions. Britain could look at competing models that are delivering better outcomes in the arrival lounge.

Our Republicans Missing in Action

Tomorrow, like on every Republic Day, there will be much speculating about 'the world's largest democracy' and the 'sacred text' that is the Constitution. But if you let the rhetoric of a bit and let facts do the talking, we may be looking the other way to avoid being caught looking uncomfortable as a democratic nation. PRS Legislative Research's annual report, 'The Annual Review of State Laws' for 2023 released last year, shows that state assemblies met for 23 days in 2023. As many as 12 states met for less than 100 hrs that year. 44% of all bills were passed on the day of introduction or the very next day, giving debates a short shrift. In 2002, a committee set up to review the working of the Constitution recommended that houses of

legislatures with less than 70 members should meet for at least 50 days in a year, and other houses meet for at least 90 days. Parliament doesn't fare much better. The 2024 winter session functioned for 43 hrs 27 mins with a productivity of 40.03%.

Maybe the Narayana Murthy and Subrahmanyan should give our MLAs and MPs some advice on work culture. When legislative bodies fail to meet, sessions are adjourned, bills are rushed through, public trust erodes. No amount of 'voter turnout' stats can sweeten this missing hand.

It is reasonable for voters to expect that their elected representatives show up for work in Parliament and assemblies, engage in meaningful debate and discussion, and address issues critical to public welfare. Instead, executive absenteeism has been rationalised and normalised. Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla recently shared his concern over the declining number of sittings of legislative bodies and disruptive tendency of frequent adjournments. We should be concerned, too.



THINK ABOUT IT

Another show put up by the military-industrial-patriotic complex

Not Republic Day, It's Show Weaponry Day

Tomorrow, once again we'll be in the Soviet Union, Or North Korea, Or China. Along with the quality-inconsistent dioramas depicting clichés from various states, there will be 'boy toys'—no, 'toy boys' are a different thing altogether—and people playing 'soldiers' because that's what they are. The display of metaphorical muscle in the form of tanks, anti-air guns, and other weaponry euphemistically categorised as 'defence equipment' even when they are used in offensive manoeuvres is the nation indulging in coquetry while every-one wolf whistles.

For all the bhashans on India as the 'land of Gandhi', implying an innate attraction towards peace, an alien landing up at Rajpath in Delhi would be forgiven for believing that she was witnessing a strutting militaristic state. Such performative display of war machines to celebrate the adoption of the Constitution is rather strange. What a K-9 Vajra self-propelled howitzer gun has to do with India's republican status, only the military-industrial-patriotic complex will be able to tell. The ritualisation of what is essentially perpetuating a government scheme that sends its citizens to possible death as its job description comes alive every January 26. There will be enough children, who are otherwise taught to respect life and avoid violence, who'll be cheering on this 'Republic Day' (sic) parade.

Any Trumpian move that weakens the Western alliance brings glad tidings to Beijing

Making China Great Again



Saibal Dasgupta

Many Chinese pundits and commentators are jubilant about Donald Trump's return to power. The US president avoided a direct attack on China in his inaugural speech on Jan 20. Two days later, he said he would impose a 10% tariff on Chinese goods, scaling back his earlier position of charging a 60% duty. On Thursday, the US leader went one step further when he said that he would 'rather not have to use [tariffs]. But it's a tremendous power over China'.

So, is Trump then looking for a deal to resolve some of the vexing issues in US-China relations? There are some clear signals that he is revising his attitude towards China. For instance, he no longer accuses China of stealing American jobs. He will charge a 10% additional duty because he claims China is behind the supply ofentanyl, a highly addictive drug plaguing many Americans.

The first sign of Trump working on a deal with China emerged three days before the swearing-in when he talked to Xi Jinping over the phone. 'It is my expectation that we will solve many problems together, and starting immediately,' he said on social media. He specifically mentioned trade, fentanyl and TikTok as topics discussed. Soon after taking charge, Trump 'saved' TikTok. China's powerful soft power tool with 170 million American followers, from an immediate ban through an executive order. During a panel discussion at WEF on Tuesday, Harvard Kennedy School's Graham Allison said that the deal between the two superpowers could tick up. 'I'm betting this time next year... we'll be surprised on the upside in the

relationship,' he said, adding, 'Is Trump a China hawk? I think, if you look at what he said and did, you'll find it difficult to classify him in those terms.'

A deal between the two biggest competitors in business, tech and military is not easy to achieve. Besides, there are several China hawks, including secretary of state Marco Rubio, in Trump 2.0. At the same time, Trumpites include Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, both of whom have business interests in China.

At the most, Trump and Xi might work out a plan to accommodate each other, mostly allowing the former to show he is leaning more money for America out of China. Trump is changing his views because the original purpose of derailing China's exports through trade war has not worked. Chinese exports to the US grew by 4% during Nov 2023-Nov 2024.

Xi's main objective is to get assurance from the new administration that it would not protect Taiwan militarily in case of a clash. More than economic issues, Xi is keen to capture Taiwan in what the Chinese regards as a 'reunification' between the two regions.

Trump has earlier indicated that he sees no 'emotional' reasons to defend Taiwan and has even suggested that Taipei pay protection money to the US.

Any deal between the world's biggest and second-biggest economies, even on a limited scale, will cause major changes in the global supply chain and throw up threats and opportunities. India, which has demonstrated a leaning towards the West without becoming a committed US ally, has reason to be wary. A US-China deal would weaken the western alliance. The Biden administration's programme of using India and Japan to counter China's influence in diplomacy and in far like Quad, India has been the only voice that did not take an anti-US stance in BRICS while China, Iran and Russia continuously lambast Washington.



Dr. Dilip Kumar

Indian businesses have been looking forward to additional flow of investments and high technology from US companies trying to move their operations, partly or fully, out of China. That flow could take a hit.

Trump is a businessman at heart, his considerations are more pragmatic. He is not interested in ideology,' said Wang Dong, international relations professor at Peking University. 'Other problems, like geopolitical issues, the Taiwan question, are all secondary to Trump,' he added.

Noting that the self-governing island, which Beijing claims its own, did not come up in his inaugural speech. During his first term in 2017, some Chinese experts had predicted that Trump would weaken the western alliance. They feel vindicated this time as Trump has pulled the US out of the Paris Agreement on climate change, an important issue in Europe. Several European leaders, including heads of Germany and

France, opposed his recent remark about the US taking over Greenland. Incidentally, he skipped this claim in his inaugural speech.

China views the western alliance, which includes knowledge economies like Germany, Britain, Japan and the US, as a major hurdle in China's ambition to become the foremost hub of high-end technologies and achieve the dream of becoming the world's biggest economy. Any move that would weaken the western alliance brings glad tidings to Beijing.

If Trump succeeds in making a deal with China, he will be emulating what Richard Nixon did when he visited Beijing in February 1972. Nixon visited China at the height of the Cold War as part of his 'ping pong diplomacy' idea. The Nixon visit resulted in China attracting FDI and going on to become an 'economic miracle'.

The writer is author of *Running with the Dragon: How India Should Do Business with China*

Democracy's Constitution's Judicially Free Isn't 'Above All'



Satvik Varma

The seeds of the term 'republic' were sown in 1847 by the introduction of the 'objectives resolution' by the assembly by Jawaharlal Nehru. The very first of these objectives read: 'to proclaim India as an Independent Sovereign Republic.' Nehru was of the view that evolving into a republic was a natural progression for India after independence. He was also clear that whatever system of government India establishes, it must fit in with the temper of its people and be acceptable to them.

He had no doubt that India stood for democracy, but voiced that the assembly would determine what shape to give to that democracy. And eventually, his resolution, through discussions and changes, culminated in the preamble to the Constitution. While introducing his resolution, Nehru even argued that there was no need for inclusion of the word 'democratic' as 'republic' meant that India would naturally be democratic. It is the republican nature of the Constitution that supplements India's democratic character.

During the debates, BR Ambedkar argued that the republican nature of the government signified that the ultimate authority rested with the electorate and, consequently, leadership would be based on the will of the people. It was important to underscore in its founding document that Independent India will bear no allegiance to any external authority. A close scrutiny of the deliberations reveals that the republican character is also embodied in the democratic principles of universal adult suffrage, equality of rights, secularism and social justice, all of which are critical pillars of India's Constitution.

The assembly was aware that in some countries, traditions and conventions sufficed for governance. But owing to India's heterogeneous society there was a need to incorporate written provisions to integrate laws and practices, especially with a view to reconcile varying customs and needs of all citizens. Assembly member KT Shah asserted that in a country as diverse as India, the Constitution should provide detailed guidance to prevent misinterpretation and misuse. He wanted the Constitution to 'lay down in clear and un-

mistakable terms what is to be done and what is not to be done. It must not be left to be interpreted by any individual or body in any manner they please. This is the reason why I am urging that the assembly should exercise the wisdom and discretion of future generations.'

Thanks to this, the Constitution emerged as the longest written one of any republic. The assembly was cognisant that the Constitution needed to be practical, capable of being understood by the common people, and not a document to be interpreted by lawyers or academics.

Over seven decades, politically one has seen reorganisation of some states, growth of regional parties and their role at the Centre and, often, in government formation. India has also matured as a nation and naturally progressed as a society. Through it all, the Constitution has been our lodestone.

Yet, as we move forward, we should remember what Ambedkar said in his final speech in the constituent assembly on November 25, 1949. 'If we wish to maintain a democracy not merely in form, but also in fact, what must we do? The first thing in my judgment we must do is to hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives.' He emphasised that the people 'must not be content with a mere political democracy but rather strive for a social democracy with underlying principles of equality, liberty and fraternity.' For Ambedkar, to divorce these three principles from each other was to defeat the very purpose of democracy.



Keep it constitutionally fit

Today, we are witnessing the hollowing out of many institutions created by the Constitution, the diminishing of Parliament and pressures on our judiciary, all of which is undermining the democratic spirit. So, if we wish to preserve the Constitution, we must resolve not to be tardy in the recognition of the evils that lie across our path, or be weak in our initiative to remove them.

The writer is a senior advocate



MC Govardhana Rangan

The 1973 Supreme Court ruling in the Kesavananda Bharati vs State of Kerala case limiting Parliament's amending power, and the judiciary holding monopoly in selecting judges, have the potential to play out in the future.

A Constitution bench of 13 judges, in a 'view by the majority' ruled that Gol of the day can amend the Constitution, but may 'alter its basic structure'. This is celebrated as a turning point where the judiciary clipped the powers of elected members to bring about changes through processes prescribed in the Constitution.

It may have been a happy outcome at that time, given the then prevailing political situation when fundamental rights were under threat. But later revelations threw light on how much politics was involved in the decision itself.

The bench was divided in two groups, having firm views on amendments. There were also some members who were parties to other rulings that raised the question of judicial propriety. The 66-day hearing and delivery of the ruling read more like a thriller than a studious examination of the power of Parliament. The narration of the events... may raise doubts not only about the reliability of the verdict of the un-amendability of the basic structure of the Constitution, but may also cast doubts on whether the hearing of 66 days, with its political overtones and outcome, was really a judicial exercise guided by judicial norms expected of the Supreme Court, writes TR Andhyarujina in his 2014 book, *Kesavananda Bharati Case: The Untold Story of Struggle for Supremacy by Supreme Court and Parliament*.

