

Reforms for growth

Independence Day announcements can go a long way

Addressing the nation for the 12th consecutive time from the Red Fort, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made several announcements that would not only give a new impetus to the economy but also help make India a more secure nation. Among the biggest announcements was the formation of a task force for next-generation reforms, which would evaluate all laws, rules, and procedures related to economic activities in a time-bound manner. To be sure, Mr Modi had earlier talked about a deregulation commission, but the idea didn't move forward. A thorough evaluation of rules and regulations can increase the ease of doing business enormously. To be fair, the government has been working on this front and has removed over 40,000 unnecessary complications and over 1,500 outdated laws. However, a comprehensive review is needed to bring rules and regulations governing economic activities in tune with the requirements of the 21st century. States must also be taken on board in this exercise.

The other big announcement was the next-generation goods and services tax (GST) reforms. The GST system will likely move to a two-rate structure for the majority of goods and services (5 and 18 per cent), along with a higher rate (40 per cent) for sin goods. This will simplify the rate structure and boost compliance. Fewer slabs would also likely address classification and procedural issues. The simplification of the rate structure and rationalisation of rates were long overdue, though the reported structure may have revenue implications, which will need to be managed carefully. Mr Modi also touched on India's macroeconomic stability, one of the government's biggest achievements since 2014. Sustained fiscal consolidation after the pandemic and improved expenditure quality prompted S&P Global Ratings to upgrade India's sovereign rating after an 18-year gap. The upgrade will improve India's attractiveness, particularly among foreign portfolio investors.

However, in the near term, investment may be driven by trade tensions with the United States (US). Trade-related uncertainty is the biggest risk to growth at the moment. It is in this context that Mr Modi said that India would never compromise on the interests of farmers. It has been reported that India's position on the farm sector was a major sticking point in trade negotiations with the US. Things, of course, became more complex after the US threatened to impose additional tariffs on India for importing Russian oil. While there is no doubt that India needs to protect the interests of its farm sector, which supports the livelihood of about half the population, it may remain a hurdle in trade negotiations with other countries as well. Thus, it would be important to evaluate the situation to strike the right balance.

Against the backdrop of Operation Sindoor, the Prime Minister was expected to speak about defence. In this regard, he announced Mission Sudarshan Chakra, a national security shield capable of not only neutralising attacks but also striking back with force. The system will be researched and manufactured in India. He also spoke of a high-powered demography mission to check illegal migration in border areas. There is no debate that people from neighbouring countries should not be allowed to illegally settle on Indian soil. However, the mission must take adequate care that poor and marginalised Indians in these areas are not subjected to difficulties. Overall, if India is to move closer to the target of becoming a developed nation by 2047, it needs to grow at a much faster pace. While addressing trade-related issues is a priority in the short run, announcements like the GST reform and broader next-generation reforms will go a long way in increasing growth.

Alaskan encounter

Only Mr Putin gained from the meeting

Hopes for an early end to the three-year war between Russia and Ukraine were comprehensively dashed following United States (US) President Donald Trump's much-anticipated meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska. Even given the low expectations for this meeting, the result could not have been worse for embattled Ukraine, for the signals it sends to countries with irredentist ambitions, notably China (Taiwan) and the US (Greenland). At most, it offers more compelling evidence of the US's abdication of its role as a principled interlocutor in global conflicts. After affording Mr Putin a lavish welcome, including a red carpet and ride in "The Beast", the armoured US presidential limousine, to the venue of the meeting, Mr Trump failed to secure even a ceasefire agreement. Instead, he backtracked, apparently backing Mr Putin's plans for Ukraine to cede territory Russia holds in the east as a condition for a peace agreement. At a press conference, Mr Trump alluded to eliminating the "root causes" of the conflict before a peace deal could be made. Mr Putin, on his part, suggested that the talks were "constructive" and Ukraine was just one of the topics discussed. Mutual trade and space exploration were others, apparently.

The Alaska meeting has been fruitful only for Mr Putin. Shunned by Western nations for his invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022, his first meeting on US soil since then has immeasurably strengthened his stature. With an International Criminal Court (ICC) warrant against him, Mr Putin has only visited such Russian allies as North Korea, Belarus, and Mongolia before this (the US is not an ICC signatory so the meeting broke no international rules). In terms of geopolitical stability, the immediate and long-term consequences of the Alaska meeting are deeply concerning. For Ukraine and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose gallant defence of his country is being stretched dangerously thin, the Alaska meeting did not make much headway. Ahead of a meeting at the White House scheduled for Monday, he can expect more pressure to cede the 20 per cent of Ukraine, including coal-rich Donetsk, which Russia has captured. Since he is unlikely to agree, US-Ukraine relations may be hit, with all its implications for much-needed military support, on which Kyiv is dependent in its war against the better-resourced and larger Russian nation.

Alaska's suboptimal outcome also weakens the 76-year-old North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) alliance. Post-Alaska, most key Nato nations have agreed to continue supporting Ukraine with materiel, intelligence, and training. Such assistance underlines a moral commitment; it is unclear how far it will help Ukraine since the US has done the heavy-lifting in terms of military and financial support. Meanwhile, fault-lines within the alliance are emerging, with Slovakia and Hungary praising Mr Putin for his Alaska "win". Leaders of both countries have criticised the European Union for what they see as its "rigid" stance on the conflict. Given Mr Trump's maverick, transactional style, it is unclear whether India can expect a post-Alaska rollback of the punitive 25 per cent tariff for buying Russian oil, although Mr Trump is reported to have indicated that the penal additional duty on India for buying Russian oil would be reconsidered. After all, in the space of six months, Mr Trump has swung from denigrating Mr Putin to embracing his Ukrainian agenda for no notable gains to the US. Where India will figure in this perpetual policy pendulum remains to be seen.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY

Building a better GST

New moves on the GST are progress, but much more is required

AJAY SHAH, VIJAY KELKAR & ARBIND MODI

The debate on India's goods and services tax (GST) has been stimulated. The leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, offered a four-point critique: The existing system is overly complex arising from multiple rates; disadvantages micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs); undermines fiscal federalism; and prematurely excludes petroleum products. In response, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced a "double Diwali" package of "next-generation GST reforms", promising to simplify the tax structure by collapsing it into two main slabs of 5 per cent and 18 per cent. These developments can be assessed by measuring them against the principles of "the perfect GST" as conceived by its original architects.

The GST rate structure conundrum

The seven-slab, multi-rate structure (0.25, 3, 5, 12, 18, 28, and 28+ per cent plus cess) has led to significant economic distortions and compliance challenges. These are very high rates in objective terms.

The call for a single rate correctly identifies this multiplicity as a central problem. The Prime Minister's proposal to streamline the system into a five-slab structure, with a 5 per cent rate for most consumption goods and an 18 per cent rate for general goods and services, is a step toward rationalisation and rate reduction. Nearly 99 per cent of items at 12 per cent will go to 5 per cent, and nearly 90 per cent of items at 28 per cent slab will go to 18 per cent. The 28 per cent slab with cess will be consolidated into a single 40 per cent rate, while the 0.25 per cent and 3 per cent concessional rates will continue to apply to specified high-value items.

This is progress, but it is not the perfect GST. A low single-rate system, a global best practice, is really the only way to go.

The present 5 per cent rate is a bit of an illusion. In many aspects, today, input tax credits (ITC) are restricted or capped. This is a full negation of the vision of GST. The effective tax burden is then much higher. Gross tax collections at the 18 per cent rate tend to be overstated as ITC is not taken into account. This design leads to cascading and gives complexity without meaningful net revenue.

The time has come to go to a single GST rate with full ITC. A value of about 10 per cent is a wise solution, with a slice of this GST going to the city government. We estimate that shifting to a low single-rate system would give an additional 0.7 to 1.4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in revenue.

MSMEs and the cronyism debate

The assertion that GST fosters "crony capitalism" by disproportionately burdening MSMEs is politically framed, but it has a foundation in the realities around us. The perfect GST would enable seamless ITC, but the present implementation has created a structural disadvantage for smaller firms.

While large businesses can fully claim ITC on their inputs, which are often taxed at the standard 18 per cent rate, MSMEs frequently fail to do so due to a combination of factors, including compliance barriers, liquidity constraints, and a dependence on informal suppliers. This imposes a high tax burden on them and pushes them to remain small and informal.

MSMEs will be helped by reforming the core rate structure, reducing the standard rate on inputs from 18 to 12 per cent, thereby easing MSME participation and making compliance a more viable option.

Fiscal federalism

The debate surrounding the timing of GST fund transfers to states, which has been cited as a breakdown of fiscal federalism, shows the political frictions that arise from a structural design flaw. The friction over transfers stems from the architecture of the integrated GST (IGST).

IGST collections come to the Union, and are then apportioned to the states. Delay or disputes become political conflicts. The issue is not one of intent but of design. It is better to split IGST into two distinct levels: A Union-IGST and a state-IGST at the outset, each component could be credited directly to its respective government in real time. This would eliminate the need for complex cross-credit settlements and remove friction with states.

The road not taken: Petroleum, electricity, and broader reform

The demand to include petroleum products within the GST framework misrepresents the economic function of the current taxation structure. The Union excise on petroleum functions as a corrective tax to internalise their negative externalities: Carbon emissions, solid particulate matter emissions, and congestion. State VAT serves as a consumption tax. The transformation required is deeper: The excise on petroleum needs to be fused into a single "excise" or carbon tax, applied to petroleum and coal, administered by the Union for the last decades of these industries. Once that is done, petroleum products and coal should become an ordinary part of a single-rate GST.

The electricity duty on the other hand is a clear and compelling reform priority. The fragmented tax treatment on electricity leads to cascading effects that undermine Indian exports. Making electricity an ordinary product in GST would be wise.

The taxation of gold and luxury goods requires improvements. The current 3 per cent GST on gold and bullion should be reconsidered; international best practice treats bullion as a savings instrument, not a consumption good, and thus exempts it from VAT and customs duties. Jewellery, however, should be fully taxed at the new single GST rate. Luxury and sin goods should be subject to specific excises imposed concurrently by the Union and states, but fully separate from GST, to ensure that GST itself remains a clean, broad-based consumption tax.

Similarly, all GST exemptions should be comprehensively eliminated. Redistributive objectives should be met by cash transfers.

Fixing Indian tax policy remains central to Indian success. The announcements constitute progress, but the unfinished agenda remains clear. A decisive move to a single rate, a structural reform of the IGST settlement mechanism, and the inclusion of key inputs like electricity into the GST fold.

The authors are affiliated with Pune International Centre and XDR Forum

Giving soybean its due

The soybean industry has urged the government to declare 2026 as the "Year of Soy". The plea, backed by all stakeholders, including public-sector bodies and research organisations, has come at a time when the soybean sector is at the crossroads. While the production of soybean is stagnating at around 12.5 million tonnes over the past few years, the demand for this multi-utility grain is steadily mounting, escalating the dependence on imports. The profitability of soybean cultivation has been on a steady decline due to climate change-driven weather uncertainties, the growing threat of pests and diseases, and price fluctuations, dissuading farmers from raising production. The crop-planting trends in the ongoing kharif sowing season clearly indicate the diversion of some land from soybean to more lucrative crops, such as paddy, sugarcane, or maize, even in the country's leading soybean-producing state, Madhya Pradesh, which also abounds in soy-based industrial units. An appropriate response, by way of favourable policies and programmes to boost the production and consumption of soybean, is imperative to prop up this sector. Observing 2026 as the Year of Soy would provide an appropriate opportunity to do so.

Soybean is a rich source of both protein and oil. Higher soy production can facilitate achieving two critical objectives of alleviating rampant malnutrition, especially protein deficiency, and mitigating edible-oil shortage. It can, additionally, generate more employment in the soy-based industry and the downstream value-chain, and allow higher exports of value-added soy products to capitalise on the growing global demand for vegetable proteins. At

present, Indian soy exports consist largely of low-value, albeit highly nutritious, de-oiled soybean meal for use as animal feed. Good-quality soybean grains for producing protein supplements and protein-dense soy-based snacks for human consumption are mostly imported from abroad.

According to the Soy Food Promotion and Welfare Association (SFPWA), soybean is one of the most cost-effective sources of good-quality protein and many other vital nutrients. It contains all the nine essential amino acids (a complete range of dietary proteins) and sizeable amounts of healthy fats, fibre, vitamins, and minerals. The cost of soy protein is generally around one-sixth of that of protein from eggs and other non-vegetarian sources, and half of wheat protein. The grains have, on average, 40 per cent protein, which is quite comparable to — and, in some cases, even higher than — the protein in eggs and various kinds of meat. Its fat content, estimated at around 20 per cent, though lower than that in some other oilseeds like mustard and groundnut, is deemed of good quality because it comprises both mono-unsaturated and poly-unsaturated fats. It also contains some vital vitamins, such as Vitamin K and Vitamin A; minerals like calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, and selenium; and the much sought-after antioxidants and phyto-nutrients, which offer various health benefits.

However, the present level of consumption of soybean in India is too low, merely 2 grams per day, compared to 40 grams in China and 30 grams in Japan. Experts believe that this level should go up to 15-20 grams to ensure proper nutrition for people who rely

primarily on vegetarian foods for their protein requirement. Meagre soy consumption can be attributed to several factors, apart from limited availability. These include want of awareness of the health and nutritional merits of soybean; people's intrinsic preference for dairy products, such as milk, dahi, lassi and paneer; and, most importantly, the issues related to the digestibility of soybean, particularly when used like traditional Indian dals. Soy seeds carry certain undesirable compounds, chiefly trypsin-inhibitors and phytates, which adversely affect nutrient absorption, and pose health hazards like acid bloating. Though many of these unhealthy ingredients can be eliminated to a large extent through simple procedures like overnight soaking in water, proper cooking, and industrial processing, not many people know this. Besides, many consumers do not relish the typical taste and flavour of soy products. Even a globally popular soy-based product like tofu fails to find many takers in India because it does not match the appeal of its equivalent milk-based diet alternatives.

Unfortunately, soybean also suffers from an identity crisis. It is neither considered an oilseed, though it is grown largely for extracting oil and using the resultant seed-cake as cattle feed, nor as legume (pulse crop), though it has a very high content of protein and, like other legumes, fixes atmospheric nitrogen in the soil. The onus of educating people about the virtues of soybean, and the correct ways of consuming it, rests primarily with the soy-based industry, trade, and other stakeholders. No doubt, they cannot be accused of inaction on this front, but more needs to be done to further boost the demand of soybean as a health food. Observing 2026 as the Year of Soy can go far in putting this sector on a fast growth trajectory.

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FARM VIEW
SURINDER SUD

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Why India remains Bharat



SANJEEV AHLUWALIA

This is the author's fourth book but the first in the non-fiction genre, an innovation from the 1950s, merging responsible journalism and engaging fiction in impactful storytelling. The result is a sparkling flow of thoughts sustained by their own sometimes convoluted logic. The author quit as editor of the *Open* magazine to write and explore alternative opportunities. So, why don't more upper-class Indians get slaughtered in their beds by the numerically overwhelming poor, many of whom serve the former in their

homes, know their secrets and have both adequate motive and opportunity? Think of the ultimate luxury — being served bed tea — and the accompanying service dilemma of in-house help. Keeping a dog is a safeguard. But not if walked and fed by the house-help as most upper-class pets are.

The poor attacking the rich is relatively rare in India. Sordid jails and the small-spaced cellulars are effective disincentives for voluntary criminal acts. The resilience of the Indian social order can be attributed to the preservation of "social distance" as in not eating on the same table, not sitting on the same furniture, and not eating from the same crockery. Oddly, rather than detract, these add to social cohesion albeit of the stratified Indian kind.

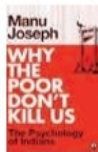
The author posits that humans do not hate those significantly better than themselves. They hate the "visible just above" and the "next below". The

former because they could block their social ascent and the latter because they might be pushing them out of a job or a house or even just space on the road. This principle applies uniformly. The result is a stable, social order, tempering social upheavals into ripples on a placid lake rather than tidal waves in a stormy sea.

Not showing off wealth publicly is another practice that under the poor to gross inequities. The author comes from a family of gold money lenders of Kerala, though he was raised in Chennai and lives in "Gurugram, Delhi's richer suburb." These money lenders dilute the opprobrium associated with their business by presenting themselves as savourous of last resort, do virtuous deeds like rebuffing a drunkard, pawing family jewellery, and sympathising with a widow pawning gold to get by. Like the author's mother, they remain hyper local — there is a gold money lender

every 100 yards in Kerala — devoted to religious congregations and practice an austere lifestyle — "We fill our bottle at a water fountain rather than buy bottled water on a cruise ship." According to the author, ascribing to "moral ideas like the importance of family, religion, nation, putting community before self" favour the rich but also appeal to and bind the poor, in a virtuous compact.

Could India's urban chaos and dirt be a strategy to maintain a depressing common reality — making cities look poorer than they are — to signal that everyone is in the same boat, creating a common sense of belongingness? So strong is the hold of this chaotic stable but iniquitous social order that even the unimaginable prettiness of defined sidewalks in Europe, the orderly rows of self-regulated traffic, the attractive public spaces for people to meet and relax all begin to pale after a while.



Why the poor don't kill us: The psychology of Indians by Manu Joseph. Published by Aleph 2025. 266 pages ₹599

Beautiful public spaces where the rich and the poor mingle make India's well-off uncomfortable. They take away the signs of privilege and present the dirty, the Indian middle and upper classes — private transport, gated communities inaccessible to the poor, except as guards, maids, handymen, or drivers. No wonder, once the euros are spent, they are happy to return.

Some of the author's conclusions appear exaggerated, such as his view that "inequality cannot be solved." Yes, greed, a key human driver, will always create an upwardly sloping ladder of income and benefits. But inequality is a lower order problem than poverty and a less pervasive one. In wealthy countries state support insulates the young in poor families and provides opportunities, albeit imperfectly. Similarly, it is over-the-top to assert that the obsession with higher

education is an upper-class trick to trap the poor into hoping for better times till it is too late for remedial steps. Barely one third of American children graduate from college. But a decent life is possible even outside college if you can identify your talent and act on it — ask Mark Zuckerberg. A competitive economy is the key differentiator between a rentier and an innovator. Wealth can be generated and lost in a single generation. Kerala did something right in providing good basic education and good public health services for all. No surprise then, that it has the lowest percentage of poor families at 0.55 per cent.

This is a racy and drolly humorous read, with the folksy irreverence and perceptive insights on human behaviour of stand-up comedians. It is a must-read for those seeking quick answers to intractable questions on why India is Bharat.

The reviewer is distinguished fellow at Chintan Research Foundation and was previously in the IAS and the World Bank

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

SPINELESS FOE: HOW JELLYFISH DISRUPT NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 17

ONE OF the largest nuclear power plants in France was forced to temporarily shut down on August 10 due to a slimy and spineless adversary: jellyfish.

The incident took place after a "massive and unpredictable" swarm of the marine creature clogged up the plant's cooling system.

This is not the first time that jellyfish have thwarted nuclear plants. Swarms of these invertebrates have caused such disruptions across the world since at least the 1990s.

However, the incidents of jellyfish disrupting power generation have been on the rise in recent years. For instance, in 2011, jellyfish paralysed plants in Israel, Japan, and Scotland. In 2013, an invasion of jellyfish halted a reactor in Sweden.

So how do jellyfish get into nuclear plants?

Nuclear power plants require a constant flow of water to cool their reactors and turbine systems, which is why many are built near large bodies of water. The plants' intake pipes have screening areas with graded barrier systems to remove solid materials and aquatic life and allow the inflow of water, sometimes millions of gallons every minute.

However, jellyfish pose a unique problem to this system. When a large volume of jellyfish—around a million individuals—gets pulled by the intake pipes, they entirely cover and clog the screening areas within minutes. As a result, the flow of water is interrupted. This risks overheating and damage to the major plant constituents, such as the turbines, condensers, and boilers, forcing the reactors to shut down.

Such a large number of jellyfish are typically pulled in when these creatures bloom—a rapid, temporary increase in jellyfish reproduction rates—near coastal nuclear power plants. During this process, millions of separate jellyfish clump together into dense groups.

Removing jellyfish from the screens involves complicated and dangerous procedures.

If a large population of jellyfish has



A jellyfish at an aquarium in Vancouver. Wikimedia Commons

clogged the intake pipes, it may take up to two days for the workers to clean them (Preventing Jellyfish Attacks on Electrical Power Plants in Kuwait: An Innovative Solution). The International Journal of Engineering and Science, 2024). During this process, there is a chance that jellyfish may sting the workers.

Why are such incidents on the rise?

The increase in incidents of power disruption caused by jellyfish is primarily due to a rise in their population in recent years, and their ability to adapt to the conditions found in and around coastal nuclear power plants.

Several factors are contributing to the proliferation of jellyfish.

CLIMATE CHANGE: Global warming has led to higher ocean temperatures, which, in turn, has resulted in a surge in plankton—the primary food source of jellyfish. With an abundance of food available, jellyfish have been able to increase their population substantially.

Also, these marine creatures breed faster in warmer water. Studies have found that higher temperatures lead to a higher metabolic rate and faster division of cells among jellyfish.

OVERFISHING: Jellyfish have proliferated because of overfishing as well. Various kinds of species, such as tuna and sea turtles, which prey on jellyfish, have been removed from the ecosystem.

PLASTIC POLLUTION: Unlike other marine creatures, jellyfish can tolerate low oxygen levels in water, which is a consequence of pollution. This has also contributed to the increase in their population in recent years.

India's S&P rating upgrade

The Indian government has for several years pursued the three global agencies—S&P, Moody's, and Fitch Ratings—for higher ratings. What has convinced S&P that now is a good time for India to get an upgrade?

SIDDHARTH UPASANI
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 17

LAST WEEK was turning out to be a great one for the Indian economy even before Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a raft of reforms in his Independence Day speech. A day earlier, S&P Global Ratings had upgraded its rating for India to BBB from BBB-. The sovereign rating upgrade by S&P is significant for two key reasons. One, it came after a gap of nearly two decades; and two, it has meaningful implications for the Indian economy.

India's upgrade pursuit

The Indian government has over the last several years aggressively pursued the three global agencies—S&P, Moody's Ratings, and Fitch Ratings—for higher ratings that, in its opinion, better reflect the economy's fundamentals. In fact, New Delhi has repeatedly expressed its displeasure over the agencies' methodologies, saying they were biased against emerging economies. The Economic Survey for 2020-21 even had a chapter titled 'Does India's Sovereign Credit Rating reflect its fundamentals No?'. "The rating of India did not capture India's fundamentals for almost a decade," Soumya Kanti Ghosh, State Bank of India's Group Chief Economic Adviser, said in a note on August 14.

