Capital charter

Delhi needs to solve the infrastructure deficit and the housing crisis

Nearly four months into her tenure as Chief Minister of the National Capital Territory (NCT), Rekha Gupta seems to have more agency and resources to address Delhi's infrastructure issues and economic woes. The governance deficit seen during the previous government led by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) due to political differences with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government at the Centre is noticeably absent now. Interacting with a cross-section of society at *The Hindu* Mind, a platform for leaders from all fields to converse with curious minds, Ms. Gupta said that she wanted to be known as someone who is dedicated to resolving the daily problems of the people of Delhi. Problems abound. From electricity to education, transportation to public infrastructure, and sewage treatment to water availability, there is a litany of issues that plague the national capital. Ms. Gupta blamed the previous AAP and Congress governments for the situation. It is true that the AAP's style of governance provided succour to the poorest segments, but shallowed out the promise of Delhi as an investment destination and an enabler of the middle-class dream for housing facilities and jobs. AAP used Delhi as a staging post of its chief Arvind Kejriwal's electoral ambitions.

That said, no incumbent can succeed by blaming predecessors. The one in charge currently is the one answerable. Ms. Gupta said the Minto Bridge underpass in Connaught Place in central Delhi would no longer flood in the rains, and she was proved right this week when the city received a heavy downpour. But numerous other places in the city were waterlogged, and this is just a small part of the challenges. Ms. Gupta said all the water logging points in Delhi have been identified, and a nodal officer has been put in charge for each of them, who will be accountable. This must be enforced strictly. Haphazard and unpredictable land use regulations over the decades are one of the main reasons for Delhi losing out to surrounding places as a destination for housing and office space. The land pooling policy in the capital which has been meandering, now needs to be urgently streamlined and implemented. Thousands of people who have invested their hard-earned money with the dream of a house in Delhi cannot be punished for policy confusion that is not their fault. Schooling in Delhi needs to have predictable regulation, and both private and public schools must follow standards. Huge disparities in school educations can have cascading ill effects for the society. Freeing up Delhi's so-called agricultural land for planned development must be a priority, and the Chief Minister seems to be cognisant of this. Ms. Gupta said a new Master Plan for the city will account for all these, and the fact that the BJP is in power at the Centre, NCT and in all Municipal Councils of Delhi will make things easy. It is a great chance for Ms. Gupta to lead a definitive transformation of the national capital.

A new cycle

India begins its quest for the Test Championship with young players

Less than a week after South Africa emerged triumphant in the ICC World Test Championship (WTC), a new cycle has begun. Bangladesh is already in Sri Lanka, busy playing a Test, while a more high-profile series will commence once India takes on England at Headingley in Leeds from Friday. A new-look Indian squad under the stewardship of Shubman Gill will step out for duty while a clean break from the past has been implemented due to the retirements of Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma and R. Ashwin, and the omission of Ajinkya Rahane and Cheteshwar Pujara. A tour of the Old Blighty is never easy and that has been the case since 1932 when India made its Test debut at Lord's. Series triumphs were etched in 1971, 1986 and 2007, but otherwise it has been a tale of Indian batters floundering against swing under whimsical English skies. Even as India beat Australia in its backyard over the last decade despite the loss in the last encounter, England has remained a tough place to tour. However, cricket's spiritual home has also gifted some special Indian memories like B.S. Chandrasekhar's spells, the 1983 World Cup victory, Dilip Vengsarkar's three consecutive hundreds at Lord's, and the Test debuts of Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid, to name a few.

A sense of a beginning is evident in cricket's birthplace and seen in that light, Gill and his men are in the right place. Ravindra Jadeja, K.L. Rahul, Jasprit Bumrah and Karun Nair, busy charting a comeback, constitute the seniors in a unit high on youth with even Gill being just 25. The Punjab star has to deliver on two counts, both as batter and skipper. A 35.05 average after 32 Tests does not reflect the quality innate in him. It is not just that the batting core has changed as even the slip-cordon will have new personnel, and the way Gill guides his outfit through this transition will determine how India will fare in the latest WTC cycle. Bumrah will remain the spearhead but with workload management being the key, he will not play all the five Tests at stake. His old ally Mohammed Shami will be missed but in Mohammed Siraj and others, Bumrah has a set of talented fellow pace bowlers. Squaring against them would be Ben Stokes and his men busy relishing home advantage with Joe Root being the anchor among their batters. In a challenging tour stretching all the way to August 4, Gill, in tandem with vice-captain Rishabh Pant, gets an opportunity to forge a fresh and strong Indian unit.

Blame not the messenger in India's diplomacy

Suhasini Haidar

History and literature are replete with references to not 'shooting the messenger' for bringing bad news. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Egyptian queen assaults a messenger and threatens to have him "whipped with wire and stewed in brine, smarting in ling'ring pickle", for bringing her the news that the Roman General Mark Antony has married another. "I that do bring the news made not the match," the messenger replies, before making a hasty exit. Over the past two months, India's 'diplomatic messengers' too have faced an ire that is unprecedented – criticised not for the message they bring, but for failing to convey effectively enough, the message New Delhi has sent out after Operation Sindoor (May 7-10, 2025).

Criticism of Indian diplomacy

Public commentary that is critical of the Ministry of External Affairs and its missions has focused broadly on three counts. First, that India received condolences and statements condemning the Pahalgam terror attack from all quarters, but not the kind of unequivocal support, especially from the neighbourhood, for retaliatory strikes on Pakistan, of the kind seen in 2016 (post-Uri) and 2019 (post-Pulwama). In 2016, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives backed India's decision to stay away from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit in Pakistan after the Uri attack. In 2019, global solidarity with India forced even China to back a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) terror designation for Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar. Earlier, in 2008, there was international consensus in India's favour after the Mumbai attacks, when Hafiz Saeed and a number of Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists were designated by the UNSC, and Pakistan was put on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list for the first time. Instead, this time, unfavourable comparisons have been made to Pakistan for the lines of support it received from China, Turkiye, Azerbaijan, Malaysia and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Second, the perception is that Pakistan has scored some diplomatic wins, despite widespread global understanding that Pakistan uses terrorists as state proxies. In April, Pakistan, a non-permanent member of the UNSC, managed to amend the resolution on Pahalgam to delete any reference to The Resistance Front (TRF), that claimed responsibility for the heinous attack.

Earlier this month, Pakistan was chosen as chair of the Taliban Sanctions Committee and vice-Chair of the Counter-Terrorism Committee at the UNSC, and secured loans from the International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank despite New Delhi's opposition. Next was the White House's lunch invitation to Pakistan Army chief (now Field Marshal) General Asim Munir, despite the belief in India that his "jugular vein" speech was a virtual green signal for the Pahalgam attack. In July, as Security Council President for the month, Pakistan will try to schedule meetings on the India-Pakistan conflict and Kashmir, even as India accelerates efforts to designate the TRF at the UNSC, and place Pakistan on the FATF greylist. India's diplomats will be tested again.

The third aspect pertains to United States President Donald Trump, who, despite official denials from India, has chosen to muddy the narrative of how the May 10 ceasefire was achieved, hyphenating India and Pakistan in more than a dozen public statements, and offering to mediate on Kashmir. His latest iteration of the comments this week, just hours after a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and just before his meeting with Gen. Munir, was possibly the most blatant. Thus far, Mr. Trump's statements, post-ceasefire, have not had a single word on the scourge of terrorism itself, showing just far apart the understanding between Delhi and Washington is at this time.

A flurry of diplomacy does not seem to have moved the needle on these criticisms. After Operation Sindoor, special delegations of Members of Parliament and former diplomats travelled to 32 countries. The most time (six days) was spent in the United States. After the G-7 meet, Mr. Modi has meetings ahead with BRICS leaders. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar is visiting the U.S. for the Quad Foreign Ministers Meeting soon, after several visits to European capitals recently. The government had not essayed such a campaign after the 2016 or 2019 actions against Pakistan, indicating that it too feels that diplomatic efforts by the Ministry of External Affairs and missions abroad have been found wanting and need bolstering.

But much as the messenger in Shakespeare says, India's diplomats do not decide the message that India wishes to send after Operation Sindoor, and cannot be held responsible for its resonance. It is necessary for the government to study the contents of that message, the shift in geopolitical narratives and in how India is perceived, in order to build a more realistic assessment of how far international diplomacy can ensure the outcomes New Delhi desires *vis-à-vis* Pakistan.

India's tough message on terrorism and Pakistan will find more takers if it plays to its advantage it being a secular, stable and rule-abiding democracy

The 'new normal'

With reference to the content of the message, Mr. Modi's three-pronged "New Normal" has raised eyebrows in some capitals. The first prong – 'Any act of terror is an act of war' – lowers the threshold for future conflicts, passing the trigger for Indian strikes into the hands of any terrorist, acting on orders on their own. The second – 'India will not bow to nuclear blackmail' – is not necessarily new, but has been left unarticulated thus far because it gives the appearance of a heightened nuclear risk for the region. The third – India will not distinguish between state and non-state actors henceforth – sends out an escalatory message, indicating that the next terror attack could well invoke 'Armageddon', rather than the controlled four day conflict in Operation Sindoor. While India's partners have not asked for evidence of Pakistan's links to Pahalgam, they look askance at other aspects – like why India has been unable to trace the terrorists responsible yet.

Next, it is necessary to note that global shocks in the past few years have changed how the world views India's tough messaging. Take for example, a growing number of statements by Indian Ministers about "taking back Pakistan occupied Kashmir" by force if necessary. These make many of India's interlocutors uncomfortable, given the current number of conflicts over territorial aggression underway, from West Asia, to Ukraine to the South China Sea. In the light of Israel's retaliation for the October 7, 2023 terror attacks, few wish to give any state a free hand for "retribution". New Delhi's refusal to criticise Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and to raise its oil imports from Russia in the face of sanctions, lost it some support in the western world, especially Europe. The Modi government's silence on Israel's devastation of Gaza has also been met with disappointment in the Global South.

India, as Mr. Modi told Mr. Trump this week, views terrorism emanating from Pakistan, "not as a proxy war, but as a war itself". India's diplomats have been left explaining why their stock responses that "this is not an era of war" and that "dialogue and diplomacy" are the only way forward do not apply to India and Pakistan. Thus, it may be necessary for New Delhi to rethink how it frames its message in view of these changes, notwithstanding the global double standards inherent in the expectations from India.

Democracy in decline

Finally, there is need for introspection over how the Modi government's image itself has altered in the world since 2019, leading to diplomatic challenges on a number of fronts. These range from concerns abroad over laws such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the amendment of Article 370, Internet bans and summary arrests in different parts of the country, and accusations against Indian government agents of involvement in transnational killings in the U.S. and Canada. Questions over the broader decline in democracy and the status of minorities within India have also increased in the past few years. India's delegations abroad (Operation Sindoor) had to field some of those questions during their travels.

India's right to defend itself from decades of Pakistan-backed, trained and funded terrorists is unassailable. But carrying a tough message on terror is easier for the diplomats tasked with the role, if in a strife-roiled world, the government plays to India's advantages, and what differentiates it from Pakistan – as a secular, stable, pluralistic, rule-abiding democratic and economic power.

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Exiting refugee status, getting back dignity

T. Ramakrishnan

Two recent unrelated developments, one in India and another in Sri Lanka, have brought into focus the issues of repatriation and the local integration of Sri Lankan refugees who have been living in Tamil Nadu for over 30 years.

First, the Supreme Court of India had refused to interfere with the verdict of the Madras High Court, which, in 2022, reduced the sentence of a refugee from 10 years to seven years – he had been convicted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

The convict, who had given an undertaking to the High Court that he would leave India on completion of the sentence, had approached the Supreme Court with the intent of settling down in the country, citing personal reasons, as he had completed the sentence. In its hearing, the two-judge Bench made an oral observation that "India is not a dharamshala (free shelter)" to entertain refugees from all over the world. It was a remark that came as a shock to refugees as Indian courts, on many occasions, have been empathetic towards them.

In the other development, a septuagenarian refugee, who returned to Sri Lanka on his own after spending years in Tamil Nadu, was detained by the authorities, much to his dismay, on his arrival at Palaly airport in Jaffna, the headquarters of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The reason was linked to the ground that he had left the country "without valid documents". He had been detained despite the Chennai office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees facilitating his repatriation.

He was released after a furore. Sri Lanka's Transport Minister and the ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)'s senior leader Bimal Rathnayake responded swiftly by stating that the remand was due to "the automatic application" of law to persons who had emigrated through a "non-legal" port. He promised the community of immediate action to change the policy.

India's policy treatment with respect to Sri Lankan refugees on the one hand and Tibetan refugees on the other is stark

Different circumstances, different policies

Close to 90,000 Sri Lankan refugees have been in Tamil Nadu, within and outside rehabilitation camps. Though Tibetan refugees, numbering around 63,170 people, have been in India longer, there are at least a couple of differences between the two. In respect of Sri Lankan refugees who came to India between July 1983 and June 2012, organised repatriation took place till March 1995. But there has been no such exercise in the case of the other category, as the influx of the two groups of refugees was under entirely different circumstances. Unlike Tibetan refugees who have been settled in different States including Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Arunachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Ladakh, almost all the Sri Lankan refugees have been settled in Tamil Nadu, barring some in Odisha.

In fact, the fundamental difference between the two can be seen in the manner in which the Union Ministry of Home Affairs handles the matter in its annual reports. In the case of Sri Lankan refugees, the ultimate objective is of repatriation to Sri Lanka, while such language is not used with respect to the Tibetans. In the case of the Tibetans, the Union government formulated the Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy (TRP) in 2014, with no such document for the other group despite its larger numbers. The TRP also talks of an extension of welfare schemes to the community, an aspect that the Tamil Nadu government has been practising for years with respect of Sri Lankan refugees.

As the policy document lays down a framework for productive engagement of the refugees – either under government schemes including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or in the private and non-government sector in chartered accountancy, medicine and engineering – similar means can be extended to the Sri Lankan refugees. Even though nearly 500 young refugees in Tamil Nadu have got engineering degrees, hardly five per cent of them have found jobs in their disciplines as private companies, especially IT firms, are reluctant to employ them. If the Union government, without disturbing its traditional position on the repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees, can formulate a policy for this category of refugees too, they would find the move beneficial.

Live up to the theme

As it is over 40 years since the first batch of refugees came from Sri Lanka, it is time that the larger society debates how long the rehabilitation camps, which account for two-thirds of the total refugee population in the State, will continue to be maintained in the country. However well intentioned governments at the Centre and in the State may be, the tag of being a refugee is not an aspect that a person with self-respect can cherish.

Repatriation and local integration should form part of a package of durable solutions to be worked out by the authorities in consultation with all the stakeholders including Sri Lanka. The focus this year on World Refugee Day (June 20) is "solidarity with refugees". It is a theme that can be meaningful to them only if they lead their lives with honour.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump's claims

United States President Donald Trump's repeated claims over Operation Sindoor are a clear indication that Mr. Trump is unsure of himself (Page 1, "India will never accept a mediation: PM to Trump", June 29). The American President's claims are only a ploy to assume importance and proclaim that he is very influential in shaping world events.

C.G. Kuriakose,
Kothamangalam, Kerala

The ideal setting

We need to thank the central government for implementing a new rule standardising air-conditioner temperature between 20° C and 28° C. When air conditioners are set at unnecessarily low temperatures, they work harder, drawing more power, leading to higher bills and faster wear and tear. According to the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), every 1° C increase in an air-conditioner set point can cut energy consumption by up to 6%. A modest adjustment in set points may seem inconsequential in the face of India's vast cooling challenge. Yet, when 'multiplied across millions of units in households and offices nationwide, it signals a quiet revolution — one that can help secure a cooler, greener, and more sustainable future for all. The government's move reflects the need to optimise our response in ways that are technically sound and socially just'.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Paddy procurement

I am writing this letter to highlight the poor state of the paddy procurement management system in Bargarh district of Odisha. Farmers are facing numerous difficulties due to delays in procurement, the lack of transparency, and inadequate support from the authorities concerned. The situation is causing significant hardship to the farming community. Timely procurement is crucial for our livelihood, but the system is not running smoothly, resulting in financial losses and distress among farmers.

Mukesh Kumar Sahu,
Bijepur, Bargarh, Odisha

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Different strokes

SEBI is moving away from micro-management

The new Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Board of India, Tuhin Kanta Pandey, has indicated that he intends to walk the talk in streamlining regulations. At Wednesday's meeting, the SEBI Board approved 19 proposals, providing relief from stringent rules and aiding intermediaries such as merchant bankers, debenture trustees, custodians, investment advisors and research analysts.

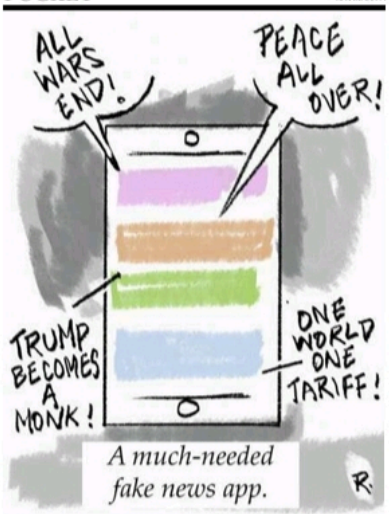
Wednesday's moves, while cementing trust in the stock market ecosystem, also mark an effort to deflect legacy allegations of regulatory micro-management. The board took a major decision in allowing a separate set of delisting rules for public sector undertakings where government's stake is more than 90 per cent. Listed PSUs such as Kudremukh Iron Ore Company and State Trading Corporation are hit by bleak business outlook due to outdated products and poor financials. Yet, these stocks witnessed heightened speculation due to the low public float and low perceived risk due to the government backing. To enable easy exit, delisting regulations for these companies have been relaxed by waiving the requirement of approval of two-thirds of public shareholders for the delisting, and mandating the offer at a fixed price. This entails a 15 per cent premium over floor price and a change in the method of fixing the latter. These rules will help the government delist these companies at a good price.

The growing volatility in currency and bond markets with geopolitical uncertainty has resulted in foreign portfolio outflow of $29 billion in June so far. Easing compliance for FPIs investing in G-secs through the Fully Accessible Route can ease this pressure. Mandating less frequent KYC reviews, not requiring them to furnish details about the group they belong to and allowing NRI, OCIs and resident Indians to be part of the FPIs investing only in G-secs can help improve the flows through such FPIs. Since the G-sec market is deeper and less vulnerable to manipulation, lesser scrutiny is unlikely to cause trouble going forward.

The move to allow promoters to hold on to ESOPs issued to them a year before the public issue is likely to give a fillip to start-ups approaching the primary market. While public issuances on the SME platform and the mainboard have surged over the last two years, the existing rule that promoters should not hold share-based benefits in the company has worked as a deterrent. Similarly, the rule mandating dematerialisation of shares held by all categories of investors prior to company listing could help complete the transition from physical to demat shares. The settlement scheme proposed for brokers involved in the NSEL scam too cannot be faulted. This case has dragged on for 12 years. A temporary trading ban and a penalty payment to SEBI should settle the matter. In a recent interview with this newspaper, Pandey said he would prioritise engaging with stakeholders to relax regulations in areas where the risk was low. Now, despite the guardrails in place it may be worth reviewing these relaxations after a year.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



Economic impact of Israel-Iran war

OIL WORRIES. A blockade of the Strait of Hormuz would hit the flow of 12% of world oil supplies and will lead to a sharp spike in prices

NILANJAN BANIK

REUTERS

Tensions between Iran and Israel have long simmered beneath the surface of Middle Eastern geopolitics, but recent escalations have reignited fears of a broader regional war. At the heart of the economic fallout is the energy market.

Iran, a major oil producer and a member and rotating president of OPEC this year, plays a crucial role in the global energy supply chain. Any disruption in oil exports resulting from military action — particularly blockades in strategic chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz — could trigger significant upheaval in global markets.

This vulnerability was evident in past confrontations, where tensions between Iran and the West led to volatility in global oil prices. In today's tightly interconnected energy markets, a sustained conflict could push oil prices above $100 per barrel, reigniting inflationary pressures across the globe.

PRICE PRESSURES

In fact, following the recent attack, oil prices have already surged by approximately $10 (around ₹870) per barrel, with a prolonged war likely to drive them even higher. There are 42 gallons in a barrel of oil, and a $1 increase in the price of crude oil per barrel translates to an increase of approximately 2.4 cents per gallon.

According to a report by ClearView Energy Partners, in markets where fuel prices are not subsidised, a $10 rise in crude oil typically leads to a 7-cent (approximately, ₹6) increase per litre of petrol at the pump.

In extreme cases, such as a blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, prices could surge by an additional 27 cents (approximately, ₹23). So far, shipping lanes through the Strait remain open and operational. However, that may change with Iran threatening to lay naval mines if the US joins the war.

While Iran accounts for less than 2 per cent of the global oil supply, a closure of the Strait of Hormuz would disrupt the flow of approximately 12 per cent of the world's oil, given that much of the Middle East's oil exports pass through this strategic chokepoint. This makes the Strait's security critical not just for the region, but for global energy markets as a whole.

Per data from UN COMTRADE, in 2024, Iran, exported $13.26 billion around the world, the main destinations being: China (34.59 per cent), Turkey (16.45 per cent), and India (7.68 per cent). Valued at $4.59 billion, China is the main export destination (by trade value) for Iran.

For energy-dependent nations — especially developing economies already burdened by debt and post-Covid recovery challenges — such price hikes could prove economically destabilising.

In fact, two of the largest economies, such as China and India, buy as much as 80 per cent of the oil which passes through the Strait of Hormuz. China will be more impacted than India, as it has become a major importer of Iranian oil following the US sanctions on Iran. Like Russia, Iran has also been using a "shadow fleet" to sell oil at discounted prices to China. A "shadow fleet" refers to oil tankers that operate outside standard regulations — often lacking mandatory insurance and disabling tracking systems — to evade sanctions or regulatory oversight.

A significant portion of formal oil trade relies on insured shipping, and since most major insurers are based in the EU and the US, Western-led sanctions can make regular oil transport increasingly difficult. The "shadow fleet" consists of old vessels that are not insured and often transfer oil at sea to other ships to conceal its origin and destination. China has been accessing Iranian oil at a discounted price of between $2 and $3, a barrel. Iran also stands to lose, as this oil is paid for in Chinese renminbi, and disruptions caused by the war may limit Iran's access to Chinese goods.

For India, in the short term, there is likely to be limited impact. But if the war prolongs and oil prices rise then CAD can widen

ISRAEL ECONOMY

Israel, on the other hand, while not a major oil producer, is a key player in the global tech and defense sectors. The Israeli economy is heavily reliant on foreign investment and international trade, particularly in high-tech industries and cybersecurity. An extended conflict could scare off investors, disrupt operations, and hinder export performance. Already, signs of market nervousness are visible through currency fluctuations and risk-averse investor behaviour in the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange.

Beyond the borders of Iran and Israel, regional economic stability is also at stake. Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar could face dual pressures: rising defense expenditures and investor hesitation. These nations, often viewed as relatively stable economic hubs, may find their markets rattled by perceived proximity to conflict zones.

For India, there is no short-term impact as long as the government continues to regulate oil prices. Petrol is still being sold at the same rate as before the war began. Consumer Price Inflation at 2.82 per cent remained under control, along with Wholesale Price Index which stood at 0.39 per cent in May 2025. The promise of a good monsoon, along with the fact that domestic demand drives two-thirds of economic activity, is expected to shield India from external shocks.

However, a prolonged war combined with rising crude prices will impact India's Current Account Deficit (CAD). During the fiscal year 2024-25 (April–March), India imported approximately 242.4 million tonnes of crude oil, a 4.2 per cent increase from the previous year's 232.7 million tonnes.

According to a report by Union Bank of India, India's CAD for the fiscal year 2024-25 faces upward risk, as every $10 per barrel increase in oil prices could widen the annual CAD by nearly $15 billion. If the rise in petrol prices is passed on to the consumers, it could eventually lead to higher inflation and impact the common man. For now, at least, investors in the stock market are feeling the impact, with stocks like ONGC and Oil India — whose prices tend to rise with crude oil prices — likely to perform well.

On the other hand, companies like Reliance, GAIL, BPCL, HPCL, and Mahanagar Gas, etc., which rely on crude oil and natural gas as inputs, appear to be struggling.

The writer is Professor, School of Management, Mahindra University

Quality control orders are vital for Indian industry

As the example of toys suggests, quality control should not be seen as a trade barrier, but as a consumer-friendly measure

Rajiv Arora

Does the concurrent use of various WTO-compliant regulatory interventions like trade remedial measures and Quality Control Orders (QCO) by the government intend to strangulate free competition? QCOs need to be demystified.

The usage of such measures in the post-WTO regime can be traced back to the late 1990s when imported toys from China at extremely low prices with no regard for safety concerns flooded the Indian market, threatening the existence of the Indian toy industry, which was fragmented and largely SSIs.

With the industry not in a position even to collectively organise to seek protection under the anti-dumping provisions, the Government, invoking the suo motu provision, initiated the anti-dumping (AD) case based on alerts as available from the customs import data.

Given the structure of the industry, the investigation was handicapped by the availability of requisite data from the domestic industry due to capacity limitations.

Under such a challenge, the Government had to resort to the process of compulsory registration of domestic suppliers and imports to enable intervention on the issue of unsafe safety concerns. Subjecting imports to quality standards was not feasible as our industry, being SSI-based, was not subjected to established standards.

While AD action was dropped, the registration process provided a layer of safety to both the consumers and producers. The adherence to standards was of primacy rather than price, as the low prices were largely a derivative of non-adherence to safety concerns.