The way the 'view by the majority' was arrived at remains questionable. It was reported that Chief Justice SM Sikri circulated a note for the signature of his fellow judges, based on Justice HR Khan's observation, which was reportedly not the view of the majority. 'Never had the Supreme Court seen such a spectacle,' writes Andhyarujina. 'This is the so-called "View by the Majority" of the bench which has been assumed to be the decision in the Kesavananda case.'

This benchmark judgment's one vital outcome has been the formation of the collegium to select high court and apex court judges. Borrowing from the 'basic structure' doctrine, the top court, in the 1993 'Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v Union of India' case overruled an earlier decision that said 'consultation' doesn't mean 'concurrence' in the appointment of judges, and Gol can decide when there are differences.

The irony is that the Constitution doesn't mention 'collegium,' and it remains a later formulation of the judiciary. An independent judiciary is essential for a democracy. But can it assume supreme powers over other arms of democracy? Appointments and transfers of judges to higher courts by the collegium have been criticised.

Justice Jasti Chelameswar, who dissented in the NJAC case, said, 'We, the members of the judiciary, exult and frolic in our emancipation from the other two organs of the State. But have we developed an alternative constitutional morality to emancipate us from the theory of checks and balances, robust enough to keep us in control from abusing our independence?' Soli Sorabjee also questioned the collegium system. 'No doubt judges are the most appropriate persons to be involved in the matter of appointments of lawyers to the higher judiciary, but the judiciary cannot have a monopoly in the matter,' he said.

Parliament has attempted four times to empower itself with a say in judges' appointment. There would certainly be no other attempt to amend it. The 'basic structure' doctrine may also resurface. To keep the Constitution working, a correct interpretation is required.

There can be no two opinions on the need for the maintenance of judicial independence. AK Ayaz said during the constitutional assembly debate. 'The doctrine of independence is not to be raised to the level of a dogma so as to enable the judiciary to function as a kind of super-legislature or super-executive.' There are late persons in protecting something the founders didn't give us in the first place.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Breaking Barriers

TEAM ST

Ultra-nationalists, focused only on making their 'own' country, race and religion great again, have an antithetical approach to fostering a united world in the face of global challenges, such as climate change. Sages remind us that we live in an interconnected world—and other issues are related to economics, environment or health, we rely on global cooperation rather than on isolated endeavours. This is especially true when addressing global problems such as climate change, degradation of ecosystems and the consequent destruction of numerous species and their habitats.

In such an environment, it is important to explore the African Ubuntu philosophy, based on happy, mutual coexistence: 'I am because you are.' Ubuntu asserts that individuals are not isolated beings; we are interconnected and derive our humanity through relationships with others.

In Indic philosophical tradition, Pratyakhyana, the theory of dependent origination, is imperative to Buddhist central tenets. Nothing in this world has an independent origin, including shunyata or emptiness. Geography and borders ought to be seen as conveniences rather than as impediments. Withdrawing from common platforms and intellectual exchanges, for example, might not be such a good idea when instant communication tools have virtually broken down all barriers.



LOLLING ON SATURDAY

Sympathy From The Devil

Dilip is walking down the street one day, and he happens to see his old high school friend, Harish. 'Harish! How are you?' he greets his old buddy.

'Not so good, boss,' says Harish. 'What's what happened?' asks Dilip. 'I just went bankrupt. I don't know what I'm going to do.'

'Could have been worse,' Harish replies calmly. 'Could have been worse.'

A month later, Dilip again encounters Harish in a restaurant. 'Hey how are you now?' he asks. 'Terrible! Our house burned down last night.'

'Could have been worse,' Dilip says again. 'A month later, Dilip runs into Harish a third time. 'Well, how goes it?'

'Oh! Now my wife has left me.'

Dilip nods his head and gives his usual optimistic smile, saying, 'Could've been worse.'

'This time, Harish grabs Dilip by the shoulders. 'Every time you say the same thing: 'Could have been worse.' How in Heaven's name could it have been any worse?'

Dilip looks at Harish and explains: 'Could have been worse. It could have happened to me.'

Chat Room

A Race to Save The World

Apologies to the Edit Adapting to Life in the Room (Jan 24). Trump's Adieu Paris proclamation is regrettable though not unexpected. This not only shifts focus from climate-proofing efforts but turns the clock back by several decades. Trump's obsession with American oil-leveraged economic growth is a national disaster and will hamper plans for achieving net-zero targets that are based on science. Scientists, national global leaders and other experts must work together to get the world off this dangerous path.

Rajarao Kumar Bengaluru

CAPITAL CANVASS

Assembly Elections 2025

No of Seats: **70**
Reserved for Scheduled Castes: **12**

Total No of Voters: **1,56,14,000**

Male: **83,76,173**
Female: **72,36,560**

Third gender: **1,267**

Polling stations: **13,033**

Date of Polling: **February 5**
Date of Counting: **February 8**

POLL POINTS

AAP

- Eyeing a fourth straight win, despite corruption charges, anti-incumbency
- Reaching out to caste groups and communities

BJP

- Eyeing a return to power after 27 years
- Going to polls without a face, attacks AAP on scams

Congress

- Hoping to regain some space after drawing a blank in 2015 and 2020
- Fields heavyweights against Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia and Atishi

POLL PROMISES

AAP

- Rs 2,100 monthly for women
- Rs 18,000 monthly for Hindu priests and Sikh Granthis
- Free medical treatment for the elderly

BJP

- Rs 2,500 monthly for women
- Rs 21,000 and 6 nutrition kits for pregnant women
- LDC cylinder at Rs 500

Congress

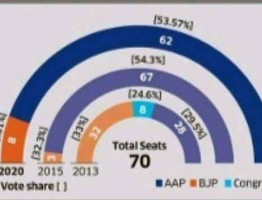
- Rs 2,500 monthly for women
- LDC cylinder at Rs 500, unique ration kits
- Rs 8,000 per month for a year for unemployed youth

STARS OF THE SHOW



• New Delhi: Arvind Kejriwal (AAP), Parvesh Verma (BJP), Sandeep Dikshit (Cong) • Kalkaji: Atishi (AAP), Ramesh Bidhuri (BJP), Alka Lamba (Cong) • Jangpura: Manish Sisodia (AAP), Tarwinder Singh Marwah (BJP), Farhad Suri (Cong)

Assembly Elections: 2013-2020



AAP in a do-or-die battle in Delhi

Can BJP dislodge Kejriwal's party?

HEMIN JOY
DH NEWS SERVICE

The Aam Aadmi Party has entered the Delhi battleground with its image bruised by corruption allegations and the novelty factor diminished. Fighting a BJP that is dreaming of capturing power in the capital after a gap of 27 years and a Congress that is seeking to restore its past glory, AAP knows that 2025 is a 'do or die' battle and not as easy as it was in 2015 or 2020 when they dusted the opponents to irrelevance. Its campaigner-in-chief Arvind Kejriwal is cross-dressing Delhi, announcing 'guarantees', seeking the support of various caste groups, attending campaign rallies and trying to put the BJP on the back foot.

Knowing well that it cannot bank on 'freebies' alone, AAP has reached out to new allies - from 'Sanatan' practitioners to Sikh Granthis, Jats, Aggarwals, auto-drivers, washer-people, sanitation workers, students, slum-dwellers to RWAs and middle-class - as a dent has appeared in its voter-base.

AAP was in disarray a few months back with its top leaders in jail on corruption charges and doubts lingering in the minds of cadre. Some left for greener pastures while some waited for clouds to clear. In the last few months, it has tried to regain control and stabilise itself, with several manoeuvres.

Kejriwal, who did not vacate his chair while in jail to scuttle the emergence of any other power centre in AAP, quit as chief minister within days of walking free on bail in September, in what was seen as a smart move to deflect any discussion on his continuance. Atishi was chosen as a "temporary" successor. Minister Kailash Gahlot walked out of AAP accusing Kejriwal of moving away from ideals. One of Kejriwal's close aides Swati Malviwal fell out of his favour after she warmed up to his opponents following one of his aides allegedly assaulting her.

Unfazed by the setbacks and other leaders found wanting in managing the party's affairs when he was behind bars, Kejriwal took the command and steered AAP back on track. AAP soon re-energised one lakh office bearers at the grassroots and deployed 5,000-member women squads as a first step.

MLAs were given the task of reaching every voter's doorstep. AAP became the first to announce candidates after wooing some influential leaders from other parties while benching around two dozen sitting MLAs to minimise anti-incumbency.

As AAP changed gears, its opponents unleashed a campaign centred around 'Sheesh Mahal' or lavish spending on refurbishing the chief minister's official residence and liquor scam.

At the same time, AAP faced a renewed challenge from its LNDLA ally Congress with Rahul

Gandhi leading the charge to make the Delhi battle a triangular fight. Dalit groups and minorities too have reservations about AAP, which has never shed away from flaunting its Hinduva credentials. A narrative pushed by the saffron camp that a fresh Kejriwal term would end up as another five years of confrontation with the BJP-led Centre and stagnation of development has also triggered some concerns for the AAP.

At another level, AAP is also sharing its apprehensions about the "manipulation" of electoral devices - it has complained about deletions from electoral rolls and applications for the addition of unprecedented numbers of voters from BJP MP residences.

AAP is leaving no opportunity to attack the BJP - it has picked up Ramesh Bidhuri's sexist comments, Parvesh Verma's comments on Punjab registration vehicles, and alleged distribution of cash and articles - while ignoring Congress as an insignificant force in the capital.

With its governance record of 10 years, a slew of new guarantees aimed at Dalits, priests, elderly and youth among others and a carefully crafted victim card, can AAP overcome the BJP's bid to end its power drought and the Congress' hope for a resurgence even at the cost of an ally?

SUMIT PANDE
DH NEWS SERVICE

Jana Sangh, the Bharatiya Janata Party's pre-Emergency avatar, tasted power for the first time in 1967, when Lal Krishna Advani was elected chairman of the Delhi Metropolitan Council. By 1983, when the statehood of the national capital territory was restored, Advani had moved on to the national stage. Madan Lal Khurana, who had been handed over the baton, romped home with a comfortable majority to form the government.

Over the next five years, apart from the three BJP CMs - Khurana, Sahib Singh Verma, and Sushma Swaraj - a lot changed in Delhi. The first wave of globalization and the market economy created a new consumer class. Middle classes, accustomed to customized Doodharan coverage, watched wars on cable TV streamed live by CNN. Engineers drew five-digit salaries, as hoards from the heartland states and elsewhere poured into the national capital region in search of employment and education.

BJP led by its first-generation post-partition migrant leadership like Khurana, V K Malhotra, and Kedar Nath Sahani somehow failed to discern this metamorphosis. It

continued to rely on the Punjabi-Baniya vote base when the changing demography created an entirely new polity of the aspirational classes.