So, what has convinced S&P that now is a good time for India to be given an upgrade?

Steady economic improvement

The primary reason is clarity on the government's finances. While the Centre has had a law called the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act since 2003—it demands reducing the annual fiscal deficit to 3 per cent of GDP—it has rarely been met. In fact, only once since the Act's enactment has the Centre's fiscal deficit fallen below 3 per cent, in 2007-08, and that was primarily due to some financial juggery. It was in January 2007 that S&P had last upgraded its rating on India.

However, post the Covid-19 pandemic, the fiscal deficit has been reduced aggressively from 9.2 per cent in 2020-21 to the current fiscal's target of 4.4 per cent.

Going forward, the Centre will start targeting a reduction in its debt-to-GDP ratio from 571 per cent in 2024-25 to 49-51 per cent by 2030-31.

Then there is growth. Despite GDP



A govt project in Lucknow. Most countries borrow to meet expenses.

growth falling to a four-year low of 6.5 per cent in 2024-25, India remains one of the fastest growing large economies in the world—or in S&P's words, "among the best performing economies in the world". And this is real, or inflation-adjusted, growth; nominal growth—which is the actual increase in the GDP in today's prices—is even higher. When it comes to calculating the debt-to-GDP ratio, it is the nominal GDP that matters. As such, as long as nominal GDP growth is higher than the pace with which the debt is increasing, the debt-to-GDP ratio will keep falling.

Another key factor has been the fairly low and stable domestic inflation, with S&P praising the Reserve Bank of India's inflation management record. According to latest data, India's headline inflation rate had fallen to 1.55 per cent in July—the lowest since mid-2017. Low and stable inflation is crucial to foreign investors as sharp increases in prices can erode their investments, weaken growth and the domestic currency, and create social unrest—all factors that can lead to a rating downgrade.

Why credit ratings matter

A credit rating is nothing more than a measure of an entity's creditworthiness, or how likely it is that they may pay back borrowed money. If you repay loans and credit card bills on time and in full, your credit score improves. It is the same for countries.

Most countries need to borrow money every year to fund some of their expenditures. The difference between the total income and the expenditure for a year is the fiscal deficit; the Indian government's is Rs 15.69 lakh crore for 2025-26. This has to be met by borrowing money from the markets,

with the government paying interest on it. Now, if the government is seen as being more likely to repay the loan—which is what a higher credit rating indicates—the rate of interest is lower.

According to Madhavi Arora, Chief Economist at Emkay Global Financial Services, the rating upgrade "can open the door for new pools of global funds' capital", resulting in "lower cost of funding across macro agencies' curves, including corporates—especially those borrowing abroad".

The rating scale

To be sure, India's rating category with S&P has itself not changed—the country remains in the BBB zone. It's just that it has gone from the lowest edge of it, or BBB-, to a more secure position. The next step would be BBB+.

Ratings are divided into two rough classes: investment and speculative grades. Entities, including countries, in the former class are worth investing in, while repayment of loans taken by them in the latter is more difficult to predict. But even within the investment grade, there are levels, and BBB is the lowest.

According to S&P, a BBB rating indicates "adequate capacity to meet financial commitments, but more subject to adverse economic conditions". The next step is A, then AA, and finally, AAA, which signifies "extremely strong capacity to meet financial commitments".

Who stands where

Alongside India, S&P has the likes of Greece, Mexico, and Indonesia at BBB, just above it, at BBB+, are Botswana (negative outlook), Bulgaria, Italy, Thailand, Uruguay (all

INDIA'S ECONOMIC PROGRESS SINCE S&P'S LAST RATING UPGRADE

	2006-07	2024-25
Real GDP growth	8.1%	6.5%
Real per capita GDP	₹56,964	₹1,33,501
Wholesale inflation	6.6%	2.31%
Retail inflation	6.7%	4.6%
Debt-to-GDP ratio	77.9%	81.3%
Forex reserves	\$199.18 bn	\$668.33 bn

Source: RBI, MoSPI, IMF

stable outlook); and Philippines (positive outlook). A positive outlook puts a rating closer to an upgrade, while a negative outlook makes a downgrade more likely.

Above this, with an A- rating, are countries such as Cyprus, Poland, and Malaysia. And right at the top of the tree, with AAA rating, are the richest countries in the world—Australia, Canada, Denmark, and Germany, among others.

The richest countries are not guaranteed the best rating. Take the US, for instance, which was downgraded to AA+ by S&P in August 2011—the first time the world's largest economy had ever been assigned any rating lower than AAA—days after the US Congress raised the country's debt ceiling. More recently, Moody's in mid-May lowered its rating on the US to Aa1 from Aaa reflecting "the increase over more than a decade in government debt and interest payment ratios to levels that are significantly higher than similarly rated sovereigns".

The road ahead

The implications of a better credit rating are clear—the Indian government should be able to borrow at a lower rate of interest. Financial markets are already preparing for this, with government bond yields in the secondary market on August 14 falling as much as 10 basis points, with the rupee's exchange rate also getting a boost.

Helpfully, S&P said on August 14 that it may further raise India's rating if the fiscal deficit of the Centre and states falls below 6 per cent of GDP on a structural basis. This, however, is a "tough ask", according to Arora of Emkay Global. S&P itself expects the combined fiscal deficit to decline only to 6.6 per cent in 2028-29 from 7.8 per cent in 2024-25.

COSMIC COMPANIONS AT FIRST, HOW BLACK HOLE TOOK APART GIANT STAR

ASTRONOMERS HAVE observed the calamitous result of a star that picked the wrong dance partner. They have documented what appears to be a new type of supernova, as stellar explosions are known, that occurred when a massive star tried to swallow a black hole with which it had engaged in a lengthy pas de deux.



The star, which was at least 10 times as massive as our Sun, and the black hole, which had a similar mass, were gravitationally bound to one another in what is called a binary system. But as their distance narrowed, the black hole's immense gravitational pull appears to have distorted the star before causing it to explode.

"We caught a massive star locked in a fatal tango with a black hole," said astrophysicist Alexander Gagliano of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, lead author of the study published in the *Astrophysical Journal*.

"After shedding mass for years in a death spiral with the black hole, the massive star met its finale by exploding. It re-

leased more energy in a second than the sun has across its lifetime," Gagliano added. The explosion occurred about 700 million light-years from Earth. A light-year is the distance light travels in an entire year, or 9.5 trillion km.

"The gravitational pulls of the two objects were... similar because we think they had similar masses. But the star was much larger, so it was in the process of engulfing the black hole as the black hole pulled material off it," Gagliano said. The researchers are not certain of the exact mechanism involved.

The binary system started with two massive stars orbiting each other as cosmic companions. But one reached the end of its natural life cycle and exploded in a supernova, and its core collapsed to form a black hole, an object with gravity so strong that not even light can escape.

"This event reveals that some supernovae can be triggered by black hole companions, giving us new insights into how some stars end their lives," said Harvard University astrophysicist and study co-author Ashley Villar. REUTERS

Govt plan for an animal blood bank network

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 17

THE CENTRE is working on ways to facilitate and standardise blood banking and blood transfusion in veterinary care.

The Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying, under the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying has invited comments from experts, institutions, and the public on the draft "Guidelines/Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Blood Transfusion and Blood Bank for Animals in India" that it prepared last month.

Why are SOPs needed for blood transfusion in animals?

India is home to a large livestock population of 536.76 million, according to the 20th Livestock Census conducted in 2019, and is also seeing a boom in the practice of keeping pets or companion animals.

Livestock include cattle, buffalo, goats, and sheep, as well as animals such as horses,

ponies, mules, donkeys, camels, and pigs. India has the world's largest population of cattle and buffalo, and the second-largest population of goats. The population of companion animals is estimated at 125 million, according to the draft guidelines.

The animals play a pivotal role in the agricultural economy and rural livelihoods. The animal husbandry and dairying sector contributes about 30% of the agricultural GVA and 5.5% of the Indian economy.

Given this context, there is an urgent need to formalise critical and emergency veterinary care services, the draft says.

India, the draft notes, "lacks a national regulatory framework and standardised protocols guiding veterinary transfusion medicine with structured blood banking and transfusion practices". Most animal blood transfusions are dependent on "hospital-available or client-owned donors, without consistent screening, blood typing, or standard operating protocols".

According to the government, the SOPs will address this situation.

How will the blood banks be stocked?

As per the draft guidelines, donor animals—whether canine, feline, or livestock—must meet laid-down criteria for being able to donate blood. These include:

- **General health and suitability.** The animal must be clinically healthy and free from tick- and vector-borne diseases.
- **Age and weight requirements.** Donor dogs must be between 1 and 8 years of age, with a minimum body weight of 25 kg; cats should ideally be of age between 1 and 5 years, with a minimum body weight of 4 kg, and not be obese; livestock must be selected from among healthy adults.
- **Vaccination and reproductive health.** Donor animals must be fully vaccinated, especially against rabies, and should have been regularly dewormed.
- **Female donor animals must not be pregnant or recently lactating.**

The veterinary blood banks will be hosted at veterinary colleges and universities, referral hospitals and polyclinics, large diagnostic centres, and multi-specialty animal hospitals operated by the government.

How will the various components be integrated into a cohesive system?

- The draft document envisages the establishment of a National Veterinary Blood Bank Network (NVBBN) under the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying. The NVBBN will provide four core services:
- Digitally integrated donor registries, which will have details on species, breed, location, and blood type.
- A real-time inventory management system that will map the availability of whole blood and components across participating centres.
- A helpline and online portal to connect veterinary clinics, hospitals, and donors in emergencies.
- A standardised set of practices, reporting formats, and adverse reaction logs.

Manjit Bawa's bovines: symbols of harmony with nature, human resilience

VANDANA KALRA
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 17

DRAWING FROM Indian mythology, folklore, and Sufism, artist Manjit Bawa envisioned a world where humans and animals lived in peaceful harmony.

"He had deep empathy for animals... Completely at ease around them, he would fearlessly approach cows and bulls, and pat them affectionately." Ina Puri, curator and author of Bawa's biography *In Black and White* (2017), told *The Indian Express*.

"His gentleness and familiarity with animals was reflected in his work, and brought a certain level of expertise that can never come from looking at them from a distance," she said.

In particular, Bawa was fond of bovines: cows, buffalo, bulls, and calves.

Childhood inspirations

"I grew up like Krishna, playing with [cows] and drinking milk straight from their udder... therefore, farm animals like cows... keep appearing in my paintings," Bawa had said in a 2004 interview.

Bawa's affinity for cows can literally be traced to his birth: the youngest of five brothers, he was born in a goshala (cow shed) in Dhuri, a small town in Punjab's Sangrur district. He grew up in a family which cared deeply for animals.

Puri said, "He often spoke about going for a walk with a cow or playing with cattle as they bathed in the stream".

Man and nature, for Bawa, were meant to be in unison. "All living beings were linked with one another through love and integration of identities... His drawings sought commonality through the physical forms he created... Bull humps and a man's



knees could not help but have identical curves through the same principle of interconnectivity," art restorer and author Rupika Chawla wrote in a 2022 essay for the website of the Vadehra Art Gallery.

Evolving depiction

While studying fine arts at Delhi Polytechnic in the late 1950s, Bawa would spend hours observing horses in *tabelas* (stables) and in shelters where *tongwales*



Manjit Bawa's untitled work from 1985, oil on canvas. AstaGuru Auction House, Express archives

retired for the night, Puri recalled. These experiences saw him experiment with figurative depictions in gestural brushwork.

Over time, more populated narratives gradually gave way to solitary subjects as his visual language evolved. Instead of the then-dominant greys and browns in Indian art, he opted for more traditional Indian colours such as pinks, reds, and violet.

"Until the mid-1980s Bawa's work featured numerous studies and drawings born out of his close observation of the figures and modest modeling. The animals mostly appeared alongside human figures in the narrative scenes," Manoj Mansukhani,

Director Marketing, AstaGuru Auction House, told *The Indian Express*.

"This changed in the mid-1980s and 1990s, when the colours deepened and the bovine motif became more central, as we saw in several of his Krishna-and-cow pairings," he said.

Over the years, Bawa's figures acquired a sense of weightlessness, as their perfectly rounded forms were portrayed in graded tones, with subtle chiaroscuro defined by interplay of light and shadow.

"By the late 1990s-2000s, singular bovines dominated, defined by minimal lines and saturated backgrounds. There were no landscapes as the figures were surrounded by solid colour fields, giving them a heightened sense of divinity. Towards the end, we saw more silhouettes in a softer palette," Mansukhani said.

Many meanings

"Bawa wanted his works to be open to diverse interpretations," Puri said.

At times, his depictions belonged to the

mythical realm, while on other occasions, they appeared as enduring symbols of humankind's resilience. Bawa, who had learned to play the flute from maestro Pannalal Ghosh, could himself be the flautist in his paintings, most often identified as Krishna, Puri noted.

A 1992 titled painting featuring Krishna fetched a staggering Rs 25.11 crore at an AstaGuru auction in 2023. In 2017, Christie's had sold Bawa's 1998 *Untitled (Krishna and Cow)* (1998) for \$780,500.

In 2021, a Bawa canvas went viral after appearing in actor Amitabh Bachchan's home. Painted against a blue backdrop, the canvas had a solitary bull as an emblem of power and resilience.

"The creature he painted are his—distilled through his imagination, with the sweeping lines of their contours adding a certain vigour and power," Puri said.

This is the final part of a series on Indian masters and the motifs that appear repeatedly in their works.

9 THE IDEAS PAGE

The next leap forward

It has to be in rationalising subsidies and increasing investments in agri-R&D and efficient value chains. Environmental sustainability has to be central to this journey



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND RITIKA JUNEJA

AS THE TRICOLOUR was unfurled on India's 79th Independence Day, the country stood proudly as a confident, resilient, and rising nation. It is not just the world's largest democracy, but a country that has successfully crafted its destiny since attaining independence in 1947. Notwithstanding the current headlines of US President Donald Trump's tariff war, it has weathered many storms in the past. One may recall the sanctions by the US in 1998 after the Pokhran nuclear tests conducted by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government or the role of the US in sending its Seventh Fleet in 1971, when India's war with Pakistan led to the creation of Bangladesh. India emerged stronger on the world stage. Today, no one can stop India's rise — its time has come.

Just look at the last decade. India's GDP has more than doubled. It is projected to reach \$4.19 trillion by 2025, making India the fourth-largest economy, behind the United States (\$30.5 trillion), China (\$19.2 trillion), and Germany (\$4.74 trillion) (IMF estimates). Measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, India is already the world's third-largest economy at \$17.65 trillion, trailing only China (\$40.72 trillion) and the US (\$30.51 trillion) in 2025. All this is a reflection of rising aspirations and India's strong resolve to regain its civilisational legacy.

Since Independence, poverty levels have plummeted, while literacy, life expectancy, and women's empowerment have seen transformative leaps. From Chandrayaan's historic landing near the Moon's South Pole to the trailblazing Mars mission, Mangalyaan, India has staked its place at the frontiers of space exploration. The meteoric rise of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), processing over 10 billion transactions each month and inspiring fintech innovations worldwide, reflects a digital revolution. Indian origin leaders such as Sundar Pichai, Satya Nadella, Indra Nooyi, and many more lead some of the most influential corporations, underscoring India's intellectual and entrepreneurial footprint far beyond its borders. Lal Bahadur Shastri's call of "Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan", later enriched by Vajpayee with "Jai Vigyan" (hail science) and more recently by Modi with "Jai Anusandhan" (hail research), reminds us that India's progress is rooted in science and technology. As Vajpayee once said, what information technology (IT) is for India, biotechnology (BT) is for Bharat.

Independence Day is both a moment for celebration and reflection on the road travelled — and the one still ahead.

When India gained independence in 1947, its GDP was around \$30 billion. The population stood at 330 million, with an estimated 80 per cent living in poverty. The average life expectancy was a mere 32 years (1947), and literacy levels were just 18.3 per cent (1951). Foodgrain production stood at about 50 million metric tonnes (MMT). Fast forward to 2025: India's population has increased to 1.46



C R Sasikumar

billion, but poverty, measured at the \$3/day (2021 PPP) threshold, has fallen to just 5.3 per cent, as per World Bank estimates. Literacy has surged to 77 per cent, while life expectancy has more than doubled to 72 years (2023). Foodgrain production has multiplied sevenfold, reaching 353.9 MMT in 2024-25. India is now the world's largest rice exporter, shipping 20.2 MMT in FY25. Grain stocks with the government exceed 90 MMT, well above buffer norms. Horticulture output has risen 15 times since independence, milk production 11 times, and egg production an astonishing 77 times. From FY15 to FY25, under the Modi government, India's real GDP has grown at an average of 6.5 per cent annually, while agricultural GDP has expanded by 4 per cent per year, well above the population growth rate of under 1 per cent. As a result, India is a net exporter of agriculture, unlike the US and China, which are both net importers of agriculture. These are not mere statistics; they narrate the story of a country in motion.

However, even as India has achieved food security, there are still many challenges: Nutritional security, especially of children under the age of five, remains pressing. This calls for a sharper focus on women's education, improved maternal health, and continued emphasis on sanitation. The Modi government deserves compliments for making India open defecation free (ODF), which will help improve child nutrition.

In the agri-food space, however, much more can be done. In particular, rationalising food and fertiliser subsidies needs to be put on high priority. Together, these accounts for nearly Rs 3.71 lakh crore in the 2025-26 Union Budget — Rs 2.03 lakh crore for food and Rs 1.67 lakh crore for fertilisers. While these subsidies are meant to shield vulnera-

ble populations, they are plagued by large inefficiencies. Studies suggest that at least 20 to 25 per cent of these subsidies fail to reach intended beneficiaries. Though politically tempting, these subsidies come at the cost of productive investments. The next leap forward has to be rationalising subsidies and increasing investments in agri-R&D and efficient value chains. India's future lies in empowering its citizens to innovate, invest, and generate sustainable incomes. Environmental sustainability has to be central to this journey. The quality of India's soil, water, and air needs to be protected to attain the Viksit Bharat vision by 2047.

As we reflect with pride on our progress, it is equally important to look outward. While India has surpassed Pakistan and Bangladesh in per capita income — both in nominal and PPP terms — it remains far behind China, which began its journey around the same time. China's per capita income in 2025 is \$13,690 (PPP \$28,980), while India is at \$2,880 (PPP \$12,130). However, for India, democracy remains its compass, setting it apart from its neighbours.

India's story is still a work in progress. The world watches it closely. It has lessons for many countries in Asia and Africa, and in many high-tech sectors, it competes with the best. The vision of the Modi government for a Viksit Bharat by 2047 can be realised only if we remain focused on accelerating growth in an inclusive manner, cut down bureaucratic hurdles, and adopt a scientific culture as the guiding principle, backed by investments.

Gulati is Distinguished Professor and Juneja is a Research Fellow at ICRRIE. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The key for Zelenskyy in the coming days is to ensure that Moscow, not Kyiv, is rightly blamed for any lack of progress. That means maintaining an openness to negotiations and not being baited into public debating, like in their last Oval Office meeting." — THE WASHINGTON POST

Nothing moved in Alaska

The only one who has emerged victorious from this ill-conceived summit is Vladimir Putin, who has not made any concessions on Ukraine



SUMIT GANGULY

ANY COMPETENT ANALYST or scholar of international relations knows that prior to a summit meeting, enormous amounts of preparation are necessary. An agenda is agreed upon, and the aides to the respective leaders burn the midnight oil to reach agreements in advance and iron out key differences. Only a few odds and ends are usually left to be tackled at the meeting itself. When the event convenes, the leaders confer to establish a new relationship or bolster an existing one and then turn to various public ceremonies as well as press conferences.

The hastily convened summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his American counterpart Donald Trump raises profound questions about how much preparation for this convale had been made in advance, especially on the American side. Before the meeting, Trump had proclaimed at least 53 times that he would end the war in Ukraine within 24 hours of assuming office. That, as is well known, failed to transpire.

It is possible to endlessly speculate why Trump chose to pursue this meeting with Putin at such short notice. Some analysts have argued that he decided to meet with Putin primarily to see if he might boost his chances of getting the much-sought-after Nobel Prize. Thus far, for all his putative negotiating skills, he has not made any real headway in tamping down any conflict of consequence, such as the brutal ongoing war in the Gaza Strip. Even pulling off a temporary ceasefire in Ukraine could have been spun into a tale of his ability to terminate a sanguinary war. His motivations for meeting Putin aside, little or nothing was accomplished in Anchorage, Alaska. All that was agreed upon was that the two sides would continue their discussions.

However, the lack of preparation on the American side and Trump's eagerness to meet Putin resulted in an outcome that granted the Russian President multiple easy PR victories. At the outset, Putin was able to step on American soil after a decade. Not only was he able to do so, but it was because of nothing short of a presidential invitation.

In the process, a national leader, who has been under indictment since 2023 at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, suddenly acquired

an aura of legitimacy in the global order. After all, no less than the President of the United States rolled out a red carpet to greet him. The American soil.

The contrast in terms of protocol with Trump's meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House in February of this year could not have been more striking. At that meeting, Trump's Vice-President JD Vance had publicly berated him, no doubt at Trump's behest. Even Zelenskyy's choice of attire at the meeting had come under criticism.

At this meeting in Anchorage, Putin not only received the red-carpet treatment but was also granted other rare privileges. Without any aides (or even interpreters) accompanying them, Trump invited Putin to join him briefly in the heavily armoured presidential limousine (popularly referred to as "The Beast"), a gesture that is even rarely accorded to the leaders of allied nations. This sight left many American observers downright aghast.

And what did Trump get in return from Putin for all this pomp and fanfare? It appears that he received nothing. What, however, he did receive was the slightest bit in terms of bringing an end to the vicious conflict in Eastern Europe. Far from stopping Russia, Trump could not even induce Putin to commit to a ceasefire.

As the summit drew to a close, at a joint press conference, neither leader answered any questions. Later, Trump claimed that significant progress had been made in terms of ending the war. However, he did not proffer any details about what, if anything, had been accomplished. Putin, on the other hand, with some evident glee, announced that he had invited Trump to another meeting in Moscow and that the US President had accepted his invitation.