SAFETY ISSUES

Even though the Indian toy industry is no longer large and vibrant, the menace to public health and safety in toys imported from China continues. On March 24, 2023, the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) seized over 41,000 uncertified toys violating safety norms on flammability, mechanical safety and toxicity due to lead-based paints. Harmful chemicals like phthalates, commonly found in cheap plastics, are linked to hormonal disruptions. Toys that easily splinter or shed parts risk causing injuries or choking incidents.

The rationale behind India's adoption of Quality Control Orders (QCOs) is therefore not primarily for the protection of producers' interests but of consumers for public health and safety.

MANUFACTURING. Quality matters

While some argue that QCOs function as trade barriers, claiming that mandatory BIS certification raises costs and causes delays for importers, the reality is more nuanced. QCOs help in climbing up the quality ladder.

QCOs also support Indian manufacturers, exporters and importers. MSMEs in the toy industry have publicly welcomed QCOs as a way to restore fair competition. Once substandard imports were screened out, there were fewer chances that prices of quality imports would remain predatory, and therefore, the Indian industry began to see more stable demand and healthy pricing. The criticism of overuse and abuse of trade remedial action like AD no longer would no longer holds merit.

Seized of the perceived burden on MSMEs, the government has in fact taken steps to ensure the transition is smooth and make compliance easier, especially for small enterprises. To reduce the cost and capacity burden of mandatory certification, the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) provides fee rebates and extensions in a timeline to ensure micro and small enterprises for compliance. MSMEs under Scope 3 compliance of the ESG framework see no choice but to adhere to environmental and social standards as their exports directly or as part of the value chain have to comply with CBAM. The adoption of standards, domestic or global, is a necessity.

QCOs should be leveraged to send a clear and positive message: Indian products are reliable, tested, and in line with global expectations. Rolling back these standards now would not only undermine consumer protection but also harm compliant manufacturers and tarnish India's reputation, just as global supply chains are seeking trustworthy partners.

The writer is former Additional Secretary, GoI. Views are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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Trump's posturing

This refers to 'In a first, Trump says two leaders of India-Pak 'decided' to stop conflict' (June 19). In all fairness, the US President "owes" an explanation to the Indian people for taking some "undue credit" by proudly claiming that he was the man behind sudden cessation of war between India and Pakistan.

That apart, such a startling revelation by him must also serve as an eye opener for the Congress party's top brass and its "over-enthusiastic" spokespersons too.

One fervently hopes that the Congress Party soon realises the folly of raising the false political bogey aimed to corner PM Modi even in the matters concerning our national security and prestige.

SK Gupta
New Delhi

Fostering research

The article 'Consortia needed to align academia, industry talent' (June 19), drawing up an actionable blueprint, highlights an imperative for India "to convert demographic dividend and academic capital to industrial strength".

The gap between acquired knowledge and the application of it seems to be widening, roiling most efforts aimed at development, resulting in sub optimal outcomes.

A collaborative approach with dependable funding options from industry's R&D initiatives - directed to facilitate usable adaptation of academic knowledge - can kindle the quest for knowledge, assuring rewards for pursuing it. This will enable a win win for both academia and industry and in turn hasten development. Using a portion of CSR funds, industrial houses can provide dedicated research facilities, set up scholarships to pursue area specific research to cash in on the curiosity of young scholars.

Jose Abraham
Kottayam

Edge of war

Apropos to Iran-Israel war, Ayatollah Khamenei's stark warning to the US amid continued Israeli strikes highlights the razor's edge we're on. President Trump's mixed signals coupled with reluctance only heighten uncertainty. Putin's offer to mediate reflects Russia's strategic interest, not neutrality. The risk of direct US and Iran confrontation is growing, with devastating potential. Rather than sabre-rattling, world leaders must prioritise diplomacy to defuse tensions.

Vijaykumar H K
Raichur

Fix MSP on oilseeds

With reference to news report "Edible oil companies reduce rates after duty cut" (June 19), consumer markets may rejoice, but not the farmers producing oilseeds.

With frequent revision of import duty, the oil companies regulate purchase price from farmers which is stifling, since the farmers have to abide by the diktats.

The government must fix MSP for oilseeds and mainly oil-palm, failing which the farmers may shift from oilseed production to other crops.

Alternatively, the government must establish a board to procure oilseeds and store it for future usage so that the farmers' anxiety is mitigated.

Rajiv Magal
Halekere Village (Karnataka)

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The unregulated drink: rethinking alcohol control in India

Alcohol consumption significantly raises the risk of injuries, mental illness, and non-communicable diseases, including cancer; it is time for a National Alcohol Control Policy and Programme that prioritises people over profit, prevention over revenue, and long-term well-being over short-term gains

Vid Karmarkar
Jitendra Chouksey

The safe limit for alcohol consumption is zero ml. Yet, 23% of Indian men and 1% of women consume alcohol (NFHS-5). India also records one of the highest rates of heavy episodic drinking, with lakhs needing clinical and social support.

Alcohol consumption significantly raises the risk of injuries, mental illness, and non-communicable diseases, including cancer. Beyond health, alcohol use is associated with aggression, crime, suicides, and risky behaviour.

In 2021, alcohol-use contributed to approximately 2.6 million DALYs (Disability-Adjusted Life Years) in India, reflecting the combined toll of premature deaths and years lived with illness or disability. The estimated societal cost of alcohol-related health is ₹6.24 trillion. Meanwhile, per capita alcohol consumption increased by about 240% in the last two decades, an underestimate because nearly half of alcohol use in India is unrecorded.

Swift action: Alcohol use in 2021 caused 2.6 million Disability-Adjusted Life Years in India. ISTOCKPHOTO

Determinants of alcohol consumption

Alcohol use is shaped by a complex web of biopsychosocial, commercial and policy-level determinants. (i) Biopsychosocial determinants: Biologically, some individuals are genetically predisposed to addiction. Alcohol activates the brain's reward system making it habit-forming. Psychologically, people drink to relieve stress, anxiety, or experience euphoria. Socially, urban lifestyles, peer pressure, and glamourised portrayals in media have normalised alcohol use. (ii) Commercial determinants: The industry has broadened its product portfolio with offerings such as fruit-flavoured spirits, pre-mixed cocktails, and other ready-to-drink options, making alcohol more appealing to new and younger users. Despite legal advertising restrictions, promotional tactics persist through surrogate advertising, brand sponsorships, and strategic product placements, where the depiction of alcohol has doubled over the past two decades. Pubs and bars offer incentives like 'Happy Hours' and free samples, while social media algorithms subtly amplify alcohol-related content (ARC).

The placement of liquor stores in residential and high-traffic areas, ensures easy access and everyday visibility. Packaging shapes consumer perception - sleek bottles, international labels, and premium branding enhance the aspirational value of alcohol.

Pricing ensures affordability. Indian Made Indian Liquor (IMIL) remains cheap and accessible to lower-income groups, especially in rural areas, while growing disposable incomes in cities have made alcohol increasingly affordable for the urban middle class.

(iii) Policy is the most influential determinant. The alcohol industry wields significant influence over regulation, often resisting stricter laws by emphasising its contribution to State revenues through excise taxes. Even bans on advertising are undermined through tactical marketing and alcohol persists in public life under different names.

Alcohol regulation in India falls under State jurisdiction, granting each State authority over legislation, excise taxes, supply chain, licensing and manufacturing, sale and consumption restrictions, prohibition, and pricing. This autonomy has led to regulatory variations across States.

For instance, Bihar, Gujarat, Mizoram, and Nagaland enforce prohibition, while Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Kerala, Manipur, and Tamil Nadu had previously imposed similar bans. In contrast, some States are now actively promoting alcohol sales. Kerala's new Akbari Policy markets toddy as a "natural, traditional beverage," while Andhra Pradesh is introducing a policy offering alcohol for ₹99 to ensure "quality, quantity, and affordability." Meanwhile, some States are exploring online alcohol delivery through platforms like Swiggy, Zomato, and Blinkit, contradicting efforts to restrict alcohol access.

Alcohol accessibility

Regulation of alcohol accessibility in India varies as equally as availability. The legal drinking age differs across States, ranging from 18 to 25 years. Alcohol pricing regulation exists in 19 of 33 States/UTs, with nine States setting only maximum prices while others setting both maximum and minimum prices. The GST Act excludes liquor from sales tax, leaving alcohol taxes to States, often vaguely defined in excise policies.

Compared to State policies, national-level policies are more specific addressing single aspects such as drunk driving or prevention of alcohol use and regulating supply-chain in an individual policy. However, India lacks a unified national policy on alcohol regulation.

Earlier, alcohol was excluded from the National Policy on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) 2012 despite being a common psychoactive substance followed by cannabis and opioids. Later, alcohol regulation was included in the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (NAPDDR) 2021-22 under Nasha Mukta Bharat Abhiyan.

While the NAPDDR addresses alcohol regulation, its demand and supply reduction efforts are scattered across Central ministries and State governments. The Ministry of Social Justice leads demand reduction, while supply and harm reduction are handled by the Ministries of Home Affairs, Finance, and Health.

The National Mental Health Policy (NMHP) 2014 recognised the role of alcohol in mental illness and suicide prevention and suggested the need for a specific action plan. Similarly, the National Health Policy (NHP) 2017 mentioned curbing alcohol use through higher taxation. More recently, the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) 2022 identified alcohol as a major risk factor for suicides, advocating for a national alcohol control policy and measures to limit alcohol accessibility.

The National Action Plan and Monitoring Framework for Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (NMAP) 2017-2022 also echoed the call for a national alcohol policy.

The way ahead

Regulating alcohol is urgent but complex, given alcohol's deep entanglement with State revenues, social norms, and political interests. It is time to move beyond short-term revenue thinking and adopt a systems approach - grounded in both evidence and equity. Based on the biopsychosocial and commercial determinants of alcohol consumption, we propose the following to regulate alcohol-use.

(i)Affordability: Alcohol pricing must deter excessive use without pushing the poor toward dangerous alternatives like illicit liquor.

(ii)Allocation: Health taxes on alcohol should not disappear into general revenues. Ear-marking these funds for public health, combined with transparent governance, can improve trust and accountability - and prevent corporate lobbying from redirecting them.

(iii)Accessibility: Alcohol access must be curbed beyond geographic distance. Urban policy must reduce availability in everyday spaces to signal a shift toward alcohol-free environments.

(iv)Advertisement: In the digital age, "alcohol influencers" in India promote consumption by framing alcohol positively. Regulating this "social surrogacy" - including algorithmic amplification - is key to reducing social appeal.

(v) Attractiveness: Plain packaging, visible warning labels, and controls on point-of-sale promotion are needed to disrupt the cycle of normalisation.

(vi) Awareness: Public understanding of alcohol's health harms - especially its link to cancer, mental illness, and generational poverty - remains low. Large-scale public education campaigns, similar to tobacco control efforts, are overdue.

(vii) Artificial Intelligence:AI tools can detect and suppress alcohol-related content on digital platforms and flag misinformation. When 180 million monthly users see health misinformation (e.g., WebMD praising alcohol), it is clear that digital regulation is a frontline public health priority.

India's alcohol crisis cannot be solved through isolated actions or State-level measures. It is time for a National Alcohol Control Policy and Programme that prioritises people over profit, prevention over revenue, and long-term well-being over short-term gains.

(Dr. Vid Karmarkar, is a venture building partner at Fittr, and the founder of Canseva Foundation. vid.karmarkar@gmail.com; Jitendra Chouksey is the Founder and CEO of Fittr, a fitness company. jc@fittr.com)

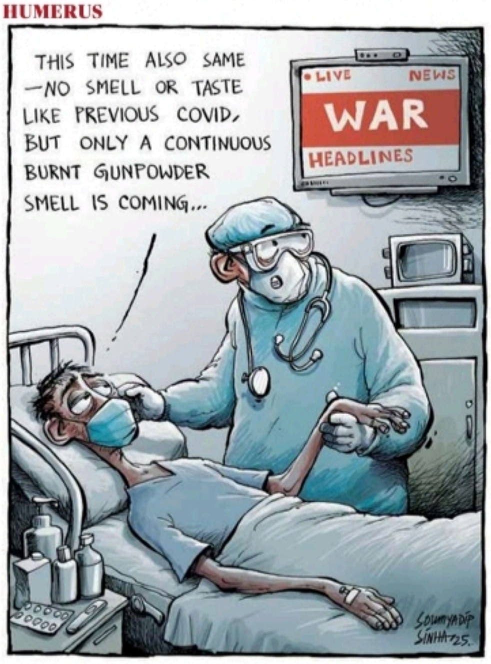
THE GIST

India records one of the highest rates of heavy episodic drinking, with lakhs needing clinical and social support

Alcohol use is shaped by a complex web of biopsychosocial, commercial and policy-level determinants. Policy is the most influential determinant

Compared to State policies, national-level policies are more specific in addressing single aspects such as drunk driving or prevention of alcohol use

HUMERUS



What the WHA's landmark resolution on skin diseases means for global health and equity

Monisha Madhumita

On May 24, 2025, something unprecedented happened: for the first time in history, the 78th World Health Assembly (WHA) unanimously adopted a resolution titled 'Skin diseases as a global public health priority'. This long-overdue resolution marks a significant shift in how the world understands skin health, not only as a cosmetic issue, but as a core component of global public health, social equity, and human dignity.

The road to this resolution was paved through years of advocacy, cross-sector partnerships, and irrefutable data. Despite affecting an estimated 1.9 billion people worldwide, skin diseases have remained chronically underfunded and neglected, especially in low- and middle-income countries. This landmark resolution, jointly sponsored by Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Togo, and Micronesia, and others, supported by the International League of Dermatologic Societies (ILDS), the world's largest alliance of dermatology organisations marks a pivotal moment in recognising skin diseases as a global public health priority.

It reflects a growing global recognition that skin health is central to the well-being and dignity of populations across every region.

Skin diseases affect 1.9 billion globally but remain neglected. ISTOCKPHOTO

The urgency of this resolution is especially pronounced in low-resource settings where dermatologic care is inaccessible and stigma remains high. Folakemi Cole-Adeife, consultant physician and dermatologist at LASUTH (Lagos State University Teaching Hospital), Nigeria, underscores the significance of this moment. "This historic step will be positively pivotal for skin healthcare worldwide," she says. "Skin diseases, though often overlooked, carry immense morbidity, stigma, and socioeconomic burden, particularly in LMICs (low and middle income countries)."

She adds that the ripple effect of this resolution must extend globally. "It compels us to ask why so many common skin conditions still go untreated, why dermatology training remains limited in frontline health systems, and why stigma persists, particularly for diseases visible on darker skin tones. In India and Africa, where the burden of pigmentary disorders, fungal infections, and neglected skin diseases is immense, this resolution is an opportunity to push for better access, culturally competent care, and research that reflects diverse skin types. It's time we reframed skin health as a public health issue."

The regional reality

The significance of this resolution is being deeply felt across South Asia, West Asia, and Africa - regions represented by Rashmi Sarkar, Regional Director of the ILDS. She is one of the leading voices in pigmentary disorders and global dermatology policy. She says healthcare funding has traditionally prioritised chronic diseases of internal organs, often overlooking skin health, despite its significant physical, psychological, and economic impact.

"Skin diseases are deeply tied to a person's self-esteem and opportunities," Dr. Sarkar notes.

"Stigma around visible conditions including vitiligo, psoriasis, or chronic infections leads to exclusion not just from medical care, but from employment and society itself." She sees the resolution as a pivotal tool to correct these disparities.

For India, the WHA resolution arrives at a crucial time. With one of the highest dermatologic disease burdens globally from chronic inflammatory conditions to fungal infections and pigmentary disorders, India stands to benefit immensely from global recognition and domestic reform.

This is a chance to integrate skin care into public health infrastructure, strengthen research on skin of colour, expand dermatology training at the primary care level.

(Dr. Monisha Madhumita is a consultant dermatologist at Saveetha Medical College, Chennai. mail.monisha.m@gmail.com)

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

Doing business in India

Talent, innovation driving global firms' interest

Shivanshu Gupta
Soumyadeep Ganguly

TARGET INDIA. International companies see it as a growth engine

India is increasingly being seen as a dynamic market teeming with opportunities for global companies, and not just a place to cut costs for products and services. The number of international firms setting up business in India has tripled — about 320 companies registered to operate here between 2019 and 2021, it rose to 984 companies between 2021 and 2023. The key to this lies in India's available talent pool, burgeoning consumer base and large-scale infrastructure improvements.

ENGINEERING R&D

India's proposition has evolved to, 'a place for engineering innovation': India produces about one-third of the world's STEM graduates — those going beyond software coding to create the next wave of global products and services, from cutting-edge battery technology for electric vehicles to groundbreaking pharmaceutical formulations. The value of engineering research and development (ER&D) sourcing from India is projected to increase from $44-45 billion in 2023 to $130-170 billion by 2030.

The government is also shaping policies to bolster this proposition across manufacturing: the National Manufacturing Mission aims to enhance ease and cost of doing business, workforce development, technology availability, production of quality products, and also support for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises.

This approach shows results, like a leading global semiconductor company deciding to diversify its manufacturing footprint by building its first packaging, assembly and testing facility in India, taking advantage of a 70 per cent capital subsidy from the Central and State governments combined.

India's vibrant digital economy is also a driver of appeal: Smartphone users in India surpassed 690 million in 2024, and the number of internet users is expected to exceed 900 million in 2025. The value of digital commerce through the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) is projected to rise fivefold, from $60-70 billion in 2022 to $320-340 billion by 2030, according to McKinsey estimates.

However, tapping into these opportunities requires companies to navigate the unique challenges of operating in India. The country's diverse population and geographic spread create multiple "Indias within India": while the average monthly household consumption has risen from $271 in 2012 to $705 in 2023, there are wide variations in consumption patterns.

Detailed consumer segmentation could help companies develop products and their variants to appeal to the needs and spending capacity of a wide number of households.

LARGE-SCALE PRODUCTION

The scale of the market also necessitates large-scale manufacturing. However, many suppliers in India are small to medium-sized firms that struggle to meet the quantity of components required for large-scale production. Additionally, global trade shifts and geopolitical uncertainties demand agility in managing new tariffs and trade policies.

Local plants can help businesses reduce costs and gain access to talented employees, developing a local supply chain can streamline component sourcing, and partnerships with Indian research institutions and start-ups could promote innovation and training.

Companies that expand operations, manufacturing, sourcing or other activities in India should focus on long-term gains, rather than quick wins. Companies that are winning in India tend to emphasise product quality and consumer satisfaction from the outset, move fast to capture opportunities and scale operations, customise pricing and set clear business goals.

India could create a new growth engine for international firms, with India not simply becoming a new location for manufacturing but a source of innovation and new product development.

Gupta is senior partner, and Ganguly is partner, with McKinsey & Company

Time to bridge income inequality gap

SHADOW OVER EQUITY. The weakening of India's middle-income groups signals a worrying trend towards a hollowing-out of the economic centre

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

AMIT KAPOOR
MUKUL ANAND

Every tale of rapid economic growth carries within it a quiet and yet persistent question; who truly benefits and who gets left behind? India's development journey is no exception. The World Banks's 2025 Spring brief highlighted that 171 million people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in India. Poverty is, however, absolute and pegged to a poverty line. Inequality on the other hand is quantifiable as a stock or a flow variable. If we look closer into official numbers in India, it is evident that the widening income gaps are quietly redrawing the boundaries of opportunities.

This persistent income inequality cannot be brushed away as a mere statistical concern; it is a powerful force that influence social and political cohesion, progress and the very foundations of inclusive growth.

DEEPENING RIFT

Labour market data offers a powerful lens into the structural drivers of income inequality in India, revealing how systemic disparities and not just individual skills shape wage outcomes. Since labour incomes form the core of household earnings, the patterns they reflect are critical to understanding and addressing broader inequality across the country. An analysis of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) from 2017-18 to 2023-24 reveals that income inequality at the national level has persisted and, in key ways, deepened. The median income rose from ₹102,000 to ₹144,000 over this period, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.92 per cent.

The top 1 per cent in India earns at least ₹75,000 per month in 2023-24. This threshold has increased from ₹50,000 in 2017-18, reflecting a CAGR of 6.99 per cent. In 2017-18, the monthly income to be in the top 10 per cent was ₹25,000. It has since risen to ₹32,000 with a CAGR of 4.2 per cent. For the bottom 50 per cent, income levels moved from ₹8,500 to ₹12,000 while the bottom 10 per cent saw their thresholds inch up from ₹3,200 to ₹3,900 only. This muted 3.35 per cent CAGR at the lowest rung is a sharp contrast to the accelerating gains at the top, pointing to growing asymmetries in income gains across the Indian labour market.

The Gini coefficient, which is a standard measure of income inequality, remained around 0.42 during this period, suggesting little meaningful change even as per capita GDP rose from $1,907 to $2,481. Moreover, the Theil index stood at 0.33 in 2023–24, reinforcing the picture of concentrated gains at the upper end of the income distribution.

Further analysis also revealed accelerating growth at the top and stagnation at the bottom income levels. The ratio of the top 1 per cent income threshold to that of the bottom 50 per cent increased from 5.89x to 6.25x over these seven years.

In contrast, the gap between the top 10 per cent and the bottom 50 per cent narrowed slightly only from 2.94x to 2.67x, suggesting some marginal improvements among the broader middle-upper tier, though gains remain modest and uneven. This undeniably casts a worrisome shadow over the prospects of equity and mobility in the Indian labour market.

In a rapidly transforming India, equitable distribution of opportunities and incomes will be key not just for fairness, but for building a resilient and prosperous nation

STARK DISPARITIES IN STATES

At the sub-national level, stark disparities in inequality dynamics have emerged, with some States diverging significantly from the national average. States like Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Jharkhand exhibited the highest levels of income inequality, as measured by both Gini and Theil indices. In these States, the gap between the top 1 per cent and bottom 50 per cent was particularly pronounced, indicating that wealth accumulation at the top has outpaced improvements at lower income levels. Conversely, States such as Mizoram, Bihar, Manipur, and Goa showed relatively lower inequality levels. Some of these States, notably Mizoram and Bihar, also managed to narrow gaps between income thresholds, reflecting stronger inclusivity at the bottom half of the distribution. Income dynamics within employment types also varied widely across States.

In Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra, self-employed workers exhibited the widest income gaps, while salaried workers in States like Chhattisgarh and Meghalaya showed growing top-end income concentration. Additionally, the rural-urban income divide widened in many States, particularly among top income thresholds, compounding the problem. For instance, urban top 10 per cent incomes were more than double rural incomes nationally by 2023-24, with States like Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Goa, and Meghalaya leading this rural-urban divergence.

The weakening of India's middle-income groups, reflected in both PLFS and income tax return data, signals a worrying trend towards a hollowing-out of the economic centre. Addressing income inequality in India demands more than aggregate economic growth. As Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz has noted, middle-class erosion threatens both political stability and sustainable demand-driven growth. This requires deep, structural interventions: strengthening rural economies, investing in education and skill-building for lower-income groups, promoting gender parity in labour markets, and expanding access to formal employment. In a rapidly transforming India, equitable distribution of opportunities and incomes will be key not just for fairness, but for building a resilient and prosperous nation capable of harnessing its full demographic and economic potential.

Kapoor is chair, and Anand is researcher, Institute for Competitiveness

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

June 20, 2005

Anil Ambani unveils new identity

Mr Anil Ambani today announced the formation of Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Enterprises (ADAE) to control Reliance Capital (RCL), Reliance Energy (REL) and Reliance Infocomm. The new entity will invest about ₹2,000 crore in Reliance Capital and ₹1,000 crore in Reliance Energy. The boards of Reliance Energy and Reliance Capital have proposed preferential offers of equity shares and/or equity related securities to ADAE and long-term institutional investors, to further strengthen the companies' financial position.

Reliance Info: Major changes unlikely

The board of Reliance Infocomm will most certainly be changed; and the company's most high-profile official, Mr Kamal Nanavaty, Chief Operating Officer, will return to Reliance Industries. Little else would need to change at Reliance Infocomm with respect to its management, said Mr Anil Ambani.

61.1% exports to North America: ESC

The North American market (mainly US and Canada) accounted for 61.10 per cent of India's total exports of software services and ITES in 2004-05, according to Electronics and Computer Software Export Promotion Council.

India's next leap in sickle cell care

CK Mishra

As the National Sickle Cell Anaemia Mission (NSCAEM) completes two years, India, with the third highest burden of Sickle Cell Disease (SCD), stands at a critical juncture. More than 20 million Indians live with this inherited blood disorder, and approximately 42,000 children are born with SCD each year, accounting for 14.5 per cent of global SCD births.

To date, 5.75 crore individuals have undergone screening under NSCAEM. The mission's robust foundation rests on universal screening, early detection, public awareness campaigns and integrated care delivery, facilitated through the country's extensive network of public health institutions. However, it is evident that to truly eliminate SCD by 2047, we must deepen our focus on access, equity, and long-term continuity of care.

India's tribal communities are at the epicentre of the SCD burden. Approximately 83 per cent of this population lives in rural areas, with significant concentrations in States such as Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

These communities often reside in geographically remote and socio-economically marginalised regions. The challenge is not the absence of medical solutions; treatments such as hydroxyurea, counselling protocols, and referral mechanisms are available. The real issue lies in the system's ability to deliver these solutions equitably and consistently to those who need them most. For NSCAEM to succeed, it must prioritise reaching the communities.

RE-IMAGINING PRIMARY CARE

SCD is not an episodic illness; it is a lifelong condition that requires daily medication, regular monitoring, and ongoing psychosocial support. Distant hospitals mean high transport costs, lost workdays, and long waiting hours. As a result, adherence to treatment in these settings often drops sharply, frequently falling below 20 per cent.