As the BJP missed the bus, Congress lapped up the opportunity by handing over the reins of the Delhi unit to Sheila Dikshit nee Kapoor, the former Congress MP from Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh who was married to party stalwart Uma Shankar Dikshit's son Vijay.

Sheila Dikshit's projection was a tactical move to cater to Punjabi and Poorvanchali sentiments. And it worked - not once but thrice.

Once the BJP lost power, it remained in opposition for 15 years. When Congress finally lost in 2013, it was not to the BJP but a political start-up - Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party.

While AAP weaned away Congress's traditional vote base in the lower middle class, and Delhi migrant workforce by offering a slew of welfare schemes, the BJP's attempts at image makeover failed repeatedly.

Interestingly, while the party missed every opportunity to resuscitate life into the state unit, the BJP did extremely well to win all seven Lok Sabha seats in the last three elections since 2014. The trends would completely reverse when it came to assembly polls.

The BJP feels that the taint of the "liquor scam" has taken

the veneer off Kejriwal's 'anti-corruption crusader' image. The alleged exorbitant expenditure on the renovation of the Delhi CM's residence has worn out both the outsider and the outlier tags, bringing AAP to the conventional playing field. AAP MLAs, who are into their second and third terms face local anti-incumbency. And perhaps, most importantly, an aggressive Congress that has sought to reclaim its voter base in the national capital is making the contest tri-polar in pockets at the cost of AAP.

But would this be enough to dislodge Kejriwal?

Acutely aware that it does not have a name and a face to match Kejriwal's blitzkrieg in Delhi, BJP has not named a CM candidate for Delhi polls. Instead, the party is relying on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's name and face to pull off.

In the last 10 years at the national level, AAP and its emergence have helped the BJP to indirectly contain its main opponent, the Indian National Congress. From Goa to Gujarat, a split in the non-BJP votes tends to benefit the saffron front and its allies.

Though un-intentionally, Delhi is a small price BJP has had to pay for this bargain. A weak AAP is something the BJP may prefer than a resurgent Congress.

It is a tough choice, though, as Indian voters of late have been fairly rigid in handing out decisive verdicts.

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

Aluminium in jabs: Good or bad?

Robert F Kennedy Jr and others have blamed it for allergies and illnesses. Scientists say it bolsters the immune response, writes **Teddy Rosenbluth**

Robert F Kennedy Jr has often trained his critics on the safety of vaccines on a common ingredient: aluminium, which he has suggested is responsible for a litany of childhood ailments, including food allergies, autism and depression.

"You wonder why a whole generation of children is allergic to stuff," Kennedy said during a 2021 interview. "It's because we're inducing allergies, pumping them full of aluminium."

To many vaccine scientists, aluminium is a strange target. It is among the most studied ingredients in vaccines and perhaps in modern medicine.

"There's a huge amount of information that's gathered," said Dr Andrew Racine, a paediatrician and chief medical officer at the Montefiore Health System. "If there was something jumping out about a lack of safety, we would most likely have seen it somewhere, and it just doesn't appear."

Aluminium salts, a more soluble form of the metal, are added to vaccines such as the Tdap shot to bolster the body's immune response. The ingredient has repeatedly been evaluated as a part of vaccines in clinical trials and administered in billions of doses over several decades.

Even so, as Kennedy prepares for confirmation hearings as Secretary of Health and Human Services, many experts fear the standby will face fresh scrutiny and may even justify limiting access to several childhood vaccines, like the shots for hepatitis B and pneumococcal disease.

Aaron Siri, a lawyer and close ally of Kennedy, has represented clients in petitioning federal regulators to pause the distribution of more than a dozen vaccines until the makers provided more information about the amount of aluminium in the formulations.

The origins of added aluminium in vaccines can be traced back nearly a century. Today, aluminium adjuvants are found in 27 routine vaccines and nearly half are recommended for children under 5.

This extra boost of immunity is not needed in all types of vaccines. Shots that contain a weakened form of a virus, like



the measles mumps and rubella shot, or created with mRNA technology, like the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, generate strong enough immune responses on their own.

But in vaccines that contain only small fragments of the pathogen, which would garner little attention from the immune system, adjuvants help stimulate a stronger response, allowing vaccines to be given in fewer doses.

Scientists believe that aluminium salts work in two ways. First, aluminium binds to the core component of the vaccine and causes it to diffuse into the bloodstream more slowly, giving immune cells more time to build a response.

It's also thought that aluminium operates more directly, enhancing the activity of certain immune cells, though this mechanism is not fully understood.

Though aluminium salts are not the only adjuvants on the market, vaccine makers often prefer them because of a lengthy track record of safety data.

Each time a new vaccine that uses an aluminium adjuvant is developed, it undergoes lengthy clinical trials to evaluate its safety, and side effects are continuously

monitored after approval. One of the earliest trials, including an aluminium adjuvant, was published in 1934.

Later trials revealed some minor side effects, such as redness, body aches and, in rare cases, painful nodules at the injection site. But there is little evidence that aluminium in vaccines causes serious, long-term side effects, as Kennedy has suggested.

People routinely exposed to large quantities of aluminium - such as workers who breathe in aluminium dust or dialysis patients who routinely receive aluminium-rich medications - may experience respiratory, bone and neurological complications.

The amount of aluminium in childhood vaccines, however, is trivial compared with what people are routinely exposed to by the environment and food, said Dr Michael Moody, director of the Duke Human Vaccine Institute.

"We're exposed to aluminium constantly," he said. "If you inhale dust from the outside, you're coming into contact with aluminium."

In the first six months of babies' lives, vaccines expose them to roughly 4.4

milligrams of aluminium. By contrast, one slice of American cheese can contain as much as 50 milligrams of aluminium.

When scientists compared aluminium levels in the blood and hair of babies who had been given aluminium-containing vaccines versus those who hadn't, they found no significant difference.

Some scientists believe that one potential side effect needs additional research. In 2022, after a federally funded study found a minor association between aluminium exposure from vaccines and asthma, the CDC noted that the link warranted "further investigation." (The agency said it would not change vaccine recommendations "based on a single study.")

Kennedy, who was then the chair of Children's Health Defense, a nonprofit frequently critical of vaccines, held out the study as evidence that immunizations were causing an "asthma epidemic."

However, the paper's authors were quick to point out the limits of their findings, most notably that the effect was small and that the study was observational, which means it cannot prove cause-and-effect.

In the paper, they cautioned that their results "do not constitute strong evidence for questioning the safety of aluminium in vaccines."

Independent experts also noted that the authors did not collect data on several key risk factors, like whether the participants were exposed to cigarette smoke or had a family history of asthma - either of which could explain the difference they observed. In response to the study, a group of researchers from the Statens Serum Institut, Denmark's public health agency, ran a similar analysis on a national data set of more than 450,000 children.

Their preliminary results did not show an association between aluminium adjuvants and asthma, said Dr CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices in 2023.

Still, a CDC spokesperson said the agency was "discussing additional studies" to investigate the potential risk.

The New York Times

DID YOU KNOW?

DNA proof of men migrating for marriage

A tantalising vision of a women-centric society has emerged from an ancient cemetery in the south of England.

Whereas women commonly left home to join their husbands' families upon marriage, the Dorset, a Celtic tribe that lived in Dorset 2,000 years ago, bucked the mold with a system called matrilocality, wherein women remained in their ancestral communities, and men migrated for marriage.

By analysing the genomes of 57 Dorset (Roman) people buried sometime from about 100 B.C. to A.D. 100, scientists found maternal lineages typical of modernity. This was the first time this system had been identified in European prehistory.

Meanwhile, individuals with ancestries unrelated to the dominant line were mostly men, suggesting that they had moved from other communities to live with the families of their wives, according to a study in the journal Nature. "I was not expecting such a strong signature of matrilocality," said Lara Cassidy, an assistant professor in genetics at Trinity College Dublin who led the study. "When that came out of the data, it was a bit of a shock."

"But upon reflection, if you look at what classical writers were talking about and if you look at the archaeological context, there are a lot of hints that women were able to attain high status in these societies," she added.

The liberties of Celtic women were a topic for thousands of years. Roman writers were scandalized by reports of their sexual freedoms, which included taking multiple husbands. Carminandua and Boudica, early female leaders in Britain, demonstrated that women could reach the highest levels of power, commanding armies and heading tribes.

Archaeological evidence also hints at flexible gender dynamics that varied widely depending on local traditions. For instance, Celtic women were sometimes buried with luxurious grave goods, like jewellery and mirrors, a marker of high status. Matrilocality, whereby women live near their in-laws, is still far more culturally common, but female-centric societies are not as universal as they were even a decade ago. "It's a generational paradigm shift," said Rachel Pope, an associate professor in European prehistory at the University of Liverpool with expertise in matrilocality who was not involved in the study. "It's partly a trend in archaeology more generally, where we have returned to data and material evidence to lead narrative, rather than imposing narratives that confirm our own biases."

- Science Times



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

Learnings from another accident

Most accidents happen because of a misunderstanding or mistiming, a lack of ability and opportunity to respond to events, and sometimes, a combination of all these. The tragedy on the tracks in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra on Wednesday – in which 13 people were mowed down by the Karnataka Express – had all these elements. The accident occurred when some passengers of the Mumbai-bound Pushpak Express jumped out of the train in panic after someone raised a fire alarm and pulled the chain to stop the train. According to reports, a tea-seller started the rumour which was relayed by two passengers and spread among the others in the train. The passengers who jumped out were struck by a train on the neighbouring track which slowed down after the driver applied the brakes. A curvature on the track may have reduced the vision of the driver of the incoming train. Multiple factors combined to cause a major mishap, the first such event for the Railways in the new year.

It is not clear, yet, if the fire alarm was caused by baseless rumours or signs of sparks and smoke. Preliminary reports point to the possibility of sparks emanating from the hot axle or brake-binding (jamming) in the train. If true, they indicate an equipment failure and the Railways' maintenance department needs to provide answers. The Railways have clarified that there was no spark or smoke but that cannot be the final word. An investigation is underway to identify any operational or safety lapse that may have occurred. The state government has attributed the accident to "sheer rumour" or "misinformation." The district administration has said that the police are also investigating possible criminal conspiracy angles while the Opposition attributed the mishap to a flawed safety system.

While the investigations may throw light on the cause, there are lessons to be learnt from this accident as well. Whether it is a human error, a mechanical failure, a natural disaster, unexpected or irrational passenger behaviour, misinformation or sabotage, the onus is on the Railways to ensure that accidents arising out of each of these threats are averted. The Jalgaon accident raises the question on how the Railways would deal with a rumour that has potentially disastrous consequences spreading in a train. There may be the need for an internal communication system that could quickly and effectively deal with it. It is human nature to panic in a situation of perceived danger, and passengers cannot be blamed for their reaction. On the infrastructure side, the curvature of the line was a contributory factor. Every accident raises pertinent questions about safety and these are questions that cannot be left unanswered.