In the meantime, the Ukraine war continues unabated. It is not known whether Trump will brief America's European allies, let alone Zelenskyy, about what transpired in his ill-conceived summit in Anchorage. Putin, more than apparent is that this much hyped but hastily convened meeting has little or nothing to show for it. For all of Trump's much-vaunted negotiating skills, his lack of attention to detail, his unwillingness to pay heed to professional (and regional) knowledge and expertise, and his fondness for fanfare at the cost of substance have yielded yet another hollow outcome for American foreign policy. The only one who has emerged victorious from this ill-conceived summit is Vladimir Putin. Most importantly, he has greatly benefited from this meeting without making any concessions in the war in Ukraine.

The writer is a senior fellow and directs the Huntington Programme on strengthening US-India relations at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

COLLECTIVE VISION

THIS REFERS TO Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech on Independence Day, 'Atmanirbhar and Viksit' (IE, August 16). The address to the nation this year was markedly different. Absent were the familiar barbs on the Opposition. The emphasis on growth, infrastructure, and a vision of a resurgent India was a reminder that the sternest plank for political legitimacy. In the backdrop of a turbulent global economy and the disruptive tariff push from the Donald Trump administration, the recalibration seems deliberate. India cannot afford to be distracted by political rancour when external uncertainties demand stability and internal consensus and unity. National days are best served by a collective vision, beyond electoral politics.

R Narayanan, Mumbai

HUMAN WORK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Hope, not fear' (IE, August 16). What was once a vibrant launchpad for individual talent, YouTube's core identity is now at risk of being diluted by repetitive, algorithm-driven content designed solely to capture views, not to express a unique voice. To counteract this trend, there is an imperative need to implement a tiered system that prioritises and rewards original, human-made work. Platforms should invest in tools that facilitate the search for allowing them to curate a feed that celebrates authentic expression. By championing the unique and often imperfect nature of human creativity, we can ensure that digital spaces remain a true reflection of our shared experiences, rather than a sterile product of an algorithm.

Anantha Padmanabhan, Noida

POLITICAL SPEECH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Hope, not fear' (IE, August 16). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Independence Day address to the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort was far from refreshing and less than inspiring. One assertion stood out and took the attention away from his announcement of policy reforms for self-reliance. The social demography of a country is never static, and it is mind-boggling. He did not seem to think that it was unfair or wrong to link demographic changes, or, more precisely, the perceived threat of them, to national security. It is as if he needs to arouse the fear of demographic change for the sustenance of his political relevance. As someone who listened to the 103-minute speech with rapt attention, I am un-

able to say that it was worthy of India's democracy.

G David Milton, Marathnagode



C UDAY BHASKAR

Stress tests for nuclear taboo

Global deterrence template is being tested by ongoing conflicts

THE BOMBING of Hiroshima with an atomic weapon on August 6, 1945, that killed almost 140,000 people and led to the end of World War II is a pivotal event in global history. It marked the dawn of the apocalyptic atomic age, wherein nuclear weapons demonstrated their enormous destructive capability — first in Hiroshima and three days later over Nagasaki. Progressively, a norm was internalised globally that Nagasaki would be the last time that a nuclear weapon would be used militarily. And so, the nuclear taboo was born.

It is a matter of considerable relief that the nuclear-weapon nations of the world have so far respected the sanctity of the nuclear taboo. But the run-up to the 80th anniversary suggests that the taboo is under stress in a very unexpected manner. The recent war of words between the US and Russia, laced with menacing references to nuclear weapons, is cause for deep concern and augurs ill for global nuclear stability and restraint.

The US and Russia (which inherited the nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union) were the two superpowers of the Cold War decades and had amassed thousands of nuclear weapons of varying yields. After the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis that saw these two nations stepping back from the precipice, they arrived at a modus vivendi that neither nation would use the dread-

nuk except to "deter" the other. Thus was born the deterrence doctrine of MAD — mutually assured destruction — an anomalous form of ensuring "security" in a SAD manner: Self-assured destruction.

To regulate the spread of nuclear weapons, the two superpowers introduced the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) in 1970, and while this had no legitimacy in law, it was a de facto imposition of realpolitik and techno-strategic power. The world was divided into the nuclear haves — the first five nuclear weapon powers (US, USSR/Russia, UK, France, and China) — and the permanent nuclear have-nots, who were compelled to forego the option of ever acquiring nuclear weapons.

The quid pro quo was that the latter, the NNWS (non-nuclear weapon states), would have access to civilian nuclear technology, and they would not be threatened by an NNWS nuclear weapon state. Concurrently, the NNWS agreed to "negotiate in good faith" towards disarmament — this remains the elusive Holy Grail.

In summary, the world had evolved two norms to ensure the sanctity of the nuclear taboo. One, that nuclear weapons would not be brandished to resolve territorial disputes (Pakistan was rebuffed for its attempt to do so in the 1999 Kargil War), and secondly, the sovereignty of a NNWS would not

be violated without legitimate sanction. These norms were respected in the main for almost three decades from 1991, the year that marked the end of the Cold War. During this period, Ukraine surrendered its nuclear weapons to Russia. Both the US and Russia maintained a degree of nuclear restraint, and there was no sabre-rattling for almost three decades, from 1991 till 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and Moscow found it necessary to invoke its nuclear capability.

This was a major setback to the deterrence template and agreements such as the 1975 Helsinki Accords that sanctified the inviolability of borders in Europe. This was compounded in June 2025 when Israel, not an NPT signatory, attacked Iran, a NNWS, on the assumption that Tehran was about to acquire a nuclear weapon in violation of its NPT commitment. Regrettably, Israeli impunity was tacitly endorsed by the US — this was another body blow to global nuclear non-proliferation norms.

In the latest stress test for the nuclear taboo, Washington and Moscow have engaged in a menacing exchange after former Russian Dmitry Medvedev's remarks, followed by Trump ordering the deployment of two nuclear submarines in response. The attack on Iran has gutted the spirit of the NPT, and regulating the spread of nuclear

weapons will now be even more challenging. The stark lesson among the NNWS is that Ukraine blundered in giving up its nuclear weapons, and there is no sanctity in treaties.

The more alarming exigency is a breakdown in US-Russia relations and an unintended military escalation. While the probability is low, it merits notice that both nations possess the world's largest nuclear arsenals — Russia with 5,459 warheads and the US with 5,177 (Federation of American Scientists' 2025 report on the Status of the World's Nuclear Forces). Even a limited exchange could cause catastrophic loss of life. A 2019 Princeton University simulation estimated 91.5 million casualties in the first few hours of a US-Russia nuclear war, with long-term effects like radioactive fallout and global cooling adding to the atomic apocalypse.

If the world was spared a repeat of Nagasaki, it was more luck and individual rectitude that collective sagacity. One can only hope that this holds for the foreseeable future. India, which was once in the vanguard of the global disarmament effort, has remained muted since it acquired nuclear weapons in 1998. This gauntlet must be picked up again by Delhi with other like-minded nations.

The writer is director, Society for Policy Studies

WORDLY WISE
A GENUINE LEADER IS NOT A SEARCHER FOR CONSENSUS BUT A MOULDER OF CONSENSUS.
— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The discomforts of modernity

Alasdair MacIntyre cast an unflinching gaze on its oppressions and fictions



ALASKA SHIFT

Progress was made in Trump-Putin summit, even as sticking points remain. There are mixed signals on secondary tariffs

US PRESIDENT DONALD Trump's decision to align with Russian President Vladimir Putin's approach to peace in Ukraine at the Alaska Summit has provoked sharp criticism in Europe and at home. Yet this reaction may be missing the essence of what Trump is trying to do. He has long been indifferent to the censure of the mainstream press and foreign policy establishment that labels him "soft on Putin." Trump has endured that line of attack for a decade, including attempts to remove him from the White House during his first term. Across three presidential campaigns — in 2016, 2020, and 2024 — Trump has consistently reaffirmed his conviction that the United States needs better relations with Russia. In his latest campaign, he promised a quick end to the war in Ukraine. The Alaska Summit was the culmination of that commitment. By moving beyond the narrow objective of a ceasefire and pressing for a peace agreement, Trump has signalled recognition of battlefield realities, rather than deference to Putin. Speaking to a television channel after the summit, Trump bluntly stated that Ukraine has little chance of defeating Russia, a far larger power.

Both leaders spoke of "considerable progress" in Alaska. The main sticking point, however, remains the issue of territorial concessions. Putin is pressing for Ukraine to cede parts of the Donbas still under its control in return for Russia freezing the rest of the frontlines. For Kyiv, this is a bitter pill to swallow. Trump has said he will urge Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy — due at the White House on Monday — to accept concessions in exchange for the benefits of peace. Europe, briefed by Trump after the summit, has not outrightly rejected the idea of territorial compromise. But European leaders insist on robust security guarantees for Ukraine and the preservation of its freedom to choose its security partners. The reality, however, is stark: Neither Ukraine nor Europe holds a veto over US policy. Should Trump decide to disengage from Ukraine — a move that would resonate strongly with his anti-war MAGA base — Kyiv's resistance would collapse quickly. Europe, for its part, lacks the capacity to replace Washington as Ukraine's security guarantor. This imbalance creates space for Trump's peace diplomacy in the coming weeks. Flexibility in Kyiv and Brussels could open the door for a second Trump-Putin summit to formalise new arrangements for Ukraine. But entrenched resistance to compromise across the Atlantic could still derail the process.

India, for its part, welcomed the progress at Alaska. A thaw in US-Russia relations tends to widen India's geopolitical space. Yet Delhi faces an immediate challenge: Trump's threat of secondary tariffs on Indian purchases of Russian oil. These tariffs, set to take effect on August 27, could impose a crippling 50 per cent duty on Indian exports to the US, its most important trading partner. At the summit's close, Trump sent mixed signals by saying he would decide on the tariffs "in a couple of weeks," once the Ukraine situation becomes clearer. For India, the moment demands deft diplomacy abroad and a credible economic plan at home to cope with the potential shock of punitive tariffs.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY political life requires zooming out to the big picture presuppositions of modernity. Modernity comes in many shades and histories. Many traditions like to think they can help overcome the pathologies of modernity. But they operate within its frame: The nation-state and capitalism being just two institutional forms we cannot quite escape. Characterising the nature of modernity has been the greatest philosophical prize at least since Hegel. Is it emancipatory? Or does it unleash another dialectic of oppression? What kind of moral life does it make possible? What are its contradictions?

Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century, passed away in May. He was an unsurpassed diagnostician of modernity, sharper than his more feted contemporaries like Habermas, Taylor and Foucault. His career is a distressingly rare model of what genuine philosophical seeking looks like. He learnt from every stream of thought and refused all fads and fashions. It is not an accident that his brilliant collection of essays is called *Against the Self-Images of the Age*. Almost everything he wrote was luminous, deep and profound. Every topic he touched — moral philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis, history of ideas, philosophy of science, sociology — was transformed by his interventions. He did not settle for the easy comforts of a single theory. He resisted the temptations of self-satisfied cleverness, where you win an argument but miss the point. His method, if it can be called that, was to often draw attention to the deep and hidden presuppositions of any claim. At every turn, saying: "Have you thought of that?" His masterpiece, *After Virtue*, published in 1981, anticipates many of the pathologies of modern political life. Its central claim is that modern moral life in effect acts as if emotivism were true. Emotivism is a moral theory that all moral claims are, at their base, simply expressions of personal preferences or feelings. If moral claims are simply expressions of feeling, then moral arguments are interminable. It is conflict, all the way down. There is no rational standpoint from which moral claims can be justified. But MacIntyre brilliantly teased out the social implications of this. For one thing, the distinction between manipulation and rational persuasion breaks down;

all social life at its base becomes manipulation. Modern culture revels in the task of unmasking hidden motives and structures of power that lie behind particular moral claims and practices. But this unmasking cannot appeal to any higher good. The second implication is perpetual indignation in political life. The shrillness of political life arises from the fact that no one can win an argument. All you can have is indignant self-righteousness, since there is no objective truth. The purpose of protest is to mobilise those who share the protestors' preferences; it is not to persuade. How do we manage complex life in the absence of a common objective framework? Liberalism might seem the perfect answer to the modern predicament. Under conditions where value is fragmented and disagreement interminable, why not endow each one with the rights to fully realise themselves as they deem fit? But the emotivism and interminable disagreement that characterise moral life go all the way down to conceptions of rights. These are not shared moral truths as much as fictions without shared rational justification. Merit consent is too thin a gruel around which to build a common life. Modern societies sever the connection between the right and the good. The individualist character of rights means that liberals often ignore the constitutive social commitments that make values the object of common action.

Liberalism is powerful in constituting itself as a kind of meta tradition that stands above all traditions and conceptions of the good, only concentrating on the freedom that enables them. This is the power of liberalism, but also its weakness. As a meta tradition, it becomes immune to criticism, and it has no answer to how we might secure goods that people actually care about. Being above the fray means it is never in the fray, and so undercuts its own political significance. Three social roles come to the forefront in modernity: The aesthete, the therapist and the manager. Think of these not as social roles but as three dominant needs: The needs of self-fashioning, the management of emotions and the managerial ordering of preferences in society, through application of technical knowledge in different forms of modern organisation. MacIntyre is a defender of science and

knowledge. But he was a scathing critic of expertise and managerialism. He rightly thought the claims to effectiveness embodied in managers, bureaucrats, and experts are themselves part of a masquerade of social control. They claim to have forms of social knowledge; it is impossible to have. MacIntyre was brilliant on the philosophy of social sciences and the claims of social sciences to represent social reality. The epistemic foundations of the managerialism of modern societies turn out to be rickety. Our condition is characterised by moral incoherence and self-misrepresentation. As he put it, the new dark ages are upon us.

MacIntyre does not convert his diagnostic into a political programme. For all his criticisms of liberalism, he had an anti-authoritarian streak, a serious suspicion of converting any ideology into something that could be deployed by the state. He broke with Marxism over this. He is now deployed as the guru of post-liberalism. But he gives no one comfort. The extent of our incoherence is such that all modern ideologies that claim to transcend modern pathologies end up exemplifying it. Marxism cannot transcend the managerial frame of modernity. Modern conservatism, he presciently observed, turns out to be even more hyper-individualist than liberalism.

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It is hard to do justice to a prodigiously productive 70-year career. Apart from his diagnostic, his sense that humans are, above all, brilliant animals, led him to articulate a stirring account of the importance of narrative to moral and scientific life. His account of how inquiry always presupposes a tradition, concepts like rationality themselves have a history, and how traditions break down, is unmatched. The eloquent opening of *After Virtue*, the portrait of a society that continues to use scraps of language, where the practices that made them intelligible have long ceased to exist, is a bracing account of all modern traditions (including India). But as he put it, "if we are indeed in as bad a state as I take us to be, pessimism too will turn out to be one more cultural luxury we will have to dispense with in order to survive in these hard times." Wise words from one of the wisest philosophers

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

THE UPGRADE

By raising India's rating, S&P affirms optimism about growth. Governments must adhere to the path of fiscal consolidation

LAST WEEK, S&P Global Ratings raised India's long-term sovereign credit rating from BBB- to BBB. A BBB rating, which is at the lower end of the investment grade rung, indicates adequate capacity to repay obligations. S&P's rationale for the upgrade rests on the pillars of "buoyant" growth, the "commitment" to fiscal consolidation, improved "quality" of spending and anchored inflationary expectations. Coming at a time of acute economic uncertainty, the ratings action — this is the first upgrade by the agency in 18 years — reaffirms India's growth prospects, underlines its resilience and its "remarkable" recovery from the pandemic.

S&P has projected the Indian economy to grow from around \$3.9 trillion in 2024 to about \$5.5 trillion by 2028, with growth averaging roughly 6.8 per cent over the next few years. This is marginally higher than other assessments, such as by the IMF. In its April World Economic Outlook, the Fund had pegged the economy to grow at around 6.3 per cent over this period. The ratings agency is strikingly less pessimistic about the impact of Trump's tariffs on the Indian economy, expecting it to be "manageable" and not pose a "material drag on growth". This is based on its view that India is "relatively less reliant on trade" (exports to US are roughly 2 per cent of GDP), and more on domestic consumption. There is, however, a cautionary note here. This assessment is at odds with views expressed by several analysts who believe that not only will there be a direct impact of high tariffs but that there will also be an indirect impact which could reflect in the form of lower investment flows into the country.

The government's debt-deficit dynamics is another area of improvement flagged by the ratings agency. General government debt (Centre and states put together) had surged during the pandemic. However, since then, governments have stayed on the path of consolidation, bringing down their deficits and debts. The ratings agency expects the general government deficit to fall from 7.3 per cent of GDP in 2025-26 to 6.6 per cent by 2028-29. Alongside, it projects the debt to GDP ratio to decline from 83 per cent in fiscal 2025 to 78 per cent by fiscal 2029, bringing it "closer to its pre-pandemic level." While progress has been faster than what was envisaged by the Finance Commission, the path of consolidation must continue to be adhered to, S&P has, in fact, cautioned about not doing so, saying that "We may lower the ratings if we observe an erosion of political commitment to consolidate public finances."



AN INDEPENDENCE DAY speech is an occasion to celebrate our freedom, remember our martyrs — the men and women to whom independent India will always remain indebted — to take pride in our achievements and identify our challenges. It is not a platform for self-praise, for partisan politics and the promotion of divisive forces. In his speech on the 79th year of India's independence, Prime Minister Narendra Modi crossed the line between being the PM of a secular democratic republic to being a proarch of a sectarian organisation.

A large part of the speech was devoted to claims of development, which will no doubt be challenged as they should be. What was striking in the speech were also the omissions. Last year, the PM had spoken a great deal about the "termites of corruption". This year, the word "corruption" was hardly mentioned. Has the declared war against corruption ended? Only a few days ago, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) told a New York Eastern District court that they had asked India's Ministry of Law and Justice for help in delivering the summons and complaint to Adani officials in a Rs 2,000 crore bribery case but the authorities in India have not delivered the documents even after six months. In the government telling answer in Parliament, the answer stated that Rs 35,000 crore in tax and penalty demands were raised in the last 10 years under the

A LET-DOWN AT RED FORT

Bogey of 'ghuspathiye' and praise for RSS in PM speech struck jarring notes

Black Money Act (2015), but the recovery so far has been just Rs 338 crore. This is when there has been a surge in Indian linked funds in Swiss banks.

But there were two specific aspects of his speech that should be of deep concern to all Indians.

The first was his astounding warning of a "conspiracy" by "ghuspathiye" to change India's demography. If there is such a conspiracy, what was the home and defence ministry's role all these years? How is it that Parliament has never been taken into confidence about such a "conspiracy"? Presumably, the government of the country sending in such "ghuspathiye" would be involved. Is it not contradictory then that India should be giving shelter to a person who headed such a government for the decade when "ghuspathiye" invaded India? The figures on land takeover in tribal areas show that the largest taker of land has been taken over by corporates and "helped by the central government. According to a reply given in Parliament in February, there were a total of 6,779 sexual crimes against ST women registered between 2020 and 2022. Nowhere does it mention crimes by "ghuspathiye". It is shameful that the PM should use an Independence Day platform to make such serious assertions of a communal nature without facts. Across India, in the name of detection of foreigners, poor migrant

Bengali-speaking workers, and particularly Muslim migrants, are being subjected to inhuman treatment. It is this demonisation that was reflected in the PM's speech.

Secondly, and arguably a statement which constitutes an unprecedented breach of trust, the PM used the occasion to lavish praise on the RSS. This organisation was described in no uncertain terms by India's first Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel, revered as an Iron Man by the BJP. Here is what he said while banning the RSS "to root out the forces of hate and violence that are at work in our country and imperil the freedom of the nation and darken her fair name": "Undesirable and even dangerous activities have been carried on by members of the Sangh... individual members of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh have indulged in acts of violence involving arson, robbery." Since then, the RSS has been named and implicated as being responsible for violent communal riots decade after decade in independent India by official Commissions of Inquiry. The PM did not just whitewash this truth; he gave it his stamp of public approval — a violation of the trust he holds to protect the Constitution and its values.

Thus, the line was crossed and Prime Minister Modi became Pracharak Modi — for India and the world to see. A sad day indeed for India, that is Bharat.

The writer is a senior CP (M) leader

FREEZE FRAME

EP UNNY



AUGUST 18, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

PUNJAB ELECTION

PUNJAB WILL GO TO THE polls on September 22 to enable a popular government to be installed in the state before October 5, when the present term of President's Rule expires. The Punjab Assembly, which was earlier under suspended animation, stood dissolved on June 26 last year. The present term of President's Rule expires on October 5, and to extend it, the Constitution has to be amended.

OPPOSITION REACTS

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF elections in Punjab evoked mixed reactions from po-

AGITATION CONTINUES

litical parties. While the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress (S) welcomed the announcement, the CPI (M) felt it was not a proper decision and "unfortunate". In separate statements, J P Mathur, member of the national executive of the BJP, and K P Unnikrishnan, Congress (S) general secretary, hoped the decision had been taken after careful consideration of all aspects of the situation. Harkishan Singh Surjeet, CPI (M) politburo member, said the elections should not be held immediately.

SRI LANKA MASSACRE

OVER 200 TAMILS were killed in two villages near Trincomalee in Sri Lanka as security men and armed hoodlums went berserk for the second day, violating the ceasefire agreement. According to the Eelam National Liberation Front and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam spokesmen, the securitymen and armed civilians entered the villages, plied out the residents of the houses and shot them dead.

Opinion

MONDAY, AUGUST 18, 2025



● A GOLDEN CHANCE
Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan
The present moment offers a unique opportunity to emphasise on the need for achieving self-reliance, ignite collective action for driving national priorities, and fulfilling the vision of Samridh Bharat by 2047

No deal in Alaska

For India, the biggest takeaway is Trump deciding to send some positive signals on secondary tariff

THE WORLD, ESPECIALLY the global South, has a huge stake in a negotiated end to the 42-month-long conflict between Russia and Ukraine. All eyes were on a favourable outcome of the meeting in Alaska between US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. The expectation was that there would be at least an unconditional ceasefire that freezes the conflict that provides space for diplomacy to bring it to an end. That did not happen in Alaska. "There is no deal until there's a deal" stated Trump somewhat enigmatically, adding that he considered this meeting as "extremely productive". The truth is that the US President, who promised to end this war in 24 hours, is finding it tough going as a peacemaker. The ball is now in the court of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to "make a deal". Trump held out the prospect of future meetings with Putin and Zelenskyy—that is slated for Monday—and indicated that the onus for ending the conflict now rested with Kyiv and its European allies.