To close this gap, care must shift from hospitals to homes. A community-anchored model is thus essential. Local health actors, such as ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists), should be empowered to play more significant roles beyond initial screening. Their responsibilities should include follow-up visits, treatment delivery, mobilising peer support, and providing basic counselling. Madhya Pradesh has set a positive example with its door-to-door screening efforts, targeting pregnant women, schoolchildren, and families of known SCD cases. Odisha offers transport incentives for SCD patients, while Maharashtra ensures that hydroxyurea reaches patients through trained frontline workers..

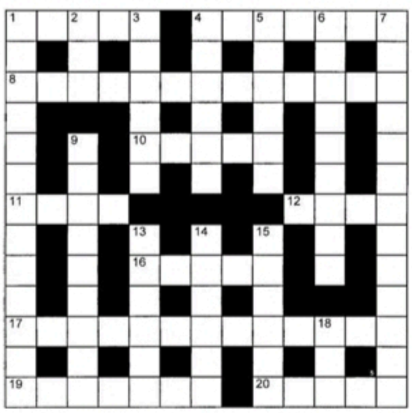
TRIBAL COMMUNITIES. Bearing the brunt of sickle cell disease KR DEEPAK

However, scaling such effort requires more than logistics; it necessitates trust. Many tribal communities harbour deep-rooted anxieties concerning blood disorders and medical interventions. To address these concerns, the power of the community must be fully utilised. Gram sabhas, village councils, and local NGOs should be integrated into programme design and communication strategies. Focusing only on early detection and symptomatic relief, though vital, will not be enough to eliminate the disease entirely. NSCAEM needs to expand its scope to advanced, disease-modifying and potentially curative therapies. This includes integrating a spectrum of advanced therapies, beginning with automated red blood cell exchange, which offers relief during acute complications such as stroke or acute chest syndrome. For patients eligible for long-term solutions, bone marrow transplantation presents a curative pathway, having demonstrated high success rates in matched-donor cases. India is also advancing towards gene-based interventions, with CRISPR-based therapies.

To ensure innovations help reduce health inequities rather than exacerbate them, a phased, publicly financed roadmap with regulatory and ethical safeguards is imperative.

The writer is former Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2722



EASY

ACROSS

1. Tree, its leaf emblematic to Canada (5)
4. Least amount (7)
8. RAF officer (4,9)
10. Distance to target (5)
11. Chief (4)
12. Self-satisfied (4)
16. Eat away (5)
17. Unlikelihood (13)
19. Total or partial disappearance of sun etc (7)
20. Lesser (5)

DOWN

1. Mechanical grass-cutter (6,7)
2. Cooking-vessel (3)
3. Additional item in performance (6)
4. Acting in dumbshow (6)
5. Closer (6)
6. Solstice around 21 June (9)
7. Matins (7,6)
9. Chief, head (9)
13. Make good one's losses (6)
14. Avowal of subject's obedience (6)
15. Agency, instrumentality (6)
18. Hostelry (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Syrup-tree providing first private meal (5)
4. No less than half-minute one gives mother (7)
8. Under Group Captain he'll order player on flank to come round (4,9)
10. Scope of one's voice may be mountainous (5)
11. Provide crew, including one for the high sea (4)
12. Contrabandist isn't half pleased with himself (4)
16. Some of the jeunesse d'oreé return to wear it away (5)
17. Unlikeliness could imply one has rabbi to turn to (13)
19. About fifty pieces might blot out the sun (7)
20. He's not old enough to be given key of this sort? (5)

DOWN

1. In order to con him, win game as it cuts the grass (6,7)
2. Harshly criticise a hollow metal drum (3)
3. Repeat performance once upset the Sappers (6)
4. Behaving speechlessly, in play (6)
5. Nine are rarely revealed as being more close (6)
6. Drum mimes play on quarter-day (9)
7. How to repay grim Norn for early service (7,6)
9. The head can rip lip apart (9)
13. Recover losses concerned with military takeover (6)
14. Reverence paid to silver in the house (6)
15. One of supernormal powers takes the middle course (6)
18. Travellers rest here to graze, say (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2721

ACROSS 1. Catch 4. Grammar 8. Nutriment 9. Sai 10. Related 12. Half 14. Inflict 17. Ream 18. Erudite 20. Ink 21. Signature 23. Literal 24. Evert

DOWN 1. Controversial 2. Tattle 3. Hoisting 4. Gee 5. Alto 6. Missal 7. Reinforcement 11. Delve 13. Accurate 15. Packet 16. Figure 19. User 22. Gel

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 2025

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New Green India Mission roadmap in climate change battle

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

NIKHIL GHANEKAR
NEW DELHI, JUNE 19

THE CENTRE on Tuesday released a revised roadmap for the National Mission for Green India, also known as the Green India Mission (GIM). The GIM is a key component of India's national effort to combat the effects of climate change.

In addition to the core objectives of increasing and restoring forest and green cover, the mission will address the issues of land degradation and desertification. The revised roadmap will also focus on restoration of the Aravalli range, Western Ghats, the Himalayas and mangroves.

The mission so far

GIM was rolled out in 2014 as one of the eight missions under India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), to be implemented over 10 years. The revised roadmap is for the period upto 2030.

The GIM's core aim is to combat the effects of climate change by increasing forest and tree cover, and the ecological restoration of degraded ecosystems and forests. It also aims to improve the livelihoods of communities that are dependent on forest produce.

The mission specifically targeted an increase in forest and tree cover on 5 million hectares, and on improving the quality of forest cover on another 5 million hectares. Between 2015-16 and 2020-21, GIM facilitated tree plantation and afforestation activities across 11.22 million hectares (mha) of land through central and state schemes.

Between 2019-20 and 2023-24, the Centre released Rs 624.71 crore to 18 states for interventions under GIM, of which Rs 575.55 crore has been utilised, according to an Environment Ministry response tabled in Lok Sabha this February.

Activities under GIM are concentrated in states based on mapping of ecological vulnerability, potential for sequestration (the process by which plants and trees store carbon using photosynthesis), forest and land degradation, and restoration potential.

Revised roadmap

The revised GIM roadmap accounts for on-ground climate impacts and feedback received from implementing partner states and scientific institutions, Environment Ministry officials told *The Indian Express*. A central focus of the revised mission plan will be the restoration and saturation of vulnerable landscapes through regionally conducive best practices. This includes area and landscape-specific restoration activities in three important mountain ranges — the Aravallis, the Western Ghats, and the Indian Himalayas, along with mangrove ecosystems.

The Aravallis, a natural barrier against the Thar desert, have witnessed extensive deforestation and degradation, leading to a total loss of forest cover in at least 12 places, according to past studies by the Wildlife Institute of India. These gaps have resulted in frequent sandstorms and dust pollution in Delhi, the National Capital Region and Punjab. GIM interventions in the Aravallis will work in sync with the Aravalli Green Wall project, recently launched by the Centre to combat degradation and desertification in one of the world's oldest mountain ranges.

Under the Green Wall project, restoration works have been planned initially across 8 lakh hectares spanning 29 districts and four states. This would be done in forest areas, grasslands, water systems and their catchment areas, and through the plantation of native, locally conducive species. The project is estimated to cost Rs 16,053 crore, and aims to create a buffer zone of 5 km around the mountain range, covering 6.45 million hectares.

In the Western Ghats, which have seen degradation, deforestation, and illegal mining, the revised roadmap will focus on afforestation, groundwater recharging, and the eco-restoration of abandoned mining areas.

Combating desertification

Around a third of India's geographical area — 97.85 million hectares — underwent land degradation during 2018-19, according to the Indian Space Research Organisation's Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas.

India has committed to creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide through additional forest and tree cover by 2030 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The natural carbon sinks of forests, restored grasslands, wetlands, and mountain ecology will help offset greenhouse gas emissions and act as natural sponges and barriers in absorbing climate change impacts.

An additional carbon sink of 2.29 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent was created between 2005 and 2021, as per the Environment Ministry statement made in Lok Sabha earlier this year.

India has also made an ambitious commitment to restore 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. To restore large swathes of forests and degraded lands, the restoration of impaired open forests is key — cost-effective and high-impact for CO2 sequestration, the revised GIM roadmap says, based on Forest Survey of India (FSI) estimates.

According to the FSI, this approach alone has the potential to sequester 1.89 billion tonnes of CO2 over approximately 15 million hectares. It also estimates that by aligning ongoing schemes and intensifying afforestation efforts, GIM can help India expand its forest and tree cover up to 24.7 million hectares. This would be enough to achieve a carbon sink of 3.39 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent by 2030, as per the FSI's projections.

NEWS YOU CAN USE

FASTAG ANNUAL PASS: HOW HIGHWAY TRAVEL FOR RS 3,000 WILL WORK

The new annual pass can be activated on your existing FASTag. *Express Archive*

DHEERAJ MISHRA
NEW DELHI, JUNE 19

ROAD TRANSPORT and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari on Wednesday announced a Rs 3,000 FASTag-based annual pass for "hassle-free highway travel" in non-commercial private vehicles such as cars, jeeps, and vans.

The FASTag-based passes, which will be effective from August 15, will remain valid for a year or 200 trips or crossings, whichever comes earlier, Gadkari said. The passes will address "long-standing concerns" of commuters at toll plazas, he said.

With the pass, the average cost of crossing a toll plaza will be only Rs 15, and users will save at least Rs 7,000 per pass, the Minister said.

FASTag, annual pass

FASTag is an electronic toll collection system managed by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) and National Highways Authority of India (NHAI). FASTag was launched in 2014 as a pilot project and was made mandatory at every toll plaza in the country in 2021.

A sticker is usually pasted on the windscreen; most new vehicles these days leave the showroom with it, and the user has to periodically recharge the wallet by putting money in it.

The annual pass scheme will allow free passage through National Highway and National Expressway plazas during its validity, after which it will automatically revert to a regular FASTag, with the usual per-trip user charges.

A user may repurchase the annual pass if the 200-trip limit is exhausted before the one-year period of validity ends.

The pass is non-transferable.

Details of the pass

SINGLE TRIP: For point-based fee plazas, each crossing of the plaza will be counted as one trip; a round trip (to and fro) will be counted as two trips. For closed tolling fee plazas, a pair of entry and exit will be counted as one trip.

NOT MANDATORY: The existing FASTag system will continue to operate as usual. A user can choose to pay as per applicable user fees at the plazas.

NOT FOR COMMERCIAL VEHICLES: The pass is only for private vehicles, and its use in any commercial vehicle will result in immediate deactivation, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has said.

NOT FOR STATE HIGHWAYS: The annual pass is valid only for National Highway and National Expressway fee plazas; at other roads such as expressways managed by state governments or local bodies, or state highways, etc., regular user fees will be payable.

PASS MAY GET COSTLIER: The Ministry's June 17 notification says the cost of the annual pass may be revised on April 1 every year.

How to activate

The pass will be activated after the eligibility of the vehicle and associated FASTag are verified. The user will have to pay Rs 3,000 for the base year 2025-26 either through the *Rajmargyatra* mobile application or the NHAI website. Once the pass is activated on the registered FASTag, the user will receive SMS notifications.

You need not buy a new FASTag to get the annual pass; it will be activated on the existing FASTag.

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

Cost of pulses, oil imports

India's imports of pulses and edible oils have scaled new highs, even as the cultivation of these crops have turned increasingly unremunerative for farmers. Here's what's been happening — and why

HARISH DAMODARAN

RAO GULAB SINGH LODHI has harvested around 90 quintals of summer *moong* (green gram) from his 16 acres of land in Nanhegaon village of Madhya Pradesh's Narsinghpur district.

But he is worried about the government's apathy in procuring the crop that is fetching about Rs 6,500 per quintal in the open market, as against its official minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 8,682.

And it's not only *moong*.

Lodhi cultivates soyabean during the *kharif* (monsoon) season, sowing in early-July and harvesting by mid-October, followed by *chana* (chickpea) and *masoor* (red lentil) during *rabi* (winter-spring).

After harvesting *masoor* around March 10 and *chana* about 5-10 days later, he sows summer *moong* that matures in 60-70 days.

None of these crops is procured by the government at MSP in the same way as rice and wheat are. "But I can't grow rice or wheat, except for self-consumption, here. This black cotton soil is suitable for pulses and oilseeds," Lodhi says.

Lodhi, 65, is a progressive farmer who plants the best recommended varieties of soyabean, *moong*, *masoor*, and *chana*. And yet, soyabean is selling in the state's *mandis* at Rs 4,100-4,200 per quintal — below not only the MSP of Rs 5,328 for the upcoming 2025-26, but even the Rs 4,892 of last year's crop.

Lodhi is stoic about his situation, and is going ahead with planting soyabean. "*Vikalp kya hai* (what option do I have)?" he says.

Record pulses imports

The woes for the growers of pulses and oilseeds come amid all-time high imports during 2024-25 (April-March).

Pulses imports touched 7.3 million tonnes (mt), valued at $5.5 billion, surpassing the previous record of 6.6 mt ($4.2 billion) for 2016-17.

For five years from 2017-18, the imports of pulses fell to an average of 2.6 mt, worth $1.7 billion, on the back of improved domestic production (*Charts 1a and 1b*).

India's pulses output, which stood at 19.3 mt in 2013-14, and 17.2 mt and 16.3 mt in the drought years of 2014-15 and 2015-16 respectively, rose to 27.3 mt in 2021-22 and 26.1 mt in 2022-23.

Much of this increased production was due to *chana* and *moong*. Scientists bred short-duration varieties (100-120 days) of *chana* that required hardly any irrigation, and varieties of *moong* that were amenable to growing in all seasons. Farmers today plant *moong* in *kharif* and *rabi*, as well as in the spring and summer.

However, this relative self-sufficiency achieved in pulses was reversed in 2023-24, which was an El Niño-induced drought year. Domestic production fell to 24.2 mt in 2023-24, and recovered to 25.2 mt in 2024-25, as per Agriculture Ministry data.

Falling output and retail inflation in pulses soaring to double digits by mid-2023 led to a slashing of duties on imports, which peaked during the last fiscal.

The 7.3 mt of pulses imports in 2024-25 included 2.2 mt of yellow/ white peas (largely from Canada and Russia), 1.6 mt of *chana* (from Australia), 1.2 mt each of *arhar* or pigeon-pea (from Mozambique, Tanzania, Myanmar, Sudan and Malawi) and *masoor* (from Canada, Australia and United States), and 0.8 mt of *urad* or black gram (from Myanmar and Brazil).

As imports surged, the consumer price index (CPI) inflation in pulses eased to 3.8% year-on-year by December 2024 and further to 2.6%, – 0.4%, – 2.7%, – 5.2%, and – 8.2% in the following five months.

The boot is on the other foot now, with *arhar* and *chana* selling at Rs 6,450-6,500 and Rs 5,450-5,500 per quintal respectively in Maharashtra's Latur *mandi*, below their corresponding MSPs of Rs 7,550 and Rs 5,650.

The story of oils

The story in vegetable oils has been more uniform — that of increasing import dependence.

The last 11 years have seen imports more than double from 7.9 mt to 16.4 mt, a trend that needs to be arrested, if not reversed.

In value terms, imports almost trebled from $7.2 billion in 2013-14 to $20.8 billion in 2022-23, which was around the time when international prices skyrocketed owing to supply disruptions due to the Russia-Ukraine war. While global prices have come off those peaks, the quantum of imports has continued to rise (*Charts 2a and 2b*).

The 16.4 mt of imports during 2024-25 mainly comprised 7.9 mt of palm (primarily from Indonesia and Malaysia), 4.8 mt of soyabean (from Argentina and Brazil), and 3.5 mt of sunflower oil (from Russia, Ukraine, and Argentina).

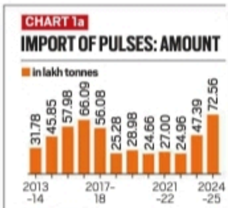
On the other hand, India's production of oil from domestically grown oilseeds and secondary sources such as cottonseed, rice bran and maize is estimated at just about 10 mt, which translates to an import dependence of well over 60%.

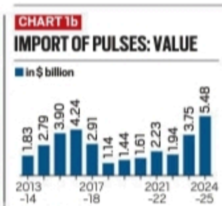
CPI inflation in vegetable oils, unlike pulses, has been ruling at double digits since November 2024, with the latest May reading at 17.9%. It explains the government's May 30 decision to cut the basic customs duty on crude palm, soyabean, and sunflower oil from 20% to 10% and the overall import tariff (after adding an agriculture cess and social welfare surcharge) from 27.5% to 16.5%.

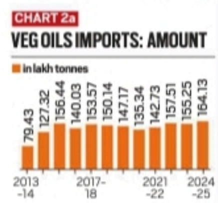
The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) expects the lowering of duty to result in a "further increase" in soyabean oil imports by India. Although this market is dominated by Argentina, "the reduced tariff can boost the import of US soyabean oil," a USDA report dated June 10 has stated.

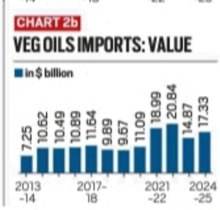
All this suggests imports will likely hit a new high in the current fiscal, even as the USDA has projected a record-breaking global vegetable oil output of 235 mt for 2025-26, led by palm (80.7 mt) and soyabean (70.8 mt). That may not be good news for farmers like Lodhi.

The Soyabean Processors' Association of India has expressed concern over the 11-percentage-point duty cut, which is expected to "flood the Indian market with cheaper imported oils". That will make oilseed cultivation less attractive to farmers, who may sow less area and switch to more profitable crops in this *kharif* season, said Davish Jain, chairman of the Indore-based association.









Source: Department of Commerce

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The Great Charter: How Magna Carta came to be, and why its legacy endures

EXPLAINED CULTURE

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, JUNE 19

EIGHT HUNDRED and ten years ago, an English king gave his seal of approval to a seminal document which laid down principles that would help establish modern democracies.

The Magna Carta (Latin for "Great Charter") was signed on June 15, 1215, at Runnymede Meadows near London. English barons collectively sought to restrict King John's arbitrary orders and had him agree to several principles, most significant of which was that the king could only act as per the law of the land.

Last month, Harvard University discovered one of the earliest versions of the document in its collections, dating back to the year 1300, previously assumed to be a copy. "Considered a key step in the evolution of human rights against oppressive rulers, Magna Carta has formed the basis of constitutions around the world," a report on the website of Harvard Law School noted.

Context of medieval England

The Magna Carta was sealed at a time when King John witnessed several military failures. In 1204, the King of France, Philip II, took control of Normandy and Anjou. To fund expeditions to seize those lands, John raised taxes on his subjects.

In the feudal structure, barons were granted varying sizes of land in exchange for their loyalty and services to the monarch. These services would include things such as providing knights or steeds during times of war.

King John's taxes and policies, however, were not popular. Such was the discontent that his defeat in the battle of Bouvines in 1214 — once again at the hands of the French — became the immediate trigger for a barons' rebellion.

English historian JC Holt wrote in his book *Magna Carta* (1965) that agreements for the king ceding some of his power after battle losses were not unusual in mediaeval Europe. Nonetheless, the Great Charter was a significant moment which defined power or rights in the political structure, at a time when there existed no constitution. This was a society "in which privilege seemed to be part of the natural order of things", wrote Holt. "From these primitive elements to a settled constitution was a long, tortuous and often bloody journey in which the grant of charters of liberties was but one, and that an early, step."


A 19th century depiction of King John, surrounded by barons, signing the Magna Carta. *Wikimedia Commons*

What charter said, its adoption

The meeting in Runnymede resulted in a charter running into more than 3,500 words across 63 clauses. Some dealt with more local administrative issues, while others had universal applicability.

Clause 39 says: "No free man is to be arrested, or imprisoned, or disseised, or outlawed, or exiled, or in any other way ruined, nor will we go against him or send against him, except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land." Clause 40 says: "To no one will we sell, to no one will we deny or delay right or justice." Copies of Magna Carta were sent out to be read out in each county to popularise it.

Within three months, fearing the loss of his power, John was able to annul the charter with the help of Pope Innocent III. But he died just a year later.

His remaining supporters decided to install his nine-year-old son on the throne: Henry III was crowned later that year. In exchange for the barons' loyalty, Henry III reissued the Magna Carta, first of several times that the charter has been reissued, with modifications over the years.

Today, four copies of the original document have survived. A version from 1297 sold at an auction in 2007 for $21.3 million.

A contested legacy

Critics say that the charter strictly dealt with the distribution of power among elites.

A *BBC* report from 2015, the 800th anniversary of the document, stated "free men" mentioned in clause 39 accounted for less than half the population at the time. "The rest were serfs, to whom the charter did not apply. And "men" meant men — women, except for widows, merit barely a mention in Magna Carta," it said.

Its modern association with democracy is also debatable, as it wasn't aimed at truly democratising the political structure.

English historian David Carpenter, in an essay for *The Guardian*, wrote that despite these lacunae, the document still resulted in "the most radical and detailed restrictions on the ruler" in Europe. That wasn't necessarily because of magnanimity on the king's part, but because he was "uniquely demanding and intrusive" of his subjects, "thanks to the pressures of maintaining a continental empire" that stretched to southern France.

Still, it "asserted a fundamental principle — the rule of law. The king was beneath the law, the law the Charter itself was making. He could no longer treat his subjects in an arbitrary fashion."

Clauses 39 and 40 are still on the UK statutes and are seen as the basis of concepts such as *habeas corpus* (guarding against arbitrary detention).

US National Archives note: "During the American Revolution, Magna Carta served to inspire and justify action in liberty's defense. The colonists believed they were entitled to the same rights as Englishmen, rights guaranteed in Magna Carta. They embedded those rights into the laws of their states and later into the Constitution and Bill of Rights."

Rather than the specifics, the Magna Carta's representation as a symbol of modern democratic values is what has endured.

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
NOTHING IN LIFE IS TO BE FEARED.
IT IS ONLY TO BE UNDERSTOOD.
— MARIA SKLODOWSKA-CURIE

The Indian EXPRESS
FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

NOT MAKING THE CUT

As Trump ramps up pressure for lower rates, US central bank's pursuit of its dual mandate goals becomes more challenging

IN ITS JUNE meeting, the US Federal Reserve kept interest rates unchanged, maintaining the target range for federal funds at 4.25-4.5 per cent. This is the fourth consecutive meeting when the Fed has refrained from lowering rates. The decision was along expected lines. The Fed has adopted a wait-and-watch approach as it gauges the impact of President Donald Trump's policies on inflation and the economy. The US central bank has now indicated the possibility of two interest rate cuts this year and another cut next year.

But there was a notable change of tone in the Fed's policy statement this time. In May, the central bank had said that "uncertainty about the economic outlook has increased further". The meeting was held just after Trump's "Liberation Day" tariff announcements. In the June meeting, however, the Fed noted that "uncertainty about the economic outlook has diminished", though it still "remains elevated". But the effects of tariffs on the economy, and inflation in particular, are beginning to be felt. In his comments, Fed Chair Jerome Powell noted that in some categories, such as personal computers and audio-visual equipment, price increases were being seen, and that is "attributable to tariff increases". However, the full effect on consumer prices will only be visible in the weeks and months ahead once the inventories built up by retailers before the tariffs were imposed are exhausted. Powell has acknowledged that: "We've had goods inflation just moving up a bit, and, of course, we do expect to see more of that over the course of the summer," he said. In line with this, the central bank has now raised its inflation forecast for the year to 3 per cent, up from 2.7 per cent earlier. It also expects the economic momentum to slow down — it has lowered its growth forecast to 1.4 per cent from 1.7 per cent. The labour market, though, is expected to remain broadly healthy — the Fed has projected the unemployment rate to edge only marginally upwards to 4.5 per cent, from 4.4 per cent earlier — creating the space for it to remain focused on inflation.

The Fed's policy continues to draw criticism from the US President. On Wednesday, prior to the Fed meeting, Trump is reported to have said, "So we have a stupid person, frankly, at the Fed. He probably won't cut today. Europe had 10 cuts, and we had none. I guess he's a political guy." In the past as well, Trump has been vocal in his criticism of Powell and the direction of the Fed's monetary policy. As Trump continues to ramp up pressure for lower interest rates, the Fed faces a challenging task as it pursues its dual mandate goals of maximum employment and price stability.

NO STOPPING HER

Class XII board exam data from 2024 show science is no longer a boys' club. Challenge now is to keep up the momentum

DATA ON 2024 Class XII board exams, released by the Ministry of Education, tell a story of quiet persistence: For the first time in a decade, more girls — 28.14 lakh — cleared the board exams in the science stream than in humanities — 27.24 lakh. These figures mark a powerful shift in academic and social dynamics. As an analysis of numbers from 25 school boards between 2010 and 2023 by this newspaper in September 2024 showed, only 38.2 per cent of students clearing science in 2010 were girls. By 2023, that number had climbed to 45.5 per cent, setting the stage for the 2024 breakthrough. The reversal of the longstanding gender tilt toward humanities is an affirmation that science — once seen as a male preserve — is being actively pursued by female students across the country. In a country aspiring to be a global leader in the knowledge economy, this is welcome news: Drawing on the scientific potential of half its population is not just desirable, it is essential.

State-level results underscore the national picture. In Tamil Nadu, girls achieved a formidable 96.35 per cent science pass rate in 2024; in Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha, girls outperformed boys. This reshaping of ambition and possibility has been facilitated by growing parental encouragement and good-faith policy interventions such as the Vigyan Jyoti scholarship schemes for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the CBSE's Udaan initiative, which helps underprivileged girls prepare for engineering and medical entrance exams through mentoring and financial aid. What happens when more girls enter higher education in STEM? According to the All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22, women now make up 52.1 per cent of all students in science disciplines across undergraduate, postgraduate, MPhil, and PhD levels. At the undergraduate level, they constitute a little over 51 per cent of the total enrolment. In medicine, women are at par with men; in engineering and technology — fields where they have traditionally been a sliver — their representation has risen considerably. These numbers point to a future workforce that is likely to be more diverse, representative, and arguably, more innovative.