The Jalgaon tragedy underscores need to counter misinformation in moving trains

Opinion is alright, where's the evidence?

V Kamakoti, the Director of IIT Madras, is entitled to his personal views on any matter but his position as the head of one of the country's premier technical education institutions comes with certain responsibilities he needs to consider while expressing those views. Kamakoti recently claimed that cow urine could cure ailments like fever and irritable bowel syndrome. A *Ga Somrakshana Sala* event on January 15, he said cow urine possessed anti-bacterial and anti-fungal and digestive properties, and shared an anecdote about a *sanyasi* who recovered from high fever after drinking it. He also said there was scientific evidence to back his views and that he consumed *panchgavya*, made of urine, dung, curd, ghee and milk every day.

Kamakoti's argument has been refuted by scientists and doctors. The claims about the medicinal properties of cow urine are old and have been discounted by scientific bodies. The Indian Veterinary Research Institute has found that cow urine contains at least 14 types of harmful bacteria that could cause infections in humans. The Doctors Association for Social Equality (DASE) has sharply criticised Kamakoti and said that cow urine cannot cure any disease. It said Kamakoti's prescription could do harm and even cause death if people with fever, a common occurrence, followed it. The doctors' body said consumption of *panchgavya* could also have harmful effects. Some years ago, scientists had criticised the government's proposal to do research on the "uniqueness" of indigenous cows and the claimed curative properties of cow derivatives as "unscientific" and a misuse of public funds. Some political parties have criticised Kamakoti's statement and demanded his resignation or dismissal, though he has found support among some sections.

Prominent persons have made similar claims about cow urine and even recommended its use. It is unfortunate that the overwhelmingly unfavourable medical opinion about it is ignored and its consumption is advocated. As an individual, Kamakoti has his right to hold his belief and practise it. But he should not publicly endorse a controversial claim that has been dismissed by the scientific and medical community. The IIT-M Director's expertise is in computer science but his stature will provide credibility to his claim. As a practitioner of science and technology, he is expected to promote scientific temper. Unfortunately, there is an ecosystem in the country in which faith-based ideas, superstitions and pseudo-scientific claims find currency. But faith, religion and politics should not be mixed up in the public sphere. Kamakoti has a doctorate in computer science but he should not assume the role of a medical doctor.

IIT-M Director's endorsement of cow urine's medicinal values has no scientific backing

COMMENT

GOALS AND GAPS

Funding India's climate plan

In the face of an uncertain climate future, well-financed adaptation measures become non-negotiable

INDU K MURTHY

Climate adaptation is no longer a distant concern; it has become a pressing priority in the face of escalating climate impacts. The need to prepare for these changes, from intensifying heatwaves to erratic monsoons, is urgent. While the discourse on mitigation – reducing greenhouse gas emissions – has gained momentum, adaptation often remains underfunded. Addressing the financing needs and gaps in climate adaptation is crucial for safeguarding communities, ecosystems, and economies.

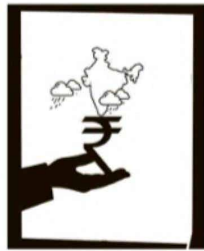
Despite the growing recognition of its importance, several barriers impede the flow of investments into climate adaptation. One of the most significant challenges is the lack of localised, granular climate risk data, which hampers informed decision-making and discourages investment. The perception that adaptation projects yield low financial returns further deters private sector participation, as these initiatives are often not profit-driven. High upfront costs, coupled with long payback periods, add another layer of complexity, making such projects less attractive to investors.

The fragmented nature of funding mechanisms is another issue. Many adaptation projects rely heavily on donor-driven, short-term funding rather than sustainable, long-term strategies. Policy and regulatory gaps also create uncertainty, dissuading investments. Subnational governments, often tasked with implementing adaptation measures, frequently lack the technical and financial capacity to design and execute projects effectively.

A range of resources and mechanisms currently support adaptation financing, though their scale remains insufficient to meet the growing needs. Public sector funding, such as India's National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC), provides critical support, but these funds need significant scaling up to realise their potential. International climate funds like the Green Climate Fund (GCF), Adaptation Fund, and Global Environment Facility (GEF) play a pivotal role in channelling resources to vulnerable regions, yet their reach is limited by available

capital and bureaucratic hurdles.

Private sector engagement is expanding, with companies investing through innovative products such as climate insurance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and impact investments. Philanthropic foundations are also stepping in to bridge gaps, often supporting innovative projects that public and private funding overlooks. Debt-refinance mechanisms, like debt-for-climate swaps, offer a creative approach to finance adaptation while easing debt burdens. Blended finance, which combines public and private capital, helps de-risk projects and attract investments into initiatives that are less commercially viable.



Scaling up adaptation finance requires tapping into key opportunities. Nature-based solutions, such as restoring ecosystems, offer the dual benefits of enhancing climate resilience while supporting biodiversity. Investments in resilient infrastructure – these include energy, transport, and urban systems – can minimise long-term risks. Agricultural resilience is another critical area, where microfinance and climate-smart technologies can support smallholder farmers and enhance food security.

Financing early warning systems for weather protection and disaster response is another opportunity to save lives and reduce economic losses. Private sector mobilisation can be encouraged through incentives like tax breaks, guarantees, and green bonds. Additionally, redirecting revenues from carbon pricing mechanisms towards adaptation initiatives ensures a balanced approach to climate action.

Adopting innovative financing instruments can bridge existing gaps. Green bonds for resilience, tailored for projects with measurable adaptation outcomes, are gaining traction globally. Insurance-linked securities,

such as catastrophe bonds which are high-yield debt instruments designed to raise money for companies in the insurance industry in the event of a natural disaster, and parametric insurance – that covers the likelihood or probability of a loss-causing event such as a heatwave – provide financial protection against climate risks. Climate-resilient sovereign bonds or green bonds offer governments a way to finance national adaptation priorities, while community financing models such as cooperatives empower local stakeholders to address specific vulnerabilities.

Empowering the states

State governments play a pivotal role in the implementation of these adaptation measures, and building their capacity is vital for scaling up efforts. While India is developing National Adaptation Plans for different sectors, developing state-specific adaptation plans aligned with the national goals will provide a clear roadmap for action. The recent Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill 2024 is a step in the right direction, empowering states to build resilience.

Institutional coordination is equally crucial, as cross-sectoral adaptation efforts require collaboration between various departments. Robust systems for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and financial flows ensure transparency and effectiveness. Most importantly, engaging local stakeholders in project design and implementation ensures that interventions address grassroots needs and are well-received by the communities they aim to support.

Addressing the financing needs and gaps for climate adaptation demands a transformational approach. Incremental measures are no longer sufficient to match the scale of the challenge. Public-private partnerships, complemented by international cooperation, can unlock scalable finance and foster innovative solutions. At the same time, equity must be the cornerstone of these efforts, ensuring that the most vulnerable populations and regions receive prioritised support and resources.

With India's Budget due in early February, the question remains: will climate resilience and adaptation take centre stage in national planning? As we navigate an increasingly uncertain future, a cohesive and well-financed adaptation strategy is not merely an option – it is an essential imperative for ensuring resilience and survival.

(The writer leads the Climate, Environment, and Sustainability sector at the Centre for Study of Science, Technology, and Policy)

SPEAK OUT

Arvind Kejriwal is going to get stumped; Arvind Kejriwal is going to get clean-bowled by the people of Delhi because they seek clean drinking water, they seek clean air and clean roads, and a clean Yamuna.

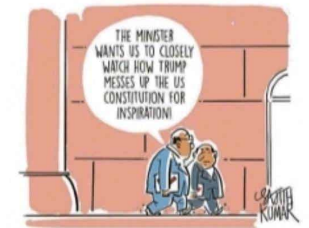


Anurag Thakur, BJP MP

There are two kinds of forecasters: those who don't know, and those who don't know they don't know.

John Kenneth Galbraith

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Balancing capex growth, fiscal health

Ensuring an expenditure push amid worrying fiscal trends will involve serious budgetary challenges

M R ANANTHA RAMU

Covid-19 has disrupted the fiscal consolidation roadmap of the Union Government as well as state governments. Federal governments are trying to bring back public finances on the fiscal consolidation path as laid down in the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act and state-specific Fiscal Responsibility Acts. The FRBM Act mandates the Union Government to cap the fiscal deficit below 3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and keep the revenue account balanced. Total liabilities of the Union Government shall be kept below 40% of GDP as per this Act. Fiscal deficits are the difference between revenue receipts, non-debt capital receipts, and total expenditure. Revenue deficit is the difference between revenue receipts and revenue expenditure. Many studies have observed that higher fiscal deficits and debt beyond numerical ceilings will affect the macro-economy adversely by way of retarding economic growth, creating inflationary pressure, and raising the interest and exchange rates.

Numerical ceilings are laid down in the FRBM Act considering the "golden rule" of public finance. The rule implies that all the borrowings shall be invested in capital formation. If the revenue account is balanced or in surplus, while borrowings shall be devoted to capital formation. However, at present, the revenue deficit constitutes 37% of the fiscal deficit. This is as per the 2024-25 budget estimates and changes as per the revenue and expenditure situation at the end of the financial year. It implies that the government is resorting to borrowing to meet its current expenditure. The situation is true for many state governments with few exceptions. This trend usually takes off the money available for the much-needed capital push.

The Union Budget 2025-26 will be presented soon. The current expenditure of the Union Government may increase further in the upcoming financial year as the government is setting up the 8th Pay Commission to revise the salaries and pensions of Central Government employees. Though the implementation of recommendations takes time, it will add to the increasing committed expenditure in the next financial year. This may further reduce the fiscal space available for capital investments. The Union Government could reduce the fiscal deficits and revenue deficits during FY 2023-24

with a substantial increase in transfers of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) dividend of Rs 2,10,874 crore. This constituted 13% of fiscal deficits and 28% of revenue deficits during 2023-24. The amount was Rs 87,416 crore during FY 2022-23 and it constituted 5% of fiscal deficits.

Tax mobilisation

On the revenue front, though the net Goods and Services Tax (GST) mobilisation is growing positively, it is less than the budget estimate of 11% for FY 2024-25. During the first nine months of FY 2024-25, the net GST mobilisation has grown at 9.2%. This trend may result in less-than-estimated GST revenue mobilisation for 2024-25, adding to the fiscal deficits. It is expected that the government may come up with plans to give an impetus to consumption expenditure in the Union Budget 2025-26. Net direct tax collection till January 12, 2025 has grown at 15.8%, indicating a positive sign. More simplification of direct tax payment procedures, and rationalisation of slabs to give more disposable income to the middle-income population may further enhance the growth of direct tax collection. This step will also help in increasing GST mobilisation with a boost to consumption expenditure.