Why has a ceasefire been so elusive? Russia is not keen as it believes it is winning the war. Following a phone call with Trump on March 18, for instance, Putin stopped short of agreeing to a 30-day unconditional ceasefire amidst confusion regarding whether Russia would stop attacking Ukraine's energy infrastructure as well as civilian facilities. Although Russia has suffered more casualties in Ukraine than in every Soviet and Russian war combined since 1945, it feels it has the upper hand in this conflict as it has secured one-fifth of Ukraine's territory and its forces are advancing at the fastest rate in the south-east of Ukraine.

The biggest gainer from the Alaskan summit is Putin, who received a red carpet welcome by the US President. The Russian leader initiated the joint press conference and astutely played to Trump's ego that Moscow's invasion would not have happened on his watch. This was music to the US President's ears. Russia no doubt sees Trump's invitation for the meeting as an opportunity to return from the cold. US special envoy Steve Witkoff has spoken of "a possibility to reshape the Russian-US relationship through some compelling commercial opportunities." Trump has already extracted a payback from Ukraine for US support though securing 50% ownership of Ukraine's mineral deposits. Kyiv has now to directly negotiate with Moscow—with Trump in attendance—to end the conflict. The task is daunting as Ukraine's people are not in favour of what Putin really wants.

For India, the biggest takeaway is Trump deciding to send some positive signals on secondary tariff by indicating that the US may not impose it on countries continuing to procure Russian crude oil. There are apprehensions that additional secondary tariffs would have hit India in case the US decided to enforce them. India faces a 50% US tariff—including 25% as "penalty" for buying Russian oil—and therefore had a clear stake in the outcome of the meeting. Though things would become clearer by the end of the month (when the penalty is scheduled to come into effect), the upside for India after the Alaska meeting is that there is no breakdown of engagement between Trump and Putin, with both sides agreeing to meet in Moscow.

● ELUSIVE PEACE

TRUMP'S UNIQUE ABILITY TO MARGINALISE THE US' PARTNERS AND PLACATE ITS ADVERSARIES SHAPES THE UKRAINE WAR

A summit fizzles, a crisis emerges

THE MUCH-VAUNTED Trump-Putin meeting in Alaska yielded results little of substance, especially as it was being billed as the summit that will lead to a ceasefire pact in the Russia-Ukraine war. Instead, in a strange turn of events, Donald Trump is now questioning the need for an immediate ceasefire and backing the long-held Russian position that a full settlement of the issue is needed before any ceasefire can come about. Trump will now be meeting Volodymyr Zelenskyy to urge him to agree to a peace deal. But as the latter has said, "We see that Russia rebuffs numerous calls for a ceasefire and has not yet determined when it will stop the killing. This complicates the situation."

It was always complicated. Only Trump had a grandiose notion about his deal-making process that allowed him to conjure up the possibility of a quick pact with Vladimir Putin to end the war. In the end, it was Putin who got the better of Trump. He even used Trump's words that the conflict in Ukraine would have never started had Trump been in power to good effect. The once-shunned Russian leader is now back in American good books, being feted with a red carpet and driven in Trump's armoured limousine. The contrast with the way Zelenskyy was treated in the White House just a few months back couldn't have been starker. No wonder Putin has described the summit as "very useful", underlining that "We [Russia] had the opportunity, which Putin did not, to talk to the general about the causes of this crisis," and that "it is the elimination of these root causes that should be the basis for settlement." Putin has reportedly set out his conditions for peace clearly—Ukraine must withdraw from the Donetsk region of the Donbas for Russia to freeze the front lines in Zap-

HARSH V PANT

Vice president-Studies and Foreign Policy, Observer Research Foundation



izhzhia and Kherson. Trump had to change gears fast—he did so by changing his tone. After the Alaska summit, he wrote on Truth Social, "It was determined by all that the best way to end the horrific war between Russia and Ukraine is to go directly to a peace agreement." Coz fires, he now suggests, "often times do not hold up." This not only contradicts his publicised position but also negates Ukraine's main demand—an unconditional ceasefire must come first for any peace dialogue to move forward. This has European support and was conveyed to Trump before his summit with Putin.

Such a stance is important for Putin as it buys the Russian military time on the battlefield, where they seem to be gaining ground. The few months before winter kicks in are crucial for Putin to solidify his military gains and it's the time that Ukraine doesn't have. Russian military operations in Ukraine can now go unimpeded even as it gets bogged down with assuaging Trump's ego.

For his part, Zelenskyy has firmly rejected the idea of surrendering control of the Donbas region—which includes Luhansk and Donetsk—arguing that doing so could provide Russia with a launchpad for future aggression. He has

also laid out Ukraine's conditions for what he calls a "truly sustainable and reliable peace", which include a credible security guarantee and the return of children allegedly taken from occupied territories by Russian forces. Trump seems willing to offer security guarantees for Ukraine—a central demand from Zelenskyy and the so-called "coalition of the willing," a group of nations including the UK, France, and Germany that have committed to upholding peace in Ukraine once a settlement is reached. But how far can Ukraine and Europe rely on Trump remains an open question at this stage.

Trump's current Ukraine war policy emphasises it is an amalgamation of a push for a comprehensive peace deal, limited American involvement backed by sanctions and European troops, territorial compromises from Ukraine, and securing resource-based levies in reconstruction efforts. But the shift from one end to the other has been quite dramatic at times, with the most recent one being from seeking a temporary ceasefire toward pursuing a comprehensive peace agreement—a lasting resolution rather than a short-term pause in fighting. Similarly, while signalling openness to providing US security guarantees for Ukraine, he envisages a

European-led peacekeeping mission, supported by the US. Such an approach is confronted with long-term strategic issues. French President Emmanuel Macron has floated the idea of deploying European peacekeeping troops to Ukraine and urged Europeans to "muscle up." Trump's conciliatory stance toward Putin has stoked fears that the US may be drifting from its traditional commitments to Europe and Ukraine.

The Ukraine war is as much about the future of the Cold War European security architecture. Putin is clear about what he wants and he is going all out for it. Europe is stuck between its dependence on the US and its security imperatives. The US under Trump seems to have no real comprehension about the long-term implications of his push to get the Nobel Peace Prize by ending the war in Ukraine. Ukraine is fast becoming a symbol of the helplessness of a weak nation desperately trying to preserve its dignity while the strong are doing what they can.

Trump's unique ability to marginalise American partners and placate the nation's adversaries continues to shape the contours of the Ukraine war. The next few weeks would be decisive as Trump plans to roll the dice in his search for the elusive peace in Ukraine.

Ukraine is fast becoming a symbol of the helplessness of a weak nation desperately trying to preserve its dignity while the strong are doing what they can

● FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

India@79: From independence to influence



ASHOK GULATI RITIKA JUNEJA

Respectively, distinguished professor and research fellow, ICRIER

As we reflect with pride on our progress of 79 years, including reduced poverty levels and strides in multiple fields, we must also look outdoors

Uber Freight is stuck in a no-win situation

REBECCA TINUCCI HAS just been assigned one of the toughest jobs in transportation. She was named chief executive officer of Uber Freight after its founder, Lior Ron, jumped ship to become the chief operating officer of Waabi, a driverless large-truck startup. Tinucci, a Tesla Inc. veteran, was hired by Uber Technologies Inc. to help develop infrastructure for Uber drivers who own electric vehicles. She's now in charge of solving Uber's freight problem. The ride-hailing company made a bet that using its technological prowess to digitise the trucking industry would reap big rewards. That bet hasn't paid off and it's unlikely to ever will. Uber Freight has posted operating losses every year since it was founded in 2017 except for 2022, when it broke even. Trucking industry profits hit a high in 2022, riding the wave of the pandemic surge of both demand and cargo rates. Legacy freight brokers posted large profits, including C.H. Robinson Worldwide Inc.'s \$1.5 billion of earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization that year. The trucking industry is now in its third year of a historically long downturn. With tariffs weighing on global trade and creating headwinds for manufacturers, there's no relief in sight for the trucking industry.

The technological advantage that Uber was counting on didn't pan out. Legacy freight brokers beat back the threat from startup tech companies by adopting digital platforms and incorporating artificial intelligence (AI). Convoy, Transfix, Next Trucking and other Silicon Valley-born digital freight startups went out of business, leaving Uber Freight as the only large one left standing.

Ron's Uber Freight exit may be a sign that Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi has finally put patience with this money-losing unit. It couldn't come too soon. By now, Khosrowshahi likely realizes that freight doesn't fit Uber's business model and has little to no synergies with its main ride-hailing and delivery businesses. Uber could hold the business until the trucking cycle turns positive, possibly in 2026. Then again, an imminent trucking turnaround has been predicted for a couple of years now. Tinucci could work magic and turn the unit into a profit centre. As unlikely as that is, such a turnaround still wouldn't make the freight unit a good fit with Uber.

Uber's strength lies with its millions of drivers who are dispatched quickly in their own vehicles by the nimble Uber app to serve individual customers. That's why the expansion into delivery has been so successful. Delivered started with food and has expanded now to groceries and retail items. The delivery business has also lost money during its early stages and freight is a natural fit. Uber Freight's revenue has been big. The delivery unit had adjusted Ebitda of \$1.5 billion in 2023, and that swelled to \$2.5 billion last year. Analysts forecast \$3.5 billion this year.

Another sign that patience is wearing thin on Uber Freight is that management simply doesn't talk about the business. In the last nine quarterly earnings conference calls, management mentioned the word "freight" only twice in passing, and analysts just don't ask questions about the unit. The last time management discussed the freight unit on a conference call was in May 2023. Executives mentioned that freight was a headwind in prepared remarks, which prompted an analyst question. After that painful explanation about the freight downturn and Uber Freight's prospects for making money, management decided to stop talking about the unit.

The latest initiative to improve profitability is to offer a full suite of services in which Uber Freight can handle cargo from long-haul to middle-mile to last-mile delivery. The reality is that trucking and last-mile delivery don't have synergies; they are distinct operations. That's why United Parcel Service Inc. sold its less-than-truckload business in 2021 and freight brokerage business last year. FedEx Corp. is spinning out its less-than-truckload business.

Uber has succeeded in profitably growing its mobility and delivery businesses. That's not the case at Uber Freight. The opportunity to revolutionize the trucking industry with digital technology has passed. Competitors have done the digital and are profitable. Uber Freight's growth has stalled. Even if the unit does find financial footing, it's not going to become a growth engine like the delivery business. No amount of patience is going to change that.

AS INDIA HOISTED the tricolour on its 79th Independence Day, it stood proudly as a confident, resilient, and rising nation. It has just celebrated its largest democracy, but a country that has crafted its destiny quite successfully since it attained independence in 1947. Notwithstanding the current headwinds of Donald Trump's tariff war, it has weathered many storms in the past. One may recall the sanctions by the US in 1998 for the largest democracy, but a country that has crafted its destiny quite successfully since it attained independence in 1947. Notwithstanding the current headwinds of Donald Trump's tariff war, it has weathered many storms in the past. One may recall the sanctions by the US in 1998 for the largest democracy, but a country that has crafted its destiny quite successfully since it attained independence in 1947. Notwithstanding the current headwinds of Donald Trump's tariff war, it has weathered many storms in the past. 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MINT CURATOR

One Nation, One Election: Does it reflect an Indian way of thinking?

Let's weigh this push for efficiency and cost-savings against what it could imply for our complex if messy democratic system



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One of the common themes of regimes in power at the Centre is a drive to standardize or make uniform some important aspects of policy and process throughout India. This drive is not partisan, in the sense that both major national parties have shown their propensity to do this over the decades. One could argue that this drive has gotten stronger in recent years, most likely enabled by digital technology that makes things possible which couldn't have been imagined earlier.

This uniformity drive includes some procedures that have been established for many years, such as national examination systems for engineering (JEE for central institutions), medicine (NEET for all medical colleges), civil services (the UPSC exam), CAT (for management), CLAT (for law) and so on.

More recently, we have seen the creation of the Aadhaar card system under the Unique Identification Authority of India. Its current form was established in 2016 by the BJP-led NDA, but it was the brainchild of the Congress-led UPA and began functioning in 2009. This "voluntary" mechanism is the world's largest biometric database and increasingly feels like a requirement for all practical purposes.

A recent major national policy that affects all residents was the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) in 2017. Rolled out under the slogan of "One Nation, One Tax," this is an indirect tax that replaced numerous central and state-level indirect taxes (including excise duties and VATs). Something like the GST began under the Rajiv Gandhi government's MODVAT policy in 1986; in 1999, a GST proposal was considered seriously by the A.B. Vajpayee government; the Manmohan Singh government introduced a Constitution Amendment Bill in 2011 to introduce GST, but was resisted by the BJP at that time. After gaining power, the BJP-led NDA passed the GST law and it has since become a fact of life in India.

The most recent effort at standardization is what is being called the "One Nation, One Election" proposal. The intent is to have the Lok Sabha election for central government formation coincide with all Vidhan Sabha elections in the states (and Union territories with elected bodies). The key argument being put forward is similar to the one that undergirded the GST push: efficiency by saving time, money and bureaucratic resources. Independent India did indeed begin with simultaneous polls, but as state governments started falling before their term-end (either through internal dissension or because they were toppled by the Centre), the Vidhan Sabha calendars lost synchrony. The idea of simultaneous elections has stayed around (even under Congress rule), not necessarily with a catchy name, but this is the first time that this idea has



gone as far as this: The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, which was introduced in December 2024 in the Lok Sabha.

It is not my intent to examine or critique the mechanisms in the bill. Interested readers should look up a meticulous analysis by Milan Vaishnav, Caroline Mallory and Annabel Richter (*shorturl.at/miDht*). They conclude that the efficiency and savings being projected by backers of the bill may not be realistic and that the Constitutional amendment, if passed, "could create new problems without resolving old ones."

My intent is instead to suggest that efficiency and cost savings, virtues as they are in most settings, may not be the most important objectives in all settings—in India perhaps more than anywhere else. What could be more important? In India, a broader perspective suggests that the more important objective may be the maintenance of a delicate balance of social diversity and tradition (even though some "traditions" may be quite recent).

To help us think through the argument, I begin with the brilliant insights of the eminent linguist and poet A. K. Ramanujan. In a 1989 essay called "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" Professor Ramanujan argued that there is indeed one, at least in the sense that it's different from "Western" rationality, because Indian thought is characterized by context-sensitivity, internal contradictions and a lack of universals. For example, the punishment for a crime like cattle theft was not standardized (even within the same region); it varied by location, time of day, season, the social identity of the owner and of the thief, and so on. This way of

thinking explained, for Ramanujan, why his father was both an astronomer and an astrologer.

One of the best examples of context-sensitivity is the collection of land laws in India. Land is a "state subject" under the Indian Constitution precisely because of the wide variance in land rights and their history in various regions for different communities. Most readers of this column are likely to be familiar with India's urban land and property markets and laws, which have some city-to-city variation, but are generally unrestricted. In the rest of the country, its rural and especially tribal regions, there are hundreds of state-specific laws on who can buy land and from whom, who can sell and to whom, what can be sold and how much, what can never be sold, etc.

Does this patchwork of laws and customs lead to the "highest and best use of land"? From a purely market efficiency perspective, the answer is surely "no." But from a political or social economy perspective, the answer is probably "yes," not least because the system has proven to be sustainable.

The Indian way of doing elections—everything, everywhere, all at once—is a hallmark of the Indian parliamentary system. No other multi-party parliamentary system comes close to India's in size or complexity. Streamlining this massive and complex system is a temptation for sure. Short-term self-interest apart, many modern minds simply abhor this messiness. But, to streamline it may be foolhardy. What could be gained in time and cost (if anything) could pale in comparison with what may be lost: the flexibility and adaptability that make Indian democracy work.

Perplexity's bid for Alphabet's Chrome appears mischievous

It could be a tactic to pierce Google's defence in its antitrust case



DAVE LEE
is Bloomberg Opinion's US technology columnist.



Alphabet argued that hijving off Chrome would wreck this browser. **BLOOMBERG**

If you're fighting an antitrust lawsuit that might end up breaking your company into pieces, one defence is to argue that those pieces would wither away if separated from the mother ship, thus creating a worse outcome for the consumer. That's what Google has been doing in the face of the US Department of Justice (DoJ) calls for it to sell Chrome, its market-leading web browser, as part of the remedies for its monopolistic behaviours involving its search business.

As the company wrote on its blog in May, the DoJ's proposal to break off Chrome—which billions of people use for free—would break it and result in a "shadow of the current Chrome," according to Chrome leader Parisa Tabriz. She added that the browser would likely become "insecure and obsolete."

This defence was complicated somewhat on 12 August when it emerged that Perplexity, an AI company, had made an "audacious" *Bloomberg* "longshot" (*Wall Street Journal*) and "mischievous" (my term) bid to take Chrome off Google's hands for \$34.5 billion.

Perplexity doesn't have \$34.5 billion. The company was valued at \$18 billion at the time of its last funding round, but said it would come up with funds from a coalition of investors who are already on board with the plan. The deal would realistically be possible only if the court does force the Alphabet unit to sell Chrome, which, according to most analysts I've spoken to, would be an extreme measure. But it's not an impossibility. Indeed, it might have become slightly more possible thanks to Perplexity's bid and what might come next. But before I get into that, let's humour this for a second and talk about why buying Chrome would make sense for Perplexity.

The web browser has become a critical early battleground for shaping new habits in AI. Perplexity realizes this and recently introduced its own browser, Comet, which places its own AI assistant front and centre if you type a query into the address bar. Comet will, instead of searching Google, turn to its AI instead.

At scale, this shift in behaviour from search engine to AI would be profound. The problem is that Comet has a tiny market share compared with Chrome's 70% of desktop browser use globally and 67% on mobile phones. Following loose estimates of about 3.5 billion users of Chrome, Perplexity would be paying about \$10 per user. The goal then would be to convert as many of them as possible to users of its \$20-a-month Pro AI plan. As AI business

models go, it's actually not bad. Unlike its biggest competitors, Perplexity lacks a shop window for its AI, an existing highly-used product where users can discover the functionality of AI without having to consciously go looking for it.

Still, the lack of movement in Alphabet's share price on 12 August suggests investors have brushed off the possibility. For starters, some analysts think the valuation is way off. The offer "vastly undervalues the asset, and should not be taken seriously," according to Baird. A better number, its analysts said, would be more like \$100 billion—though it's hard to say how the dynamics of a deal would play out if Google had no choice but to sell Chrome. Previous valuations put it somewhere between \$30 billion and \$50 billion, a figure that seems a little conservative if the browser is indeed pivotal to building AI market share.

Regardless, what this bid truly represents is a cunning plan to get in the ear of Judge Amit Mehta as he considers the appropriate antitrust remedies for Google's prior bad behaviour. With this move, Perplexity is skewering Google's defence that spinning out Chrome would be fatal to not just Chrome but to Chromium, the open-source project that forms the backbone of most top web browsers, including Google's direct competitors. It can now be sincerely argued that there's a bona fide offer from a company capable of not only taking Chrome out of Google's hands but developing it further—keeping it from becoming "insecure and obsolete," as the company warned. What's more, it seems likely other AI companies will throw their names into the ring. OpenAI's head of ChatGPT testified during the trial that the company would be interested in buying Chrome, "as would many other parties."

How much of this the judge takes into account is another thing. He probably shouldn't. The rationale to force a sale of Chrome would be to prevent Alphabet from creating a new AI monopoly with the same tactics it used to dominate search. Fine, but Judge Mehta has other tools at his disposal to achieve that more fairly. After all, the only reason an AI company would be interested in buying Chrome, at a cost that's double its existing value, would be to use the browser for those same anti-competitive ends. **BLOOMBERG**

THEIR VIEW

India's antitrust watchdog needs to get its mojo back

BINOY PRABHAKAR



is chief content officer, Hindustan Times Digital.

In 2012, Dr LH Hiranandani Hospital in Mumbai denied a couple, Manu Jain and Saurabh Kumar, the right to choose their preferred stem cell banker. The couple did not turn to the judiciary or even a consumer court for justice. Instead, they approached the Competition Commission of India (CCI). About a year later, India's fair-trade regulator fined the hospital \$3.8 crore for anti-competitive and anti-consumer practices.

The CCI, established in 2009 to rein in the misuse of market power by powerful companies and protect consumer interests, was then the new sheriff in town. Consumers and companies could seek speedy justice against any abuse of dominance by enterprises or exploitation by competitors. The CCI has since then busted cartels across a raft of sectors ranging from entertainment to cement. It has raided companies suspected of foul play. Any merger and acquisition (M&A) worth its salt needs the CCI's approval.

That's not all. The CCI seems to have the government's backing. Finance minister

Nirmala Sitharaman has in the past backed the regulator to police American Big Tech companies and asked it to stay "proactively alert" to ensure healthy competition.

Yet, the CCI is now a fading star in India's regulatory constellation, hobbled by loads of important pending cases. Take a look: A probe was launched in January 2020 against e-commerce companies to examine allegations of preferential treatment of certain sellers and deep discounting practices that could be predatory. More than five years later, the case seems to be going nowhere. In April 2022, food delivery firms Zomato and Swiggy came under the CCI's scrutiny for exclusivity clauses and platform neutrality issues. A final order is pending. The CCI had opened multiple cases against tech giant Google. An investigation of its Android licensing practices, Play Store billing system and Android TV dominance is more than four years old. The CCI settled the Android TV case in April 2025, but the wider inquiry into advertising practices and Play Store service charges is unresolved. Although an investigation against Apple was completed in July last year, the CCI is yet to issue a final ruling. The complaint dates back to 2021. An investigation into quick commerce companies such as Blinkit, Instamart and Zepto,

which potentially impacts scores of mom-and-pop stores across the country, is moving at a snail's pace. Last December, the CCI raided the premises of alcohol companies Pernod Ricard and AB InBev to investigate complaints of price collusion in Telangana. Again, that case is hanging. What about its probes into steel and cement companies that face charges of violating antitrust rules? Same story.

It is not hard to see why rulings on high-profile cases are delayed. The CCI has long been operating with a severe staff shortage. For example, the director general's office, which is tasked with fact-finding as part of CCI investigations, is understaffed. Only 113 of the CCI's 195 sanctioned posts were filled as of 31 March 2024, "indicating a significant vacancy rate," as observed by a parliamentary panel that reviews financial matters of the government in a report published on 11 August.

The CCI still has a knack for making news, no doubt. Its crackdowns against Asian

Paints and the advertising industry are recent examples of the flutter it can cause.

But what about a final closure in critical cases? That is anybody's guess.

Not all delays are the CCI's fault. The regulator faces the same challenge that many India-seeking justice are up against—a plodding judiciary. The Delhi and Karnataka high courts, for example, have stayed multiple CCI investigations, including the case against Flipkart and Amazon.