The promise of these numbers, however, will continue to come up against the shadow of unequal realities unless it is met with deeper investment in infrastructure, mentorship networks, employment opportunities and safe spaces to learn and to linger in. Girls from rural areas and low-income households still face immense barriers that cap their ambitions: Lack of resources; unavailability of laboratories and equipment; a private study space, or simply, the right to stay in school. If this moment is to make room for long-term change, it must ensure that STEM dreams that have got off the block are not stalled midway.

STARTING OVER

New-look Indian team and captaincy of Shubman Gill are a leap of faith by selectors, and a big generational jump

INDIAN CRICKET IS in uncharted territory on the eve of the first Test of the five-match series in England that starts on Friday. The uncertainty isn't just due to the exit of Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, two players whose auras were so large that they became the team's identity. It's also because the baton now falls on a younger lot of players who may not be quite ready yet for the oldest format in the game. The new-look Indian team and the captaincy of Shubman Gill are a leap of faith by selectors, and a big generational jump.

The young players in the Test team would do well to remember Kohli's words at the end of an emotional celebration of his first IPL title for RCB: "It's still five levels below Test cricket. If you want to earn respect in world cricket all over, take up Test cricket, give your heart and soul to it." The big hole left by the two players has been evident so far in the pre-series build-up in England by the local media. Most questions to the players have been about Kohli or Rohit. The large shadow cast on them can be erased by the new-look Indian team by their own performance in the home of Test cricket.

Luckily for them, they have their ace bowling trump card in Jasprit Bumrah, even if he is likely to play just three Tests. On the batting front, it will come down to K L Rahul, the senior-most batsman, to set the base, Gill the captain to build on it, and Rishabh Pant to trigger consternation in the opposition camp. If the rest of the youngsters, and Karun Nair, a veteran domestic-cricket batsman making a remarkable comeback, can find their feet, then India can test England. The hosts, too, are sporting a depleted bowling attack due to a spate of injuries, and their batting isn't quite a settled unit yet.

Just a lunch

Strategic interest, not sentiment, shapes US approach to Pakistan. India need not worry about Trump-Munir meeting

SYED ATA HASNAIN

US PRESIDENT DONALD Trump's recent lunch meeting with Pakistan's Army Chief, General Asim Munir, has raised more than a few eyebrows, particularly in India. Munir is not a well-known figure in Washington's strategic circles and yet, he found himself seated across from the most powerful man in the world. For many, it seemed like a bizarre political detour. But if one strips away sentiment and looks through the lens of history and statecraft, the picture becomes clearer.

As the old adage goes, nations have no permanent friends or enemies — only permanent interests. What we are witnessing is not a departure from norms but a reaffirmation of how American foreign policy has long worked, particularly when it comes to Pakistan.

Pakistan occupies one of the most strategically sensitive pieces of real estate in the world. It borders five civilisational and geopolitical spheres: Indian, Chinese, Central Asian, Persian and Arab. No other space in the world offers such a dense intersection of influence. That alone ensures that Pakistan, regardless of its economic health or internal chaos, will continue to feature in the calculus of global powers.

This is not a new phenomenon. From the 1950s onwards, Pakistan was a member of both SEATO and CENTO — Cold War alliances aimed at containing communism. In 1960, CIA pilot Gary Powers flew a U-2 spy plane from Peshawar over Soviet territory, which was later shot down, sparking an international crisis. In the 1970s, Pakistan served as the covert conduit through which President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger opened diplomatic relations with China.

Crucially, after 9/11, Pakistan's territory became indispensable for US operations in Afghanistan. Whether it was providing a logistics corridor for NATO supplies, intelligence coordination (however uneven), or access to airbases, Pakistan allowed America to wage a two-decade war in its backyard without the financial and operational burden of establishing new infrastructure in Central Asia. Without Pakistan, the Afghan war would have cost three times as much and been logistically far more challenging.

Many Indians are rightly puzzled by Washington's recurring tilt toward Pakistan, especially when it is common knowledge that Pakistan has harboured and supported anti-India terror networks. However, the US Department of Defence has maintained a deep institutional relationship with the Pakistan army that survives changes in political mood. America may mistrust Pakistan's civilian governments or even its double-dealing on terrorism, but it views the Pakistan military as a rational, hierarchical force that can "get things done". I attended training courses and programmes in the US. I can state that in a lineup of Indian and Pakistani officers from the armed forces, an American general will always shake hands first with the Pakistanis.

> Trump's outreach to Pakistan should not be read as a betrayal or a shift away from India. It is better understood as tactical engagement driven by geography, legacy relationships, and evolving regional threats. Pakistan will always offer America access, whether for leverage in Kabul, observation posts against Iran, or to counter Chinese expansion. But such engagement is opportunistic, not strategic. India's strength lies elsewhere. We are not a country that offers itself as an operational base or intermediary. We offer long-term strategic value; a stable democracy, a massive consumer market, a growing technological base, a competent military, and a rules-based approach to global governance.
> We are not transactional in our diplomacy;
> we are a civilisational state with depth.

That calculus has not changed. Trump's meeting with Munir signals a tactical re-engagement rather than a fundamental strategic pivot. The US may be planning for renewed contingency operations in Afghanistan, hedging against China's Belt and Road Initiative via CPEC, or managing risks in Iran and Central Asia. Pakistan is relevant in all these theatres.

At the same time, India must recognise that its own strategic partnership with the US remains strong and is grounded in very different fundamentals. Since 1991, when India opened up its economy and began integrating with the global order, relations with Washington have steadily deepened. The nuclear deal of 2008, defence cooperation under LEMOA and COMCASA, technology partnerships and the rise of the Quad reflect this.

However, this relationship is not immune to friction. India's insistence on strategic autonomy occasionally confounds American expectations. Nowhere was this more visible than during the Ukraine war. While the West imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia, India chose a path of calibrated engagement — buying oil at discounted rates, abstaining at the UN, and maintaining robust dialogue with both sides. This decision wasn't about fence-sitting; it was about placing Indian national interest above alliance politics.

Washington noticed — and, to its credit, ultimately respected — India's position. But the episode was a timely reminder; even close partners will diverge when their interests do.

Seen in this light, Trump's outreach to Pakistan should not be read as a betrayal or a shift away from India. It is better understood as tactical engagement driven by geography, legacy relationships, and evolving regional threats. Pakistan will always offer America access, whether for leverage in Kabul, observation posts against Iran, or to counter Chinese expansion. But such engagement is opportunistic, not strategic.

India's strength lies elsewhere. We are not a country that offers itself as an operational base or intermediary. We offer long-term strategic value; a stable democracy, a massive consumer market, a growing technological base, a competent military, and a rules-based approach to global governance. We are not transactional in our diplomacy; we are a civilisational state with depth.

Pakistan's ruling elite — particularly its military — has always sought visibility abroad to compensate for instability at home. Foreign engagements like the one with Trump are often used to burnish credentials domestically. But Pakistan's fundamentals remain fragile: An economy in freefall, a splintered polity, and an increasingly alienated populace. America knows this. While it may engage Islamabad's generals from time to time, it does not mistake tactical necessity for strategic trust.

India, on the other hand, has remained firm and predictable through global flux. India remained steady whether it was Covid, the Afghanistan pull-out, or the energy crisis after Ukraine. That is the hallmark of a reliable partner, not one that flits in and out of favour but one that shows up and stays the course.

Let us not be distracted by luncheon invites. Let us remain focused on India's trajectory. We are not a fly-by-night friend of the US — we are a strategic power in our own right. We are neither insecure about Pakistan's moment in the sun nor anxious for validation.

We should be confident that the more uncertain the world becomes, the more valuable India's stability will appear. The US knows this, even if it occasionally wanders in search of old allies for new problems. Real partnership is tested over time — and India has passed that test repeatedly.

The US may dip back into its Pakistan playbook occasionally, but its real bet is on a rising India. That bet may not always be loud, but it will be lasting.

The writer is a former corps commander of the Srinagar-based 15 Corps and a member of the National Disaster Management Authority. Views are personal

THE MISSING MINING DRIVE

India must fast-track exploration of critical minerals

DHIRAJ NAYYAR

THE EVOLUTION OF human civilisation is intrinsically linked to the use of metals. Around 7,000 years ago, civilisation made a great leap from the Neolithic Age to the Chalcolithic Age. Subsequently, it grew more advanced as it moved to the Bronze Age and then the Iron Age. In more recent times, epochs have not necessarily been named after metals or their source — minerals that occur under the surface. But eras have been defined by them. Coal powered the first industrial revolution of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Oil and its derivatives fuelled the second industrial revolution (think cars and planes), and global prosperity in the second half of the 20th century. Now, the long 21st century is going to be the critical minerals age.

In a way, it already is. The president of the world's largest economy has put critical minerals at the core of his foreign and domestic agenda. The reason Donald Trump wants to "annex" Canada and Greenland is to have control over their vast mineral wealth. The only reason he is remotely interested in solving the Russia-Ukraine conflict is the potential for the US to access Ukraine's rich mineral resources. At home, Trump is opening up vast tracts of federal land — previously on no-go lists — for mineral exploration on a fast-track basis, cutting approvals time from a year to less than a month. Minerals have also taken centre-stage in the global trade war. China is using its disproportionate control over rare earth materials to threaten the US and the rest of the world with the debilitating consequences of restricted supply.

> China alone accounts for two-thirds of global rare earths mining. Australia, Chile and China account for a majority of lithium mining. In processing, there is complete dominance across the board by just one country, China. Sixty-six per cent of the processing of critical minerals (also including copper and aluminium) takes place in China. For rare earths, this goes up to more than 90 per cent. China alone can bring the global EV industry to a halt by restricting the supply of rare earths. It is happening right at this moment.

Twenty or even 10 years ago, the thought of critical minerals or rare earths being at the centre of global conflict, whether geopolitical or geoeconomic, would not have been taken very seriously. The only natural resource that figured in the context of international security and strategy was oil. Since then, two things have happened. First, a growing consciousness about climate change. Second, technological advancement towards a fourth industrial revolution.

The technologies that help mitigate climate change — by enabling a substitution of fossil fuels like coal and oil — are heavily mineral-intensive. An electric vehicle uses six times the minerals a conventional vehicle does, largely because its battery is made of lithium, cobalt and nickel. Renewable energy infrastructure for solar and wind power is also mineral-intensive. For example, an offshore wind infrastructure project consumes nine times the minerals that a conventional power plant would.

The fourth industrial revolution, which involves AI, robotics and big data, is also mineral-intensive. For example, any digital or digital connectivity infrastructure requires copper in large quantities. Copper is critical because of its electrical conductivity. Data centres, the backbone of big data and AI, consume a lot of copper. They also consume large amounts of energy. To mitigate climate change, a lot of this needs to be sourced from renewable sources. There are several other examples of the mineral intensity of emerging technologies. As the adoption of these technologies grows, the demand-supply gap of critical minerals will grow.

The biggest risk to the emerging landscape is the heavy concentration in the supply of critical minerals, much greater than the concentration in oil. There are two stages of the value chain that are of concern. First, the extraction of the metal ore from the surface. Second, the processing of that ore into usable metal. There is a high degree of concentration in the first. Cobalt comes almost exclusively from Congo. Indonesia dominates the mining of nickel, almost 50 per cent of the global supply. China alone accounts for two-thirds of global rare earths mining. Australia, Chile and China account for a majority of lithium mining. In processing, there is complete dominance across the board by just one country, China. Sixty-six per cent of the processing of critical minerals (also including copper and aluminium) takes place in China. For rare earths, this goes up to more than 90 per cent. China alone can bring the global EV industry to a halt by restricting the supply of rare earths. It is happening right at this moment.

Neither the US nor India can rely on China. It is time to emulate America's policies and fast track the exploration of critical minerals. India remains under-explored for all minerals. This state of affairs is no longer an option, especially if India is to become a serious player in manufacturing. It is near-impossible to secure mineral supply chains from overseas — even the US is struggling. As a country that is geologically rich, India must explore within.

The author is chief economist, Vedanta Ltd

JUNE 20, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN EXPRESS

$4 BN AID FOR INDIA

THE AID-INDIA consortium pledged total assistance of four billion dollars to India during the fiscal year 1985-86, which represents an increase of over five per cent in real terms. India will get 3.9 billion dollars in terms of Special Drawing Rights (SDR) as against 3.7 billion dollars last year. This is an increase of 200 million dollars or 5.5 per cent in real terms. In pledging four billion dollars, the World-Bank led consortium has maintained its assistance to India at approximately last year's level.

PAK CRITICISES INDIA

INDIA EXPRESSED "REGRET" at the statement of Pakistan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Zain Noorani, about the human rights of Indian Muslims. An official spokesperson said, "we regret that the minister should have spoken in such terms about India's internal affairs." Noorani had made the statement while referring to the anti-reservation agitation in Gujarat. He alleged that the state government has instigated a communal riot to divert attention from the agitation.

CONG CHIEF KILLED

THE CITY CONGRESS (I) president, Neta Hakimuddin, was shot dead by unidentified assailants on the Prahlad Nagar road in Meerut. The DIG, police, Nathu Lal told PTI that the Congress (I) leader, who was riding on a rickshaw, was shot from point-blank range by some persons. The bullets hit him on the temple and he died on the spot, he said. The assailants managed to escape.

THE IDEAS PAGE

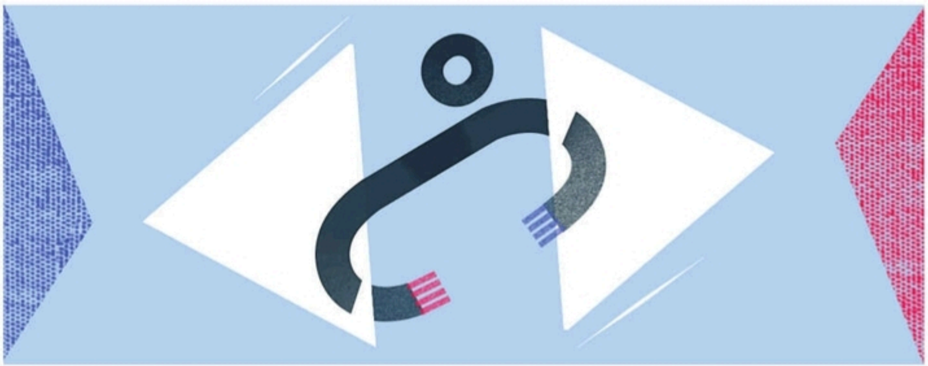
WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Washington must not join Tel Aviv's war party, while the global community must censure Israel for sowing chaos in the region, while unleashing... violence in the occupied territories."

— DAWN, PAKISTAN

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



C R Sasikumar

The government is contemplating a cap on air conditioner temperatures. Is this a durable way to conserve energy?

Cooling: Necessity and emergency

AC temperature cap, while not a game-changer, opens the door to much-needed conversations on an urgent developmental need

CHANDRA BHUSHAN

THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT is reportedly contemplating to limit air conditioner (AC) temperature settings between 20°C and 28°C. This seem like a minor technical move, but it marks an important symbolic step in reshaping our approach to cooling. While it will not, by itself, lead to a significant reduction in energy use — and will face major implementation challenges on the ground — it sends a critical signal about the growing impact of cooling on India's energy grid, environmental footprint and climate ambitions.

Cooling is the fastest-growing energy-consuming sector in India. With economic growth, rising urbanisation, and more intense and frequent heat waves, demand for air conditioning is surging. Last year, about 15 million ACs were sold in the country — up from just 7.5 million units in 2022. As a result, cooling now accounts for a significant share of electricity consumption, and this is expected to rise exponentially. In Delhi, for example, ACs now account for nearly 40 per cent of the city's annual electricity use — a figure that rises to 50-60 per cent during summer months, even though only about 30 per cent of households own an AC.

Even with modest penetration, ACs are already a major driver of peak electricity demand, prompting the installation of new coal-fired power plants just to meet summertime surges. In a country heavily reliant on coal, this directly undermines efforts to reduce emissions and meet climate targets. Additionally, the grid — under pressure from this rising load — is becoming increasingly vulnerable to stress and blackouts.

This growth in AC use is particularly problematic because it relies primarily on vapour compression technology — the most energy-intensive and environmentally damaging cooling method. The climate cost of an AC extends well beyond electricity. Most ACs in India use hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) refrigerants — super greenhouse gases with global warming potentials hundreds or even thousands of times higher than carbon dioxide (CO2). Due to frequent leakage and poor servicing practices, these gases are typically refilled every two to three years (in parts of Delhi it is every year).

A typical 1.5-2.0 ton AC contains around 2 kg of HFCs, which, if released, equates to roughly 1.5 tonnes of CO2-equivalent emissions. Add to that the emissions linked to the unit's annual electricity use — about 1.5 tonnes of CO2 — and the total climate impact comes to around 2.25 tonnes of CO2-equivalent emissions annually. For context, the average car in India emits about 2.0 tonnes of CO2 per year. Running and maintaining a single AC is among the most climate-damaging individual activities.

Yet cooling is no longer a luxury. It has become a basic need. It is essential for health, productivity, and even social stability. Research shows that hot, sleepless nights are linked to increased aggression and violence. For the poor and vulnerable, the lack of cooling is not just uncomfortable, it can be fatal. The challenge, therefore, is to make cooling both accessible and sustainable. India cannot afford billions of energy-guzzling ACs. This will break the grid and the environment. What we need is a complete reimagining of how we keep our homes, offices, and cities cool in ways that serve all people.

This begins with the built environment. Buildings and urban layouts must be designed to stay cool naturally, using high-insulating building materials, shaded façades, reflective roofs, cross-ventilation, and landscaping. Cities must be made cooler through more green spaces, water bodies, reduced asphalt, and materials that lower heat absorption. India must invest in alternatives like centralised cooling and district cooling systems (DCS) — networks that supply chilled water through pipes to buildings, which can then be used for cooling. These systems minimise the need for harmful refrigerants. Studies also show that DCS can reduce cooling demand by 30-40 per cent and cut electricity bills in half. Large-scale district cooling projects are now being planned. Hyderabad Pharma City, for example, aims to install one of the largest DCS facilities in Asia.

At the same time, India must accelerate the development and deployment of super-efficient ACs. They promise up to five times more efficiency than today's best five-star-rated models. These innovations must be fast-tracked through targeted subsidies, smart regulations, and market transformation programmes to ensure both affordability and wide-scale adoption.

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Finally, cooling must be made inclusive. While the rich rely on air conditioners, the majority of India's population remains vulnerable to extreme heat with little or no access to cooling. Ironically, ACs disproportionately affect the poor through overloaded grids, blackouts, and intensified urban heat islands. We must develop cooling solutions for the poor — low-cost technologies that consume less energy. Public cooling shelters must be established in high-heat, high-poverty areas. Policies must prioritise access for those most at risk — street vendors, workers, slum dwellers, and the elderly. Solutions like shared cooling spaces should be built into urban planning.

The AC temperature cap, while not a game-changer on its own, opens the door to a more urgent conversation. Cooling is now a developmental necessity — but also an environmental and energy emergency. How we choose to cool will shape not only our physical comfort but also our economic resilience and environmental future.

The writer is CEO, International Forum for Environment, Sustainability and Technology (iFOREST)

The cap is a quick fix

The need is to provide solutions that don't impose high energy costs or harm the environment

TRISHNA SARKAR

LAST WEEK, AS Delhi reeled under an intense heatwave, I stepped out to a local market. A group of agitated street vendors shifting their carts caught my eye. I asked one of them what was going on. He responded with visible frustration, "Ma'am, we're caught in a heat trap. Behind us, AC vents from shops are blasting hot air. In front, parked cars and SUVs are idling with their ACs running, releasing more heat. Surviving this weather while trying to earn a living feels like hell."

Air-conditioning systems exemplify the dual nature of technology. Although they keep the people in their environment comfortable, these cooling systems use a lot of energy and emit heat into the surrounding air. A solution for one person thus becomes a burden for another and also harms the environment.

Union Minister of Power Manohar Lal Khattar has announced that guidelines would be set to mandate ACs to operate within a temperature range of 20°C to 28°C. The move might seem timely in view of the energy-consumption problem posed by these cooling gadgets. But is that a practical solution to a difficult predicament? It seems akin to asking people to use less water during monsoon so that drains don't get burdened and cause waterlogging.

Waterlogging is inevitable in poorly constructed and outdated drainage systems. The same also holds for piecemeal solutions to deal with heat. Our cities become heat islands during summer and are deluged in the monsoon because of untamed construction. Real estate has occupied open areas, encroached on water bodies and blocked paths for heat and water to escape. Delhi is a good example of this. The abundance of malls, high-rise buildings, and flyovers is seen as a sign of urban success, but these amenities impose high energy costs and come at a cost to the environment and quality of life.

> The answer lies in planning cities in ways that obviate heat islands. Let's talk about restoring green spaces, reimagining how we build our cities, and designing buildings that stay cool naturally. Let's talk about increasing the efficacy of public transport systems so that people rely less on cars.

With no green or open spaces nearby, the heat generated by ACs, generators and other gadgets is not dispersed properly. This canyon effect tends to enhance heat retention. Glass façades are frequently seen as emblems of modernism and graceful architecture. Their smooth, clear surfaces let in plenty of natural light and provide eye-catching skylines. They also require less artificial lighting throughout the day. There is, however, a hidden expense associated with such stylish construction. Wide glass sections can significantly enhance heat absorption, particularly in warmer areas. This process causes interior temperatures to rise by trapping solar energy. Buildings then rely even more heavily on air conditioning systems. This contributes to creating urban heat islands — cities become noticeably warmer than surrounding areas due to concentrated infrastructure and energy use.

Green spaces are often the first to be sacrificed to meet the demand for additional land, depriving cities of their natural cooling functions. The pollution from car tailpipes follows next. The heat from private vehicles, their air conditioners and engine exhausts add to the city's overall heat burden.

Our fast-paced urban lifestyles are facilitated by smart devices such as computers, phones and refrigerators, which streamline work, food, and even our daily activities. However, in addition to making life simpler, they silently release heat. Imposing restrictions on a single gadget is no solution.

The United Nations projects that by 2050, nearly 68 per cent of the world's population will live in urban areas. Despite covering only 3 per cent of the planet's surface, cities account for 78 per cent of global energy consumption and generate 60 per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions. In light of these stark realities, the UN adopted the New Urban Agenda in 2016 to guide countries in shaping urbanisation processes that are more inclusive, sustainable, resilient, healthy, and liveable. Instead of working on such guidelines for systemic change, the government is resorting to quick fixes like shifting the burden onto the AC thermostat.

People in several parts of the country require cooling systems. The need is to provide solutions that don't impose high energy costs or harm the environment. Planners need to work towards giving them alternatives to ACs — or, at least, to using these gadgets at a low temperature. The answer lies in planning cities in ways that obviate heat islands. Let's talk about restoring green spaces, reimagining how we build our cities, choosing materials that breathe, creating open-ventilation corridors, and designing buildings that stay cool naturally. Let's talk about increasing the efficacy of public transport systems so that people rely less on cars. Let's plan office areas close to where people live.

All this may not be easy. But the truth is that planners and policymakers have, at best, taken a siloed approach to issues related to energy, environment and people's well-being. They haven't provided the right incentives or given the nudge that could have resulted in systemic changes.

Imagine a summer day, with a market bustling with activity, people chatting beneath trees, parks in place of parking lots, and a community enjoying pleasures like kulfis and mangoes while shielded by a massive tree. This is neither romanticism nor nostalgia. It's about making the right choices for our well-being. Policy should help us make these choices instead of resorting to unsustainable approaches.

The writer is assistant professor, Department of Economics, Dr BR Ambedkar College, University of Delhi

Unseeing the Northeast

Framing of Meghalaya honeymoon case speaks of a disconcerting pattern when it comes to the region

ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O'BRIEN

EVEN GANESH IDOLS *come from abroad, small-eyed Ganesh idols whose eyes don't even open properly."* **— Prime Minister Narendra Modi, May 27.**

If the Prime Minister of India can propagate a hurtful stereotype against the 4.5 crore people living in Northeast India, are you surprised that fellow Indian citizens in the Northeast are labelled? Many have borne the brunt of racial prejudice and violence for decades. In 2014, the Bezbaruah Committee was formed after a teenage student from Arunachal Pradesh was assaulted and killed in Delhi. The committee quoted a research report which found that nine out of 10 people from the Northeast faced racial discrimination in Indian metros. Another report quoted revealed that two out of three women from the Northeast frequently suffered various forms of discrimination.

The most recent instance was the tragedy of the Meghalaya honeymoon, which dominated news cycles till the heart-breaking catastrophe in Ahmedabad took over. Unsubstantiated facts and fabricated reports started doing the rounds on social media, running down a state which has so many natural gems: Elephant Falls, Umiam Lake, Double Decker Living Root Bridge, Mawsmai Cave and more. There was a concerted campaign to denigrate not just Meghalaya, but the whole of Northeast India. Vile messages, from targeting dietary habits to social customs, physical appearance to language, nothing was out of bounds.

There is little official data in the public domain to showcase the important role played by people from Northeast India, especially in the hospitality, aviation, and health sectors. Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) in 2020 suggests that one out of four women migrants from Northeastern India are engaged in the hospitality sector. Five years on, this figure might well be even higher. It also reveals that most are in jobs that are low-paid, informal, and devoid of social security benefits.