Recent trends in economic growth are expected to pose challenges for the 2025-26 Union Budget preparation. Economic growth in the first two quarters of FY 2024-25 turned out to be much lower than anticipated. The RBI Monetary Policy Committee in its December report has forecasted that the country's real GDP growth to be 6.6%. However, for the fiscal projections in the 2024-25 Union Budget, RBI's projection of 7.2% economic growth has been adopted. A decline in growth further constitutes 37% of the fiscal deficit. This is as per the 2024-25 budget estimates and changes as per the revenue and expenditure situation at the end of the financial year. It implies that the government is resorting to borrowing to meet its current expenditure. The situation is true for many state governments with few exceptions. This trend usually takes off the money available for the much-needed capital push.

The government has its task cut out as it balances the challenge of raising the salaries and pensions of Central Government employees. Though the implementation of recommendations takes time, it will add to the increasing committed expenditure in the next financial year. This may further reduce the fiscal space available for capital investments. The Union Government could reduce the fiscal deficits and revenue deficits during FY 2023-24

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Maharajas of the hostel

My friend and I were battle-ready, but we won some allies instead!

SRIDHAR SACHIDANANDA

Whenever I visit Mysuru, I reminisce about the five years I lived in this quaint and extraordinary city as a journalism and mass communication student. Especially my days at Maharaja College hostel. I hold both graduate and master's degrees from University of Mysore.

Maharaja College Hostel is the iconic building that was pretty famous for producing many a young reclitrant rowdy. And I am sure many of them aged like me and joined local politics now (I have not).

Off all the amazing things that happened during my stay there, one incident comes to mind often. My brawl with some of my seniors at the hostel who had a notorious reputation for

ragging newbies. This was not the first skirmish of my life. I was very much a hot-headed and aggressive youngster then. But this is by far the most memorable one.

During my first few days at the hostel, my roommate Prince (That is his given name at birth. Not a nickname), and I went out for dinner. Those days food was really inexpensive and delicious in Mysuru and so I would indulge in an occasional egg, or chicken dinner, though I am born into a vegetarian family.

Mysuru in the 1990s was still a very old fashioned city. Wearing shorts in public was scorned upon; dhotis and trousers were more the norm. And Prince and I were wearing shorts. Abruptly, we were summoned by the gang of seniors who were drinking liquor in the "inner sanctum" of the restaurant reserved for preferred guests.

"The next time I see you two in shorts, I will cut you in half," threatened the senior menacingly. And me being me, "I would like to see you too," I retorted. Mysurians were shocked. They were the "rulers" of Maharaja College hostel and

such repudiation to their authority was most unbecoming of a junior. "You go back to your room, and I will show you I am," said the senior. So, we happily finished dinner and returned to our room.

Within minutes, the gang of seniors was at our door. I prepared for a fight with a baseball bat, a birthday gift from friends, brandishing it like Bhima with his mace. Prince, who had some martial arts training, was ready to beat back the aggressors with his bare hands.

Then the inevitable happened – a "compromise" (short for compromise). Having wasted away all their ire at each other, the two gangs agreed to a truce. The challengers became our protectors for the rest of my stay at the hostel. This particular fiasco made them the new "maharajas" of the hostel!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Whip is authoritarian

Appropos 'Dhankhar questions need for parties to issue whip to their law makers' (Jan 23), the practice of issuing whips by political parties to ensure lawmakers toe the party line has long been a contentious issue. Although it maintains party discipline and ensures a cohesive policy direction, it can also stifle individual lawmakers' ability to represent their constituents' voices. In stark contrast, the bipartisan approach in the United States demonstrates a more effective way forward. US legislators often cross party lines to vote based on their convictions or the interests of their constituents, fostering a more open and deliberative democratic

and his family without any evidence.

Yatnal's comments are an affront to the nation and demeaning to the country. A defamation suit will hold Yatnal accountable. This would send a strong message that such rhetoric will not be tolerated.

S Kamat, Mysuru

Shame!

It is appalling and reprehensible that BJP legislator Basangouda Patil Yatnal would suggest Jawaharlal

Nehru was involved in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. It's a shameful reflection on our legislative body that Yatnal holds office. The relationship between Gandhi and Nehru is well-known, making such absurd accusations is utterly unbelievable.

SV Srinivasan, Bengaluru

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SV Srinivasan, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com or by letter to: Deccan Herald, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Rekindling historic ties

The President of Indonesia is the chief guest at the Republic Day, a fitting tribute to the friendship between two nations

India will celebrate its 76th Republic Day on January 26, 2025, marking a moment to reflect on the country's remarkable journey since its first Republic Day in 1950. This year's celebrations will have a special touch as Prabowo Subianto, President of Indonesia, will be the chief guest. His presence is a reminder of the deep historical and cultural ties between the two nations, which have seen their share of highs and lows but continue to thrive. Incidentally, the chief guest at the first Republic Day parade was President Sukarno of Indonesia, highlighting the camaraderie between two newly independent nations that had emerged from colonial rule. The relations between the two countries have come a full circle. The early years of India-Indonesia relations were marked by solidarity and mutual support. Biju Patnaik, a prominent Indian freedom fighter, played a key role in aiding Indonesia's struggle for independence, even flying its leaders to safety during critical moments. This partnership extended to global platforms like the Bandung Conference of 1955, which laid the groundwork for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), co-sponsored by India and Indonesia.



India has come a long way since 1950. From grappling with post-independence challenges like poverty, illiteracy and infrastructural deficits, the nation has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. It boasts advancements in science, technology, space exploration and global diplomacy, while remaining rooted in its democratic ethos. Similarly, Indonesia has evolved into a vibrant democracy and a leading voice in Southeast Asia. Both nations share a legacy of anti-colonial struggles and have worked together in various domains, including trade, culture and defence. The partnership between India and Indonesia has seen its ups and downs. In the 1950s, ties were warm and cooperative, but by the 1960s, geopolitical differences, particularly over relations with China and the 1965 India-Pakistan war, strained the relationship. Indonesia's support for Pakistan during that conflict and claims over parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands led to significant diplomatic tensions. However, the 1970s marked a period of reconciliation, with agreements on maritime boundaries and a renewed focus on cooperation. Today, Indonesia is one of India's largest trading partners in Southeast Asia, with bilateral trade reaching nearly \$30 billion in 2023-24. The two nations have also strengthened defence ties, including a Defence Cooperation Agreement signed in 2018, signalling a strategic partnership in a region increasingly shaped by competition with China. Prabowo Subianto's visit as the chief guest at India's Republic Day parade holds symbolic and strategic importance. This visit underscores the growing warmth in India-Indonesia relations. The presence of the Indonesian president at this year's parade is a tribute to the enduring friendship between two nations that have weathered challenges and found common ground in their aspirations for peace, prosperity and global cooperation.

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PICTALK



Children holding national flags in a mustard field ahead of Republic Day 2025, at a village near Balurghat

The complex terrain of relationships

Relationships, whether personal or professional, are a delicate balancing act of emotions, perspectives and communication



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Relationships are a tricky business. Two people who, at one stage of life, can agree so well that they can see or believe in having any difference in the point of view that they will hold. Different perspectives are an enigma; affection, agreement and endorsement are all rolled into one. Identification with each other is more important than identity any day. Very often, it is the bedrock of affection and togetherness in action. The same couple, as time passes and because of hormonal changes in their systems, can and do start having different points of view. What is initially a pleasant disagreement can soon become an assertion of identity. Personality conflicts follow.

These personality conflicts can be a logical derivation, and very often, it is difficult to find the origin of the derivation itself. Coherent dialogue in a spirit of give and take can often be substituted by the urge not only to protect one's turf but also to prove oneself more talented and resourceful. It can often become the source of further identity conflicts. The skill to handle such disagreements cannot be taught and is often taken over by other habits.

These habits may include being short-tempered, incoherent talking and having a high pitch in conversation, which is seen as an extension of good logic. The aberrations are far too many to be recounted, and the results are easy to identify. Instead of working together to resolve the differences, it becomes a battleground to show who can prevail. The rest, as they say, is history. In an era, that is full of talk about skills, it is important at this stage of dialogue to focus on life skills. Two people who cannot get together try to demonstrate who has the right of way in a marital relationship.

The life story moves from one end of the spectrum to an often incoherent hurtling down the slope of not only a difference of opinion but also a difference in personalities. The analysis can go only so far because then logic gives way to preferences and pas-



sion. This is at the root of many marital discords, and it is difficult to reverse the gears and change the pitch. Unfortunately, while there are numerous dissertations in psychology and elsewhere on relationships, practical-oriented thinking in handling relationships is few and at best, commonsensical. One is merely indicating the value of focused research and showing how a structured approach to problem-solving, even in everyday life, can be very valuable. There is a need to see research as an enabling situation for problem-solving, and many use the phrase 'applied research' for it. In the present day and age, more of the fashion world is about skill, and it is being generously used because of its attractive value in situations that cannot be practically handled. Sometimes it works; sometimes it does not.

The important thing is to realise that research requires insights and the adoption of a structured methodology, even in commonsensical situations. It is this aspect of research that can lead to a better quality of life, which can be termed as enabling research and it has to do with life skills. Solving this situation, which affects many interpersonal relationships, is simultaneously easy and yet difficult. It is easy to control if one can limit one's communication and how



THE LIFE STORY MOVES FROM ONE END OF THE SPECTRUM TO AN OFTEN INCOHERENT HURLING DOWN THE SLOPE OF NOT ONLY A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION BUT ALSO A DIFFERENCE IN PERSONALITIES

much one talks more wisely, keeping the number of words used in a conversation minimal. The truth is, that the more one seeks to talk and explain, the more complex it can become. Let simple things remain simple; it is a significant strategic choice. This approach works because passion subsidises irritations sort itself out and the choice of words and pitch of the voice can be better controlled. One only has to look around to notice how talking less is such an asset in keeping relationships positive. Interpersonal relationships, apart from work relationships, also get affected and the impression of losing an argument, even in work-spaces, is a personal defeat. This, by itself, is a self-defeating proposition. It is self-defeating because even if one wins the argument due to positional power or manipulative skills, the scars of a lost argument leave long-lasting damage to relationships. One can indeed often lose a battle to win the war. As indicated earlier, this applies to work situations as much as to real-life, non-work situations. Gentleness and soft words go far, especially when gentleness is received not as a proposition of the weaker person, but as a characteristic and indicator of mutual respect.