Granted, antitrust investigations can be time-consuming, but the pile-up of delayed cases is worrying. The CCI website shows that it has a disposal rate of 90% for antitrust cases. But its record on significant cases, especially those that affect consumers, is poor. In 2022, the CCI launched an inquiry against hospitals, promising to crack down on inflated prices of medicines and medical devices. That case is also gathering dust.

Not long ago, CCI prioritized the susceptibility of public tenders to anti-competitive practices. Not anymore. Can an institution

saddled with existing cases be expected to pursue new ones with due rigour?

Delays weaken the regulation of business practices, which hurts consumers and new players by failing to check the ill effects of cartelization and market dominance in many fields. This, at a time when fair-trade regulators globally are trying to keep pace with speedy changes in tech industries like AI.

India's government should fast-track the appointment of CCI officers. Legislative reforms are also needed. The CCI must be empowered to issue interim orders or launch market studies that have statutory backing. The settlement mechanism used in the Google Android TV case this April could be broadly adopted to speed up enforcement. The CCI must resolve critical and time-sensitive cases speedily.

India's competition regulator has a vital role in ensuring markets remain fair, transparent and competitive. But in the absence of systemic reforms, institutional capacity and judicial support, it risks becoming a toothless watchdog—slow to act, easy to bypass and at risk of irrelevance.

With India's economy growing fast and new-age monopolies emerging, the case for empowering the CCI and holding it accountable has never been stronger.

The CCI's tardy record on major cases entails economic risks that could be minimized by empowering it



OUR VIEW



There is no peace until both sides see it as fair

The blank outcome of the US-Russia summit held in Alaska was only a minor let-down for India. While peace in Europe matters, Gaza may offer Trump a better shot at a Nobel prize

The Alaska summit failed to pull the rug we had hoped it would: the US pretext for its 25% secondary tariff on Indian imports, ostensibly imposed for hurting Russian oil. A 'ceasefire' in Europe, the stated aim of US President Donald Trump's face-to-face meeting in Anchorage with Russia's leader Vladimir Putin, seemed just as elusive as it has been since the latter's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. "There is no deal until there's a deal," was Trump's take on the outcome after both parted, a signal that talks would go on. If sighs of relief were heaved in some world capitals, it was because the meeting did not go down in history as Yalta II; it was not a carve-up of a large landmass by big powers to suit their own grand agendas. For New Delhi, the blank drawn by the summit was a let-down, but only a minor one in the context of fraught relations with the US, which appears to have put trade talks with India on hold. In any case, Trump's pre-summit portrayal of his oil seizure as a tool of leverage over Moscow was duly met with eye-rolls. If the fate of his punitive levy due to kick in soon is no clearer today, nor is the likelihood of his proving to be a peacemaker who might earn a Nobel prize for it.

The trouble with a White House being seen as covetous of that award is the incentive it offers wily regimes to spark conflicts for US attention and favour. With trade in the picture, today's dynamics of war and peace willy-nilly involve us all, though Ukraine's top billing as a project is no surprise, given the Global North's self-obsession and Nato's involvement. Trump briefed Kiyiv as well as America's Nato allies in Europe on his Putin parley. European leaders, insistent on Ukraine's territorial integrity and

keen on a say in any settlement, seem only tentatively relieved that America's leader called the Alaska talks "productive." Post-summit, Trump posted this on Truth Social: "It was determined by all that the best way to end the horrific war between Russia and Ukraine is to go directly to a Peace Agreement, which would end the war, and not a mere Ceasefire Agreement, which often times do not hold up." But he also told *Fox News* that he and Putin had discussed potential land swaps between the two warring sides, apart from a security guarantee for Ukraine. All considered, the odds seem slim that Russia will budge from parts of the former Soviet Republic its forces have occupied.

A peace deal would be worthy of a medal only if a final settlement has the buy-in of those hit hardest by war. In Europe, Trump faces a high bar for what would satisfy war-weary locals. A clearer shot at success may lie in West Asia, where an entire population has been pushed to the edge by US-ally Israel. A rescue of Gaza's hapless Palestinians would suffice to signal intent, while a fair balance of rights is easy to formulate. The Oslo peace process had yielded a Nobel in 1994 (before Israel's rightist lurch took it apart) and an earnest push today by the White House for a just resolution that leaves neither side in despair could earn one too. Sure, it may face resistance in both the US and Israel, but leadership is about leading opinion, not being trapped by it; and the Iran-Israel war this summer was one that the Trump can actually claim to have ended. As a geopolitical bonus, it would make it harder for the Global South to cast Uncle Sam as an imperialist bully. If Trump wants peace as part of his legacy, he'll need to surprise the world. And Gaza will probably define his place in history more than Ukraine.

India must not fall into the tariff trap that Donald Trump has laid

New Delhi mustn't use tariffs to retaliate as the damage done will outweigh any near-term gains



KAUSHIK BASU
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Economic relations between India and the US have been thrown into disarray after US President Donald Trump announced a sweeping 50% import tariff on nearly all Indian imports, with the exception of some electronic items and certain pharmaceutical products. The move places India among the five most heavily targeted countries under Trump's tariff regime, alongside Brazil (50%), Syria (44%), Laos (40%) and Myanmar (40%).

The announcement caught Indian policymakers off-guard, particularly given Prime Minister Narendra Modi's apparent support for Trump's re-election campaign. The White House's harsh statement, framing the move as punishment for India's purchases of Russian oil, has only added to the confusion. As the *Wall Street Journal* recently noted, this reasoning does not hold up, since China—the largest buyer of Russian oil—has not been penalized for its purchases.

So, what explains Trump's decision? Paradoxically, India's policy of siding with Trump may have made India easier to take for granted, to the point that even a minor departure from Trump's preferences is treated as unacceptable.

This dynamic is reminiscent of Anton Chekhov's short story, *The Nippy*, in which an employer withholds the equivalent of nearly a month's salary from his children's governess for arbi-

trary reasons. The governess accepts each cut without protest—a passivity that the employer chastises as spineless. Economist Ariel Rubinstein later drew on Chekhov's story to develop a model illustrating how submission can invite exploitation.

India's apparent subservience to Trump had marked a departure from its longstanding role as a strong independent country. As a co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, it once championed strategic autonomy, balancing relations with multiple countries while avoiding subordination to any major power, be it the US or Soviet Union.

It is time for India to draw on that legacy and cultivate economic and diplomatic ties with countries like Mexico, Canada and China. This also means strengthening trade and cooperation with other governments that are concerned about the impact of Trump's tariffs, particularly in Europe and Latin America.

It would be a mistake for New Delhi to retaliate by matching Trump's tariffs, as some prominent Indian commentators have urged. While retaliation would hurt the US, the damage to India would be far greater. The US is India's largest trading partner, whereas India is only the tenth-largest partner for the US—well behind Mexico, Canada, China and Germany. The US economy is also far larger and therefore better able to absorb major shocks.

More importantly, courage does not necessarily mean responding in kind. By imposing heavy tariffs on its long-time trade partners, the US is making a grave error, isolating itself and inflicting enormous damage on its own economy.

To be sure, tariffs can play an important role in economic policy. A well-known example is the infant-industry argument, which holds that when a promising sector is still in its early stages, temporary tariff protections can give businesses the confidence to invest, allowing the sector to grow, achieve economies of scale and become

competitive. But once the industry matures, tariffs should be reduced, so that the discipline of open competition can help it perform even better.

India is a case in point. In 1977, a political dispute led the government to expel IBM, compelling the country to develop its own mini- and micro-computers. Protected by trade barriers, India's domestic computer sector expanded quickly. But it was the economic reforms of 1991-93, which opened up India's markets to international competition, that enabled its infotech sector to flourish and Indian corporations like Infosys, Wipro and Tata Consultancy Services to emerge as global leaders, helping drive a period of unprecedented economic growth.

Interestingly, the infant-industry concept predates modern academic economics and can be traced back to Alexander Hamilton, America's first treasury secretary, who successfully advocated for US tariffs to protect and nurture its nascent industries. Although US trade policies shifted after 1860, relatively high tariffs remained in place until 1934, after which they fell sharply, fuelling a sustained economic boom.

By contrast, Trump's decision to raise tariff rates to their highest levels in more than 90 years is less an infant-industry policy than a nonagrarian one, shielding an American manufacturing sector that long ago outgrew any need for protection. Moreover, competing with manufacturers in emerging economies like India, Vietnam and Indonesia would require driving down the wages of American workers—a strategy that is neither realistic nor desirable.

The same applies to India: tariffs should not be used to settle political scores. In the long run, the collateral damage will far outweigh any short-term gains.

As for Trump's tariff policy, we can only hope that he will recognize the mistake and reverse course before it causes any more damage to the US economy. ©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Strays debate: Why the poor remain unseen casualties

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. His latest book is 'Why the Poor Don't Kill Us'.

Reformers take too much credit for reform. So often, good happens when upper classes collide in self-interest but ostensibly for a good cause. As we will get to see once again when the Supreme Court decides the fate of stray dogs in the National Capital Region.

Awaiting the order are two warring sides. One group of people believes that stray dogs belong on the streets, with humans, free and fed by their lovers. The other group seems to despise stray dogs but I think their real bone to pick is with dog-lovers. They want the dogs removed from the roads, and for this they have discovered a sudden and uncharacteristic love for India's poor, who are the primary victims of dog bites as they are fully exposed to Indian street life.

Most civilian wars in societies across the world are between these two kinds of people. Those who stand for values, who have moral clarity on the matter because they will face no consequences, and who are thus able to say all the right things, which are easy to

defend on camera. And the other side that is practical, and wants to live in a convenient way and for which they know that some values need to be compromised. They cannot easily argue their moral ambiguity in public and have to deploy the plight of the poor. But what they believe in is usually what many people say privately: They want stray dogs gone but do not want to be directly responsible for that because they don't want to pay a price for it in the afterlife. The second group might well be most of India. The first makes most of the noise.

The stray dog issue has appeared in Indian courts for years, with the victories mostly going the way of stray dogs. But a few days ago, a Supreme Court bench on its own accord took up the matter of the dangers of stray dogs, especially deaths from rabies, and ruled that all strays, probably a million, in the National Capital Region must be taken off the roads and put in shelters, which do not exist today in sufficient numbers. The problem is that if stray dogs do have a right to life, then they belong on the roads. As in, they are not meant to be in shelters with hundreds of other dogs—that would be a brutally ferocious world. Another bench heard an appeal and, at the time of writing this piece, was yet to announce its decision.

By the standards of conflicts in Indian middle-class society, this is one with useful consequences for the poor. Usually, Indians waste a lot of emotion on useless things, but which I mean issues that will not improve the abysmal quality of life in India.

The issue is morally complex. Guardians of stray dogs deny the scale of the problem. They say the numbers of dog bites and rabies deaths are exaggerated, and that stray dogs don't attack without reason. But this is unlikely to be the view of most Indians. Dogs are a danger, especially to children, disabled and the old. Like people, they are enduring when powerless. But, at the slightest whiff of an upper hand, as in the presence of a scared child, they are beasts.

Also, Indians have died from dog bites despite being administered the anti-rabies vaccine. This could be because of the inconsistent refrigeration of vaccines. So, if you are a person who has to walk home down narrow lanes, especially at night, or go on a

bike, there is a real fear of death upon the sight of half a dozen dogs sitting peacefully at a road junction. It really is not about the chances of dog bite, but about the miasma of a reasonable fear.

Seen this way, stray dogs don't belong on the roads. But then, seen from the point of view of dogs, they belong out in the open. To an extent, they have better lives than house pets that are locked up most of the time and whose only luxury is that they are fed well. I have seen house dogs moan in envy, perhaps, at stray dogs.

The government has failed to do the humane thing to reduce the population of strays—sterilization. In any case, sterilization works best for pets, or on a small scale, and not for a city-wide reduction of the canine population.

Besides, the government can barely fix roads; we cannot expect it to do difficult things, like finding humane ways to keep the number of urban dogs down. This leaves us with inhumane solutions, like dumping

them all in something that we call a 'shelter' for our own comfort.

As of now, stray dogs are protected by exemplary laws. This has angered people. I feel many developed a greater anger for stray dogs chiefly because of their annoyance with the moral swag of some animal activists. Usually, when a moral idea irritates people, only politicians speak for them. So, in the past few days, politicians have raged against dogs. Some, like Rahul Gandhi, had the courage to take a political risk and say that "voiceless souls" are "not the problems to be erased." He said, "Blanket removals are cruel, short-sighted, and strip us of compassion. We can ensure public safety and animal welfare go hand in hand."

But there is no such solution, especially a short-term solution. In any moral debate, it would be very lazy not to factor in the incompetence of Indian local government officials. Sterilization is, therefore, just not practical.

I feel that nothing will come of this issue immediately because India rarely solves its difficult problems. So the dogs are safe for now. And the core of the problem will continue—the poor will pay a price as one segment of the country's elite fight for the meaning of being human.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The worst thing you can possibly do in a deal is seem desperate to make it. That makes the other guy smell blood, and then you're dead.

DONALD TRUMP

TELANGANA



Bribe and prejudice: when graft charges slip through the cracks

Cash, cover-ups and courtroom slips: In 2024, the Anti-Corruption Bureau booked 152 cases — the highest in three years — but secured only 16 convictions. Officials say the conviction rate is 60-70%, yet most trials stretch for 7-8 years. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

In Telangana, instances of officers getting caught taking a bribe may spark a scandal, but it is rarely a career-ender. Bureaucratic delays, alleged shoddy investigations and 'political shielding' drag cases to a crawl. Many accused officers not only return to their posts but climb the ranks, while prosecutions fade into obscurity. The result? A system that claims to fight graft but too often shields the corrupt. **Lavpreet Kaur** exposes how anti-corruption cases end without a sense of justice

The call from an unknown number came on the evening of June 21. Routine enough, thought 35-year-old sales executive Adepu Nikhil — until the voice on the line introduced himself as Sub-Inspector K.Y. Venugopal from the Women Police Station, Cyberabad. There had been tensions at home. His marriage to L. Swathi, 30, a private company employee, was strained. She had moved out months ago. But police involvement? That was a new line being crossed, he felt.

At home in Hyderabad's Gachibowli, he was raising their three-year-old son, Agastya, alone. The family's struggles had been quiet and private, so the news of a formal police complaint and being called in for questioning hit him hard.

He visited the police station that very evening, but the officer handling the case wasn't available. When he returned the next afternoon, he was told a case had been filed four days earlier. The charges: cruelty by husband, assault and criminal intimidation. He was not lone accused; his 63-year-old mother, Adepu Vijaya, residing in Kazipet of Warangal district, around 200 kilometres from Hyderabad, was also named in the complaint.

"My mother is the sole caregiver for my ailing father and had no role in my disagreements with Swathi. Yet her name was on the FIR," recalls Nikhil. When he explained the family situation to the police officer, the conversation reportedly took a different turn.

On June 25, during another visit to the police station, the officer allegedly hinted at a fix: reconcile with Swathi and pay ₹50,000 to have his mother's name dropped. When Nikhil refused, the demand dropped to ₹25,000, the calls pressing harder each time.

Two weeks later, Nikhil walked into the station again. This time, with officers of the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) trailing behind. The trap was swift; the officer was caught with the cash.

His case is now among 22 booked by Telangana ACB in July 2025 alone, which is part of a broader tally of 148 cases in seven months, 145 arrests, and over ₹30.32 lakh seized.

In a State where corruption is often hard to prove and harder to prosecute, the case highlights how ordinary families, already grappling with personal crises, can be further ensnared by abuse of power, leaving them either silenced or, in rare moments, emboldened to fight back.

The long road to justice

For most people, walking into an ACB office is far from a routine visit. They arrive anxious, hesitant and even scared, unsure if speaking out will bring change or invite trouble.

It begins with a complaint, usually handwritten or typed, submitted at the local ACB range office or via the bureau's online portal. Most allege that a government official demanded a bribe for a service supposed to be provided as a matter of right. Once filed, the ACB verifies the claim, seeking proof such as recordings, chats or other evidence. If the bribe hasn't been paid, officers may plan a trap.

The operation is precise: mediators are ar-



There are several government employees who have been caught more than once but nothing happens to them, thanks to the file-pushing culture.

PADMANABH REDDY, President, Forum for Good Governance

ranged, the complainant is fitted with a hidden recorder and currency notes dusted with a chemical powder called phenolphthalein are handed over. When touched, the powder leaves traces visible in a chemical test, with the entire exchange captured on camera.

If the handover succeeds, the accused is caught 'red-handed', taken into custody and booked under the Prevention of Corruption Act. Press notes and photos follow, but the real work begins behind the scenes.

The ACB compiles a case file which includes enquiry reports, witness and accused statements, forensic results and trap footage, and then sends it to the Vigilance Commission for vetting. To proceed, prosecution sanction — legal nod before the chargesheet can be filed in court — must come from the accused officer's department, a process intended to be independent but rarely swift.

After arrest, the ACB also recommends the officer's immediate suspension for two years as per its own manual and government orders. On paper, it is automatic; in practice, it often isn't.

Promotions, plum posts, repeat offenders

Despite a steady rise in ACB cases, systemic deterrence remains weak. Many accused officials face little consequence, securing plum postings and, in some cases, earning promotions while proceedings drag on.

On July 12, Panchayati Raj Assistant Engineer Jagadeesh Babu was trapped by the ACB in Peddapalli while accepting bribe of ₹90,000. He had earlier been booked in 2017 for allegedly taking ₹1.5 lakh in Karimnagar, yet continued in service

and secured a prime posting.

"This is not an isolated incident," says Padmanabh Reddy, president of the Forum for Good Governance, a non-profit working towards securing good governance at all levels. "There are several government employees who have been caught more than once but nothing happens to them, thanks to the file-pushing culture," he adds.

For misappropriation cases, we often deal with hundreds of pages of bank statements, digital transactions and layered financial data. We need more forensic experts, trained analysts, better labs and upgraded tools, but our resources are stretched thin and delays in reports are routine.

AN ACB OFFICIAL

In one instance, a Deputy Commercial Tax Officer (DCTO), posted in the office of the Joint Commissioner, Malkajgiri, who was booked by ACB in 2013, obtained a court order recommending promotion to Assistant Commissioner, with the case still pending 11 years later. In another case, a woman CTO facing disciplinary charges since 2017 was similarly recommended for promotion. The pattern is clear: institutional delays, poor follow-up and legal loopholes blunt the impact of corruption cases.

The bureaucratic backdoor

Even with trap videos, recovery of tainted cash and written complaints, an ACB case rarely moves in a straight line to conviction.

In 2024, the bureau booked 152 cases — highest in three years — but secured only 16 convictions. Officials say the conviction rate is 60-70%, yet most trials stretch for 7-8 years. "These cases represent only 5% of actual corruption in the State," says Reddy. "Everyone knows it will take 8-10 years, if at all, to reach a conclusion, so even the accused treat the proceedings with little seriousness."

Structural deficiency, he says, makes the process slower. Bail comes within two weeks of arrest, suspension is reviewed in six months and many officers are reinstated soon after.

Interestingly, right from the day of suspension, the accused official draws half-salary and 75% dearness allowance, and receives full pay after six months. If the departmental review committee finds no strong reason to extend the suspension, which Reddy says is common, they are posted back to work.

"In most cases, the committee just lets it go. Since the accused officer has to be paid the entire salary after six months, the government prefers they come back on job," says a senior official of ACB on condition of anonymity.

Early reinstatement happens in 5-6% of cases, says another ACB official. A recent Supreme Court ruling, stating that suspension should not exceed six months unless a chargesheet is filed, has further opened the door for accused officers to return early via committee orders or court appeals. "There needs to be clarity and reconcilia-

tion on this issue," the official adds.

Prosecution sanction is another bottleneck where delays spiral: "Unless the report is airtight, legally and procedurally, the file can get stuck."

If the Vigilance Commission flags gaps, files are sent back; in some cases, the government withholds sanction altogether, ending the matter without a trial. Political or departmental links can further slow down movement.

According to Reddy, the State government denied ACB permission to prosecute in at least 40 cases between 2014 and 2015 alone.

"Since then, at least 13 FIRs have been closed and six cases dropped entirely. In many other cases, files have simply been routed to 'departmental action'; tribunal disciplinary proceedings, which has remained largely inactive due to staff shortages or the 'Commissioner of Inquiries', often led by a retired officer with limited capacity," he says.

Internal inquiries often involve officers known to the accused, resulting in cursory questioning and little to zero disciplinary action.

And when a case does make it to court, judicial delays take over.

Weak links in the chain

Until recently, Telangana had only one special ACB court in Nampally, Hyderabad. Two more have been set up in Warangal and Karimnagar, but backlogs remain high. "The Nampally court is overburdened. There are no regular judges, trials are delayed, and pendency keeps growing," an ACB official says.

Structural limitations also continue to weaken investigations. "For misappropriation cases, we often deal with hundreds of pages of bank statements, digital transactions and layered financial data. We need more forensic experts, trained analysts, better labs and upgraded tools, but our resources are stretched thin and delays in reports are routine," an official notes.

Reddy says the bureau's staffing mindset must change. "An ACB posting is still seen as a punishment. Like other specialised units, ACB personnel should get special allowances or incentives," he stresses.

Legal experts warn that the bigger threat lies in exploiting procedural loopholes that enables accused officials to return to service with minimal consequences. "Removal from service is the only real deterrent, but it almost never happens," says a criminal lawyer at the Nampally court.

He asserts that many delays are deliberate: FIRs and mediators' reports in trap cases are ready, yet departments take 100 days or more to file a chargesheet that could be done in 30. "That delay itself weakens the case," he says.

In the meantime, accused officers often secure reinstatement through High Court or tribunal orders, he adds. Poor prosecution is another weakness, he rues: "Public prosecutors handling ACB cases are often poorly trained and lack the legal expertise to match the defence. If we are serious about securing convictions, we need our best lawyers on such cases." Advocate Immanuel Rama Rao echoes similar concerns, noting that political and bureaucratic interference continues to compromise accountability. "There is a lachrymose approach when it comes to certain individuals. That selective leniency creates public suspicion," he says.

While technology and online portals have improved reporting, he warns that unless the role of influential State actors is reined in, structural protections will continue to shield tainted officials.