I have an old connection and a special fondness for the Northeast. In 1991, I quit my job in advertising and started hosting quiz shows. During the first few years, these quizzes were held in cities across the Northeast: Guwahati, Shillong, Kohima, Imphal, Dimapur, and many more. These events were organised to promote a brand of instant noodles, which had a large market share in those parts. My professional fee for each show was Rs 2,500. Flights, trains, buses, mostly car rides — this was a beautiful opportunity to get to discover so much. To learn. To understand. To meet folks who were always welcoming. So it really stings to see people typecasting citizens from the Northeast.

While writing this piece, I spoke to Tonshimla Leisan, a 30-year-old woman from Manipur, working as cabin crew in a reputed airline. Here is what she told me, "A year ago, a group of youngsters kept looking at me and my mother in the Delhi Metro and kept laughing and I overheard them saying 'Chinese, Chi***es'. In the workplace, making a mockery of our unique names by our colleagues is another challenge we have to face. Many passengers motivate us for our hardworking and resilient nature, but others often try to put us down." Two of the cabin crew members on Air India flight AI171, Lamnunthem Singson and Kongbrailatpam Nganthoi Sharma, were from Manipur. Lamnunthem from the Kuki-Zo community, Kongbrailatpam from the Meitei community. It did not matter who was Kuki and who was Meitei. Manipur was united in grief.

Bias and othering of residents of the Eight Sisters (states) increased manifold during the pandemic. A study by the Centre for Criminology and Victimology at the National Law University, Delhi, commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) in 2021 on racial discrimination against people from the Northeast, found that "Northeast India seamlessly fits Indians' imagination of a Chinese person" and that they "faced an increased number of acts of hate and prejudices against them".

In the recent past, Manipur was discussed twice in Parliament. Once, when Opposition parties compelled the Union government to discuss the issue by moving a No Confidence Motion in 2023, and once, through the night in April 2025. Here is what Amit Shah, the Union Home Minister, said on the floor of the House in April this year: "President's Rule was imposed on 13 February 2025, zero violence in November, zero violence in December, zero violence in January, zero violence till 13 March and zero violence since then till today. So we should not try to create misconceptions."

Soon before the Home Minister spoke, here is what your columnist said in the Rajya Sabha: "3,80,000 kilometres. In the last 22 months, it is the distance the Prime Minister of India has travelled nationally and internationally. That is also the distance from planet Earth to the Moon! But the Prime Minister could not take a flight to Manipur, just 2,400 kilometres away. We are discussing this in Parliament in the dead of night — at three in the morning. No TV channels, no prime time. Look at Manipur straight in the eye during the day."

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha). Additional research: Ayashman Dey

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

DIPLOMATIC POISE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Pointed & needed' (*IE*, June 19). India's rejection of third-party mediation has always been a matter of principle, not posture. In that sense, recent reiterations of this stand reflect continuity in our foreign policy rather than any newfound assertiveness. But in today's unsettled world, how we communicate our red lines matters as much as the red lines themselves. The world order is volatile, and so are alliances. Even seasoned global institutions like the G7 have notably stopped short of calling for a ceasefire. This calibrated stance reflects how even powerful blocs walk a tightrope when interests and principles collide. As India's voice grows on the global stage, it must speak with maturity and measured clarity. Our role is not just to assert boundaries, but to shape conversations.

Ankita Chalia, *Kurukshetra*

CEASEFIRE NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Abyss stares back' (*IE*, June 18). Israel's relentless aggression against Iran on the pretence of neutralising Tehran's ability to develop a nuclear bomb could further destabilise the region. Israel's intention of removing the present regime in Iran will cause further disruption. Iran's threat to withdraw from the NPT could prompt other West Asian countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt to reconsider their non-nuclear pledges which would definitely have catastrophic consequences for the region. It's high time the UN Security Council and world powers intervene for an immediate ceasefire.

Amandeep Bains, *Sirsa*

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Abyss stares back' (*IE*, June 18). The recent tit-for-tat strikes between Israel and Iran have brought the Middle East to the edge of a terrifying abyss. While global leaders practice brinkmanship, it is the civilians who pay the price — in fear, in blood, and in ashes. For all the talk of defence and deterrence, the world seems shell-shocked into silence when it comes to true peacemaking. Have we forgotten the lessons of Gaza, Syria, and Iraq? War does not resolve tension — it recycles hatred. Instead of fuelling the fire with rhetoric and arms, leaders must revisit the basics: Dialogue, diplomacy, and dignity for all.

Md Hasnain, *Mumbai*

ANNUAL PASS

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Annual FASTag pass at Rs 3,000 for "hassle-free" travel: Gadkari' (*IE*, June 19). This refers to the recent announcement regarding the rollout of a Rs 3,000 annual toll pass for private car owners, valid on national highways and expressways managed by the NHAI. This is a commendable initiative by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, especially for frequent travellers who until now spent nearly Rs 10,000 annually on tolls. By allowing 200 trips on a single pass, this scheme will bring significant savings to middle-class commuters and reduce congestion at toll plazas. The integration of this pass with existing FASTags ensures convenience without requiring any new infrastructure.

Vandana Chopra, *Chandigarh*

Will delaying the Census affect its implementation?


Sanjay Kumar,

Co-Director of Lokniti, a research programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi


Poonam Muttreja,

Executive Director, Population Foundation of India

PARLEY

On June 16, the Registrar General of India under the Union Ministry of Home Affairs issued a notification that India's population will be counted in 2027. Following demands by the Opposition parties, among other reasons, the government has also announced the inclusion of caste enumeration in the Census for the first time in independent India.

The last Census was held in 2011. The exercise was to take place in 2021, but was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has now been further pushed to 2027. Will delaying the Census affect its implementation? Sanjay Kumar and Poonam Muttreja discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Vijaita Singh**. Edited excerpts:

Was the Census deliberately delayed?

Sanjay Kumar: The Census should have taken place in 2021, but that was the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since everything was stalled in 2020 and we were under a strict lockdown for a good part of that year, the Census could not take place.

Do you see any political reasons for the further delay? Do you think the government wanted to time it with the delimitation exercise, which is frozen till 2026?

SK: I don't have an explanation for this delay. The pandemic was over by mid-2022. By the end of 2022, universities had opened, schools had gone back to a normal routine, and everyone had started going back to office. The delay for nearly three years after that is frankly inexplicable. I'm not sure why the government did not take the initiative earlier. Every time delimitation takes place, the exercise uses the previous Census data. So the government could have began conducting the Census in 2023 as well. Even if it did start conducting the exercise in 2025, it would have made no difference to the work of delimitation.

Can you tell us about the implications of a delayed Census?

Poonam Muttreja: The delay has serious consequences for governance and development. India continues to use Census data from 2011 data in 2025. The ground reality has changed dramatically since 2011. Population growth, internal migration, urbanisation, and fertility patterns have all accelerated/changed. But policy continues to run on outdated assumptions. The delay effects nearly every sector. School enrolment projections are inaccurate. Vaccine coverage targets have missed the mark. Social welfare programmes such as PDS (public distribution system) and MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) cannot adjust to the actual population needs. The delay also affects disaster preparedness and infrastructure planning.


A view of Ranganathan Street in T. Nagar, Chennai. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

This is going to be the first digital Census in India. Are there any concerns about that?

PM: Digitisation can bring in efficiency, reduce manual error, and allow faster data processing. But a fully digital Census also risks excluding the very people who are the hardest to reach, such as those in rural households and informal settlements, those belonging to marginalised communities, and women. They may not have smartphones, stable electricity, or digital access. Take women, for instance – only 33% of rural women use the Internet. Among women in low income households, mobile phone ownership is significantly low. A 'digital first' approach without safeguards could reinforce the existing gender bias.

To succeed, this Census must retain door-to-door in-person enumeration, especially in areas that are difficult to access. The enumerators must be trained to work with diverse populations in regional languages and have an inclusive approach. Technology should support, not replace, the human engagement that is essential for collecting accurate data.

The government is yet to announce any decision regarding the National Population Register (NPR), which is the first step towards the creation of a National Register of Citizens (NRC). In the 2021 Census, it was planned to be updated with the first phase of the Census. Do you think if the two are combined – the NPR and population Census – it may impact the process because of the controversies and fears around the NPR?

> To succeed, this Census must retain door-to-door in-person enumeration, especially in areas that are difficult to access. The enumerators must be trained to work with diverse populations in regional languages. Technology should support, not replace, the human engagement that is essential for collecting accurate data.
> POONAM MUTTREJA

SK: If you are trying to do one piece of work and then you combine it with other work, there is a possibility of both getting tampered with. Things could get delayed, jumbled, and some information could get misrepresented.

But do you see the Centre not going ahead with the NPR so that the Census is done in a hassle-free manner?

SK: I would be in favour of getting the Census done separately because we should not forget that this is being undertaken after a very long time – 16 years! This is the first time that caste enumeration is also taking place as part of the Census. So a new element is already there. Why overburden the enumerators?

How difficult or easy will it be for the government to collect data on caste? In the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011, around 40 lakh caste names were thrown up. There were instances of people writing their surnames instead of their community names. It was based on self-disclosure. What methodology do you think the government should follow to make the process robust?

SK: If we are raising questions about caste data, we can raise questions about the collection of other information as well. If people can answer questions about their assets, age, gender, and education, why should there be any difficulty in answering questions about caste?

But yes, training is important. If we are able to train our enumerators well, the respondents will be able to answer most of the questions. The enumerators need to know that Varma, for instance, is a surname, not a caste. If a respondent mentions this surname as their caste, the enumerators will have to ask a follow-up question.

PM: Asking about a person's caste is not going to be difficult. The UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government conducted a caste census nearly a decade ago, but never released the data. I think homework needs to be done well when we collect data on caste. Enumerators must understand all the caste sub-categories. Unless they themselves are well informed, they are not going to be able to deal with erroneous answers or inappropriate answers.

Why do you think Census is important for a country?

PM: The world is changing rapidly and so many things are uncertain. In such a scenario, the Census is the most important aspect to consider in not only planning and policymaking, but also in the allocation of resources. It helps us understand how climate change is impacting us, changing population dynamics, and patterns of digitisation. In India, to understand the rapid increase in urbanisation and migration patterns, we need numbers. We also know that India is an ageing society. The number of aged people is going to nearly double in the next 20 years. You can't let people age and then start planning. So given the rapidly changing environment, planning, allocation of resources, targeting the poor and targeting those who are marginalised are all objectives. In fact, the whole purpose of having a caste census is to invest in the most marginalised communities.

Do you think the government should consider reducing the 10-year period for conducting the Census so that we can have faster and more accurate data about these changes in society?

SK: Conducting the Census is a tedious, time-consuming process. It cannot happen overnight. The Census is not merely about counting the number of people. The government's policy formulation depends on the information collected during a Census. The large amount of information gathered is valuable for the government to implement various kinds of policies. We may feel that the government can do this every five years, but it is more appropriate to do it every 10 years. But we should make sure that the Census takes place on time and there is no break in between.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

Dealing with might and fright while covering aviation

Reporting on the aviation sector can be challenging, but there are sources who are committed to bringing about meaningful change

Jagriti Chandra

Though I began covering aviation in 2014, I used to write about the sector alongside issues of women and child rights. It was difficult to explain to people why I wrote on such different sectors. While I wrote on aviation simply because there was a vacancy in the organisation where I worked, I had a natural interest in human rights issues. I would often joke about how the two beats satisfied different interests – while aviation captivated me with its glamour, human rights stories drew me in for the potential they had in making an impact on people's lives.

Over the last three years, I have been nearly exclusively focused on aviation. I have realised that it isn't as glamorous as it seemed. I often find myself venting to senior business editors in the industry over a drink on the challenges of reporting on the sector amid intense corporate pressures. These included, until recently, a long boycott by an airline.

The two beats are like chalk and cheese. While covering policy decisions on women and child rights, I often came in contact with NGOs, activists, academics, researchers, and lawyers who had dedicated their lives to social causes. Monetary interests were not on their mind; they were committed to a larger cause. I also found that this sector is dominated by women who show a lot of spine.

The same cannot be said of those working in the male-dominated corporate sector. In aviation and corporate affairs, self-preservation and the public image of the business house reign supreme. Some go to any extent – whether it is by using money power, intimidation tactics, or the age-old tactic of boycotts – to target journalists or even buy them out. Access is often granted to pliant journalists in lieu of their silence, and stories are selectively leaked in order to further the corporate agenda.

The real stories in this sector come from whistle blowers, who can be corporate employees, airline crew, air traffic controllers, aircraft maintenance engineers, or passengers. This is because there is no industry body to represent the real concerns of the people, whether of the staff or the travelling public, and to fix a compromised system where safety is at stake. While trade unions, though far and few between, contribute in their own ways, PR firms, which are hired to manage reputations of business houses, often use all their power and energies to exert pressure and have stories killed.

However, not everything is dark and gloomy. Sources who are deeply committed towards bringing about meaningful change find ways to connect with reporters despite threats to their livelihood. They talk bravely about issues such as airline safety and pilot fatigue. Some of these accounts have even helped highlight mishaps that have gone unreported to government bodies.

Occasionally, corporate leaders also recognise a reporter's work. Even amid intense scrutiny during a major crisis at their company, some corporate leaders distinguish themselves. An airline CEO, whose company faced extensive coverage in our paper during a turbulent period, exemplified this. He would constantly engage with me and answer all my questions with utmost respect. During one memorable exchange, he noted, "While we may have differences of opinion over the event, your championing of causes is commendable." The admiration, naturally, is mutual.

Last week, a London-bound Air India flight crashed in Ahmedabad soon after take-off. More than 270 people died in the tragedy. In the rare event of such an incident, some people also begin to understand why journalists pose tough questions to the industry and why such questions are not just important but essential. That acknowledgment can be uplifting and is finally what keeps a reporter going.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Tiding it over


A man seeks refuge as waves crash into houses and shanties at Bandra Bandstand in Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI

FROM THE ARCHIVES The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 20, 1975

Japan allays Soviet fears on pact with China

TOKYO, JUNE 19: The statement issued two days ago by the official Soviet news agency, Tass, which in effect warned the Japanese Government against agreeing to China's demand for inclusion of an anti-hegemony clause in concluding the Sino-Japanese peace agreement has placed Japan on the horns of a dilemma. The Russian Government's statement asked Japan to "give a proper rebuff to any actions of third States to create obstacles in the improvement of the Soviet-Japanese relations" which is interpreted by diplomatic observers as a clear warning to Japan of unfavourable consequences from Moscow, should the Miki Government acquiesce in China's adamant demand. Officially the Japanese Government has reacted rather coolly to the Soviet warning and Government spokesmen from Premier Miki downward have sought to give the impression that they are not unduly concerned over the Soviet statement. The Japanese Government's reply to the statement is expected to be conveyed to the Soviet Government in a few days and it is expected to point out 1) that Japan has worked consistently for promotion of the Soviet-Japanese friendship ever since the resumption of relations in 1956 and will continue to do so; 2) that the Soviet Union shall be fully aware of this and Japan finds it difficult to understand the reasons for the Soviet Government's statement.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 20, 1925

Educational problems

LONDON, JUNE 18: Mr. P.J. Harlog, C.I.E., speaking at a dinner to welcome him at the Criterian Restaurant dwelt on the urgency of the difficulties of the educational problem in India. He believed that the great characteristics preserved in historic books and wonderful monuments and paintings in India and in the hearts of the Indian millions would survive any shock of foreign ideas. Regarding unemployment among the University graduates, Mr. Harlog believed that with the right kind of education in Bengal the hides and skins trade might be converted into a leather trade employing far more trained men.

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Dollar vs renminbi

Chinese currency faces fundamental challenges

People's Bank of China Governor Pan Gongsheng on Wednesday made a strong pitch for a multipolar international monetary system and warned against excessive reliance on a single currency. The message clearly is to shift away from the dollar-denominated global financial system. China has been consistently trying to project the renminbi (RMB) as an international currency. Six foreign banks announced on Wednesday that they would use China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, an alternative to the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) payment system. In principle, there is merit in the argument that the world should not rely on one currency or one payment system to settle cross-border payments. Given the state of American politics and policy, such views may gain traction. For instance, European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde recently remarked that the dominant role of the dollar was no longer certain.

The Donald Trump administration is pushing the United States (US) into uncharted territory in so many ways that it's difficult to gauge where and how things will eventually settle. President Trump, for instance, has decided to change the way the US trades with the world. In his book, a trade deficit with any country is bad, and tariffs are the best way to deal with it. With his July 9 deadline for trade deals fast approaching, it is not clear how many trading partners the US will have an agreement with. Nonetheless, what is clear is that tariffs will be much higher, and the US will have done significant damage to the rules-based trading system. The uncertainty is hurting the real economy.

The Federal Reserve, for instance, decided to keep the policy rate unchanged on Wednesday, mainly because of tariff-related uncertainty. The Federal Reserve's new economic projections showed that it now expects the inflation rate to be 3 per cent in 2025, as against the March projection of 2.7 per cent. Further, it expects gross domestic product to grow 1.4 per cent in the current year, compared to the March projection of 1.7 per cent. The prospect of falling growth and rising inflation puts a central bank in a difficult spot. The administration's position on trade is not the only problem. The complete disregard for institutions can do enormous damage. Mr Trump, for example, called Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell "a stupid person" before the policy decision was announced. Financial markets don't like central banks being pressured by governments. Furthermore, the US is on an uncertain fiscal path with debt stock expected to rise substantially in the coming years.

The current US position certainly doesn't inspire confidence, and it would get reflected over time in trade and capital flows. However, this would not automatically boost the RMB's chances. Since China is a trade powerhouse and the world's second-largest economy, some bilateral and regional trade may move to RMB-based systems. There are at least two fundamental hurdles for the RMB in its path to becoming an international currency. The RMB itself has been pegged to the dollar for decades, which has been enabled by tight capital controls. China is unlikely to give up capital controls in the foreseeable future. For wide international usage, a currency needs to be freely traded. Second, China runs a massive current-account surplus, which means there won't be enough RMBs in the rest of the world to be traded. Therefore, while there are concerns about the US and the dollar, the RMB is not in a position to fill the gap. Nevertheless, the global monetary system might become more fragmented in the coming years, resulting in higher costs and increased uncertainty.

Industrial push

Targeted interventions will boost output

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are a big driver of India's economic development, generating meaningful employment opportunities at local level. The segment accounts for more than 45 per cent of India's export value, while the share of MSME in the country's gross domestic product is around 30 per cent. Just as emphasis is being laid on the development of large-scale industrial clusters, including in high-value sectors like electronics and semiconductors, MSMEs must also be given a conducive environment to grow. In this context, Uttar Pradesh (UP) seems to be making focused interventions. The state is home to the highest number of MSMEs in the country. The recent announcement on developing 15 industrial zones, across 11 districts, exclusively for MSMEs, along with the Yamuna Expressway Industrial Development Authority, earmarking 500 acres for new MSMEs, is a step in the right direction. According to a draft plan prepared by the MSME department, 764.31 acres will be allocated for these industrial estates.

MSMEs contribute almost 60 per cent to UP's industrial output and account for 46 per cent of its exports. Such units in the state contribute around 14 per cent to India's MSME count. Flagship initiatives such as the One District One Product (ODOP) scheme have played a role in revitalising traditional and artisanal skills by linking them with modern value chains. The state has also made progress on Geographical Indications (GI). With the highest number of GI tags in the country, UP has leveraged its local produce to carve niche markets. In 2023-24, the manufacturing sector grew by 13 per cent, surpassing the 7.5 per cent growth in UP's gross state domestic product. Manufacturing now contributes 27 per cent to the state economy at current prices. Importantly, investment is now spread across almost all districts. These developments complement the MSME sector and have helped in building a more balanced industrial base.

However, even as the trajectory appears promising, there remain areas where more sustained attention is needed. One of the most critical gaps lies in the realm of women entrepreneurship. Women-owned MSMEs in UP account for only about 33 per cent of the total in the state. The proportion is lower than in many other states. Targeted skilling, financial access, and women-centric industrial clusters could further boost employment and output. Moreover, UP's large agrarian economy presents both a challenge and an opportunity. There is untapped potential in agro-processing, food preservation, rural crafts, and farm-equipment manufacturing. For instance, the state's Food Processing Industrial Policy 2022–27 highlights that only 6 per cent of the state's 24,000 food-processing units have annual revenues above ₹20 crore, indicating substantial room for scaling up. Strengthening value chains that integrate agriculture with MSMEs can improve farmer incomes and reduce rural distress. It is also vital to ensure that MSME policies are not just about infrastructure and land, but also about reducing compliance burdens, improving credit access, and easing logistics bottlenecks. Prospects of higher industrial output and employment in the largest state will help improve India's overall growth prospects.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Rethinking air safety

The current design of India's air safety regulatory agency needs a radical overhaul

AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM

K P KRISHNAN

We should channel our collective national grief over the recent air disaster into introspection about the state's capability for regulating air safety.

From first principles, we know that there are market failures that motivate state intervention. There may be a problem of market power in a small oligopoly of airlines. Some airlines, to maximise profits, may cut corners on safety expenditures. Passengers cannot reasonably be expected to judge the safety of an airline because of information asymmetry. Plane crashes impose negative externalities upon many parties. We, therefore, need a government agency that intervenes in the airline industry to address these market failures. At present in India, some of this intervention —including air safety — is done by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

Regulatory theory teaches us a lot about how such an organisation should be structured. It requires arm's-length operations from the executive government, a reservoir of specialised expertise, and the ability to act swiftly and decisively. It must be legislatively empowered to regulate the domain, be autonomous and adequately resourced, with mechanisms for finance, human resources (HR) and procurement that are fit for purpose and not drawn from government department designs. We must recall that one reason for creating Statutory Regulatory Authorities (SRA) is to have specialised skills, workforce, and processes that differ from mainline government.

How does the present DGCA fare? It has a sound organisational culture, with dedicated individuals striving to uphold safety standards. But its institutional design lacks many required elements.

The powers of the DGCA are largely through executive notifications and rules under a pre-Independence-era Act and a supplementary Act of 2024. It does not have clear objectives and autonomy derived from a modern, comprehensive, and specific Act of Parliament that clearly defines its powers, independence, and governance structure. It functions as a subordinate office under the direct administrative control of the Ministry of Civil Aviation. Decisions on budgets, policy directives, and even staffing often flow from the ministry. This impedes the development of agency capability.

The DGCA uses conventional civil service recruitment processes for its HR. This makes it difficult to attract and retain seasoned pilots, aircraft maintenance engineers, air traffic control experts, and accident investigators, given the more lucrative opportunities available in airlines, MROs (maintenance, repair, and overhaul organisations), or international aviation bodies.

As a subordinate office of the ministry, the DGCA's financial resources are subject to annual budgetary allocations, often competing with other ministerial priorities. This can lead to underfunding, limiting its ability to invest in state-of-the-art investigative tools, advanced simulation and training facilities, or crucial IT infrastructure required for sophisticated data analytics in safety oversight. Resource constraints and limitations in procurement hinder the rapid acquisition and deployment of such technologies.

Operating within a traditional government departmental structure inevitably entails multiple layers of approval and slower decision-making processes. In aviation, where situations can evolve rapidly, such delays hinder the effectiveness of the agency.

These structural and operational limitations collectively contribute to problems such as a perceived lack of credibility in the regulator's independence, potential for regulatory capture, and slow adoption of best practices and innovation in safety management. Ultimately, they can compromise the ability of the DGCA to achieve its primary mission.

What do we see with similarly placed government agencies in advanced economies? In the US, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is an analogous agency. It regulates the design, manufacturing, maintenance, and operation of aircraft. This includes certifying all civil aircraft, pilots, mechanics, and airlines to ensure they meet rigorous standards. In the spirit of regulatory theory, it has an operational arm — the Air Traffic Organisation (ATO) — which manages the airspace. The FAA has its own personnel and procurement systems that are separate from the rules that govern most federal agencies.

The analogous agency in the UK is the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). It regulates the design, manufacturing, maintenance, and operation of aircraft. This includes certifying all UK-registered aircraft, pilots, air traffic controllers, and airlines to ensure safety compliance. In line with regulatory theory, and taking the separation of regulator and service provider a step further, the operational management of airspace is handled by an entirely separate entity: NATS (formerly National Air Traffic Services), which operates as a public-private partnership. This structural separation dictates their administrative autonomy. The CAA, as a public corporation, is not bound by UK Civil Service rules and thus develops its own personnel policies and manages its own procurement processes, separate from the government. NATS, being a private company, operates with full commercial freedom, setting its own distinct procurement rules and employment terms completely outside of public sector frameworks.

What is the way forward?

A new, comprehensive Act of Parliament is urgently required to establish an Aviation Safety Authority (ASA), which is grounded in modern Indian thinking on SRAs. A clean, modern, and well-drafted law, comparable to the draft Indian Financial Code, is required.

The new organisation must be operationally autonomous with its own governing board, clearly defined powers, and a mandate that prioritises safety above all else. The composition and role of the board is key to achieving state capability. The board must hold the management team accountable, and the entire working of the organisation must be conducive to transparency and accountability.

It should have financial autonomy, perhaps funded through a dedicated cess on air travel or a specific allocation that is ring-fenced and not subject to annual governmental vagaries. This will enable it to invest in necessary infrastructure, technology, and human resources. It must be empowered to develop its own human resource policies, allowing for flexible recruitment, competitive compensation, and the creation of a specialised aviation safety professional cadre.

Contracting is increasingly a critical choke point for complex technical problems. The new organisation needs to draw upon the new body of knowledge that has been created on government contracting in the last five years.

India's ambition to become a leading global economy and a major aviation hub calls for a safety regulatory framework that is world-class, autonomous, and uncompromised.