The best solution to many conflicts is when both come out as winners, and no one is

growing, smitten by the dangerous feeling of having 'lost one's face'. Be that as it may, it is necessary to reduce differences, not to personalities, but to find the best way forward. This best way forward must focus on protecting everyone's ego and be in the interest of the larger good. Much will depend on the personality elements of the players in the situation and indeed the time available to sort it out. Many times, a shortage of time necessitates two decisions that are suboptimal and more to 'get along with a job' than 'finding the best option'. Using tentative words and a hypothesis open to correction and improvement may be the best recipe for conflict resolution. In such situations, the personalities do not win or lose; it is the cause that is handled in the far-sighted way. Examples can be many, and one has to see what the issue at stake is how people perceive the result of the outcome and how they interpret it. In all cases, if there is a loser in an argument, it is best to make him feel that he has not 'lost' and that no personalities are involved. This can be a useful approach to handling institutional issues because every resolution of a conflict should be for the institutional good.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP'S HYPOCRISY EXPOSED

Madam — The ultimatum from Trump to end the prolonging Ukraine-Russia war exposes his hypocrisy. He is aware that it is with the pumping of arms by his country and its allies in Europe that Ukraine is continuing the war. He is also aware that the sanction imposed on Russia had failed miserably, as the same EU partners are buying the same Russian oil from different sources like India. Pumping arms and funds into Ukraine on one hand and giving an ultimatum to end the war on the other is rightly understood by one and all as meaningless, non-serious, and merely publicity-orientated. The entire world knows that maximum wars are waged or promoted by his country. Even while addressing after assuming office, he had demonstrated his imperial thirst by expressing his policy to take over the Panama Canal and Greenland, besides arbitrarily changing the name of the Gulf of Mexico into the Gulf of America. His threat to wage a tariff war goes against the very basic principles of globalisation that promote the free movement of goods, labour, and capital. The world also knows the key role played by the production of arms and promotion of arms trade in the economy of America. Therefore, America needs a war between some countries or the other. Mr. Trump speaking with concern over the huge human loss in Ukraine and Russia due to war is another display of his hypocrisy. Because more devastating impacts are experienced due to climate change, and his actions are hostile to the global efforts to overcome this serious issue. Therefore, one need not attach so much importance to his utterances or Quixotic actions.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

LIQUOR BAN AT RELIGIOUS SITES

Madam — CM of Madhya Pradesh Mohan Yadav has formally announced in Narsinghpur district that a liquor ban

UNESCO honours Mahakumbh



To foster the honour and delight of every Indian, the 45-day-long Mahakumbh Festival was listed in the UNESCO list as the largest peaceful religious congregation of pilgrims on earth. To disperse the Hindu aesthetic religion and spiritualism at the next

level, Maha Kumbh is truly a festival of positivity and spiritualism in India. From Naga Sadhus to Aghoris to all the other pilgrims, Kumbh is an auspicious celebration of Hindu devotees to enhance spirituality for developing godly connection, inner peace, and spiritual harmony. A dip in the Triveni Sangam of the three rivers of Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati will be considered as the precursor of all devil deeds done during the lifetime. A congregation of 450 million, including people from local and global communities, is one of a kind incidence. It is welcoming that UNESCO added this one-of-a-kind religious festivity to its list. It is a moment of extreme celebration and glee for every Indian back at home. We all welcome the UNESCO listing favourably and positively with utmost joy in our hearts.

Kirti Badhawan | Kanpur

marketing of alcohol? Jang Bahadur Singh | Jamshedpur

SCAMMERS TARGET JOB SEEKERS

Madam — The rise of job scams has become a significant problem, with scammers deceiving job seekers by creating fake job postings. These scammers often promise unsuspecting victims the opportunity to work from home and earn a high income, but only after paying for training or equipment. Research the company thoroughly to verify its legitimacy and reputation. Use reputable job boards and websites to search for job openings. Report any suspicious activities or job postings to the relevant authorities. By being aware of these job scam tactics and taking the necessary precautions, job seekers can protect themselves from falling victim to these fraudulent schemes.

Khushi Uchenia | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Cooperative commodities exchange: A global vision for farmer empowerment

This initiative leverages technology, blockchain and India's PACS network to empower farmers with fair pricing, sustainability and direct market access

The agricultural sector is the backbone of many economies, particularly in India, where nearly 60 per cent of the population depends on farming for their livelihood. Yet, smallholder farmers often remain at the mercy of intermediaries, fluctuating market prices and unequal access to global markets.

To address these challenges and promote equity, sustainability and growth, a bold initiative is proposed: the establishment of a Global Farmer-Centric Cooperative Commodities Exchange (GFCCE). This platform, rooted in the cooperative model, aims to empower farmers by ensuring fair pricing, direct market access, and sustainable practices. This ambitious project resonates with the global agenda of the World Cooperation Economic Forum to foster inclusive economic growth and social equity. Empowering Farmers Through Technology GFCCE Integration at the heart of this initiative lies technology—a powerful enabler that can bridge the gap between farmers and markets. The



GFCCE will leverage the Government of India's support to develop a robust and accessible digital platform integrated with blockchain technology to ensure transparency and reduce pilferage in the supply chain. Blockchain will create a tamper-proof record of transactions, from production to storage and distribution, enhancing trust and accountability.

The project will adopt a PACS-to-APEX (Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies to Apex-level organisations) approach, leveraging India's extensive network of over 95,000 PACS. These societies will act as the foundational nodes, aggregating produce from farmers at the village level. The commodities will then be funnelled through district and state-level federations, culminating

at the national apex organisation, which will oversee operations, ensure fair pricing and manage exports. To address storage issues, a network of modern warehouses will be constructed and integrated with blockchain systems. These warehouses, equipped with real-time inventory tracking, temperature controls and pest management systems, will be strategically located across key agricultural regions. Blockchain connectivity across warehouses will enable seamless tracking of stored produce, ensuring reduced wastage and pilferage. Farmers will also receive warehouse receipts, which can be used as collateral for loans, providing them with immediate financial support. This interconnected system will not only provide farmers with better access to markets but also ensure that the supply chain is efficient, transparent and secure. It will serve as the backbone for procurement planning and play a vital role in stabilising food prices.

Impact on Food Inflation

The GFCCE's blockchain-enabled supply chain and warehouse network will rev-

olutionise procurement planning, ensuring control over food inflation. With real-time data on production, storage, and distribution, government agencies will have accurate insights into commodity availability and demand patterns. This data-driven approach will enable timely procurement decisions, ensuring that food stocks are adequately replenished and distributed. By reducing post-harvest losses and pilferage, the initiative will improve the efficiency of the Public Distribution System (PDS), preventing artificial shortages that often lead to price spikes. Additionally, the transparent pricing mechanism of the exchange will curb hoarding and speculation. This system will also facilitate targeted interventions during periods of surplus or deficit. For instance, in the case of bumper harvests, surplus stocks can be stored efficiently and exported strategically to global markets, preventing a price crash domestically.

(The writer was a member of the high level MSP committee, Ministry of Agriculture; views are personal)



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SEEKING TRUE SHELTER IN THE DIVINE

Amid the chaos of desires, ego and karmaphal, how do we find lasting peace



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We are small, ignorant, helpless and unsafe. There should not be any doubt about our smallness with eight billion of us on the earth's planet itself. How knowledgeable we are or can be? Knowledge is unlimited. How much can we learn in one lifetime? Helpless we are from the time we are born till the time comes to dispose of our bodies. Just count how many people we need daily to survive well. And unsafe all of us are, as the Covid-19 pandemic proved. Therefore, we instinctively seek shelter all the time. An infant needs his parents. As one grows, one takes shelter from education to maintain oneself. Education/training over, time comes to seek shelter in a job or a business.

The idea is to have the shelter of enough money to be able to survive decently. Sex overpowers thinking beginning from a young age. Some are drawn towards fame like a sportsperson, while others get into politics, etc. for power. The most fortunate seek the shelter of God. Shelter of God is crucial to exist well. Let us see the degree of difficulty for a quality life. Our nature ('svabhava') is a huge handicap. Something or other from lust, anger, greed, jealousy, ego, etc. predominates if not more than one.

What chance is there to have a quality life? Lust derails almost everyone. One assumes that sex is pleasure, and it has so many forms. The worst thing is it's possessing our minds. Ego is not far behind. Have you met anyone who does not feel his or her superiority vis-



à-vis others? Greed does not allow us to assess our needs sensibly. More is better is the desire and there is no satisfaction. Anger is always lurking near the surface. It surfaces at the drop of a hat, literally. Then, there are karmaphalas always ready to manifest. We know how bad ones hurt. What most people don't realise are the ill effects of good karmaphalas. This is when one gets the feeling of invincibility and makes big mistakes.

People look for rewards during success, and we know what these rewards do to us. The third big enemy is old age, when we become weak and are mostly written off. Are we stuck? Far from it. God would not have made such a sorry Creation. Guidance and help are available to all of us if we accept the role of God in our lives. Ignorance, false pride or laziness stops us from taking God's help, who is the owner, controller and everything. You seek guidance sincerely and see what happens. But we don't; we prefer to be in cyclic thinking short-circuiting our own lives. We condemn ourselves by our obstinate attitude. God is prepared to help all of us at any time, but there is a rider.

We must deserve such help. How to determine who should get or who shouldn't? Therefore, the question everyone should be asking is: how do we become deserving of God's 'kripa' (favour)? Simply, you recognise yourself as a soul — part of God. Then, all spiritual activities will make sense. Shouldn't parts take shelter from God? Shouldn't we be very respectful to God and pay obeisance to Him? What about the 'dhyana' (meditation) of the entity, who is everything? How about thanking God for all that He does for everyone like providing air, water and sunlight free. In short, we should stop taking shelter of anyone or anything except God, and remain there.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

Winter's tale in Northern India: A season of discontent

Northern India's winter is more than just a fleeting season; it is a relentless narrative of marrow-freezing cold, breath-choking pollution and a grim forecast for years to come



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR



Of freezing marrows and choking breaths William Shakespeare, emperor of narratives, master of metaphors, celebrated craftsman of sentences and acclaimed presenter of deep insights into human nature, had a way of coming up with expressions surviving the passage of time. One of them is "winter of our discontent." Richard, Duke of Gloucester, says in Richard III, "Now is the winter of our discontent/ Made glorious summer by this sun of York/ And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house/ In the deep bosom of the ocean buried." The expression, which adorns one of John Steinbeck's most famous novels as its title, should resonate particularly strongly with people in northern India still in the grip of a winter that is cold, damp and utterly polluted. The chances of things improving in the next few years, are, to put it mildly, bleak.

As the chilling flipside of global warming, the cold months will continue to be increasingly marrow-freezing, since, with Donald Trump taking over as the United States' president, the chances of a deceleration in the pace of climate change, have diminished significantly. This is not to look wistfully back over one's shoulder to a mythical place like the island valley of Avilion, where, pace Alfred Tennyson in a very different context, "falls not hail, or rain, or any snow, / Nor ever wind blows loudly." Climates and the weather have been notoriously fickle cousins throughout history. If any part of the past seems golden, it is because of the distance in time which lends it enchantment.

It had, when it was the present, its warts, some of them rather large and ugly. Floods and droughts took very heavy tolls when meteorological devices and skills for predicting their advent and coping with their aftermath, were far less advanced. In the absence of electrical heating devices, which we have, life could not have been terribly pleasant during the last ice age which had covered



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about 30 per cent of the earth's surface and ended 15, 000 to 20,000 years ago. On a more specific note, slavery was legal in most parts of the world, including the chest-thumping democracies of the West-as late as the second half of the 19th century. The weather, doubtless, has an impact on life and its moods, which influence thought, speech and feeling which, in turn, trigger action.