GUJARAT



Soorji Kanji Sodha with his wife Taju, at his bhunga at Zura Camp, Kutch. VIJAY SONEJI

185 people crossed a line

Last month, when Pakistani nationals in Gujarat got Indian citizenship under the CAA, they rejoiced. Escaping alleged persecution and insecurity, many have waited for over a decade for this having come over the border on tourist visas. **Abhinav Deshpande** reports on their relief, the struggle behind the paperwork and their children's prospects

Outside his weathered *bhunga*, a circular mud hut with a thatched roof, on the outskirts of Zura camp – a sparse, sunbaked stretch of land in Gujarat's Kutch district – Soorji Kanji Sodha, 70, exhales as if releasing 16 years of apprehension. "This feels like a second birth," he says, his voice steady but sombre. He and his wife, Taju Kaur, were recognised as Indian citizens on July 25, along with 183 other Pakistani nationals in Gujarat.

In 2009, Soorji left behind his *jammabhooni* (the land of his birth) in Tharparkar district of Pakistan's Sindh province. The decision cost him nearly 40 acres of land, his livestock, and a way of life his family had known for generations. With his wife and eight children, he boarded a train to India in search of dignity and a better future, he says. "Leaving my *watan* (country) was never easy," Soorji, who now earns ₹300 a day as a daily wager, says. "But I did it for my children. Especially for my daughters."

The Sodha couple and others received Indian citizenship under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA). The CAA Rules were notified in March 2024, just before India's Lok Sabha elections. The CAA provides a pathway to citizenship for persecuted non-Muslim minorities (Hindu, Sikh, Parsi, Jain, Buddhist, and Christian) – both documented and undocumented – from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who arrived in India before December 31, 2014.

Across Rajkot, Morbi, and Kutch districts, many say the wait for citizenship stretches well beyond a decade, forcing families to live in a constant state of legal and social limbo. A man in Morbi who also got Indian citizenship says, "There we were a minority. Here, until we get our citizenship documents, we are no one."

Just before COVID-19 regulations came into force in March 2020, anti-CAA protests took place across India, claiming that it was discriminatory in nature against Muslims. The Bharatiya Janata Party that leans towards Hindutva and its allies were in power then. The same party is in power now, both at the Centre and in Gujarat.

Minority report

It was not just religious persecution and looting, Soorji explains, but the limitations placed on their future as a minority that drove his decision. In his native region, most Rajput families bore the Sodha surname, making it difficult to find suitable matrimonial matches for his children, due to norms that discourage marrying within the same extended clan. "In Pakistan, there were no Jadesias, no Parmars, no Nadodas for us to marry our children to," he says, wrapping his yellow turban around his head. "Those families are in India, not in Pakistan."

Zura camp, where Soorji lives, was initially set up shortly after Partition in 1947 to accommo-

Things weren't safe there, especially for women. We lived in fear of theft, religious persecution, and general insecurity. That's when we decided it was time to leave

SAVITHA FUFAL
Rajkot resident

date Hindu refugees from the Sindh province. Over time, it has become home to those who migrated during later periods of unrest, especially around the 1971 Indo-Pak war. For many like Soorji, life in the camp has meant living in limbo – waiting for citizenship, waiting to belong.

Clutching his certificate, he says, "I can now say I am Indian – not just in my heart, but on paper too. Now, I hope my children also get their citizenship based on my documents and can work in this country with pride."

Data accessed from the Directorate of Census Operations, Gandhinagar, reveals that 1,050 Pakistani nationals settled in Gujarat – 537 men and 513 women – are covered under the Act between July 2, 2024 and July 22, 2025. All of them are Hindus, with the highest number in Ahmedabad (433), followed by Rajkot (271), and Patan (133) districts. In addition, separate data from the Gujarat government shows that since 2018, up to 1,386 Pakistani nationals have been granted Indian citizenship through the discretionary powers given to District Collectors.

Most of them travelled to India on a visit visa, with no intention of returning. They booked one-way tickets on the now-suspended weekly *Thar Express*, an international passenger train that ran between Bhagat Ki Kothi in Jodhpur in Rajasthan and Karachi Cantonment in Pakistan. Immigration and customs facilities were located at Munabao railway station on the Indian side.

The service was suspended in August 2019 following a deterioration in diplomatic ties between the two countries, after the Indian government revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status and reorganised the State into two Union Territories.

Caste consciousness

A six-hour drive from Zura camp, in Rajkot, Savitha Fufal, 44, a mother, is getting ready to head

out for her wedding anniversary dinner with her husband Vishan and their son Jignesh, 12, on August 5. It is a quiet celebration, a far cry from the life she left behind over a decade ago, she says.

In May 2013, just nine months into their marriage, Vishan, now a hotelier, decided to leave Karachi and move to India with seven family members, including Savitha, his mother, sister, and four relatives from his brother's family. Savitha's four siblings still live in Pakistan, and she keeps in touch with them regularly through video calls.

Sitting in the small living room of their rented home, Savitha recalls the emotional weight of leaving her country. "It was hard to leave," she says, "but living there wasn't easy either." The couple initially came to India on a tourist visa and later applied for and kept renewing their Long-Term Visa (LTV). "Things weren't safe there, especially for women. We lived in fear of theft, religious persecution and general insecurity. That's when we decided it was time to leave."

Savitha is one of four people who were granted citizenship under the discretionary powers of the District Collectors. "I'm proud to call myself an Indian now," she says with a smile. She adds that her husband's brother and his family eventually returned to Karachi after spending some time in India. "They weren't comfortable here. They felt more connected to their relatives back home," she says.

Savitha remembers that she was not able to attend her father's funeral in 2015. "I could only go in 2017, after we managed to get a visa for my son too," she says. Her husband has never gone back.

The family belongs to a community in India classified as a Scheduled Caste (SC). However, due to the absence of documentation, her son will not get any of the social welfare benefits that the community can claim.

Another migrant-turned-citizen, Manoj Parmar, 49, who works at a petrol station in Rajkot, says he became aware of the caste system – and that his community falls under the Scheduled Castes – only after arriving in India. His great-grandfather had migrated from Botad to Karachi in search of work following a severe drought, and eventually settled there. Before moving to India in February 2012, Manoj worked at the Karachi Electric Supply Company.

"There, even my subordinate would refuse to follow my work instructions and insult me because of my religion. I thought, 'If this is my condition despite being educated, what will happen to my children?' The situation was only going to get worse, so I came to India," he says. "Now, my children want reservation rights."

Rules and regulations

The CAA Rules authorise Central government officials stationed in States – including those from the Directorate of Census Operations, India Post,

Railways, National Informatics Centre (NIC), and Intelligence Bureau (IB) – to handle and process citizenship applications.

Once an application is submitted online, the applicant is required to appear before a District Level Committee headed by the Superintendent of Post Office as the designated officer. The committee also includes representatives from the NIC, IB, Railways, and the district administration.

"The process is usually completed within a couple of weeks, including antecedent verification by IB, but if there are errors in the application – such as mismatched names or issues with supporting documents – applicants are informed and asked to make the necessary corrections before resubmitting," says an officer from the India Post in Bhuj.

According to the official, 18 people from the Kutch district have been granted citizenship under the CAA so far, and another 97 applications are in the pipeline. "District officials have informed us that now only 115 Pakistani nationals are in Kutch, including the 97 whose applications are currently pending. The rest have not applied yet," the official adds.

Waiting for the gates to open

For the children of those who have waited for citizenship, life means growing up in a country they call home, yet don't belong. They cannot take admission in government schools, and have no access to reservations in education and jobs.

Sending children abroad is complex. Soorji's younger brother, Laxmansinh Sodha, 53, a graduate of Karachi Medical College with an MBBS degree, who now runs a clinic in Morbi, says he had hoped to send his son Mehtabsinh, 17, – who qualified for NEET – to Russia to study medicine, after facing issues with admission in India due to incomplete documentation. "But that too didn't work out because he doesn't have an Indian passport." His education shows he is from India, while his passport is from Pakistan. "Now, we've enrolled him in an LTB programme at a private university here. His citizenship is still pending."

Laxmansinh migrated to India in November 2012 and was granted citizenship earlier this year. His first visit to India was in 1971, he recalls, when he was just six months old. During the Indo-Pak war, his parents fled to India and took shelter in the Zura camp for nearly three years. However, due to limited facilities at the camp and a lack of livelihood options, the family eventually returned to Tharparkar in Pakistan. "I practised medicine there for nearly 10 years, and left everything behind and came to India, fearing forced conversions and attacks on Hindus," he explains.

Sitting beside him is Netsinh Sodha, 56, who once worked as a *patwari* (village accountant) in Tharparkar district. He left his government job and migrated to India with his wife and seven children in May 2014. Now settled in Morbi, he runs a cloth shop and is among those who have been granted Indian citizenship.

While Netsinh welcomes CAA, he raises concerns about the implementation process, alleging that staff involved in handling applications often harass applicants. "The Act clearly states that even a single document or visa entry stamp is enough to apply for citizenship under CAA, yet many officials lack clarity on the provisions. As a result, many migrants are facing unnecessary hurdles," he says.

"Applicants are being forced to submit their forms five to 10 times over minor issues. This is something the government must urgently address." He says many Hindus are still "stuck" in the neighbouring country and are waiting for the authorities to start issuing visas again. In April 2025, after the Pahalgam attack, India suspended visa services to Pakistani nationals.

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(Left) Savitha Fufal with her family in Rajkot; Laxmansinh Sodha (right) and Netsinh Sodha, in Morbi. VIJAY SONEJI

FULL CONTEXT



Cruel intentions: Villagers gather in large numbers in front of the residence of caste killing victim C. Kavin Selvaganesh in Arumugamangalam in Thoothukudi district on August 1. RAJESH N

How 'honour' killings in India are reinforced and legitimised

States like Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Maharashtra, and Kerala — where Dalit communities have seen relatively greater empowerment — record higher rates of inter-caste marriages. Ironically, these are also the States with increased incidents of honour killings

Sivabalan Elangovan

Caste in India is not an individual problem — it is a deeply rooted social phenomenon. Caste survives and thrives not just because individuals insist on it, but because families, communities, and entire social structures continue to enforce and legitimise it, knowingly or otherwise. At the heart of this caste endurance lie social customs passed down and protected within households. Children grow up internalising boundaries — who to talk to, who to marry, who to avoid — long before they can even articulate why. As a result, the caste system remains one of the most resilient social frameworks in India.

'Honour' killings

One of the biggest threats to the rigidity of caste has been social justice interventions. When marginalised communities, particularly Dalits, gain access to quality education and secure meaningful employment, it opens the gates for their integration into mainstream society. With that, a foundational shift begins. No longer confined to the margins, the oppressed now begin to interact with caste-Hindu society on an equal footing — in workplaces, colleges, cities, and most importantly, in relationships. This has created a new frontier of social tension: romantic unions that cross caste lines, especially those involving Dalit men and dominant caste women. These unions represent not just love or rebellion but a direct challenge to centuries-old caste hierarchies. And for many conservative

families, that challenge is intolerable. States like Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Maharashtra, and Kerala — where Dalit communities have seen relatively greater empowerment — also record higher rates of inter-caste marriages. According to the India Human Development Survey (IHDS-II), the national rate of inter-caste marriages stands at around 5%, but States with empowered Dalit populations show higher numbers. Ironically, these are also the States with increased incidents of honour killings. This paradox reveals a disturbing truth: honour killings occur not where casteism is strongest, but where it is most threatened. In States where the oppressed still maintain their "status quo," violence is less — not because casteism is absent, but because it remains unchallenged. Thus, caste-based violence is not a sign of persistent hierarchy alone, but of hierarchy under siege.

Tamil Nadu's caste paradox

When caste killings happen, democratic voices among the public are strong in Tamil Nadu as the State boasts a strong and vibrant civil society. At the same time, caste is glorified on social media. Due to the anonymity such platforms offer, some accounts go so far as to defend caste killings. How do we understand this paradox? Perhaps in Tamil Nadu, while people possess a collective consciousness against casteism, shaped by decades of social justice politics, individual attitudes may not always align in the same way. The State's anti-caste culture is collectively progressive but individually conflicted. In public, caste violence is rejected but in

private conversations, WhatsApp groups, and through anonymous posts, caste continues to dictate social preferences, marriage alliances, and "honourable behaviour." This paradox does not mean that Tamil Nadu's anti-caste movement is a failure. It means that one is living in a liminal space — between tradition and transformation. What we see on social media is not just caste pride, it's also the fear of losing inherited power and the anxiety of cultural change.

On family and caste

There's a popular belief that the caste system survives mainly because of political parties or caste-based organisations. While these certainly reinforce caste divisions in the public sphere, they are not the roots of the system. Caste survives because it is protected and transmitted within the family. Through everyday customs, rituals, marriage arrangements, social expectations, and inherited prejudices, caste becomes part of a child's consciousness long before they can question it. This is why caste has remained transgenerational, even in the face of rising education, urbanisation and exposure to new ideas. However, the psychological and cultural importance of the "family" itself is changing, especially among adolescents. Around the world, particularly in countries like South Korea and Japan, we are seeing dramatic shifts: marriage rates are falling, fertility rates are at historic lows, and the traditional family unit is losing its central place in people's lives. Instead, new models of relationship —

open partnerships, cohabitation, single living, and self-parenting — are emerging. India's urban youth are slowly reflecting this trend too. Many adolescents today are increasingly prioritising individual growth, emotional well-being, and autonomy over traditional family obligations. As the value of the family unit weakens, so too does the primary mechanism through which caste is enforced and reproduced. In other words, if the family becomes less central in shaping relationships and social norms, caste may lose its strongest and oldest vehicle of survival. This doesn't mean that caste will disappear overnight. But it suggests that the cultural infrastructure that sustains it is slowly being dismantled — not by revolution, but by changing lifestyles, shifting emotional priorities, and evolution of the self. Caste in India is at crossroads. On one hand, we see violent reactions and online glorification. On the other, we witness strong democratic voices against honour killings and a new generation slowly withdrawing from social values. Tamil Nadu symbolises this contradiction in its most vivid form — a State where both the loudest resistance to casteism and the quietest internal caste pride coexist. But it also offers hope: if this contradiction is acknowledged, addressed, and challenged, especially through engagement and digital counter-narratives, we may finally move toward a society where caste loses its grip not only on our systems, but on our hearts and minds. Sivabalan Elangovan is Professor and Head, Dept of Psychiatry, Dr MGR Educational and Research Institute.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

I fear the talks have reached an impasse

It is a pity he won't be coming back to live here. The house will soon fall into a state of disrepair

S. Upendran

"The new chap we've hired leaves home at 6:45 to be in time for work. He makes use of different transportations to get here. First..."
 "Not transportations. You have..."
 "He takes the train, bus and..."
 "I understand, but you cannot say 'transportations'. Transportation is an uncountable noun. The plural is 'transportation' and not 'transportations'."
 "I see. So, if someone uses a bus, an auto and a train to get to..."
 "Then, you talk about the different modes of transportation the person uses. For example, Iai uses several modes of transportation to get to office. What mode of transportation do you use?"
 "My scooter."
 "In the past, when we went to my father's village, we had to use several modes of transportation. Including a bullock cart."
 "Those were the days! By the way, how do you pronounce...m...p...a...s...s...e?"
 "There are several ways of pronouncing the word. One way is..."
 "What's the simplest way?"
 "The Americans pronounce the 'i' in the first syllable like the 'i' in 'hit', 'bit' and 'kit', and the 'a' in the second, like the 'a' in 'ant' and 'apple'. They pronounce the word im-PASS with the stress on the second syllable. Do you know what impasse means?"
 "Doesn't it mean dead end?"
 "Very good! When you say that your discussions have reached an impasse, you're suggesting you have reached a dead end. No progress can be made because the two of you don't agree on anything."
 "It's a deadlock. There's no point in discussing the matter further because no progress is possible."
 "That's right! It's a stalemate. Here's an example. The rest of the world was stunned when the two countries found a way to end their impasse."
 "If we are to overcome this impasse, we both need to be willing to make certain concessions."
 "That's a good example."
 "Anyway, what's happening with your idea of buying an independent house? Are you making any progress?"
 "Not really! I'm seriously considering dropping the idea."
 "But why? I heard that you saw a couple of houses. What happened?"
 "I saw three, actually! They were all pretty old, and in a state of disrepair."
 "Disrepair? You mean 'repair', don't you? Does the word 'disrepair' exist?"
 "There's a big difference between 'repair' and 'disrepair'. When you say that the monument has fallen into disrepair, what you mean is that the monument is in bad shape."
 "The building probably looks shabby — with the paint peeling off, the walls crumbling, the roof leaking, and the..."
 "Stop, stop! You get the picture."
 upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

Every culture and civilisation, particularly the polytheistic, had its own representation of the gods of medicine and healing. How well do you know your medical myths?

Ramya Kannan

- QUESTION 1**
The son of the god Apollo, he was believed to have the power to raise the dead and was revered by healers in Ancient Greece. The staff he held in his hand, is still relevant today in medicine and gives you a big clue about his name. Who was this?
- QUESTION 2**
In south Indian Hindu folk cultures, a goddess incarnated from Parvati, is believed to protect children from the pox. In the north, she is known as Shitala. Who are we talking about?
- QUESTION 3**
In Japanese myth, Sukunabikona or the god of healing is also credited with inventing a popular drink. What was the drink?
- QUESTION 4**
Roman myth boasts of a goddess who could specifically protect people from fever and malaria. In fact, the word fever derives from her name. Who is this?
- QUESTION 5**
In Egyptian mythology, _____, a fierce goddess, could unleash her messengers to cause plagues upon populations. Naturally enough, she also receives prayers to ward off sickness and diseases. Fill in the blanks.



Visual question: While Dhanvantari is believed to be the physician of the gods, and the god of Ayurveda, the Rig Veda associated the twins seen in the picture with medicine, health, sciences, and interestingly, the twilight. What is the name of the pair?

- Questions and Answers to the August 15 edition of the daily quiz:**
1. The Bretton Woods system created two major institutions: the IMF and the _____. **Ans: IBRD**
 2. The system encouraged countries to depend on the US dollar as the central reserve currency. Name the national currency that the dollar succeeded in this capacity. **Ans: Pound sterling**
 3. French president Georges Pompidou sent this warship to New York to bring France's gold holdings at the Federal Reserve Bank back. **Ans: Colbert (aka Suffren)**
 4. On August 15, 1971, President Richard Nixon cancelled the ability of the U.S. dollar to be converted to gold. The collective name of the effects of this measure. **Ans: Nixon shock**
 5. Name the agreement that officially rewrote the IMF's rules. **Ans: Jamaica Accords**
- Visual:** Name this English economist who proposed a supranational currency called 'bancor' in the early 1940s. **Ans: John Maynard Keynes**
- Early Birds:** Nobody got all the correct answers

Word of the day
Dovish: opposed to war
Synonym: pacifist
Usage: He proposed a dovish policy.
Pronunciation: newstv.live/dovishpro
International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈdɒvɪʃ/

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

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

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Trains which are going to get additional stoppages across T.N.

38 As many as 38 trains running across Tamil Nadu will have additional stoppages from August 18, Union Minister L. Murugan said. Mr. Murugan said he received petitions demanding that express trains, superfast trains and passenger trains stop at additional railway stations in the State. **PH**

Persons injured in Dahi Handi festivities in Mumbai, Thane

318 Two people have died and more than 300 have sustained injuries during the 'Dahi Handi' festival in Mumbai and Thane that drew large crowds of people, civic officials said on Sunday. Of the 318 persons injured in Mumbai, only 24 have been hospitalised. **PH**

People evacuated as Turkish rescuers battle wildfire in Gallipoli

250 The fire began in the northwestern province of Canakkale, and spread quickly due to high winds in the hills near the town of Gallipoli, on the shores of the busy shipping strait. More than 250 people were evacuated overnight as the wildfire raged on. **AFP**

Demonstrators detained by Israeli police in protests

38 Thousands of Israelis took part in a nationwide strike on Sunday in support of the families of hostages held in Gaza, calling on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to reach an agreement with Hamas to end the war and release the remaining captives. **REUTERS**

Total outflow by foreign portfolio investors in equities

1.16 In ₹ lakh crore, Foreign investors offloaded Indian equities worth nearly ₹21,000 crore in the first half of August, pressured by U.S.-India trade tensions, lacklustre first-quarter corporate earnings, and a weakening rupee. **PH**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What has been the impact of ethanol blending?

How are petrol vehicle owners reacting to the E20 mandate? How environmentally friendly is India's dependence on sugarcane for ethanol? How has the U.S. reacted to India's booming ethanol economy? Why has the adoption of EVs in India been much slower compared to other large economies?

EXPLAINER

Kunal Shankar
S. Haridharan

The story so far:

E20 petrol, which contains 20% ethanol and is being sold by Indian oil refiners, has been much in the news lately. India has achieved its target to blend 20% ethanol per litre of fuel five years ahead of the target under the National Policy on Biofuels. Ethanol blending in India rose from just 1.5% in 2014 to 20% in 2025, backed by the government's strong fiscal incentives to the sugarcane industry. While the government says ethanol blending achieves a range of goals such as cutting greenhouse gas emissions, bolstering farmers' incomes and reducing India's oil import bill, its benefits to the environment require closer scrutiny.

How are vehicle owners reacting to this change?

Vehicles sold in India from 2023 come with E20 stickers, indicating compatibility with 20% ethanol blended petrol. Additionally, manufacturers have addressed the concerns of those who own older vehicles. Hero MotoCorp says in its website, "The material composition such as rubbers, elastomers and plastic components that are directly exposed to fuel also need to be changed to E20 compatible materials."

However, according to LocalCircles, two in three petrol vehicle owners are against the E20 mandate. Only 12% of the 36,000 people surveyed across 315 districts are in favour of the switch. Critics cited a drop in mileage and increased maintenance costs. The survey urged the Union government to allow consumers to choose the type of fuel they want.

While the Centre admitted to a "marginal drop" in engine efficiency, it said this "can be further minimised through improved engine tuning and use of E20-compatible materials." Minister Hardeep Singh Puri has called the consumer angst a "vilification campaign" facilitated by "vested, economic interests". While the Union government attempts to defend its E20 policy, its own think tank, the NITI Aayog, has urged the government "to compensate the consumers for a drop in efficiency from ethanol blended fuels", by way of "tax incentives on E10 and E20 fuel".

According to the Minister, "since 2014-15 India has already saved more than ₹1.40 lakh crore in foreign exchange through petrol substitution." But has the benefit been passed to the end consumer?

An analysis by *The Hindu* showed that Coal India Ltd, Oil & Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL), and Gas Authority of India Ltd collectively contributed ₹1.27 lakh crore, or 42.3% of the total ₹3 lakh crore dividends the Union government received from non-banking Public Sector Undertaking (PSUs) between 2020-21 and 2024-25. IOC and BPCL together saw a 25% rise in their dividend payouts since 2022-23 and a 65% decrease in oil prices. However, the two PSUs only passed on a 2% decrease in petrol prices to the public.