The author is an honorary senior fellow at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy, and a former civil servant

Private capital to revive nuclear agenda

INFRATALK

VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

When Homi Bhabha unveiled India's nuclear programme in the 1950s, the vision was profound: An indigenous path to energy independence built on pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWRs), fast breeder reactors (FBRs), and ultimately, thorium-based systems to unlock the country's vast reserves. This early promise unfolded slowly. The Tarapur Atomic Power Station, India's first, was commissioned in 1969, but progress stalled under the weight of post-1974 sanctions, limited uranium reserves, technological hurdles, and policy caution. Even today, nuclear power accounts for just 8.8 Gw of India's 466 Gw installed power capacity.

It has now been 20 years since the announcement of the historic US-India Civilian Nuclear Agreement. This high-profile deal, signed in 2005 by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and US President George Bush, dominated Indian politics through the late 2000s. It involved bitter infighting between the government and the Left parties, with the Left adamantly opposed to the deal, and Singh, who personally shepherded it, risked his own, as well as the Congress Party's future.

Cut to the present, India's nuclear journey is all set to enter its most transformative phase — that too by inviting private capital to participate in scaling up nuclear power to 100 Gw by 2047. This goal is intimately tied to India's net-zero emissions pledge for 2070, which depends on decarbonisation of the power sector. At the heart of this renewed push are small modular reactors (SMRs): Compact, factory-built units under 300 Mw that can be quickly deployed at industrial zones or repurposed coal plant sites. The 2025–26 Budget allocated ₹20,000 crore for a research & development mission to commission five indigenous SMRs by 2033. According to the Department of Atomic Energy, SMRs will help revive old coal plants by utilising their existing grid infrastructure, water supply systems, and land. If the Ministry of Power's advisory to retire coal-based generation units older than 25 years is implemented, as much as 50–60 Gw of capacity will retire in the coming 10 years, opening up significant opportunities for SMR deployment at these sites. SMRs are expected to contribute 41 Gw to the 100 Gw target.

But India is not turning away from conventional nuclear reactors. State-owned Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) currently operates 25 reactors nationwide, the majority of which are PHWRs, and plans to add 50 Gw of capacity by 2047. Moreover, the national target of 100 Gw of nuclear by 2047 may include up to 5 Gw from FBRs, an advanced technology currently used only in Russia. India's first 500 Mw prototype fast breeder reactor (PFBR) is being developed by state-owned Bharatiya Nabhikiya Vidyut Nigam Ltd at Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu. The PFBR uses plutonium as fuel and turns ordinary uranium into new nuclear fuel that can be used to generate more energy. This process generates more fuel than the reactor consumes, effectively multiplying India's usable nuclear fuel.

Nuclear power will no longer be a government monopoly. Bhuwan Chandra Pathak, chairman and managing director of NPCIL, anticipates that nearly 50 per cent of the national target will come from private partnerships. Industrial giants such as Tata, Adani, Reliance, and Larsen & Toubro are establishing dedicated nuclear divisions and committing large-scale investments. Among international players, Connor Teskey, president of Brookfield Asset Management — one of the world's largest infrastructure investors — is ready to back Indian nuclear ventures, recognising that the technology "provides clean, dispatchable baseload power". Brookfield-owned Westinghouse Nuclear, a key global supplier, sees India as a pivotal growth market. So do GE-Hitachi and Areva (the French nuclear company) and Holtec International.

The exact contours of private involvement vis-à-vis oversight and assurance by NPCIL are being worked out. To address concerns of private investors, the government is likely to advance two key amendments to the Atomic Energy Act. The first relates to the easing of provisions in the Nuclear Liability Law, which would effectively cap the liability of equipment vendors in the event of an accident, both in terms of limiting the monetary exposure to the original value of the contract, and a possible time frame limitation on when this liability would apply. The second would allow private companies to build, co-own, or operate nuclear plants, subject to regulatory safeguards. Both amendments are expected to be introduced during the Monsoon Session of Parliament and are seen as crucial to unlocking long-term private investments and international collaboration. The government is also considering a proposal to allow foreign direct investment of up to 49 per cent of equity.

Beyond legislative reform, India must financially incentivise private investment as nuclear power is expensive. Viability gap funding — used effectively in other infra sectors — should be extended to nuclear projects to cushion high upfront costs. Long-term power purchase agreements, sovereign guarantees, and green energy classification would help to derisk investments. Clear uranium supply assurances, via both domestic mining and global deals, are essential to allay fears about fuel shortages. Further, fast-tracking site approvals and allowing partial ownership of brownfield coal plant sites would accelerate investment.

India's nuclear revival is no longer just a vision; it is soon to be a policy-backed, capital-supported mission in the truest sense. From just 4.78 Gw in 2014 to 8.8 Gw today, and with 21 reactors totalling 15 Gw under construction, its nuclear momentum is undeniable. And the renewed thrust this time includes the private sector.

The author is an infrastructure expert. He is also the founder & managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation. Research Inputs from Vrinda Singh

Tracking the real people's republic

BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

For anyone trying to understand China behind the headlines and the propaganda, *Private Revolutions: Coming of Age in a New China* is an important read. It provides a people's perspective of how Chinese society has evolved since economic reform and the manner in which the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have impacted Chinese women in particular. The book is an attempt to present the story and idea of China beyond the CCP and through the lens of the Chinese people.

The word revolution is also aptly used in the title underscoring how the word can mean different things to different sections of society and the Party. According to the author, "This book is about revolutions in two senses. It is about China's economic revolution from the 1980s and 1990s onwards, after the Reform and Opening Up era.... It is also about the personal revolutions undertaken by four young women born in those decades as they came of age amid the inconsistent rise — and now stumble — of social mobility in China's capitalist era".

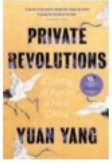
Women pay the highest price in any revolution and China is no different. Though Mao Zedong did famously proclaim, "Women hold up half the sky", Chinese society does not reflect this outlook in any meaningful way. China is inherently patriarchal; for proof, one need look no further than the gender composition of the Chinese Politburo Standing Committee.

Even initiatives such as the "One-Child Policy" have been aimed at directing and controlling women's agency over their bodies. This coupled with the preference for a male child has consistently aggravated the intensity of inequality within Chinese society. The modification of the one-child policy to a two-child policy in 2016 and to a three-child policy in 2021 directly impacts the lives of Chinese women. These changes were driven primarily because of decreasing birth rates. She describes how Chinese women responded: "Rather than being seen as a permission to have more children, everyone saw it as a sign of looming government pressure on women to rescue the country's plummeting birth rate".

There is no denying that Chinese society has seen enormous changes since economic reform. Large swathes of the population were lifted out of poverty, compulsory primary education ensured a high degree of literacy, urbanisation has been swift, and the country is an economic and military powerhouse. What gets lost in this big upbeat picture is the people. How have their lives been impacted? Can data be the only measure of success?

For instance, the author shrewdly offers a take on how Chinese women approach the issue of using make-up. She highlights how using makeup is linked to the notions of being feudal and the "fact that the party had later denounced wearing makeup as a bourgeois fashion". But equally, a decision to apply makeup can also be considered revolutionary.

The book skilfully juxtaposes the lives of four "ordinary" women since their birth to their adult lives. It also paints a picture of how the policies adopted and implemented by the Party impacts each one of them differently and yet similarly, and underscores why the major challenges that the Chinese society faces today cannot be addressed by top-down policy changes.



Private Revolutions: Coming of Age in a New China
by Yuan Yang
Published by Bloomsbury
320 pages ₹599

These policies primarily represent what the Party needs at any given point of time to survive and gain legitimacy. But these policies have also failed to address the real challenges. What China needs is a major revisit of the *hukou* system, the healthcare system, the insurance system, and child care and education system. The book details that, "by the mid-2010s, government figures suggested that there were 13 million people without any kind of *hukou*, of whom 8 million had been children outside their parents' birth quotas". It also highlights the challenges migrant workers face today, the same workers who have played a crucial role in China's economic revolution.

This is not just a book about four lives; it is about how these women adapt to the changes around them. How they try to understand the lives of their parents and their children while understanding themselves. How they all define a purpose for themselves while making the most of the limitations and challenges.

The book also shows how feudal, Marxist and capitalist structures coexist in China today. It provides a nuanced and novel context for what is a revolution in today's China. And that can be a small decision, something as simple as expressing your own opinions and deciding what kind of life you want to live.

The reviewer is associate professor, O P Jindal Global University

OPINION

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

The need to find common ground

The Centre should consider the Supreme Court collegium's concerns over appointments favourably

Chief Justice of India (CJI) Bhushan R Gavai's advice to the Union government to refrain from selectively acting on collegium recommendations is timely. HT reported on Thursday that CJI Gavai issued this message after presiding over his first collegium meeting on May 26. According to people familiar with the matter, CJI Gavai was emphatic that segregating names from a batch of recommendations not only disturbs the seniority of judges but also sends an improper message about the collegium's authority and functioning.

India has a nuanced process to pick judges for constitutional courts — where the senior-most judges pick judicial candidates and their names are confirmed by the executive, pending background checks. Selectively picking candidates out of a batch of names recommended by the collegium creates an unfavourable perception of bias and hurts the public standing of the judiciary. The smooth running of the judiciary — one of the pillars of India's democracy — depends on an honest and transparent working relationship between the courts and the executive. The selective picking of names by the executive, therefore, threatens to upset that delicate balance by creating an uneven playing field where some names are given precedence over others. Not only is this detrimental to critical processes such as seniority and filling of vacancies but also the standing of particular judges.

This is not the first time such concerns have been raised. In 2014, then CJI RM Lodha wrote to then law minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, objecting to the government's unilateral decision to drop former solicitor general Gopal Subramanium from a list of four recommended judges for the Supreme Court. Subramanium later withdrew his nomination. Between 2022 and 2023, a bench led by justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul noted that "selective appointments" damaged the "element of workable trust" needed between the judiciary and the executive, and sent "a wrong signal".

The relationship between the government and the judiciary has remained fraught since a showdown over the proposed National Judicial Appointments Commission Act. This newspaper has been a constant advocate for greater transparency in the working of the collegium. But just because the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) — which guides the appointment and transfer of judges in constitutional courts — does not explicitly prohibit segregation, it doesn't mean that the practice should continue. The Centre should reconsider its stance.

In Bonn, the pursuit of elusive climate finance

The Bonn climate conference — the mid-year climate review — serves as a prelude to the annual Conference of Parties (CoP). To that end, the stormy start to the ongoing mid-year review in the German city is not good augury. On the first day, developing nations clashed with developed nations — Donald Trump-governed US is absent from the talks — over two inclusions to the conference agenda proposed by the former: discussions on climate finance under Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement, and on unilateral trade measures with climate goals in mind.

The Like Minded Developing Nations (LMDC) bloc that includes India had demanded that climate finance as well as trade measures such as the carbon border adjustment mechanism be taken up at the conference. Predictably, the EU and other rich nations and blocs strongly resisted this, delaying the adoption of the agenda for the conference to the second day. Climate finance, more than other differences on climate action being debated by the global community, has become the leitmotif of the limited success at recent climate talks. The developed world resists any binding obligations on quantum, duration, and conditionality of funding that they must provide to the developing nations to undertake necessary climate action.

The window for any meaningful action to contain warming within 1.5 degree C is likely closed (or quite narrow). Generating consensus in a Trumpian world will need reviving trust in multilateral climate action, and the responsibility lies squarely with the developed nations to demonstrate that they are willing to work with developing nations on climate by making greater concessions than they have agreed to in the past and, indeed, working to offset the damage from the US's abdication of climate responsibility. One of the areas where they can demonstrate this is climate financing.As India said earlier this month, without the money, even preliminary climate pledges won't be met, let alone ambitious ones articulated and pursued.

In climate of conflicts, a corridor of necessity

The crisis in West Asia highlights the necessity of pursuing IMEC by imagining it as an evolving network facilitating trade and transport between India and Europe

IMEC is often imagined as a mega infrastructure project along a single multimodal route. SHUTTERSTOCK

Jawed Ashraf

With the airspace closed over Iran and denied over Pakistan, the Air India flight from Frankfurt to Delhi last weekend flew southeast over Athens, crossed the Mediterranean to Cairo, turned east to fly across the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula to Oman and then over the sea to enter India in the Kutch region. Nearly 12,000 metres above sea level, it traced the path of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). I was returning from the inaugural edition of the Raisina Mediterranean Dialogue, where every session turned into a discussion on IMEC. The flight was evidence of both its existence and necessity.

Few positive ideas have energised the world in recent times as much as IMEC after it was unveiled in September 2023 in Delhi at the G20 Summit of the Indian presidency. There have been competing claims on its provenance, with western literature often describing it as a US-led initiative. However, it was initially conceived as a post-Covid project for a strategic India-Middle East corridor by India's national security advisor. It was later extended to Israel's Mediterranean port of Haifa and onwards to Europe to serve multiple Indian geopolitical and economic goals.

In IMEC, the Gulf seeks to reprise its historical role in trade, diversify its economy and markets and pursue its geopolitical ambitions. The US entered the project, drawn by regional competition with China and hope of normalising Arab-Israel relations; however, conditions and US relevance may have changed now. Geopolitical, economic, energy, and digital connectivity interests attracted Europe, seeking to rebalance relations amidst structural external shocks. Following France, Italy, Germany and the EU became members. The raging and expanding conflicts in the Middle East since IMEC's launch have raised grave doubts about the initiative. To the contrary, the developments only reinforce the need for resilient corridors that connect India and Europe and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific with the Euro-Atlantic.

IMEC is often imagined as a mega infrastructure project along a single multimodal route entailing hundreds of billion dollars in investments with its attendant challenges of financing, risk mitigation and timelines. However, almost 90% of the infrastructure already exists — sea connectivity between India and the Gulf; the growing rail network across the Gulf; and world-class ports that dot the Mediterranean coasts. The rail link between Saudi Arabia and Haifa remains to be built. But, if that gap remains too politically difficult to bridge at the moment, there are alternatives through Egypt, Lebanon and, if it stabilises, through Syria.

In any case, just as redundancies are built into strategic telecommunication networks, shippers should have the flexibility to switch between alternative nodes for secure, quick and competitive logistics. It is, therefore, important to think of IMEC as a network rather than a single route. The Suez, too, will continue to remain the key shipping route, especially for bulk cargo. IMEC will, however, reduce the relevance of the circuitous route around the African continent.

Multiple submarine cables carrying data already link India to Europe. The data capacity is set to grow with Blue-Raman. In Marseille, emerging as a major submarine cable junction, India accounts for a significant share of the capacity of data centres. The pipelines and submarine cables transmitting clean hydrogen and electricity from the Gulf in either direction may seem overly ambitious. But such submarine projects already exist in the world. New ones are already gaining attention and financing. The 2,000-km EastMed-Poseidon gas pipeline to transport Israeli/Cypriot gas to Greece, the Euro-Asia connector linking their electricity grid or the hydrogen pipeline from Tunisia-Algeria to Italy and onwards are examples of new projects. The IMEC should get higher priority under the European Union's Global Gateway.

What is needed most is connecting the dots for coordinated development of the infrastructure being established nationally or by a group of countries along the corridor; an agreement between governments on the seamless and smooth transit of goods on a multimodal, multi-country network; harmonisation of standards and governance; enabling framework for accelerating trade, such as the conclusion of the EU-India free trade agreement; industrial acceleration in India; security cooperation; and, coordinating mechanisms involving participating governments and the private sector. Many companies operate across the corridor.

IMEC has generated strong interest across Europe and triggered a deeper conversation on Mediterranean connectivity and integration. While ports in Greece, Croatia, Italy and France are vying to be the main terminal points, each would serve specific destinations in Europe. North African ports such as Alexandria and Port Said in Egypt and Tangiers in Morocco wish to be connected. A more integrated Mediterranean network would increase IMEC's value. Indeed, the M in IMEC could well stand for MENA (Middle East-North Africa). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Cyprus and Croatia this week as also his earlier visits to Egypt, Greece, Italy and France, and possibly to Morocco in the near future, indicate an integrated vision of the Mediterranean basin — from the northern-most palm grove to the northern-most olive grove — for its own potential but also as a gateway to the vast African and European continents and beyond.

The seas are one. Trouble in any maritime domain has global impact. The Mediterranean connects the East and the West. Not just the Middle East, the calm azure waters of the Mediterranean also carry challenges. Politics of immigration and security threatens Europe's links with North Africa. There are regional rivalries involving Turkey, Greece and Cyprus and the unstable eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean from Gaza to Syria. The spillover of the Ukraine-Russia conflict and the growing Chinese economic and naval presence bring strategic competition to the region. A broader regional engagement by India and closer coordination among Mediterranean countries will help advance IMEC. The MENA region has multiple sources and layers of competition and conflict that are not easy to resolve. As Europe, India and the region seek deeper partnership, IMEC is a necessity. It is not one grand greenfield infrastructure project with an inauguration day. It is an evolving project that must be guided by realistic goals and concomitant design. Beyond political commitment and coordination, involvement of companies, including infrastructure, logistics, shipping, energy and digital, with operational experience along the route in shaping IMEC is vital. That is essential for IMEC to succeed and not go the way of several other corridors conceived with great enthusiasm.

Jawed Ashraf is a retired Indian ambassador. The views expressed are personal.

The Emergency and its external dimension

50 YEARS OF EMERGENCY

SD Muni

The pain inflicted by the 21-month Emergency rule in India on its body politic and its people continues to hurt even after 50 years. The domestic dimensions of the Emergency have been discussed at length. A recent study by Srinath Raghavan ably explores its structural dimensions – of the gradual evolution of a powerful executive, creeping encroachments on freedoms and rights and authoritarian tendencies of governance — that have been building for long. However, Indira Gandhi's oft repeated allegations about the role of "foreign hand" (of the United States of America) in destabilising her government have often skipped rigorous scrutiny. Her political opponents, many media commentators, and even serious historians like Ramchandra Guha and Bipin Chandra have dismissed these allegations as a pretext to justify her authoritarian streak. This was also the position of the various US official organs, as expected.

The prevailing intellectual narrative clearly underlines that transformational changes in developing countries result from a conscious or coincidental coalition of domestic and external forces. Over the years, many new archives have opened and the present ruling dispensation in New Delhi has brought the issue back to the forefront of India's political dynamics. The narrative of the US pushing Indira Gandhi towards the Emergency decision and supporting the peoples' uprising against its repressive regime deserve a second dispassionate look. This may be done at three levels.

First, regime change, through covert as well as overt means, against Communist/ socialist or Left-oriented governments in Latin America (Chile) and Asia (Iran) has been an integral part of the toolkit of US policy since the Cold War years. According to American scholar Lindsey O'Rourke, the US carried out 64 covert regime-change operations between 1947 and 1989. Another scholar, David S Levins (2020), claims that the US carried out the largest number of foreign electoral interventions during 1946-2000. The use of covert operations for regime change in developing countries brought about extensive criticism of the US's democratic credentials, forcing the US Congress to appoint The Church Committee to investigate the matter. In its report in 1976, this Committee came down heavily on CIA operations and blamed it for having a worldwide network of several hundred individuals to have access "to a large number of news agencies, radio and television stations, commercial publishers and media outlets" for covert operations.

Secondly, at the regional level in South Asia, the US National Security Council's policy document, NSC 98/1, was adopted by President Truman in January 1951. It asked US policy in the region to take "more frequently accept calculated risks" in ensuring that the Communist (as also, socialist and Communist supported) governments did not remain in power. Only such governments were acceptable that "would assist the United States and its allies to obtain the facilities desired in the time of peace or required in the event of war".

The Nixon (1969-1974)-Kissinger (1969-1977) team of the US had a strong focus on South Asian regimes in its endeavour to cultivate China and isolate the Soviet Union. Between 1975 and 1977, major developments took place in South Asia. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1975) in Bangladesh and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1977) in Pakistan were deposed brutally by military regimes. Sheikh Mujib's Bangladesh in 1971 had emerged in strategic defiance of the US, and Bhutto had defied the US on the nuclear issue. Bhutto's daughter, Benazir, was reported to have disclosed Kissinger's threat in November 1976 to Bhutto to make a horrible example of him if he pursued the nuclear path. Nepal (Zone of Peace, 1975) and Sikkim (the American queen of the Chogyal sponsored independent status, 1974-75) had explicit support from the US so as to distance them from India.

Lastly, at the bilateral level, Indira Gandhi's "foreign hand" paranoia was a reflection of these regional developments. She had the worst of relations with the Nixon-Kissinger team both on the Bangladesh (1971) and the nuclear (implosion, 1974) issues. It was problematic for the US establishment that Indira Gandhi, whom the CIA supported in dethroning the Communist regime in Kerala in late 1950s, was during 1967-69, leaning on the Indian Communists in her struggle for power within her own party. The CIA activities during Indira Gandhi's regime had become so unacceptable even to the US embassy in New Delhi that ambassador Patrick Moynihan had to ask the state department to withdraw CIA operations.

The imposition of Emergency was publicly disapproved by the US state department and American media. The US secretary of state Kissinger in his memo to President Ford in September 1975 said that the Emergency had discredited Indian democracy, adding, "We should avoid any overt involvement that could confirm her allegations of foreign subversion". Did this imply that covert operations to subvert the Emergency could go on? The post-Emergency regime was headed by Morarji Desai, who American journalist Seymour Hersh alleged was a CIA mole in Indira Gandhi's cabinet. Desai fought a libel case in the US against Hersh unsuccessfully. President Carter visited India in January 1978 to acclaim the post-Emergency regime, and asked Prime Minister Desai to desist from the nuclear path.

Thus, there are ample leads at all the three levels to revisit the question of the "foreign hand" and see if it had any links with the popular protests. British scholar Paul Garr in his study, *Spying in South Asia* (2024), says that Indira Gandhi's "foreign hand" was an exaggeration sometimes, but her fears about the CIA were "genuine" and valid. Our reliance only on the structural theories and Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism do not explain her decision to end the Emergency, as also how she managed to stage an impressive electoral comeback in less than three years.

SD Muni is professor emeritus, JNU, former ambassador and special envoy, Government of India. The views expressed are personal.

The G7's unravelling and India-Canada reset

Harsh V Pant

Vivek Mishra

The just-concluded G7 meeting marks a key moment, both for the group and for India. The G7's core agenda — supporting economic growth in the developing world — stood in stark contrast to the strategic imperative of addressing the spiralling Iran-Israel conflict in West Asia. Unsurprisingly, the only strong outcome of the summit was the G7 Leaders' statement on the Iran-Israel situation — highlighting that consensus, when achieved, is more likely on geopolitical crises than on economic cooperation. This sense of drift was amplified by US President Donald Trump's abrupt departure from the summit.

This year's G7 meeting may have been a forewarning to how the US's economic and strategic repositioning could test the limits of the western economic consensus. Trump's protectionist policies, especially his aggressive tariff regime, have generated considerable friction between the US and its economic partners — none more so than this year's host, Canada. This reflects a troubling reality that the G7's economic heft and global influence are increasingly being contested as it faces new realities. The G7 faces three key issues: How does it retain its core economic agenda, primarily due to a US that is increasingly inward-looking; second, an America under Trump that is distancing itself from long-standing economic partners; and third, the group's inability to respond cohesively to the rapidly shifting global order driven by emerging powers.

Amid this backdrop of uncertainty and disunity, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's visit to Canada marked a surprising but welcome turn in bilateral relations. This thaw comes after a prolonged period of diplomatic strain under former Canadian PM Justin Trudeau's tenure. The renewal of ties signals more than a reset — it hints at a strategic recalibration of the G7 itself in response to the shifting global economic landscape, especially the rising influence of the Global South. Canada's India outreach takes on deeper significance as both countries re-evaluate their foreign policy alignments. For Canada, caught between an unpredictable US and an increasingly untrustworthy China, engagement with India offers a stabilising alternative. In this regard, the India-Canada Joint Statement's emphasis on "shared democratic values, respect for the rule of law, and commitment to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity," along with mutual sensitivities marks a significant and welcome departure from the tensions of recent years.

The decision to reinstate respective high commissioners, resume senior ministerial and working-level engagements, and identify areas of cooperation that could eventually lead to a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) augurs well for the bilateral relations and demonstrates strategic maturity and intent in Canada to insulate the relationship from domestic political turbulence.

This diplomatic reset marks a key follow through from PM Mark Carney's campaign promise to relook at India-Canada ties, signalling a possible pragmatic approach towards India despite opposition from certain quarters in Canada. Canada's long-term geo-economic strategy is evolving, and engagement with India is likely to become a key component of it both bilaterally and as an actor in the Indo-Pacific.

The shifting character of the G7 was perhaps most visible at this year's summit. Its inability to maintain a unified position on Ukraine, evidenced by the retraction of a previously agreed statement, revealed the continued centrality of US support — not just in diplomacy, but also in financial and security commitments. Yet, the presence of India, Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa served as a subtle but powerful signal that the G7 is being compelled to engage with the Global South in new and meaningful ways.

The G7, once a club of like-minded wealthy democracies, is at a crossroads. A dual dynamic of Western recalibration and Southern assertion is defining its current evolution. While internal cohesion among Western nations remains under pressure, a simultaneous embrace of emerging powers is becoming necessary. The road ahead will likely require balancing continued engagement with a less predictable US and deeper integration with economies that are assuming a growing role in global political and economic affairs.

The group's future relevance will depend not only on its ability to maintain unity within but also on its willingness to share space and shape the agenda with rising powers like India. The India-Canada thaw, in this context, is more than a bilateral correction as it signals that rebalancing of Western global economies may not remain just a choice but a necessity.

Harsh V Pant is vice president, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi and Vivek Mishra is deputy director, Strategic Studies Programme, fellow, China Studies, ORF. The views expressed are personal.