All of these, at a certain elevated level, power the wheels of history. These also affect inter-personal relations, causing friction and hostility arising from anger and discontent, or cordiality and warmth caused by harmony. The sum total of the interaction among these factors determines the quality of a community's social existence in terms of tensions between collective bodies like class and caste, and stress caused by individual actions like crime, which is often caused by alienation resulting from marginalisation, poverty and anonymity in impersonal societies. A crime can be a perverse act of self-assertion, a sub-conscious statement like, "I kill, therefore I exist"—a variant of Rene Descartes much-quoted assertion, "Cogito ergo sum" (literally, "I think, therefore, I am"). Another form of self-assertion can be participation—to say nothing of playing a leading role—in a mass movement. Eric Hoffer writes in *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, "There is in us a tendency to locate the shaping forces of our existence outside ourselves. Success and failure are unavoidably related in our minds with the state of things around us. Hence it is that people with a sense of fulfilment think it a good

world and would like to conserve it as it is, while the frustrated favour radical change. The tendency to look for all causes outside ourselves persists even when it is clear that our state of being is the product of personal qualities such as ability, character, appearance, health and so on." What is the result? Hoffer quotes Thoreau as saying, "If anything all a man, so that he does not perform his functions, if he has a pain in his bowels even ... he forthwith sets about reforming—the world." (Italics by Hoffer; Thoreau has used the plurals "ail" and "have" as it was done by many in his time in such contexts).

Attempts to reform the world invariably lead to struggles with status quoists. Besides, social tensions and conflicts will increase following rising ocean levels, caused by global warming, submerging coastal areas. Inward migration of people from these regions would trigger clashes over land and resources in the interior areas. The same factors will also be in operation in other areas to which people may escape from regions made uninhabitable by temperatures rising too high to support life.

One can, of course, argue that people would be kind to global warming refugees, realising that they may have to leave their homes someday for the same reason. But then, kindness is not what a person encounters frequently in life: it is the same with the much-quoted proverb, "What can't be cured must be endured." It has joined the ranks of venerable clichés blessed with eternal life.

And he says in *Twelfth Night*, "I hate ingratitude more in a man/ Than lying, vainness, babbling, drunkenness/ Or any taint of vice whose strong corruption/ Inhabits our frail blood." Character attributes like prudence towards gratitude are rooted deep inside one's DNA and are modified by the environment as one grows up. Seasonal changes can impact their intensity, as discomfort caused by extreme heat or cold can put one's temper on a short leash.

On the other hand, as Anton Chekhov put it, "People don't notice whether it's winter or summer when they're happy." This brings us back to our starting point—northern India's butt-freezing, breath-choking winter. Can one be happy in its midst? The answer will be in the affirmative, as the news of a progeny scaling new heights at work or being gifted with a baby, will warm the cockles of one's heart. This, however, is most likely to be a passing phase, overwhelmed, sooner than later, by the many worries and sadnesses that quotidian existence brings and that, again, are ephemeral. The more relevant question will be whether one can survive northern India's winter and for how long. The transition to the hereafter caused by pollution stalks one silently but lethally. The final truth in life is mortality.

All this has been said before, and will be said again, as one will hear the much-quoted proverb, "What can't be cured must be endured."

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

Cultural heritage tourism: A path to sustainable growth and mutual understanding

Respecting the balance between tourism and heritage enables a mutually beneficial relationship that supports communities, preserves cultural identity and promotes global harmony

Cultural tourism, as defined in the 22nd Session of the UN Tourism General Assembly in 2017, is an activity where a visitor's primary motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and engage with the tangible and intangible cultural attractions and products of a destination. These motivations shape the agendas of both the visitor and the tour guide at cultural heritage destinations, bridging the gap between the historical and the contemporary. The Evolution of Cultural Heritage and Tourism Cultural heritage has undergone a significant shift in perception, moving from an archaeological focus to the concept of 'living heritage' and its reuse. Similarly, tourism has evolved from being largely

centered on pilgrimage to a multifaceted industry encompassing learning, entertainment, experiences, and relaxation. This transformation has elevated tourism as a catalyst for inclusive economic growth and job creation across diverse sectors, such as hospitality, transportation, and entertainment. The industry's ripple effect benefits individuals and communities alike, engaging local businesses, transport operators, craftspeople, tourist guides, and the hospitality industry in a symbiotic relationship. For these benefits to be fully realised, collaboration among stakeholders is essential. They must work collectively to offer authentic and meaningful experiences that resonate with travelers while preserving the



SUKHDEV SINGH
integrity of cultural sites.
Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Tourism

A rapidly growing segment within the tourism industry is cultural heritage, which encompasses natural and architectural sites, traditional crafts, cultural events, performances, and intangible knowledge. Recognised as both a commodity and an experience, cultural heritage attracts mar-

ket players, planners, and governments aiming to expand the scope of tourism. It promotes inclusive growth, intercultural exchange and mutual understanding. The relationship between tourism and cultural heritage is built on mutuality. While cultural heritage serves as a key attraction for tourism, the latter provides the financial and structural support required for its preservation and promotion.

Navigating Contradictions Tourism operates on the principle of profit and economic growth, while cultural heritage centers on identity and inheritance. These differing foundations can create contradictions. For the tourism industry, cultural heritage is often commodified, whereas for her-



itage conservation, tourism acts as a feeder for sustainability. While these sectors can support one another to an extent, unchecked tourism practices can lead to significant challenges, including overcrowding, environmental degradation. To mitigate these issues, regulated practices in cultural heritage tourism must prioritise the symbiotic relationship

between factors influencing tourist experiences and those fostering cultural understanding. Tour operators and tourists must respect the sanctity and protocols of cultural heritage sites. Travelers should be encouraged to appreciate local customs without overstepping boundaries, ensuring a balance between immersion and respect. Sustainable cultural heritage tourism, thus, becomes a pathway to fostering "culture for peace." Economic and Cultural Benefits of Heritage Tourism Cultural heritage tourism creates opportunities for income generation and employment. This is achieved by maintaining and showcasing heritage structures, sites, and products. Preservation and management efforts, such as cata-

logging and storytelling, directly benefit from tourism revenue. Simultaneously, the broader economic ecosystem, including hospitality, transportation, and entertainment, flourishes through increased visitor engagement. However, cultural heritage is far more than a revenue-generating commodity. It serves as a repository of customs, values, and artifacts, connecting communities to their past and reinforcing their identities. Tourism, when responsibly managed, can amplify the significance of heritage sites by fostering research, introducing new narratives, and raising awareness. Reinvestment of economic returns into preservation ensures the longevity and authenticity of cultural heritage.

Challenges of Cultural Heritage Tourism

While tourism can elevate the value of cultural heritage, it also introduces challenges. Overcrowding, environmental degradation, and disruptions to the local population's way of life are common issues.

Sustainable and Responsible Tourism

To maintain a harmonious balance between tourism and cultural heritage, sustainable practices are essential. These include regulating visitor numbers, promoting eco-friendly initiatives, and ensuring that tourism revenue is reinvested into preservation efforts.

(The writer is retired professor of Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar and Vice-Chairman, INTACH; views are personal)



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US begins deportations: how many Indians could be impacted?

DIVYA DE

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 24

UNITED STATES authorities arrested 538 immigrants and deported hundreds just days after President Donald Trump took office, his press secretary said on late Thursday.

In a post on X, Karoline Leavitt said, "The Trump Administration arrested 538 illegal immigrant criminals and 'hundreds' were deported. She added, "The largest deportation operation in history is well underway."

Here's how the process of deportation is carried out by the US, whether a deportee can appeal against deportation, who bears the expenses of deportation, and the status of "undocumented" Indian immigrants in the United States.

How does deportation from the United States work?

Deportation is the process of removing a

non-citizen from the US for violating immigration law. The US may detain and deport non-citizens who participate in criminal acts, are a threat to public safety, or violate their visa. The foreign national may be held in a detention center before trial or deportation.

The US Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) sets forth an "expedited removal" process for certain foreign nationals who might have recently entered the US without inspection.

Expedited removal may happen when a non-citizen comes to the US without proper travel documents; uses forged travel documents; or does not comply with their visa or other entry document requirements.

According to a document by the Congressional Research Service on "Expedited Removal of Aliens", non-US nationals (aliens) who do not meet requirements governing their entry or continued presence in the US may be subject to removal. It further says, "The expedited re-

moval process, created by the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, permits the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to summarily remove aliens arriving at a designated US port of entry (arriving aliens) without further hearing or review if they are inadmissible."

Many of the Indian nationals facing imminent deportation fall under this category, according to experts. Most of them are likely to have been apprehended either at a designated port of entry or near the international border when trying to enter, or shortly after entering the US.

Can a person appeal against deportation?

According to the rules, a non-citizen classified as "alien" otherwise subject to expedited removal who expresses an intent to apply for asylum or a fear of persecution

if returned to a particular country, is entitled to administrative review of that claim before being removed.

Asylum is the only form of relief that gives such a non-citizen a permanent legal foothold in the US. A non-citizen, classified as an "alien", who shows a credible fear of persecution is placed in formal removal proceedings rather than expedited removal.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

Who bears the cost of deportation?

Before the deportation is carried out, one can leave the US at their own expense. This is known as voluntary departure. However, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Air Operations (AO) — ICE's primary air transportation division — facilitates the transfer and removal of non-citizens via commercial airlines and chartered flights in support of ICE field offices and DHS initiatives.

IAO also operates special high-risk charter flights on an as-needed basis to repatriate non-citizens subject to final orders of removal to locations worldwide. This may include non-citizens who have failed to comply with final orders of removal, security risks, or other risk factors. IAO has a total 12 aircraft at its operational locations in Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida.

What is the status of 'undocumented' Indians in the US?

The Trump administration's move on deportation can affect more than 20,000 "undocumented" Indians, as of November 2024. These Indians are either facing a "final removal order" (meaning that they must leave the country or face legal consequences, including potential detention and barriers to future re-entry) or are currently in detention centres of the ICE.

Of these, 17,940 "undocumented" Indians are not in detention and are under the final

removal order. Another 2,647 are in detention under ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), according to ICE's 2024 annual report.

In recent years, there has been a "steady increase" in deportations of undocumented Indian immigrants from the US, Royce Murray, assistant secretary for border and immigration policy at the DHS, had told the *Indian Express* during a virtual briefing last year.

The ICE report said Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador remain the top countries where citizens are deported or repatriated from the US. However, India figures above China and almost equals Brazil.

In 2019, around 1,616 Indians were deported, which increased to 2,312 in 2020. In the post-Covid years of 2021, 2022, and 2023, the numbers were significantly lower — 292, 276 and 370 respectively. But the number rose to 1,529 last year.

In comparison, 517 Chinese and 1,859 Brazilians were deported in 2024.

EXPLAINED HEALTH

ADULTS DIAGNOSED WITH ADHD HAVE SHORTER LIFE EXPECTANCY: STUDY

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
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ADULTS DIAGNOSED WITH attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) on average die earlier than those without a diagnosis of ADHD, according to a new study in the United Kingdom. While men with ADHD die roughly seven years younger, women with ADHD live an average of about nine years less, the analysis said.