What about the impact on agriculture?

Sugarcane-based ethanol supply has grown from 40 crore litres in FY14 to nearly 670 crore litres, derived from about 9% of total sugar output, in FY24. The Union government says it has paid "over ₹1.20 lakh crore to farmers" since



New fuel: Farmers load freshly harvested sugarcane into a tractor trolley during the harvesting season, in Karad, Maharashtra, on December 15, 2024. **PH**

FY15. But how environmentally friendly is India's dependence on sugarcane for ethanol?

About 60-70 tonnes of water is required to cultivate one tonne of sugarcane. Many sugarcane growing regions in India do not receive the 1,500 to 3,000 millimetre rainfall that is necessary for the crop's optimal growth. This leads to groundwater extraction and unsustainable irrigation methods. A 2023 Central Groundwater Board report says that sugarcane growing districts in Maharashtra extract more groundwater than nearby regions. Distress among sugarcane growers in that State has been widely reported. Unsustainable agriculture practices accelerate land degradation. The Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas of India 2021 found that almost 30% of India's land is degraded. The water intensive nature of sugarcane and the impact on groundwater reserves at a time of extreme weather has been absent from the discussion on ethanol-blended petrol.

The Centre, however, says it is looking to diversify ethanol supplies. The Food Corporation of India's rice allocation for ethanol jumped to a record 5.2 million metric tonnes, which is about 3.6% of output, from less than 3,000 tonnes allocated last year. Similarly, in 2024-25, over 34% of corn output was diverted for ethanol production. This diversion forced India to import about 9.7 lakh tonnes of corn during 2024-25 – a six-fold increase over the previous year's 1.37 lakh tonnes.

Despite diversification efforts, area under sugarcane cultivation this year is estimated to be 57.24 lakh hectare against 57.11 lakh hectare last season. The assured payment mechanism for sugarcane, the

Fair and Remunerative Pricing, is the key reason farmers bet on the crop as a source of stable income. While this rise is marginal, an analysis by the OECD-FAO says that 22% of India's sugarcane will be used for ethanol production by 2034.

India's booming ethanol economy has also come under the gaze of the U.S. The Trump administration is pushing India to relax restrictions to its ethanol imports. The 2025 National Trade Estimate report noted India's policy as a significant "trade barrier." Import relaxation could potentially undermine years of investment and capacity building in ethanol production. The Indian Sugar Mills Association has urged the government to maintain the restrictions.

Will it affect the transition to EVs?

The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas said the shift to ethanol-blended petrol "has helped India reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 700 lakh tonnes." Shifting to EVs, however, will achieve far higher rates of emissions reductions and speed up transport's decarbonisation, which is the third largest carbon emitting sector globally after energy and industry. The success of cities like Beijing in cutting air pollution is mainly due to the rapid adoption of EVs. Of course, this switch has to be backed by renewable energy rather than coal, to aid in decarbonising transport.

Adoption of EVs has been much slower in India when compared to other large economies like the U.S., the European Union and China. About 7.6% of vehicle sales in 2024 was electric. Sales of EVs have to increase by over 22% in the next five years to reach the government's own target of 30% by 2030.

Another challenge to wider EV adoption in India is its dependence on Rare Earth Elements (REE). According to the Ministry of Mines, before China's export curbs were imposed, only 2,270 tonnes of REEs and compounds of REEs were imported in 2023-24. But this relatively lower level is critical for the industry to sustain the current level of EV production. The production and processing of many REEs is geographically concentrated in China, making global supply vulnerable to several risks.

The automotive industry has also sounded alarm bells about the disruption in rare earth supply. India's largest carmaker Maruti Suzuki reduced its near-term production targets for its new EV, e-Vitara, attributing it to delays in receiving rare earth magnets. Other manufacturers too are bracing themselves for disruptions.

Crisil Ratings Senior Director Anuj Sethi has said, "The supply squeeze comes just as the auto sector is preparing for aggressive EV rollouts." The recent detente in bilateral relations with China might help the industry to address the crisis in the short term. The Union government is engaged in diplomacy with Beijing to address the rare earth supply crunch, mainly germanium.

Going forward, there is uncertainty on whether the Centre wants to push ahead with ethanol blending beyond 20%. While Minister Puri said the government will push for blending beyond 20%, the Union government in March said that there has been no decision yet.

To know more, please scan the link to watch *The Hindu's* video explainer [newsthlive.com/ethanolblending](https://www.newsthlive.com/ethanolblending)

THE GIST

Vehicles sold in India from 2023 come with E20 stickers, indicating compatibility with 20% ethanol blended petrol. Additionally, manufacturers have addressed the concerns of those who own older vehicles.

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Opinion

A case for judicial introspection

At least a few from the ruling dispensation have asked why the Opposition is not formally taking up the electoral roll issue before the Supreme Court. However, the reluctance shown by the major Opposition parties is quite reasonable and even justifiable.

The Modi regime promulgated the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Electors, Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act in 2023 with a view to nullify the Constitution Bench judgment in *Anoop Baramwal v. Union of India* (2023). The Act excluded the Chief Justice of India (CJI) and included a Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister in his place, as part of the Selection Committee for choosing the Election Commission of India (ECI). This statute was legally challenged in several writ petitions which are yet to be finally heard. Significantly, the petitioners also sought a stay of the enactment. A Bench, led by Justice Sanjay Khanna (as he then was), heard the application for a stay and rejected it on March 22, 2024, by a detailed order in *Dr. Jaya Thakur and others v. Union of India* (2024). Had the statute been stayed, the country could have had a different umpire for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and the subsequent Assembly elections. In all probability, a more independent ECI could have had the potential to conduct the elections more fairly and impartially. That this did not happen shows the Supreme Court's failure to act at a time when it was supposed to.

The present type of ECI In *Anoop Baramwal*, the Constitution Bench analysed Article 324 of the Constitution dealing with the appointment of Election Commissioners. It spoke of the need to take the appointment "out of the exclusive hands of the executive". It said that "a pliable ECI, an unfair and biased overseer of the



Kaleswaram Raj
Lawyer at the Supreme Court of India, who also appeared in the *Anoop Baramwal* case

The only way to rescue our democracy would be to restore the position laid down in the *Baramwal* verdict and to nullify the 2023 enactment.

foundational exercise of adult franchise, which lies at the heart of democracy, who obliges the powers that be, perhaps offers the surest gateway to acquisition and retention of power". The Court was assertive when it said that "the outpouring of demands for an impartial mode of appointment of the members require, at the least, the banishing of the impression that the ECI is appointed by less than fair means". This shows the rationale behind prescribing the CJI as a member of the Selection Committee for the ECI.

Yet, a few months later, the Centre ensured that only "persons under the thumb of the executive", as feared by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, dominate the Selection Committee. When this was shown to the Supreme Court, it took a very conservative and dangerous stand, saying it won't interfere with a statute for it carries a "presumption of validity". This is how the present type of ECI was allowed to function.

At a time when majoritarianism often rests on electoral frauds, courts across the world face new challenges, both jurisprudential and political. In a paper titled 'Abusive Judicial Review: Courts Against Democracy' (2020), David Landau and Rosalind Dixon have conducted an extensive global survey on the topic. According to them, "courts have upheld and thus legitimated regime actions that helped actors consolidate power, undermine the Opposition, and tilt the electoral playing field heavily in their favour". They explain that sometimes "(the) clever authoritarian often do their manipulation well before elections have actually been held, by consolidating power, stacking key institutions such as courts and electoral commissions, and harassing Opposition parties and leaders". The paper says courts in countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia aided and facilitated electoral frauds which ensured continuation of autocracies. On the other hand, there are few instances where the

courts could prevent electoral manipulation and the consequent subversion of democracy. The judgment in *Baramwal* exemplifies such judicial vigilance.

Fourth branch institutions Article 324 failed to prescribe a body free from the ruling executive for installing the ECI. Modern Constitutions have reorganised the need to evolve fourth branch institutions (in addition to the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary) which are autonomous and independent of the ruling dispensation. The Constitution of South Africa envisages a cluster of state institutions for "supporting constitutional democracy". The Chapter Nine institutions, as they are called, include the Electoral Commission of South Africa. The silence of the Indian Constitution prompted the Court in *Baramwal* to prescribe a fair body for choosing the ECI. It was an instance of imaginative interpretation of the relevant constitutional provision. However, Parliament failed the Court and the people when it enacted the 2023 Act. The Court's refusal to stay the enactment practically nullified its own hard labour and intelligence in redefining the ECI as an independent fourth branch establishment.

In India, electoral manipulation, as alleged by the Opposition, would call for a deeper and comprehensive analysis by a fair agency. The Court, on its own, will not be able to carry out this exercise. The only way to rescue our democracy would be to restore the position laid down in the *Baramwal* verdict and to nullify the 2023 enactment. A Selection Committee with the CJI in it will have to induct another ECI by way of a fresh selection process. Such an ECI will have to act as a Truth Commission to investigate the alleged instances of electoral scam. The courtesy expected from the present dispensation would be to facilitate such a course by removing the present ECI.

The journey to Singapore is just a start

Naidu has to repair the State's economic narrative and his own political legacy

STATE OF PLAY
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Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's visit to Singapore from July 26 to 30 was a strategic exercise in economic diplomacy — an effort to reaffirm his government's commitment to building a globally competitive investment climate while quietly distancing the state from the shadow of policy volatility that marked the previous YSRCP regime.

Mr. Naidu's foreign between 2014 and 2019 and now in 2025 are stories of contrasts. Between 2014 and 2019, in his first term as Chief Minister of a State that had been newly bifurcated, Mr. Naidu wanted to create a capital, attract foreign investment, and market Andhra Pradesh as an innovation-led region. Amaravati was the centrepiece of this vision, and Singapore played a starring role through consulting company Subarna Jurong's master plan.

His first-round global engagements were aspirational. They focused on building brand Andhra, learning best practices in governance, agriculture, and infrastructure, and positioning the State as the 'Sunrise Andhra Pradesh'. The results were mixed: he secured significant goodwill and several MoUs, but political headwinds and fiscal constraints meant that not all plans matured into reality.

In 2025, the circumstances could not be more different. Returning to power after defeating the YSRCP, Mr. Naidu has inherited a State grappling with damaged investor confidence, policy reversals, and economic slowdown. This time, his travels have the urgency of a rescue mission. The

rhetoric has shifted from building something entirely new to repairing and restoring what was lost. The narrative now is 'Reset and Rebuild Andhra Pradesh'.

One of the most notable shifts in Mr. Naidu's 2025 pitch is its geographic focus. The spotlight has moved from Amaravati to Visakhapatnam, now framed as the State's economic nucleus. Amaravati — once his crowning vision — was derailed, mocked, and abandoned under the previous regime. By contrast, Visakhapatnam offers a compelling narrative: a coastal city with thriving port infrastructure, tech parks, and emerging data clusters, well-positioned as the 'Gateway to Southeast Asia'.

Singapore investors were told of opportunities in green hydrogen, quantum computing, and digital infrastructure. Mr. Naidu's meetings highlighted Google's interest in establishing a new centre, alongside data hosting projects with Subarna Jurong and an Eversendal facility. These signals were meant to show that Andhra Pradesh is back on the map for cutting-edge sectors.

Yet the conversations in Singapore were inevitably shaped by the past. The YSRCP government's abrupt withdrawal from key Singapore-linked projects remains fresh in institutional memory.

From 2019 to 2024, several high-profile MoUs and joint ventures with Singaporean en-

ties were unilaterally cancelled or left to wither. This had a chilling effect, not just in Singapore but in global business circles that had been watching Andhra Pradesh's trajectory. While no official in Singapore publicly criticised the previous administration during Mr. Naidu's visit, the message during private conversations was reportedly that they would "revert after making an internal assessment".

The Telugu diaspora's embrace of Naidu was unambiguous. Over 2,500 NRIs gathered to greet him. But in boardrooms, investors wanted to see sustained stability and early wins before making major commitments.

Mr. Naidu knows the criticism from his first term — that too many MoUs failed to materialise — still hangs over him. This time, he cannot afford a repeat. For Naidu 2.0 to succeed, agreements must translate into jobs, infrastructure, and visible economic growth.

If the Singapore trip yields tangible results within the next year and a half, Mr. Naidu will not only consolidate his position at home but also set a precedent for how Indian chief ministers can leverage foreign engagements to drive State-level economic diplomacy. If not, critics will portray it as an expensive exercise in public relations, echoing the opposition YSRCP's current claims that the visit was more show than substance.

The stakes in 2025 are higher than in 2014. Back then, Mr. Naidu had the luxury of time and the novelty of leading a new State. Today, he faces a compressed political calendar and the burden of repairing both the state's economic narrative and his own political legacy. Ultimately, the Singapore visit is less a victory lap than the opening move in a long, complex game.

India's patent landscape: universities as changemakers

The country is steadily moving from being merely a consumer of global technology to becoming its creator

DATA POINT

Twinkle Halder
Vidhya Soundararajan

For 'Make in India' to succeed, India must "first discover, then invent, and then make," said David Gross, American theoretical physicist and co-recipient of the 2004 Nobel Prize in Physics, at the inaugural Quantum India Bengaluru Summit 2025. Investment in research and development (R&D) and the strengthening of innovation capabilities are particularly relevant, given the growing uncertainty in global trade and financial flows.

How is India faring on the innovation front? Are we moving towards producing technology of our own? Statistics from the Office of the Controller General of Patents, Designs, and Trade Marks are telling. In the early 2000s, countries such as China, the U.S., Japan, Germany, and South Korea dominated global filings, with Indian institutions accounting for less than 20% of the patents filed domestically. That picture has shifted dramatically (Chart 1). For the first time in 2023, Indian-origin filings surpassed those from any single foreign country. Indian applicants accounted for 57% of all patent filings — a milestone marking India's growing role in the global intellectual property ecosystem. Even among granted patents, India's share has been rising, overtaking the U.S. as the second-largest recipient in 2021.

This transformation did not happen overnight. India is steadily moving from being merely a consumer of global technology to becoming its creator. This shift reflects the government's sustained efforts to build an innovation-friendly environment and support local inventors through initiatives such as the National Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Policy and the Atal Innovation Mission, which

have encouraged startups, students, and researchers to think big and protect their ideas. Amendments to patent rules have introduced reforms such as expedited examinations for specific groups, simplified timelines, reduced application fees by 80% for educational institutions, MSMEs, and startups, and full digitalisation of filing and communication. With continued investment in faster, more efficient patent systems, stronger inventor support, and better linkage between patents and commercial value, India's innovation story could strengthen even further over the next two decades.

Historically, mechanical and chemical engineering dominated the patent landscape. By contrast, filings in computer science rose from just 1.27% in 2000 to 26.5% in 2023, while electrical engineering grew from 8.27% to 16.41%. Physics-related patents increased from 2% to 4%, and biomedical patents jumped from 0.6% to 10% over the same period.

Nearly 80% of patents filed in the past two years are still "awaiting decision," reflecting both rising volumes and bureaucratic and legal complexities. Nonetheless, processing times have improved. In the early 2000s, patent grants could take 8-10 years; by the late 2010s and early 2020s, many were approved within 2-3 years, with some granted in the same year of filing (Chart 2). This acceleration reflects the maturing of India's intellectual property infrastructure and its alignment with the government's innovation push.

Even the face of patent filers in India is changing. In 2000, about 43% of Indian patents were filed by companies. But by 2023, this share fell to under 17% (Chart 3). Meanwhile, the share of filings among individuals jumped from under 10% in 2000 to around 32% by 2023. Government bodies and hospitals remained minor contributors. Educational institutions also in-

creased their share steadily, reaching nearly 43% in recent years.

Government initiatives have helped drive this change. For example, KAPILA (Kalam Program for IP Literacy and Awareness), launched in 2020, promotes IP awareness in higher education institutions. The Atal Innovation Mission, launched in 2016 by NITI Aayog, fosters problem-solving skills and entrepreneurship within universities and research centres. Awards for outstanding patents by government and industry bodies further incentivise innovation.

Universities have also taken the lead by establishing dedicated IP cells and legal support units to assist faculty, researchers, and students with patent filing, technology transfer, and IP monetisation. For instance, IIT Madras doubled its patents granted from 156 in 2022 to 300 in 2023, while IIT Bombay led nationally in 2023-24 with 421 patents granted.

With government and universities creating an enabling environment, sustained increases in research funding are essential to maintain momentum. Foundational and technology-driven research often starts in university labs or early-stage startups — long before patenting. India's R&D expenditure currently stands at just 0.67% of GDP, far below the U.S. (3.5%) and China (2.5%). Raising this to around 2% of GDP is critical if India is to become a global knowledge leader. This investment is even more urgent in today's uncertain global trade and financial environment, as India must strive for self-sufficiency in both consumer and advanced technologies.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the relentless efforts of professors and researchers, often working with limited resources, to expand the boundaries of knowledge. Strengthening their work through greater funding is not just support for academia; it is a strategic investment in India's long-term growth and global standing.



Chart 1: Country-wise share of patent filings (left axis, in %) and the total number of filings over time (right axis)

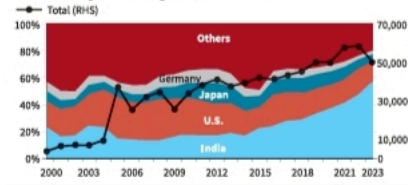


Chart 2: Average time taken to grant patents in India since 2000 (in number of years)

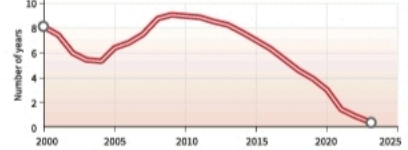
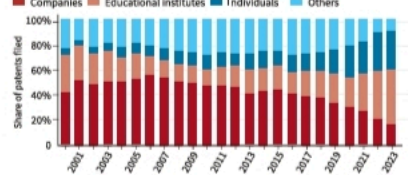


Chart 3: Share of patents filed based on filing entity type (in %)



Twinkle Halder and Vidhya Soundararajan are affiliated with Centre for Advanced Financial Research and Learning

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Arabian Nights

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 18, 1975

Boom days no more for Dubai gold dealers

Dubai, Aug. 17: This little Sheikhdom's once-active gold smugglers have run into rough times, victims of high international prices and an Indian crackdown.

Dubai alone imported a good chunk of the non-communist world's gold production of 258 tonnes in 1970. Five years later imports have dropped to only five tonnes.

In the boom days, most of the gold was mined in London and Zurich into small bars, airfreighted to Dubai and loaded in Arabian dhows of timeless design.

The dhows sailed through the Arabian Sea to slip the precious metal into India and Pakistan for sale to black-market dealers. But those days are gone, at least for the time being.

"There are really three reasons why the gold has dwindled almost to nil here," said a banker formerly engaged in the trade. "There has been pressure from India, the fluctuations in the world gold price have put the risk up and the business expansion here has provided other outlets for speculative investment."

A Pakistani took time off from his new job of dealing in steel bars, portland cement and gold in Dubai's stock and commodity exchange to explain: "The financial risks in smuggling gold to India are now three times greater than they were five years ago."

A Dubai-based smuggler could make an average 10 per cent net profit on each trip. Making several trips a month, he could soon double his stake. While the price of gold on the Indian black market has gone up, it has not kept pace with the world price.

The dhow now carry expensive watches and luxury fabrics. But this trade too has suffered a recession, with ringleaders in the smuggling network being rounded up. "You can't totally stop it," said an Indian diplomat here. "It has always gone on and it will always go on."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 18, 1925

The "Arabian nights"

Berlin, Aug. 17: It is reported from Leningrad that the reorganisation of the State Library has resulted in the unearthing of an ancient Persian manuscript which orientalists of the Soviet Academy of Sciences declare is the first manuscript original version of the Thousand and One Nights, about 1,800 years old.



Roll recall

The Supreme Court's intervention highlights the ECI's procedural failures

In what must be seen as a rap on the knuckles of the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Supreme Court of India ordered it to publish the names of 65 lakh voters excluded from Bihar's draft electoral roll, and the reasons, following the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise. That it required the Court to compel the ECI to follow the basic principles of natural justice for these voters underscores the pressing lacunae in the institution's conduct of the SIR and the presumptuous and hasty manner of its implementation. There has been no consolidated list of the excluded electors whose names, the ECI claims, have been removed because they have died, or are untraceable or have fake/duplicate entries. No reasons have been provided against each name. Data analysed by *The Hindu* and ground reports have highlighted significant anomalies. A much higher number of women (close to 32 lakh) than men (close to 25 lakh) have been excluded despite more men having migrated, and recent death rates having been slightly higher among men too. Reports indicate that several voters have been wrongly identified as dead or had not been enumerated despite having valid voter IDs and proof of residence across areas. The Court's intervention now provides a meaningful way – the ECI deadline of September 1 to complete the filing of claims and objections is near – for such voters to address their anomalous situations.

The Court will continue to hear the case on the SIR which has other problematic elements to it. The constitutionality of the exercise itself, conducted after the ECI's own summary revision in January, remains to be adjudicated. Also, the ECI still insists that enumerated voters in the draft roll are vetted by Election Registration Officers based on the availability of one of 11 indicative documents, which do not include the more universal available Aadhaar or ration cards. With the Court ordering the ECI to allow excluded citizens to file objections with their Aadhaar card and having nudged it to accept this document in two previous hearings, the ECI must now include the Aadhaar card as an identity document also. The Court's order also shines a light on the ECI's use of non-transparent means to conduct the SIR, it has made it onerous for civil society to parse the electoral rolls and it continues to use that ploy even now by refusing to put up the full list of those excluded and the reasons in one place. Universal adult franchise has been a cornerstone of India's democracy since Independence. The upcoming hearings in the case and the ECI's actions in rectifying its role in Bihar's SIR process will go a long way in assuaging serious concerns about the voter enrolment process in the country today.

New start

Ukraine's security concerns must be addressed for lasting peace

The much-anticipated summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Anchorage, Alaska, did not yield a breakthrough on the Ukraine war but appeared to narrow the gaps between their positions on how to end the conflict. While Ukraine was the most contentious issue on the agenda, the summit was significant for several reasons. Relations between the world's two largest nuclear powers have been defined by hostility and mutual distrust. A stable, predictable relationship and the prospect of a new arms control pact – hinted at by Mr. Putin – are critical not just for stability in Eastern Europe but also for broader global stability. Yet, rebuilding Russo-American ties is inconceivable without peace in Ukraine. All sides in the Ukraine war publicly claim that they are committed to peace, but they differ sharply on how to achieve it. Ukraine and its European partners have called for an immediate ceasefire, a demand reiterated by Mr. Trump before meeting Mr. Putin. Russia has resisted calls for a ceasefire, insisting instead on a comprehensive peace agreement that addresses what Mr. Putin calls the conflict's "root causes". Mr. Trump appeared to endorse the Russian line when he said "the best way to end the horrific war" is to go directly to a peace agreement.