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THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of Syrians who have returned home since Assad's fall

2 In million. Over two million Syrians who had fled their homes during the country's war have returned since the ouster of Bashar al-Assad, according to the UN refugee agency. The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011 with Assad's repression of anti-government protests, displaced half of the population internally or abroad. Assad's ouster at the hands of Islamist forces sparked hopes of return. AFP

The surge in Indian-owned businesses in the U.K.

23 In per cent. The number of Indian-owned companies operating in the U.K. has reached 1,197 this year, recording the steepest pace of annual growth. The combined revenues reported by Indian-owned companies in the U.K. increased to GBP 72.14 billion from GBP 68.09 billion in 2024, according to the annual 'India Meets Britain Tracker'. REUTERS

Death toll from floods in the Eastern Cape region in South Africa

92 South Africa was under a declared state of national disaster on Thursday as the death toll from floods caused by severe rains in the Eastern Cape region rose to 92. Speaking at the public memorial service, Zolile Williams, a member of the executive council, said the people of the coastal province have not been the same since the disaster hit. AP

Number of persons in Gaza killed in Israeli fire on Thursday

72 Gaza's civil defence agency said that Israeli fire killed at least 72 people in the Palestinian territory, including 21 who had gathered near an aid distribution site. The Israeli army said that troops had fired "warning shots" at "suspects" approaching them in the Netzarim area where the civil defence agency said 15 people were killed waiting for aid. AFP

The amount of Indian money parked in Swiss banks in 2024

3.5 In billion Swiss francs (nearly ₹37,600 crore). Indian money parked in Swiss banks more than tripled in 2024 on the back of a huge jump in funds held through local branches and other financial institutions, annual data released by Switzerland's central bank showed on Thursday. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Why India should address its propulsion gap

Is India overly reliant on imported engines? What happened to the HF-24 Marut, India's first indigenously designed fighter jet? Why has the Kaveri engine project not been able to come to fruition? How is India affected by foreign engine supply delays? Is only the Indian Air Force affected by such dependency?

EXPLAINER

Rahul Bedi

The story so far:

There has been growing excitement in military and industrial circles over the fast-tracked indigenous fifth generation stealth Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA). Touted as a multi-role fighter with super-cruise capability, internal weapons bays, advanced avionics, and diverter-less supersonic intakes enhancing stealth and reliability, the AMCA is being hailed as a milestone in Indian aerospace history. However, a dose of historical realism is warranted particularly since India has a persistent propulsion gap, and is overly reliant on imported engines. Nearly seven decades of fighter development reveal cautionary lessons, starting with India's first indigenously designed fighter jet, the HF-24 Marut (Spirit of the Tempest).

What happened to the HF-24 Marut?

Launched in the 1950s by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) under famed German engineer Kurt Tank – designer of several WWII Luftwaffe fighters – the twin-engine, swept-wing Marut was, like the AMCA, an ambitious project of its time. Sleek and capable of transonic speeds, it embodied post-colonial India's drive for self-reliance and entered service amid high hopes in the late 1960s.

However, the Marut never reached its full potential, not because of design flaws, but entirely due to its underpowered British Bristol Siddeley Orpheus 703 turbojets. Although Tank had envisioned a more powerful engine, it never materialised, leaving the Marut's performance underwhelming. And, while it performed reasonably well in ground-attack roles during the 1971 war on the western front, its propulsion limitations ultimately proved crippling. HAL produced only 147 of these high-maintenance, low-output fighters, which were eventually 'number-plated' or retired by 1990.

Indian Air Force (IAF) veterans who flew the Marut consistently cited the lack of a powerful engine as its Achilles' heel – highlighting the enduring reality that high-end fighters live or die by propulsion technology. Engines, after all, are not mere technical parts but the core of sovereign aerospace capability, shaping a combat aircraft's power, range, and mission effectiveness.

Did India develop its own engines?

Following the Marut's disappointing engine performance, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) assigned its Gas Turbine Research Establishment (GTRE) laboratory in 1989 to develop the Kaveri GTX-35VS afterburning turbofan for the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), which had been under design development since 1981-82.

Over the next 35 years, GTRE spent around ₹2032 crore, as of 2020, on the project, but without success. Despite producing nine full-scale prototypes and four core engines – logging over 3,000 hours of ground testing and 73 hours of flight trials on an Ilyushin IL-76 flying test bed in Russia – the Kaveri failed to meet the LCA's performance benchmarks. It struggled with thrust-to-weight ratio, reliability, and thermal management under sustained high-performance conditions. Though spinoff versions were proposed for tanks, ships, and locomotives, none have so far entered operational use.

Long-term vision: Three HF-24 Marut aircraft of the IAF flying in formation over Rajpath, New Delhi. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

A revival attempt in 2016, in collaboration with French engine-maker Snecma (linked to offset obligations from the IAF's Rafale deal) also collapsed. A parallel proposal by its partner Safran to co-develop a new engine for the Tejas MkII and AMCA met a similar fate, reportedly rejected by the DRDO due to institutional pride.

Meanwhile, Kaveri's failure forced the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA), responsible for the LCA's design, to adopt the U.S.-made General Electric (GE) F404-IN20 afterburning turbofan engine (producing 78-80 kN of thrust) around 2004. Although barely adequate – restricting Tejas' payload and high-angle-of-attack capabilities – the engine was eventually approved by the IAF, which inducted two Mk1 squadrons from 2015 onwards, with one squadron operating without full operational clearance, nearly 34 years after the LCA programme's inception.

How is India affected by engine dependency?

India's engine dependency issues resurfaced recently when GE delayed delivery of 99 F404 engines by 13 months for the upgraded LCA Mk1A – a lighter, more capable variant equipped with an Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar, advanced electronic warfare suites, and mid-air refuelling capability. Under a $716 million contract signed in 2021, engine deliveries were scheduled to begin by March 2024, but the first power pack arrived only in April 2025, as part of an initial batch of 12 expected by the end of the year. GE cited "unprecedented supply chain pressures," including disruptions from suppliers, as the cause for the delay, but for India it jeopardised the MK1As commissioning by deferring it further.

This triggered sharp criticism from Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh, who publicly rebuked HAL for chronic slippages in fighter deliveries amid a steep decline in IAF combat strength from a sanctioned 42.5 fighter squadrons to around 30 presently. Further reductions loom with two legacy MiG-21 'Bis' squadrons slated for imminent retirement. "We need to be now ready to be future-ready," Mr. Singh said at the CII Annual Business Summit in New Delhi on May 29. Citing HAL's blotted history of missed deadlines, he bluntly asserted that wars are won by equipping the military, not merely planning for the future.

Simultaneously, HAL's negotiations with GE to locally manufacture the more powerful GE-F414 engine (90-96 kN thrust) – intended for the LCA Mk2 and initially the AMCA Mk1 – too has hit a roadblock. The deal, announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2023 U.S. visit, has reportedly been stalled by GE's demand for an additional $500 million over the original $1.5 billion agreement.

More critically, GE appears unwilling to share core engine technologies like single-crystal turbine blades, thermal barrier coatings, and advanced cooling systems, all of which are vital for boosting engine durability and thrust. HAL continues to demand full technology transfer, but industry insiders point out that such proprietary know-how, developed at great expense, is rarely shared by global engine makers. Talks, however, are still ongoing.

Both the LCA Mk2, which is under-development, and the initial AMCA Mk1 models are expected to rely on the F414 as a 'stopgap' powerplant, pending finalisation of the deal. The ADA is also scouting for a 110 kN-class engine for the AMCA Mk2, potentially via a joint venture. Intermittent discussions with France's Safran and the U.K.'s Rolls-Royce have so far yielded no concrete outcome.

And, while these possibilities may serve as a short-term workaround, it reflects the same external engine dependence that had crippled the Marut. Consequently, a cross-section of IAF veterans and aerospace experts warned that unless India developed an indigenous engine to power future AMCA blocks, the programme risks being held hostage once again to geopolitical whims.

How much is India dependent on external engines?

India's external propulsion sourcing extends well beyond aerial platforms, affecting the Army and Navy as well, both of which are exclusively reliant on imported power packs or foreign engines assembled and built domestically under licence. The Army's Arjun Main Battle Tank, for example, is powered by the German MTU MB838 Ka-501 diesel engine paired with RENK RK-304 transmissions, while the recently trialled Zorawar Light Tank uses the U.S.-origin 1,000hp Cummins Advanced Combat Engine. The Navy too depends wholly on foreign propulsion systems – Russian, Ukrainian, French, German, and U.S. engines – that power all its indigenously designed and built frigates, destroyers, auxiliary vessels, troop carriers, corvettes, and fast attack craft. India's all-round engine development across aerospace, land, and naval platforms is critical to ensure strategic autonomy and enhance military capability.

How important is autonomous engine development ?

Aircraft engine development is vital for India to achieve aerospace autonomy and strategic self-reliance. Disruptions in foreign engine supplies delay production like that of the LCA Mk1A, hampers upgrades, and restricts exports as that would necessitate third-party approvals. The U.S., France, and China are able to assert dominance in global aerospace markets as they have harnessed indigenous propulsion.

However, for India, mastering advanced jet engine technology is not merely a prestige project but is crucial to sustaining military readiness, ensuring credible deterrence, and insulating its defence sector from external shocks and global political vagaries. Without this core capability, India's broader ambitions in aviation and defence exports risk remaining perennially compromised.

A broad spectrum of defence experts and IAF veterans contend that India's failure to develop advanced jet engines transcend technical hurdles and are fundamentally a political challenge. India's defence funding remains fragmented, largely focused on short-term projects, rather than being driven by a long-term, strategic vision.

If India is genuinely committed to closing this glaring capability gap, mere slogans like *Atmanirbhar Bharat* will not suffice. Achieving true autonomy in engine technology demands comprehensive structural reforms, unwavering political will, and the cultivation of an innovation ecosystem which will seamlessly integrate private sector participation, academic research, and defence R&D institutions into a cohesive and competitive framework.

Rahul Bedi is a veteran journalist based in New Delhi and Chandigarh specialising in military, defence and security matters.

THE GIST

- Launched in the 1950s by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) under famed German engineer Kurt Tank —designer of several WWII Luftwaffe fighters — the twin-engine, swept-wing Marut was, like the AMCA, an ambitious project of its time.

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- India's external propulsion sourcing extends well beyond aerial platforms, affecting the Army and Navy as well, both of which are exclusively reliant on imported power packs.

The US should go for recalibrated South Asia policy

US President Donald Trump seems to have become obsessed with his role as a dealmaker and peacemaker. In the run-up to the presidential poll, he promised to bring an end to the Russia-Ukraine war. To his credit, he has made a lot of effort but without much success. Evidently, he wants to bolster his image as a peacemaker by taking credit for brokering a 'ceasefire' between India and Pakistan. Facts suggest otherwise.

To begin with, India's objective was limited: it just wanted to attack the terrorist network in Pakistan. It did that; Pakistan retaliated but was soundly thrashed, resulting in considerable losses to its airbases. Islamabad and Rawalpindi both realized that any escalation would be costly and dangerous for them, so they requested a cessation of hostilities, which India agreed to. The reason was simple: hostilities, let alone war, were not on India's agenda. This is much different from Israel's war against Iran: Tel Aviv wants regime change in Tehran.

Trump's repeated claims of bringing peace to the Indian subcontinent - and the moral equivalence implicit in his statements - have been deeply painful to India. They have also tarnished the image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This was the reason that Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri recently said, "President Trump enquired [in his 35-minute phone conversation] if Prime Minister Modi could stop over in the US on his way back from Canada. Due to prior commitments, Prime Minister Modi expressed his inability to do so. Both leaders agreed to make efforts to meet in the near future". Declining the invitation was a snub enough, but Trump seems unrelenting in his claims.

Apparently, this is because for Trump, politics and diplomacy can sometimes become personal. His family's involvement in the crypto business has a Pakistan connection. Further, Pakistan army chief Asim Munir's statement that Trump should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize appears to have earned him dinner at the White House.

To be sure, Trump is doing a good job for his country by deregulating the economy, securing its borders, augmenting energy production, supporting free speech, and combating the toxic effects of the radical Left on campuses. He can do better by improving ties with India, the world's largest democracy, and downgrading relations with Pakistan, the world's biggest engine of terror.

Trump must deepen the United States' strategic partnership with India - the world's largest democracy - and decisively reassess America's long-standing. India, with its population of over 1.4 billion, a robust and growing economy, a vibrant democratic system, and a commitment to the rule of law, is an indispensable ally for the United States in the 21st century.

The two countries share a common interest in promoting peace, regional stability, free trade, and a free and open Indo-Pacific. India is also a key partner in critical areas such as counterterrorism, cybersecurity, renewable energy, and defense collaboration. Strengthening ties with New Delhi would allow Trump to align US foreign policy with the values of freedom and democracy, while counterbalancing the growing influence of authoritarian powers such as China.

Concomitantly, downgrading relations with Pakistan would send a strong message that the United States no longer tolerates duplicity in its partnerships. A recalibrated South Asia policy - one that rewards integrity and punishes duplicity - would mark his evolution from a smart dealmaker to a genuine statesman.

Listen or Die: The cost of not actively listening

SURGICAL STRIKE

K. KRISHNA SAGAR RAO

LET me begin with something fierce, something that may sound exaggerated, but trust me, it's not. The title of this column isn't a metaphor, it's evolutionary reality. Listen or die. That's how nature has worked, that's how intelligence evolved, and that's how civilizations have either progressed or perished.

We've come a long way as a species, from primitive dwellings to space stations, from grunting sounds to digital conversations with AI. And yet, with all our modern achievements, I believe we're dangerously close to losing the one core human competence that made all this possible, our ability to 'actively listen'. Not just hear but receive.

Why I call it 'Receptive Intelligence'

I've spent over two decades studying human behaviour, emotional intelligence, and organizational dynamics. And there's something I've come to realize more than ever, our ability to learn, adapt, grow, and lead is entirely dependent on how well we receive. Not how much we know, not how loudly we speak, but how deeply we listen.

This isn't some abstract philosophical idea, it's practical, it's biological, and it's increasingly rare. I call this fundamental human competence 'Receptive Intelligence', the ability to intentionally focus on reception from our immediate and remote environment, consciously cancelling all interference. The intelligence acquired through this deeply attentive reception is what I define as Receptive Intelligence.

This isn't taught in schools, it's rarely discussed in boardrooms, but it underpins everything, from our emotional well-being to our professional effectiveness. And sadly, we're not cultivating it anymore.

The species that chose to think

Let's step back in time. Humans didn't start off as the apex species. We weren't always at the top of the food chain. What got us there wasn't brawn, it was reception. Our early ancestors were feeling beings, driven by primal instincts. But over millennia, we made a subtle yet profound transition, we became a 'thinking species'. We began receiving more from our environment than just survival cues. We listened, we observed, we processed. We started asking why, not just how. And that's what propelled us from caves to skyscrapers, from tribes to nations, from myths to mathematics. But this evolution came with a price, it required attention, awareness, and an undistracted sensory field. It required what I now fear is becoming extinct, focused, undivided, active reception.

Coming full circle and falling

Today, I believe we're coming full circle. Only this time, it's in reverse. We are becoming less aware, more distracted, and dangerously passive. Despite our technological advancements, I believe we are regressing in our most essential evolutionary trait, 'listening'.

Our senses are constantly overstimulated, yet undernourished. We are bombarded with information, but we retain very little of value. We've mastered the art of reaction but forgotten the virtue of reception.

I've had moments in my own journey where this realization hit me hard. I've sat in rooms filled with supposedly brilliant minds and found them unable to truly listen. Not because they're incapable, but because they're conditioned not to. They're too busy waiting for their turn to speak, to pitch, to impress, to outdo. What we're witnessing is the erosion of Receptive Intelligence, and with it, the slow decay of the very foundation of human excellence.

Active listening is not optional, it's survival

Listening isn't just a good leadership trait or a social nicety. It's not about being polite in meetings or patient in relationships. It's much bigger than that. It's evolutionary. Those who listened well, through the ages, survived, adapted, and evolved. Those who didn't, perished. It's as simple as that.

Today, that survival isn't about escaping predators. It's about navigating complexity. Listening helps us handle uncertainty, spot opportunities, build meaningful relationships, and make decisions grounded in context.

Without it, we fall into chaos. We react instead of reflecting. We divide instead of understanding. We deteriorate, personally, socially, professionally, and as a species. Let's bring this closer to home.

Ask yourself

- Are people around you truly listening anymore?
- In your family, how much listening actually happens?
- In society, is listening growing as a value or disappearing?
- And finally, how well are you listening?

If your answers are honest, they might alarm you.

On a global level, many democracies suffer when politicians stop listening to their people. Institutions collapse when leaders close their eyes and ears and keep only their mouths open. You don't need to look far. You can observe this breakdown in your community WhatsApp groups, in television debates, in boardroom discussions. People are loud, aggressive, opinionated, but rarely receptive. This is what I mean when I say, 'Listen or Die'. It's not about literal death. It's about the death of connection, the death of purpose, the death of social intelligence, and eventually, the death of a civilisation.

Sensory deterioration - the invisible collapse

What we're dealing with is not just a listening problem, it's a sensory collapse. Modern life is increasingly corrosive to sensory focus. Loud cities, glowing screens, relentless notifications, algorithmic feeds, they hijack our senses and fragment our attention. Our ability to sit still, focus deeply, and receive fully is crumbling. That's not poetic exaggeration; it's a scientific concern.

There's credible medical evidence now showing that sensory acuity, especially among young adults, is on the decline. We see it in education, in workplaces, and even in parenting. Children are growing up in environments that discourage silence, disincentivize patience, and reward reaction over reflection.

We're losing something precious, 'Natural Intelligence'. The very intelligence that made us who we are is withering, even as we build machines with artificial intelligence to do our thinking for us.

Here's the paradox, while machines are becoming better at mimicking human cognition, humans are becoming worse at it. AI may soon write better code or perform surgeries. But what AI cannot do, and must not replace, is our ability to connect, comprehend, and empathize. And all of that begins with listening.

The human cost of poor reception

Let's not kid ourselves. Poor listening doesn't just impact businesses or productivity. It shatters human connection. I've seen marriages fall apart not due to infidelity or money, but because partners stopped listening to each other. I've seen teams disintegrate not because of incompetence, but because of unchecked assumptions. I've witnessed young professionals' plateau not because they lacked talent, but because they were poor receivers of feedback. They seem to be 'too distracted to listen to anyone'.

On a global level, many democracies suffer when politicians stop listening to their people. Institutions collapse when leaders close their eyes and ears and keep only their mouths open. You don't need to look far. You can observe this breakdown in your community WhatsApp groups, in television debates, in boardroom discussions. People are loud, aggressive, opinionated, but rarely receptive.

This is what I mean when I say, 'Listen or Die'. It's not about literal death. It's about the death of connection, the death of purpose, the death of social intelligence, and eventually, the death of a civilization.

Fear the future

Let me take a moment to paint a painful picture of where we're headed if we don't reclaim 'Receptive Intelligence'.

- Marriages will become transactional. People will live together but barely connect.
- Families will function as logistical units. Conversations will fade, replaced by digital notifications.
- Friendships will be shallow, maintained through memes, not memories.
- Workplaces will reward noise over nuance. Decision-making will be impulsive, not inclusive.
- National discourse will turn into tribal warfare. Echo chambers will multiply, and dissent will be demonized.
- Spirituality will be commodified, not as a path to inner truth, but as a commodity.

This is not dystopian fiction. It's already happening. Unless we course-correct.

So, what can be done?

Receptive Intelligence is not dead, it's just neglected. It can be revived, personally, professionally, and collectively. But it starts with conscious, daily practice. Here's what I've integrated into my own life and strategy consulting practice:

1. **Cultivate the lost art of silence.** Even 10 minutes a day. No inputs. Just presence. Train your senses to be still again.
2. **Practice focused listening.** Shut out distractions. Turn off the phone. Look into the eyes of the person speaking. Listen with your whole being.
3. **Model it for others.** As a parent, spouse, leader, friend, demonstrate what it means to be a great listener. It's contagious.
4. **Check your sensory health.** Do a weekly audit of your noise exposure, screen time, and emotional bandwidth.
5. **Encourage reflective spaces in teams and families.** Make it okay to pause, to breathe, to contemplate before reacting.
6. **Promote deep work.** In your organization, reward focus and listening, not just hustle and volume.
7. **Read slowly.** Not everything must be consumed in speed mode. Savor some information. Let it marinate.
8. **Ask better questions.** Questions are keys. They open doors to better reception. "What do you mean?" is more powerful than "I disagree."

Final reflection

We are not yet doomed, but we are drifting. Slowly, silently, and dangerously. We are forgetting what made us human. And in the process, we are risking the loss of something far greater than productivity or performance, we are risking the very meaning.

Listening is not a luxury. It's not a soft skill. It's not a bullet point on a résumé. It's a species-level competence. We didn't become great by speaking more. We became great by receiving deeply. From nature. From one another. From silence. From the unknown. If we forget to listen, we will lose not just the future, but ourselves. So yes, let me say it one more time, Listen or Die.

(The author is the Chief Spokesperson of BJP, Chairman of Nation Building Foundation and a Harvard Business School certified strategist)

LETTERS

Trump's strange moves

PRESIDENT Donald Trump is emerging as another Goebbels with his repeatedly trumpeting narratives about the recent ceasefire accord arrived between India and Pakistan, even after a flat denial by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. What is more, he has the audacity to say that Modi is a fantastic man, whatever that to mean. If he thinks that this way, India can be bullied, nothing can be farther from truth. His explicit statement that he loves Pakistan once again reveals his lack of sincerity and diversion from the avowed goals of fighting terrorism tooth and nail.

Seshagiri Row Karry, Hyderabad

India should have been tough with Pak

THE opposition took strong exception to Mr Trump's 'ceasefire' announcement of war between India and Pakistan. They opposition were wanting the PM to make it clear whether Mr Trump had engineered the ceasefire using 'trade' card. All the while the PM never reacted to the opposition's call, but now in the sidelines of G7 outreach Mr Modi said the truce was reached at the request of Pak, and that India would never allow any nation to mediate. Not everything is obvious though. Why did India not demand Pak to surrender the intruding killer terrorists, in return for truce?

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad

Increasing working hours, regressive move

THE Karnataka government is now preparing to increase daily working hours from 10 to 12, following the path already taken by Andhra Pradesh. This decision is being labelled as 'industrial development,' but in reality, it is a direct attack on the lives of millions of workers. Working 12 hours a day like machines will not only increase physical exhaustion but also lead to mental stress, strained family life, and the destruction of social balance. This raises a crucial question: Is economic progress only possible at the cost of workers' blood and sweat? While developed countries are moving toward fewer working hours and a better lifestyle, such steps in India signal regression. If governments truly want development, they must introduce policies that treat humans not as machines but as citizens deserving a dignified life. Otherwise, this so-called 'development' will one day lay the groundwork for social discontent and labour rebellion.

Prof RK Jain "Arijeet", Barwani (MP)

India's balancing act

THIS refers to "Modi snubs Trump, decline US invite" (June 19). How one sees his action as "right" or "wrong" depends on perspective. From a diplomatic protocol and sovereignty standpoint, it aligns with India's established position. From a public relations angle, it sends a clear message about India's self-reliance in regional matters. It also sends a message to other global players: India will engage, but on its own terms. At the same time, Modi's cordial 35 minutes telephonic talks on Operation Sindoor and invitation to Trump for the upcoming Quad Summit in India is being viewed as a balancing act. It keeps the door open for cooperation on broader Indo-Pacific strategy, climate, and trade, while drawing a red line around bilateral issues with Pakistan.

This divergence could create short-term friction, but it's unlikely to derail the broader India-U.S. relationship. The two countries share deepening ties in defence, technology, and regional security. The upcoming Quad Summit may serve as a reset point.

Dr O Prasada Rao, Hyderabad

Modi needs to take everyone along

INDIA has two groups; one which believes that PM Modi can do no wrong and the other which feels everything he does is wrong. An objective assessment is rare. Therefore, the edit on 11 years of Modi role is something of a rarity in the media. Modi's biggest contribution has been in infrastructure. One only hopes the roads and bridges will last the time they were designed for. It also seemed that the foreign policy was being done right until we failed to find support for Operation Sindoor. One personal fault of Modi has been his inability to take everybody along. The criticism that the BJP is now run by two and a half men is valid. His inability to control the motor mouths of his party and take any meaningful action against them goes into one of his minuses. But his biggest failure has been on the black money front which was promised to be brought back during his first them. Social cohesion is on a downtrend and the PM will have to address these issues, if he wants to be considered as the greatest PM of India!

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Reservation for minorities under housing schemes hiked to 15% in Karnataka

BENGALURU: The Karnataka cabinet on Thursday decided to enhance the reservation for minorities under various housing schemes in the state from 10 to 15 per cent. According to the government, this enhanced quota will benefit all minorities including Muslims, Christians, and Jains. The move follows a recent government initiative to introduce a 4 per cent reservation for Muslims in public contracts, which has come under criticism from opposition BJP. The saffron party has accused the Congress dispensation of "undermining" the Constitution through religion-based reservations. Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar defended the decision, saying its primary objective is to help poorer sections of the society.

Speaking to reporters after the cabinet meeting, state Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister H K Patil said, "Under various housing schemes being implemented by the Housing Department across the state, in both urban and rural areas, it has been decided to enhance the reservation for minorities from 10 per cent to 15 per cent."

"The decision was taken-- as the central government observing the inadequate housing among them (minorities) has given certain instructions, and the state government too has observed the high number of homeless among minorities in the state," he said.