The study, 'Life expectancy and years of life lost for adults with diagnosed ADHD in the UK', was published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* on Thursday. It was carried out by a team of eight UK-based researchers.

ADHD is a developmental disorder that can cause difficulties in concentration and problems with impulsiveness. It is commonly diagnosed in childhood and often persists into adulthood. Although estimates vary, studies have suggested that 3-4% of adults worldwide have ADHD.

How was the new study carried out?

For the study, the researchers examined primary care data for more than 30,000 adults diagnosed with ADHD in the UK. They compared this group with more than 300,000 participants without ADHD, who were matched by age, sex, and primary care practice, according to a report by National Public Radio, an American public broadcasting organisation.

"The researchers used mortality data to model what the death rate would be for adults with ADHD across the lifespan of the population," the report said.

What were the findings of the study?

The study found that adults with diagnosed ADHD lived shorter lives than they should. Although it was unlikely that ADHD was a direct cause of the lower life expectancies, there were a number of possible explanations for the findings, Joshua Stott, a senior author of the research and professor at University College London (UK), told *The Guardian*.

For instance, people with ADHD are more likely to experience worse physical



Men with ADHD died seven years younger, the UK study showed.

and mental health and might face problems accessing the healthcare they need. Stott told *The Guardian*, "We know that people with ADHD have higher suicide rates, unfortunately. They are also more likely to engage in risky behaviours like smoking, drinking and actually binge eating probably as well."

The findings are in line with another significant study, which was published in *Sage Journals* in 2019. It revealed that children with ADHD who were followed into adulthood had a shorter life expectancy of about 8.4 years. The study also found that "the biggest predictors of shorter life expectancy in adults with ADHD were factors including lower incomes, fewer years of education, a greater likelihood of smoking, shorter sleep duration, poorer nutrition and risky driving," the NPR report said.

The researchers of the 2019 study pointed out that most of these factors were related to impulsivity, which is treatable. The latest analysis also raised the concerns around under-diagnosis of ADHD as it noted that only 0.32% of adults in the study had a diagnosis. This was around one in nine of the likely true number of people with ADHD based on population-based surveys, according to the researchers. Max Wiznitzer, a professor at Case Western Reserve University (US), told NPR, "If you treat the ADHD, if you teach them the life skills that they need in order to work with the executive function difficulties that they're modifiable, that lessens the risk of all the complications that can develop."

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS

AS THE second Trump administration consolidates itself, Arab media has found the President's Middle East appointees a "confusing group of loyalists", even as Israeli media has been started by picks such as Michael Dillman, the new Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East who is vocally opposed to war with Iran and advocates a diplomatic approach in the region.

Trump's other picks such as Marco Rubio for Secretary of State and Mike Waltz for National Security Advisor are known hawks on Iran. (The nominee for Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth awaits Senate confirmation.)

Besides the (now paused) war in Gaza, how to deal with Iran will be the most prominent question for US Middle East policy in Trump 2.0. How has the region changed since Trump was last in the Oval Office (2017-21), and what factors could determine the alignment or divergence between Tehran and Washington now?

Iran and Trump 2.0

Iran's situation has evolved significantly since Trump 1.0. The anti-Israel 'Axis of Resistance' has been greatly weakened, especially over the past year. But Tehran has cultivated a new positive relationship with its Arab neighbours that sprang from the Saudi-Iran rapprochement brokered by China in 2023.

Within Iran, a major shift has taken place. The economic and social turmoil in the country worsened under President Ebrahim Raisi (2021-24), a conservative hardliner who at the time of his death last May had been in the race to succeed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader.

Under President Masoud Pezeshkian, Tehran has megaphoned its desire to engage with the West to lift sanctions, while also warning against underestimating its military capabilities and projecting a position of strength through nuclear enrichment.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 22, Iran's Vice President for Strategic Affairs Javad Zarif said he hoped Trump's second term would see a more "rational" approach towards Iran to ensure regional stability.

But in their statements following Trump's inauguration, both Zarif and Iran's headline leaders have made it clear that they should

Trump 2.0 and Iran

Situation in the Middle East has changed significantly since the last time Donald Trump was in the White House. The drivers of the Arab-Iranian relationship are different, and there is now scope for engagement between Tehran and Washington. But there are many moving parts in the region's complex geopolitics



President Donald Trump in Riyadh in May 2017. The New York Times. (Left) Iran's Vice President for Strategic Affairs Javad Zarif in Davos on January 22. AP

Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) declared there would be no dialogue with Iran, and then Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir accused Tehran of using its proxies to undermine the sovereignty of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The unprecedented blockade of Qatar by the Arab League during 2017-21 was triggered in part by Qatar's seemingly warm ties with Iran. All of this dovetailed neatly with Trump's "maximum pressure" approach.

Today, Arab states are prioritising regional stability based on economic diversification. Catalysed by their opposition to Israel's war in Gaza, they have deepened their rapprochement with Iran. Riyadh and Tehran are even exploring defence cooperation.

In November 2023, MBS declared that "ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia are at a historic turning point". That same month, the extraordinary joint summit of the Arab League and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Riyadh passed a resolution terminating Israel's actions in Gaza a genocide, and called for a halt to the aggression.

The current situation in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq has increased the Arab comfort for engagement with Iran — the Bashar al-Assad regime has collapsed, Hezbollah has lost its senior leadership in Lebanon, and Iraq is working to disarm Iran-backed groups or to integrate them in the Iraqi armed forces.

At the November 2024 Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh, MBS warned Israel against attacking Iran. Arab officials expect that Trump in his second term will recognise the new realities in the Middle East. The Saudi Foreign Minister this week said he did not believe the US would encourage war with Iran.

Changes in the region

When Trump first took office in 2017, the Arab world's relationship with Iran was crisis-ridden.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia and Iran had broken diplomatic ties over the execution of Sheikh Nimr, a Saudi Shia cleric. In 2017, Saudi Crown

Weighing engagement

The ceasefire in Gaza has created conditions for deliberation and contact between Iran and the US. The Trump administration is pushing Israel to withdraw from Lebanon as per the schedule agreed with Hezbollah, denying the Israel Defence Forces the extension that the previous Biden administration had promised.

The question is how Tehran and Washington could engage under Trump with neither party having to lose face before their conservative constituencies. Trump remains strongly pro-Israel, and had ordered the first significant direct attack on Iran's extra-territorial capabilities with the assassination of Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani in Iraq in 2020. The constituency in Iran that Soleimani represented still exists.

Whether "maximum pressure" returns will be also subject to the consideration of how new sanctions on Iran might affect global energy markets, which are already strained by US sanctions on Russia — one reason why the Biden administration did not strictly enforce oil-related macro-level sanctions on Iran.

At a press conference in New York in September 2024, then candidate Trump had appeared to make an overture to Iran: "We have to make a deal [with Iran] because the consequences are impossible. We have to make a deal."

Trump's (and Iran's) dual perspectives notwithstanding, there is indeed some space for an alignment of objectives. The potential full withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, for example, is in line with both Trump's anti-war objectives and Tehran's goal of "expelling" "occupiers" from the region. Iran's desire for a reduced US military presence in the Middle East aligns with Trump's larger political philosophy.

As Israel lobbies for a harsher US line against Iran in return for accommodating Trump's demands in Gaza and Lebanon, the Arab states present their rapprochement with Iran as the key variable for stability in the region, which requires US support and Israeli cooperation to be preserved.

The question is whether Trump will reconcile with a changed Middle East, or whether it will be the other way round.

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Why Bombay HC said use of loudspeakers is not essential to religion

OMKAR GOKHALE
MUMBAI, JANUARY 24

NO ONE can claim that their right to practise religion has been violated when permission to use a loudspeaker is denied, the Bombay High Court held on Thursday.

The use of loudspeakers and public address systems (PAS) cannot be deemed an essential religious practice that ought to be protected by law, the court said.

The Bench of Justices Ajay S Gadgikar and Shyam C Chandak prescribed a graded penalty system when complaints of noise pollution are filed by citizens.

The HC was hearing a writ petition filed by two residents' associations in Mumbai's suburban Nehru Nagar, Kurla (East) and Chunarbhavi areas against the use of loudspeakers by mosques and madrasas beyond

permissible decibel limits and during prohibited hours.

Law on noise pollution

Under the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000, noise levels in residential areas during the day must not exceed 55 decibels and, at night, 45 decibels.

Section 38 of the Maharashtra Police Act allows police to stop music, sound, or noise, and to restrict, modify, or alter the permission to use loudspeakers.

In their affidavit of November 2023, the police submitted that noise levels at two mosques in the Kurla area were 79.4 and 98.7 decibels. The HC observed that in case several religious places in the vicinity were using loudspeakers, the cumulative sound levels of all loudspeakers/voice amplifiers in use at a particular point of time — and not the individual ambient noise limit of 55 or 45



The court has suggested automatic calibration of sound output. Archive

decibels — should be considered.

Directions by HC

Since the petitioners had pleaded that the police were not taking action on their complaints, the court issued directions to the government and police on how to deal

with complaints relating to noise pollution. Since the plea was about noise pollution from places of worship, the court cautioned the police to act without identifying the complainant, "more so to avoid such complainants being targets of ill will and developing hatred".

The state should have an inbuilt mechanism to control decibel levels in loudspeakers and other sound-emitting gadgets used at any religious place. One way to do this would be to carry out "calibration or auto-fixation" of the decibel limit in these speakers, the court said.

The Mumbai Police Commissioner should ensure that police officers use a decibel level measuring mobile application to check for violations.

The HC laid down a four-step graded penalty system for the police to initiate. While first time offenders could be let off after a "caution", in case of repeat violations fines must be imposed on the concerned

trusts or organisations, and they must be warned of strict action in case of further violations. Thereafter, if violations continue, police shall seize the loudspeakers, and can also cancel the licence for their use and initiate a complaint against those using them.

In a separate contempt plea, the HC on January 14 sought to know what action the government had taken in respect of 2,940 loudspeakers that were being used without permission. The next hearing is on March 18.

Previous ruling

The HC ruling referred to the 2016 verdict in *Dr Mahesh Vijay Bedekar v Maharashtra*, which had directed strict implementation of the Noise Pollution (Regulations and Control) Rules.

The 2016 ruling by the HC said that places of worship could not escape being penalised for noise pollution, and that the "use of loudspeakers is not an essential part of any religion". The use of loudspeakers

could not be claimed as a fundamental right under Article 25 (freedom of religion) and Article 18(1)(a) (freedom of speech and expression) of the Constitution, the ruling said.

The 2016 ruling referred to past SC judgments and directed that loudspeakers cannot be used between 10 pm and 6 am. It also prohibited the use of horns in silence zones and during night hours in residential areas.

The ruling said the state government could permit the use of loudspeakers between 10 pm and midnight during cultural or religious occasions for 15 days in the calendar year, except in silence zones.

Areas up to 100 metres around schools, colleges, hospitals, religious places, and courts are silence zones.

The 2016 ruling also allowed exceptions in time limits in closed premises for communication, auditoriums, conference rooms, community halls, and banquet halls during night hours, and in cases of public emergency.