While the downside of the summit was its failure to deliver a breakthrough, the positive side is that it opened a diplomatic path that could lead to conflict resolution. Mr. Trump, who claimed that he and Mr. Putin agreed on "many points", spoke with European, NATO and Ukrainian leaders after the meeting. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to visit the White House on Monday to discuss Mr. Putin's proposal. Mr. Trump also suggested that it is now "up to Zelenskyy" to strike a deal with Russia, "a very big power". Russia has consistently made three core demands to end the war – recognition for the Ukrainian territories it has annexed and Ukraine's "neutrality" and "demilitarisation". Post-summit reports suggest that Mr. Putin is open to freezing the war along the frontlines in the south (Zaporizhzhia and Kherson) provided Russia retains full control of Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk). A settlement could also involve Russian withdrawal in the northeast (Kharkiv). Ukraine has so far said that it would not concede land for peace. The challenge before Mr. Trump is to sustain the talks aimed at narrowing the differences further to reach a workable compromise. While it makes perfect sense to end the war on practical terms, Mr. Trump should not impose an agreement on Kyiv. Peace would prevail in Eastern Europe only if Ukraine's security concerns are addressed and it is provided with credible assurances that Russia would not invade it again.

A conservation manual, drafted by the ordinary citizen



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In his Independence Day addresses delivered from the Red Fort, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been exhorting fellow citizens to preserve the memory of those who overthrew colonial rule. Even as his reminders have been timely, his tactics – enumerating a few freedom fighters' names and including some of their words in his speeches – are as well-worn as the Archaeological Survey of India's (ASI) approach to conserving the nation's built heritage. With a few exceptions, the ASI has largely been content with selecting monuments, isolating them, repairing them and occasionally polishing them. Given the enormity and complexity of India's past and the risk of large sections of it fading from our collective consciousness, it is time to articulate a more thoughtful and holistic approach to the conservation of ASI monuments.

Acknowledging that the current frameworks forming conservation are the result of certain historical circumstances is important. Driven by a conviction that edifices, if properly analysed, can unlock histories of communities and thus allow for governing them more effectively, colonial officers located and catalogued pillars, rock-cut caves, stupas, temples, mosques, citadels, water reservoirs, and other edifices, promulgated historical preservation laws, and prescribed procedures for maintaining their structural integrity. John Marshall's *Conservation Manual* (1923) advocated extensive repair of ancient monuments and reshaping their immediate surroundings into gardens.

Marshall's handbook continues to inform the preservation of about 3,600 ASI sites, along with new laws, amendments, and provisions of international agreements. Notwithstanding these efforts, field surveys, audit reports, and court rulings establish that many protected monuments are falling apart. Recommendations of a conservation policy enunciated in 2014 are being irregularly followed. Not surprisingly, the government has begun to invite corporations to adopt monuments.

A road map for conserving monuments

Studying the writings of modern India builders is one way to begin articulating a new approach to conserving monuments. Consider lessons provided by Sarvodaya, Mahatma Gandhi's transcreation of a collection of essays by John Ruskin, a Victorian art critic. His rendering accentuated the art critic's advocacy of improving the social condition of all individuals irrespective of their backgrounds, discussed the importance of all vocations, and endorsed his admiration of craftspeople and their labour, even as it critiqued Ruskin's valorisation of Britain's imperial ambitions. Might the lessons that Gandhi learned and promoted inspire the ASI's new

There needs to be a more thoughtful and holistic approach to the conservation of the Archaeological Survey of India's monuments

conservation manual to propose the following: when an edifice is conserved not only is its structural fabric to be tended, but the lives of all those who live around it and visit it are to be improved; and interpretive materials at an edifice should enable visitors to appreciate its builders' sophistication, inventiveness, and resilience.

Conservation is a shared concern of contemporary practitioners of diverse disciplines including translators, health-care professionals, wildlife biologists, mycologists, and economists. By convening dialogues among and between these experts at various venues, listening to how they comprehend terms such as repair, preservation, and restoration and observing how audiences respond to them, the ASI can identify more principles of their new conservation manual.

Translators today are attentive to the style and mood that the authors of source texts have sought to nurture and are grasping how sentences are formed and meanings generated in unlike languages. They are recognising that connotations change over time. Thus, their outputs are intricate works in dialogical relationships with assorted pasts, and not obsequious reproductions of texts initially written in other languages. Can such viewpoints inspire the ASI conservation manual to recommend that archaeologists acknowledge their distance between the deep past and contemporary moment and make their physical interventions of a monument's fabric clearer for visitors to discern? Contemporary translators sophisticated to reading a particular language aptness to render anew a certain text may also be used to inform a clause in the new manual: that periodic reviews be undertaken of the aptness of preservation materials to ensure that they do not harm historical fabrics.

Varied perspectives are important

Humans preserve themselves by saving memories. Listening to divergent perspectives allows memories to be exercised and sustains their propagation. Such insights should inspire the ASI to study how visitors are using protected monuments today and craft conservation principles thereafter. One way to do so would be to offer visitors opportunities to participate in open-ended conversations about their experiences.

Wildlife biologists are also thinking about protection. They reason that supporting a range of interactions occurring among and between sundry biotic and abiotic elements in an ecosystem and exchanges between networks are more efficacious strategies for restoring waning populations than safeguarding individual animals. Following this line of reasoning, might the ASI conservation manual recommend that

archaeologists pay more attention to linkages between monuments and water bodies, fields, deserts, forests and settlements around them and deliberate whether certain boundary walls may be dismantled.

Mycologists have found that fungi are far from unsettling sights. Fungi are powerful agents that break down organic matter, form mutually beneficial relationships with plants including helping them access nutrients, cause diseases in humans but also provide medicines, and help produce food. Such discernments can stimulate the ASI's manual to encourage the conservation of thousands of small, half-forgotten ancient monuments strewn across the country. Old city walls, cisterns, cenotaphs and dovescotes can have multiple benefits for communities living around them including securing neighbourhoods, recharging ground water aquifers, bringing visitors who might boost local economies, providing habitats and creating public spaces.

Finally, contemporary economists' findings may also be generative. They have shown that value is produced by how things work and not just by their appearance. Following this dictum, the conservation manual may propose that it is more important for archaeologists to restore a *haveli's* natural ventilation systems than to regularly repaint its facade. Emphasising a particular resource's scarcity is another way in which value is created. Thus, further research should be undertaken to advance our knowledge of what makes ASI monuments sites of national significance. The new knowledge be used to justify larger budgets for their protection. The economic concept of creative destruction as an impetus for growth may also be utilised. For example, it can guide the transformation of old temples submerged in the reservoirs of large dams into laboratories for developing and testing technologies to document underwater sites and forge innovative alliances between historians, geologists and marine biologists.

The citizen's role

In a country as diverse as ours, conservation's meaning and value are always going to be positional and contested. Thus, all of us as ordinary citizens can help shape a new conservation manual by becoming more aware of our own locations and actions. We can also assist by further educating ourselves. Learning to read the language of the stones that monuments are built of, will allow us to listen to stories they tell and amplify largely silenced voices. We will also be able to glean builders' biases and use monuments as mirrors to confront our prejudices. Ultimately acquiring such literacy will empower us to discover India as a monument without walls and preserve ourselves as we shape a new future.

In Namibia, India shows a new way to engage Africa



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In his address to Namibia's National Assembly in July this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi quoted a Namibian poet, invoked the symbolism of the *Welwitschia mirabilis* plant (the national plant) and the Springbok, and sprinkled his remarks with phrases in Oshiwambo, earning laughter and applause.

The gesture suggested a deliberate effort to engage with culturally meaningful terms, reflecting a more grounded approach to partnership-building. It is a sharp contrast to western engagement, which continues to be shaped by conditional aid, travel bans, and episodic withdrawals such as the recent USAID cutback, and is increasingly tied to migration deterrence, with assistance hinging on controlling outward migrant flows.

The steps being pursued

India is pursuing a quieter, adaptive approach, favouring alignment over instruction and forming issue-based coalitions. Underlying this appears to be a deliberate three-step logic: evoking shared historical solidarities, engaging in present-day pragmatic cooperation, and investing in long-term, future-oriented ties. This offers insights into what more thoughtful, durable partnerships with African states might look like. The first step anchors diplomacy in a shared anti-colonial heritage, drawing on historical memory not as nostalgia, but as a legitimate force of solidarity. There are gentle but meaningful reminders: that New Delhi hosted the South West Africa People's Organization's first-ever diplomatic office during Namibia's liberation struggle; that Lieutenant General Diwan Prem Chand, an Indian officer, commanded the United Nations peacekeeping forces during Namibia's delicate transition to independence. These references are not incidental. They create a sense of long-haul engagement, contrasting with the episodic presence of many other powers.

Second is to highlight the depth and the breadth of current cooperation. New Delhi's bilateral trade with Windhoek is \$80 million, modest but growing, and supported by a \$12

billion development partnership across Africa. More significant are India's targeted investments in capacity-building, including the India-Namibia Centre of Excellence in IT at the Namibia University of Science and Technology, and the 'India Wing' at the University of Namibia's Oshana campus, funded by a \$12 million grant. These efforts leverage India's strengths in IT and respond to Namibia's youthful population and digital readiness.

Third, and closely linked, India is laying out a road map for the future by pivoting toward knowledge-based cooperation. Namibia's recent adoption of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), the first country in Africa to implement this, signals a quiet revolution in tech diplomacy. If this succeeds, it will offer a model for transferring not just digital tools but also regulatory frameworks, institutional design, and user-centric tech architectures that India has stress-tested at scale.

Advantage Namibia

Crucial to this approach is the choice of partner. Namibia's political stability, rich mineral resources and growing technological base offer a strong foundation for India's engagement, grounded in shared histories and aligned futures. President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah's call to reform global economic and financial systems for fairness and resilience echoes India's own vision for inclusive, equitable governance. More than a bilateral partner, Namibia is a key collaborator in the Global South's broader effort to reshape international rules in line with their collective aspirations, agency, and demand for a more just world order.

While India and Namibia share a compelling vision for partnership, consistent follow-through remains a challenge. India's developmental ambitions are often criticised for uneven implementation, and its engagement with Africa has seen long lapses, evident in the recent visit to Namibia by an Indian head of government, the first in nearly three decades.

Though symbolically important, the visit's

outcomes were modest: two memoranda of understanding on entrepreneurship and health, and Namibia's accession to the Global Biofuels Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. These are valuable steps but fall short of the scale the moment, and the bilateral potential, clearly calls for.

Notably absent was any major agreement on Namibia's critical mineral reserves. As a leading uranium producer, Namibia is a natural partner for countries such as India seeking resilient low-carbon supply chains. The visit offered a clear opportunity to outline a strategic framework, including resource access, local workforce development, or investment in value addition. Though the issue was acknowledged, discussions ultimately failed to produce concrete outcomes.

Regardless, India's approach, while not without its gaps, stands out not just for what it offers but also how it engages. India's quiet recalibration emphasises trust built through inclusive dialogue, acknowledging histories, and letting African priorities shape the agenda.

Move beyond symbolism

The upcoming India-Africa Forum Summit, anticipated in the near term, could serve as a vital platform to formalise and solidify these diplomatic efforts through institutionalised cooperation. It presents an opportunity for India to build on recent momentum and demonstrate that its commitment to partnership and mutual respect is backed by enduring political resolve.

Delivering on this vision, however, will require more than symbolism. It will entail confronting structural and operational shortcomings at home and ensuring that India's strategic ambitions are matched by sustained investment and institutional coherence. Ultimately, India's credibility as a Global South partner will rest not only on what it commits to but also on how consistently and collaboratively it follows through.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Alaska summit

U.S. President Donald Trump's summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska has only highlighted the danger of treating diplomacy like a property deal. Mr. Trump's advice to Ukraine – "make a deal, Russia is very big and they're not" –

trivialises a war over sovereignty and security. Peace is built painstakingly, with credibility, trust, and sustained negotiation. A mediator must inspire confidence in both parties, not issue threats or headlines. He must present multiple frameworks – Plan A, B, and C – so that

compromise feels like balance, not capitulation. Mr. Trump leans on bluster and boasts. His oft-repeated claim that he "stopped the India-Pakistan war" was flatly questioned in India. If such exaggerations define his approach, why should Ukrainians or Europeans trust him with their future?

Unless Mr. Trump proves he can deliver more than theatrics, his "deal-making" will remain posturing, not peace-making.
Gopalaswamy J., Chennai

On Governors

The central government's rigorous defence of State

Governors is strange. Perhaps the government should also care to explain the phenomenon of only Governors in Opposition-ruled States turning into a thorn in the flesh for democratically-elected State governments. Almost every Opposition-ruled

State has been pointing an accusing finger against the Governor, accusing them of being driven by an agenda and hindering development in the respective State.
C.M. Aravind, Bengaluru

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

Biodiversity everywhere is ordered by a common 'hidden' pattern

A new study has found that biodiversity is organised like an onion: with dense, unique biodiversity at the centre and grading outward towards porous, mixed margins; these findings could reveal insights into the basic forces that assemble nature's living mosaics and show conservationists where protection could have the biggest payoff

Hirra Azmat
Yasudevan Mukunth

For almost two centuries, biologists have divided the earth into large biogeographical regions. Each region hosts a unique mix of species shaped by its own history, climate, and barriers, such as oceans and mountains. Because those histories differ, many scientists assumed the inner layout of species inside every region would be idiosyncratic – that South America's biodiversity, for example, would organise itself in a very different way from Africa's.

At the same time, global rules clearly exist. Tropical zones almost everywhere team with life while polar zones host far fewer species. The authors of a new study wondered: could there also be a universal rule inside each biogeographical region, one that transcended continents, oceans, and even entire branches of the tree of life?

Answering that question could reveal the basic forces that assemble nature's living mosaics and show conservationists where protection could deliver the biggest payoff.

Peeling the onion

A new study, authored by scientists in Spain, Sweden, and the UK, reported just such a pattern in the July edition of *Nature Ecology & Evolution*.

According to University of Kashmir Department of Botany assistant professor Irfan Rashid, the study provides a rare, large-scale, data-backed confirmation of a general rule in biogeography.

In search of a hidden rule, the researchers cast an exceptionally wide net. They studied more than 30,000 species, including birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, rays, dragonflies, and trees. Information about the species' ranges came from global databases such as the IUCN Red List, BirdLife International, and US Forest inventories. The team also tiled the earth's surface into thousands of cells of equal area – each about 111 sq. km for most land animals, for example – and recorded all the species living there.

Then the researchers used a network analysis tool called Infomap to group those cells together whose species frequently co-occurred. Each cluster thus became a biogeographical region, and the species most tied to that region were tagged as characteristic, i.e. as belonging to its core community. Species that spilled over from neighbouring regions were called non-characteristic.

Finally, they took snapshots of four types of diversity in every cell: species



A newly uncovered core rule turns the earth's messy quilt of species' ranges into something organised in layers. DAVIDRAJU (CC BY-SA)

richness (how many characteristic species live here), biota overlap (what fraction of species are non-characteristic), occupancy (how widely do characteristic species range), and endemism (how much of each characteristic species' range is confined to that region alone).

With these four numbers in hand, the researchers ran a clustering algorithm on all the cells. If biodiversity organised itself differently among different kinds of organisms, cells from birds would cluster apart from cells from mammals, and so on. If a common rule existed, however, the algorithm would lump cells from many different taxa together.

This is how the researchers were eventually able to split the world into seven repeating biogeographical sectors. More importantly, they found that the sectors appear again and again inside every major region and for every taxonomic group, lining up in a remarkably orderly pattern.

The core hotspots were highly rich, highly endemic, and had almost no foreign species. The next inner layers were still species-rich but had slightly more endemic species and slightly more widespread species. The middle layers had no richness and also had some non-characteristic species. Finally, the transition zones were species-poor and packed with wide-ranging generalists from multiple regions.

That is, biodiversity everywhere was organised like an onion: with dense, unique biodiversity at the centre and grading outward towards porous, mixed margins.

The researchers also found that in 98% of region-taxon combinations, temperature plus rainfall models could



The study provides a strong basis for understanding broad ecological trends

AMIT CHAWLA
PRINCIPAL SCIENTIST AT THE CSIR-INSTITUTE OF HIMALAYAN BIORESOURCE TECHNOLOGY (IHBT), PALAMPUR

predict which sector a cell belonged to. This implied that only species that could tolerate the local conditions could survive in a given layer.

Further, the species that inhabited the outer layers were also usually subsets, not replacements, of inner layer species. That is, moving outward from the core, there were fewer specialist species rather than entirely different specialised species.

"The study provides a strong basis for understanding broad ecological trends," Amit Chawla, Principal Scientist at the CSIR-Institute of Himalayan Bioresource Technology (IHBT) in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, said. "It shows how biodiversity tends to spread outward from regional hotspots, and how environmental filters like elevation or climate allow some species to move while blocking others."

Geographical gaps

In a time of climate uncertainty, understanding how species are spread can help make smarter decisions about what to protect and where. In the Indian Himalayas, for example, this could mean looking beyond traditional protected areas and focusing on key habitats, altitudinal zones, and natural corridors.

"We need to look at how changes in rainfall or temperature are affecting biodiversity along mountain slopes," Chawla said. "Small experiments that simulate these changes can give us important insights."

"The Himalayas are already experiencing rising temperatures and shifting rainfall and are at the frontlines of this change. Studies like this one offer a useful lens to understand the big picture," Asif Bashir Shikari, professor of genetics and plant breeding at the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, said.

Finally, Chawla did point out that while the study was global in scope, it had some geographical gaps. "For instance, groups like dragonflies in Eurasia and trees in North America were studied only in limited regions. The conclusions for these taxa could have been stronger with more comprehensive global datasets," he said.

He added that some biodiversity-rich regions in the tropics and Global South, including parts of India, were underrepresented for certain taxa, underscoring the need for region-specific research to complement these global findings.

In sum, the newly uncovered core-to-transition rule turns the earth's messy quilt of species' ranges into something organised in layers. By identifying how environmental filters shape these layers, the study could give conservationists a sharper lens through which to understand and protect the living planet.

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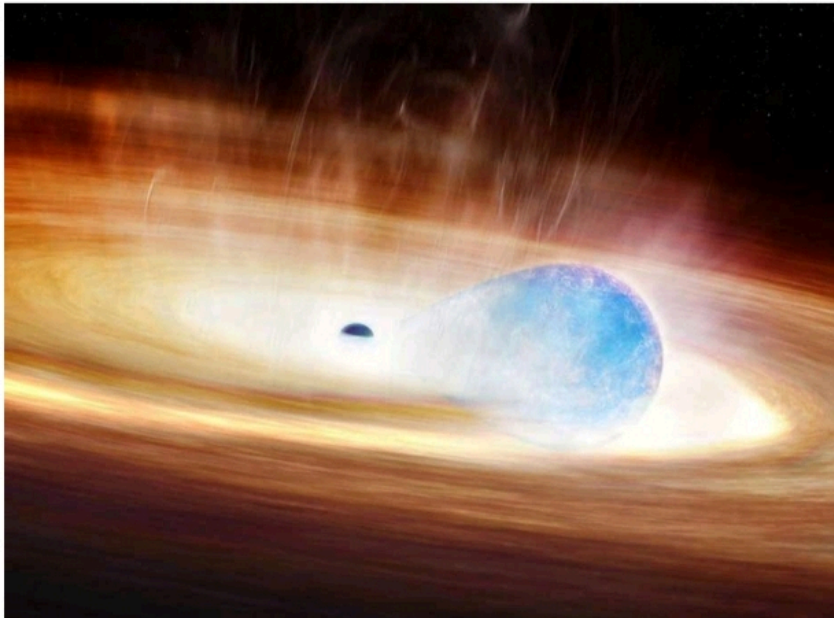
THE GIST

Researchers tiled the earth into cells and recorded the species there. Then a tool called Infomap grouped together those cells whose species co-occurred. Species were tagged as characteristic or non-characteristic. Finally, they took snapshots of four types of diversity in every cell

Researchers then ran a clustering algorithm on all the cells. If biodiversity organised itself differently among different organisms, cells from birds would cluster apart from mammals, and so on. Thus they split the world into seven sectors. The sectors appear repeatedly inside every major region and for every taxonomic group, lining up in an orderly pattern

It was found that temperature plus rainfall models could predict which sector a cell belonged to. This implies that only species that can tolerate local conditions can survive in a given layer. Moving outward from the core, there were fewer specialist species rather than entirely different species. The study shows that environmental filters allow some species to move while blocking others

BIG SHOT



Astronomers reported in *The Astrophysical Journal* on August 13, 2025, that they had found a new type of supernova that occurs when a black hole wins a gravitational tug-of-war against a giant star. The stars' final moments are depicted in this artist's illustration. REUTERS

WHAT IS IT?

Healthocide: war against healthcare

Yasudevan Mukunth

In an article published in the journal *BMJ Global Health* on August 5, researchers from the American University of Beirut in Lebanon coined a new word: healthocide. The authors wrote that the word captures a new, extreme pattern of violence against health systems that routine talk of "attacks on healthcare" does not capture. Instead, they continued, today's deliberate, large-scale destruction of whole health ecosystems in conflict zones such as Gaza needs to be called healthocide.

If the word is applied to recent wars, it could include a coordinated strategy to kill clinicians, bomb hospitals, block ambulances, and dismantle supply chains in order to erase a population's capacity for care. According to the authors, healthocide also frames these acts as being akin to genocide, i.e. the intentional destruction of a collective good essential to life and dignity, and thus demands stronger legal protections.

The authors also state that physicians and educators must document violations, push governments to enforce international humanitarian law, and to keep themselves from being complicit in healthocides.



Israel soldiers exit a tunnel underneath the European Hospital in the Gaza Strip on June 5, 2025. REUTERS

In effect, by naming the phenomenon, the authors have sought to galvanise the medical community against the increasing weaponisation of healthcare.

Not all experts are convinced a new word is necessary. For example, Len Rubenstein, chair of the group Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, told NPR he doesn't think "it adds [to] what we already understand about the sanctity of health care and war." On the other hand, University of Greenwich global health expert Amal Elamin said the word "reinforces the fact that the targeted attacks on health care settings and health workers is no longer an isolated precedent."

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