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

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Opinion

FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 2025

THE SPOKEN WORD

Union home minister Amit Shah

In this country, those who speak English will soon feel ashamed — the creation of such a society is not far away

Easing the burden

Encouraging companies to list and removing hurdles were the highlights of the Sebi board meeting

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE Board of India (Sebi) Chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey told *Financial Express* a few months back that he had set an internal goal for his colleagues: simplifying some of the decades-old regulations. "It would be quite similar to how the Direct Tax Code was drafted. I think within the next three months, we will be able to start accelerating this process, in terms of identifying the pain points. It will be driven as an organisational mission." In less than three months, the Sebi board has delivered the first tranche of the chairman's promise. It is noteworthy that the 42-page statement after the Sebi board meeting on Thursday has used the word "ease" over 25 times. That itself tells the whole story. Sebi made 19 changes, all aimed at reducing paperwork and encouraging more companies to list on the bourses. A good example is encouraging promoters to have more skin in the game by reversing the earlier regulation that did not allow them to hold employee stock options (Esops) at the time of going for an initial public offering (IPO).

Pandey, of course, clarified that an industry proposal of allowing fresh Esop benefits to be availed by founders after the listing was not approved by the board. Additionally, it has scrapped a guideline that forced investors to hold shares after conversion from compulsorily convertible securities for at least one year, as it did not allow investors to participate in the offer for sale in IPOs. Both these measures are expected to encourage companies to list and even reverse-flip, that is shifting the country of incorporation from a foreign jurisdiction to India. Similarly, by allowing trust and charitable trusts to list at social stock exchanges, the market regulator is encouraging more transparency in the sector. The approval of a framework for voluntary delisting of public sector undertakings with 90% or more government holding allows delisting at a fixed price, eliminating the two-thirds public shareholder approval requirement. This aligns with the government's disinvestment agenda.

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) wanting to solely invest in G-Secs will now have to go through less compliance burden. Clearly, the market regulator wants to facilitate more investments after India's inclusion in two bond indices — JP Morgan Global Emerging Markets (EM) Bond Index and Bloomberg EM Local Currency Government Index. In September, Indian bonds will be included in FTSE Russell EM Government Bond Index. In fact, FPI investment through the fully accessible route has seen a significant increase and has crossed ₹3 lakh-crore mark in March. Also, allowing alternative investment funds to offer co-investment opportunities through separate vehicles and reducing the allotment of infrastructure investment trusts in primary market to ₹25 lakh from ₹1 crore will attract more investors.

What is interesting is that a settlement scheme has also been extended to stock brokers who traded on the National Spot Exchange (NSEL) and faced enforcement action from the market regulator. This move is expected to bring major relief to traders whose funds have been stuck since the NSEL payment crisis in July 2013. This decision comes after over 90% of brokers voted in favour of a one-time settlement amount. Overall, the regulatory changes reflect Sebi's broader agenda under chairman Pandey to improve ease of doing business, boost investor participation, and modernise India's capital markets.

MARKET RESPONSE

CHANGE IN STANCE AND ARTICULATION ON INTEREST RATE CUTS HAVE HAD A BEARING

The post-policy bond market

MADAN SABNAVIS

Chief economist, Bank of Baroda

A WEEK AFTER the credit policy was announced on June 6, the financial markets looked quite different from what was expected. Normally when the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) lowers the repo rate there is unbridled enthusiasm with bond yields going down. The talk then centres on how soon banks will transmit the repo rate cuts.

This time the RBI had provided not just a rate cut of 50 basis points (bps) — generally more than what was expected — but also lowered the cash reserve ratio (CRR) at a time when the system was in a surplus of almost ₹2.5-3 lakh crore on a daily basis. At first sight, this would sound odd as providing liquidity when it was already in surplus would not have made any sense.

However, on deeper thought, the RBI has added certainty in the market by announcing the cut over four tranches post-September. This would also be the beginning of the busy season when demand for credit picks up. Therefore, the rate cut and the reduction in CRR are to be viewed more as a set of measures to tell the markets that the RBI would be providing full support to the system. In fact, it also signalled that the focus would be on growth from now on as inflation is well under control with the annual rate expected to be 3.7%.

This was probably a new approach taken by the RBI, which is refreshing as it blended certainty with surprise. The surprise element was the big-bang impetus of a dual boost through repo rate and CRR cuts. The market should ideally have applauded with bond yields going down. In fact, the 10-year bond should have gone to the 6.15-6.20% level but instead has now gotten into the 6.30%-plus range (going by both the new and old benchmarks). Why should this be so?

A clue to this development is the commentary used in the policy alongside as well as the post-policy interactions with the media. Firstly, the stance which was changed to neutral. While there is nothing sacrosanct in this change given that it can always be altered when circumstances so warrant, a change from accommodative to neutral combined with a large liberal CRR and repo rate cut sent mixed signals. The takeaway was that we should not be expecting any more rate cuts during the year. Second, this view was buttressed by the statement that the committee believed there was less scope for interest rate cuts to push the economy further, meaning thereby that there were limits to which repo rate can influence growth; and this limit may have been attained. This sounds logical because interest rates on their own cannot keep economies running and other factors such as consumption, employment, private enterprise investment, among others, also have to come together.

> On deeper thought, the RBI has added certainty in the market by announcing the cut over four tranches post-September

The bond market has been affected by this decision and articulation. With no signs of further rate cuts in future, the 10-year bond has stiffened even while the T-Bill rates have softened. In the past too, it has been observed that the bond yields tend to be influenced more by what the market thinks the RBI will do rather than what has been done. Often when the repo rate is lowered, and it is fully expected, the bond yields tend to be fairly intransigent even though they would have moved down in advance in anticipation. This is what is meant when it is said that the rate changes have already been buffered by the market.

Another factor coming in the way of bond yields is the state of US markets. While the RBI is clear that it does not take decisions based on what the Fed does, the same does not hold for the market. The market looks at what the Fed says and how the US treasuries are moving. Now, the US 10-year bond is hovering in the range of 4.30-4.50% and moves based on developments on the tariff front.

The Fed has held back rate cuts even though inflation is more or less within acceptable limits. The reason is that the steep tariffs announced are likely to increase inflation which would require the Fed to react. In fact, the balance will be delicate because in the worst-case situation where growth also slows down (though not turn negative to become stagflationary), a more nuanced view will have to be taken. But as of now a long pause till September is expected.

Interestingly, historically the difference between the Indian and US 10-year bond has been in the range of 250-300 bps. Right now the variation is 180-190 bps, which is quite low. This may not have mattered except to academics but for the fact that this differential is important when it comes to investment flows, especially in debt markets. Debt investors normally benchmark returns with the US yields and then make adjustments for currency fluctuations. The rupee has definitely been one of the better performing currencies in the last few years notwithstanding the turmoil witnessed since 2022, which got exacerbated after the US elections and the announcement of the tariff policies.

This differential becomes important in the context of the interest of foreign portfolio investors in Indian debt. The inclusion of Indian bonds in global bond indices was a big positive that was to usher in larger investment flows. One of the factors driving such flows would be the returns and their differential with alternatives. The present differential may not be considered too favourable.

It is normally believed that the debt market reacts with alacrity to policy changes while banks take time to adjust rates. This is so as banks need to evaluate the how the lending rates go down as loans linked to the external benchmark get repriced immediately. The marginal cost of funds-based lending rates need to also change, which can come down only if deposit rates are lowered. This is why transmission through the banking system is always with a lag as banks need to evaluate these matrices. The debt market this time has also been relatively less responsive as future actions on the policy front could be uncertain.

Views are personal

An admin task for online gaming

ALKESH KUMAR SHARMA

Former secretary, ministry of electronics and information technology

An approach where the Centre and the states work together to create harmonised regulations can ensure consistency, legal certainty, and consumer protection

INDIA'S ONLINE GAMING sector is navigating a dynamic ecosystem, with states taking bold steps to address the regulatory gaps. While the central government has come out with intermediary rules and is yet to introduce comprehensive implementation guidelines under the Information Technology (IT) Act, several states are taking proactive measures. Tamil Nadu has already established a regulatory framework through the Tamil Nadu Online Gaming Authority (Real Money Games) Regulations, 2025. Meanwhile, Maharashtra and Karnataka are reportedly exploring similar regulatory approaches. These state-led initiatives reflect a growing urgency to bring clarity and oversight to the sector amid its exponential growth. If the rules remain fragmented throughout India, it may cause a lack of ease of doing business for the industry and eventually result in a loss of revenue to the government.

Online gaming aligns closely with the Prime Minister's vision of Digital India and our ambition to position India as a gaming superpower. With 45 crore gamers and a compound annual growth rate of ~14%, the industry bolsters India's status as the third-largest digital economy, third-largest start-up ecosystem, and fastest-growing G20 nation. However, the developments around states and the Centre's regulations have sparked a broader discourse on the best way to govern the sector.

Developments in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra reflect that the states are stepping in to address regulatory gaps in the run-up to a comprehensive national framework. However, when states independently regulate internet-based industries like online gaming, businesses face a patchwork of rules that can complicate operations. This is especially true for platforms relying on seamless cross-border connectivity, where varying compliance requirements make governance complex, and may hinder innovation and expansion. Players too encounter inconsistent protections, while start-ups and smaller enterprises bear the heaviest burden of compliance, potentially stifling competition.

Constitutionally, states hold authority over betting and gambling under Entry 34 of List II, but online games of skill deemed legal by multiple high courts and the Supreme Court require a central oversight in view of a lack of clarity about it in the 7th schedule of the Constitution. They may therefore fall under the Centre's purview looking at their geographical reach, with the ministry of electronics and information technology being allotted the subject as per the allocation of business rules by the Indian government. The Madras High Court recently clarified that Tamil Nadu could regulate — but not prohibit — games of skill, although the broader question of state jurisdiction awaits a Supreme Court ruling. This legal complexity underscores the need for a unified yet inclusive approach.

> When states independently regulate internet-based industries like online gaming, businesses face a patchwork of rules that can complicate operations

Rather than a top-down model, a cooperative framework where the states and the Centre collaborate on regulation could better serve India's gaming industry. Including states in decision-making would harmonise rules, reduce duplicative provisions, and ease the compliance burden on businesses. It would also allow states to address the unique needs and concerns of their residents, ensuring both effective and regionally relevant regulations.

India's gaming boom, fuelled by rapid digitalisation, affordable internet, and a young population, has attracted significant investor interest. Yet, growth depends on a supportive regulatory environment that encourages innovation and sustains investment. Investors favour stable, predictable policies, and the lack of clarity can deter both domestic and global capital.

A collaborative regulatory approach could reverse this trend. By aligning central and state efforts, India could create a borderless, unified market that reassures investors while safeguarding users. The IT Rules already incorporate global best practices like age-gating, KYC, and need for responsible gaming measures, but further refinements such as content ratings and parental controls could be developed jointly with states to tackle addiction and inappropriate content effectively.

With over 30% of India's population engaged in gaming, the absence of cohesive oversight has allowed illegal platforms to thrive, raising risks of consumer harm and anti-social activities, as noted by the Directorate General of Goods and Services Tax Intelligence and in a report by the Rashtriya Raksha University. State-level efforts alone cannot fully address these challenges, given their reliance on the Centre for internet governance. A joint framework would enable more robust enforcement on online betting and gambling, curbing grey markets while protecting players.

Models like Tamil Nadu's regulations draw inspiration from South Korea and China, where similar measures faced pushback due to limited compliance and user shifts to virtual private network-enabled grey markets. India can learn from these experiences by fostering Centre-states dialogue to design practical, enforceable rules tailored to its context.

India's ambition to become a global hub for gaming depends on three key pillars: attracting investment, fostering innovation, and building a skilled workforce. Achieving these goals requires regulatory clarity and a cohesive national market.

To make this framework truly effective, it is vital to involve states as active partners in policymaking. This is where cooperative federalism becomes essential. A collaborative approach where the Centre and states work together to create harmonised regulations can ensure consistency, legal certainty, and robust consumer protection across India. At the same time, it allows states the flexibility to address region-specific concerns, creating a well-rounded and resilient regulatory ecosystem for online gaming.

Make the robot your colleague, not overlord

THERE'S THE TERMINATOR school of perceiving artificial intelligence risks, in which we'll all be killed by our robot overlords. And then there's one where, if not friends exactly, the machines serve as valued colleagues. A Japanese tech researcher is arguing that our global AI safety approach hinges on reframing efforts to achieve this benign partnership.

In 2023, as the world was shaken by the release of ChatGPT, a pair of successive warnings came from Silicon Valley of existential threats from powerful AI tools. Elon Musk led a group of experts and industry executives in calling for a six-month pause in developing advanced systems until we figured out how to manage risks. Then hundreds of AI leaders — including Sam Altman of OpenAI and Demis Hassabis of Alphabet's DeepMind — sent shockwaves with a statement that warned: "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks, such as pandemics and nuclear war."

Despite all the attention paid to the potentially catastrophic dangers, the years since have been marked by "accelerationists" largely drowning out the doomers. Companies and countries have raced toward being the first to achieve superhuman AI, brushing off the early calls to prioritise safety. And it has all left the public very confused.

But maybe we've been viewing this all wrong. Hiroshi Yamakawa, a prominent AI scholar from the University of Tokyo who has spent the past three decades researching the technology, is now arguing that the most promising route to a sustainable future is to let humans and AIs "live in symbiosis and flourish together, protecting each other's well-being and averting catastrophic risks".

CATHERINE THORBECKE

Bloomberg

Well, kumbaya.

Yamakawa hit a nerve because while he recognises the threats noted in 2023, he argues for a working path toward coexistence with super-intelligent machines — especially at a time when nobody is halting development over fears of falling behind. In other words, if we can't beat AI from becoming smarter than us, we're better off joining it as an equal partner. "Equality" is the sensitive part. Humans want to keep believing they are superior, not equal to the machines.

His statement has generated a lot of buzz in Japanese academic circles, receiving dozens of signatories so far, including from some influential AI safety researchers overseas. In an interview with *Nikkei Asia*, he argued that cultural differences in Asia are more likely to enable seeing machines as peers instead of as adversaries. While the US has produced AI-inspired characters like the Terminator, the Japanese have envisioned friendlier companions like Astro Boy or Doraemon, he told the news outlet.

It's likely his comments will fall on deaf ears, though, like so many of the other AI risk warnings. Development has its own momentum. And whether the machines will ever get to a point where they could spur "civilisation extinction" remains an extremely heated debate. It's fair to say that some of the industry's focus on far-off, science-fiction scenarios is meant to distract from the more immediate harm that the technology could bring — whether that's job displacement, allegations of copyright infringement, or reneging on climate change goals.

Still, Yamakawa's proposal is a timely re-up on an AI safety debate that has languished in recent years. These discussions can't just rely on eyebrow-raising warnings and the absence of governance. With the exception of Europe, most jurisdictions have focused on loosening regulations in the hope of not falling behind. Policymakers can't afford to turn a blind eye until it's too late.

Meanwhile, as the global tech industry has been caught up in a race to create computer systems that are smarter than humans, it's yet to be determined whether we'll ever get there. But setting godlike AI as the goalpost has created a lot of counterproductive fearmongering.

There might be merit in viewing these machines as colleagues and not overlords.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Welcome thaw

Apropos of "Reset in Kananaskis" (*FE*, June 19), regardless of what circumstances led to a late invite for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the G7 summit allowed a personal interaction between him and his Canadian counterpart. Cordial relations between any two sovereign nations is the pivot for diplomacy, and ideally should not depend on who is at the helm. Sadly, that wasn't the case when the former PM of Canada, Justin Trudeau, took a line that went against Indian interests. Thankfully, this seems to be a thing of the past as both nations have reset ties. Indians living in Canada would be more than happy at this turn of events, which have restored the cordiality between the two nations. However, the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar is an irritant and the sooner the murder case is solved the better it would be for Indo-Canadian relations.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Israel-Iran ripples

Apropos of "End of a nuclear order" (*FE*, June 19), last week's eruption of a conflict between Israel and Iran was quite unexpected. While Iran was at the negotiating table with the US on its nuclear research and development, Israel's attack targeting Iranian nuclear installations, scientists, and research personnel took the world by surprise. The devastation caused in Iran is unimaginable. With civilians fleeing Iran in fear of fresh attacks by Israeli forces, India, which is friendly towards both nations, is caught in a delicate situation. The fear of Iran closing its borders and sea routes for trade is sending jittters among many nations, as a complete halt on movement of goods or alternative circuitous routes could force them to spend more on ferrying goods.

—RV Baskaran, Pune

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EDITORIAL

PEACE IN PERIL

The latest border flare-up between Cambodia and Thailand has grown well beyond a routine diplomatic spat. What began with a short but lethal exchange of fire on May 28 in a sliver of disputed "no-man's land" has snowballed into full-blown national mobilisation: tens of thousands marched through Phnom Penh on Wednesday chanting patriotic songs and pledging fealty to the army, while Bangkok has tightened crossing hours, barred Thai casino workers from entering Cambodia and warned its nationals to stay away. Phnom Penh has replied with a sweeping embargo on Thai movies, television serials, fresh produce and even international internet links routed through Thailand. One Cambodian soldier is already dead; neither side contests that fact, only who shot first. The spat is inflamed by an 800-kilometre frontier never properly demarcated since the French drew their 1907 colonial map. When Cambodian troops sang their national anthem at an ancient border shrine in February it took only minutes for Thai soldiers to arrive and trade insults. History sits heavily here. Memories of the 2011 firefights around the Preah Vihear temple still shape public opinion, and every new skirmish is instantly cast as proof of perfidy by the other side. Nationalist influencers on Thai and Khmer social media have turned a cartographic ambiguity into an existential grievance, ensuring that even modest retaliatory steps—fruit bans, visa limits—land like blows to national honour. Yet the border itself is almost incidental to much deeper political undercurrents roiling both countries. In Bangkok, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra—already navigating a still-powerful military and the long shadow of her father's exile—cannot afford to appear weak. Bangkok's newspapers point out that every major Thai coup since 1991 has been preceded by a border standoff with either Cambodia or Myanmar. In Phnom Penh, Hun Sen, though no longer prime minister, remains the indispensable nationalist patron; his son and successor Hun Manet owes his legitimacy to projecting the same uncompromising defence of Khmer sovereignty.

The International Court of Justice, which awarded Preah Vihear to Cambodia in 1962 and clarified the ruling in 2013, is once again Phnom Penh's instrument of choice. Cambodia has filed a fresh petition covering several contested pockets, including the site of May's firefight; Thailand refuses the court's jurisdiction and insists on reviving a bilateral boundary committee set up in 2000. Meanwhile, both armies have quietly reinforced forward bases. A rare face-to-face between their chiefs earlier this month ended with statements of "calm" but no timetable to restart joint surveys of the frontier. Add in tit-for-tat cultural claims—over everything from shadow-boxing to spicy papaya salad—and the combustible mix of wounded pride, economic pain and unresolved cartography becomes clear. For ASEAN, which has historically prized consensus over confrontation, the dispute is a stern stress-test: if two founding members cannot keep faith with the bloc's pledge to settle disputes peacefully, its vaunted "ASEAN Way" looks threadbare.

India, with its own hard-learnt lessons in boundary management, should watch this drama with more than passing curiosity. Our investments in the Sihanoukville corridor and the Thai Eastern Economic Zone hinge on regional stability; so do crucial sea-lanes for trans-shipped Indian exports. New Delhi therefore has stakes—and experience—to offer. Quiet back-channel facilitation, technical advice on joint boundary commissions, or even support for an ASEAN-minus-two mediating panel would serve India's interests while reinforcing its profile as a constructive Indo-Pacific partner. But the larger moral is universal. Colonial-era lines, frozen in antique surveys, retain an emotive charge that modern cartography alone cannot defuse. Confidence-building measures—shared border markets, demilitarised heritage zones, coordinated patrols—are cheap compared to the economic and human cost of escalation. Cambodia and Thailand must step back from performative one-upmanship and return to patient delimitation work, whether under the ICJ's shadow or a reinvented bilateral mechanism. If they do not, every cancelled tour group, every rotting truckload of fruit at the frontier, and every grieving soldier's family will testify to the price of letting history dictate the future. The region—and India—cannot afford another flashpoint when the South China Sea is already ablaze with rivalry. It is time for Phnom Penh and Bangkok

Dear Editor

AN UNHEALTHY ALTERNATIVE

We come from the land of tea; we cannot operate without tea. However, this love for tea can bring troubles if we are sipping it out of paper cups that have replaced safer alternatives, such as the iconic tea glasses and matkas. These cups are lined with a thin layer of plastic, which disintegrates when hot liquid, such as tea or soup that is served with momos, is poured into them. This plastic, which gets accumulated over time, can lead to serious ailments such as decreased fertility, thyroid issues, and the most dreaded of diseases, cancer. These paper cups are also not biodegradable, as the plastic content makes it difficult to decompose. So these paper cups are not nature-embracing as we thought it to be so it will be a smart move to ban all paper cups before these little things worsen our already worse condition.

— NOOPUR BARUAH, TEZPUR via email

millenniumpost.in

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EASTERN EDGE

DIPANKAR DEY

THE WRITER IS A PROFESSOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION WHO PRIMARILY WRITES ON POLITICAL ECONOMY, GLOBAL TRADE, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Missing Compass?

Amid Israel-Iran conflict, India's silence at global forums, risky entanglements in IMEC, and a detour to Cyprus expose the cracks in its foreign policy and strategic foresight

The Israel-Iran war began on June 13, when Israel targeted Iranian military and nuclear sites, reportedly killing 78 people, including three senior security officials, the country's top nuclear negotiator, Ali Shamkhani, and causing damage to the Natanz nuclear facility. In response, Iran launched a barrage of ballistic missiles and drones early Saturday, resulting in at least three fatalities and injuring dozens more. The next day, in a strongly worded statement, the 10-member Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which India and Iran are also members, said member states had expressed concern and strongly condemned the Israeli strikes on Iran, characterising them as violations of international law and the UN Charter. However, underscoring its own unwillingness to criticise Israel, India issued a separate statement almost concurrently, clarifying that it was not part of the SCO's decision-making on this matter. The current Indian government is a major ally of Israel and last week India abstained from voting during the United Nations general Assembly (UNGA) resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza, abandoning India's principled stand against war, against genocide, and for justice. 149 countries voted for the UNGA resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza, while India abstained. As of June 14, Gaza death toll nears 55,300 as Israel continues brutal war on Palestinians. Over 128,400 Palestinians have also been injured in the assault since October 2023.

The Israel-Iran war may continue for a long time, which will have a major impact on global peace and the economy

The Israel-Iran war may continue for a long time, which will have a major impact on global peace and the economy. More than 10,000 Indians (mostly students) are stranded in Iran, and due to the closure of airspace, the security of the stranded Indians has become a major concern. Evacuation through Iran's land borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey is also ruled out due to India's confrontational relations with these countries. In addition to this, the future of the much hyped India Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC), which connects India and Greece via UAE, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, is at risk. The Indian company Adani Ports & Special Economic Zone (APEZ) had acquired a majority stake in Israel's Haifa port for a total consideration of $1.18 billion in 2023. As the war intensified, the shares of APEZ dropped around 2 percent on June 18.

India needs an alternative to Haifa to keep the IMEC dream alive. India's Prime Minister visited Cyprus on his way to Canada to attend the G7 Summit, held from 15-17 June. Though India is not a member of the Group of 7 (G7) – an informal group of the world's seven developed countries: USA, Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, and Italy — India has been invited, since 2019, to the Outreach session of the G7 Summit. It may be recalled, after Modi got elected for the second time in 2019, India-China relations suddenly turned cold. After the Indian Prime Minister visited the USA in September, India decided to leave China-initiated Regional Cooperation for Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2019. The 50th G7 summit was held amidst rising geopolitical tensions, including continued Ukraine-Russia war, escalating tensions in the Middle East in the wake of the strikes between Iran and Israel, as well as a trade war triggered by US President Donald Trump's tariff policies. The Summit ended in a fiasco as Trump left the Group of Seven summit in Canada a day early due to the situation in the Middle East. According to media reports, the US president had decided not to sign onto a G7 statement calling for de-escalation between Iran and Israel, but later that day, he signed onto a statement which called "Iran as the principal source of regional instability and terror." At the G7, it was Trump against the rest. The divisions within the 'Western family' have been brought out into the open, observed *Le Monde*. G7 leaders tried to salvage their summit after Trump's early exit, effectively making it 'G6', led by European members. The Indian Prime Minister did not get an opportunity to speak to the US President on the sidelines of the Summit. However, Modi spoke to him over the phone before leaving Canada. Meanwhile, the US President has invited the Pakistan Army Chief at the White House on Wednesday.

Significantly, on June 17, at the China-Central Asia Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan on June 17, 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a treaty to elevate ties with Central Asian nations as Beijing looks to further deepen cooperation on trade, energy, and infrastructure with the resource-rich region. Against this background, the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Cyprus needs to be analysed.

Cyprus visit

Cyprus is an island country in the eastern Mediterranean. Though situated in West Asia, its cultural identity and geopolitical orientation are overwhelmingly Southeast European. This strategically important island is located southeast of Greece, south of Turkey, west of Syria and Lebanon, northwest of Israel and Palestine, and north of Egypt. The island was split into two parts by the 1974 Turkish invasion. Since then, the island of Cyprus is practically divided into two, the Republic of Cyprus in the south and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the north.

The Republic of Cyprus will assume the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2026, for the second time, 14 years after the first in 2012. In the World Passport Index, Cyprus Passport ranks 7th. A Cyprus citizen can travel visa-free to 175 countries. Between 2014 and 2020, 66 Indians managed to obtain Cyprus passports under the tax haven's "golden passport" scheme, *The Indian Express*, in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), reported, as part of Cyprus Confidential. Cyprus Confidential is a worldwide offshore probe of 3.6 million documents exposing a trail of companies established in Cyprus as a tax haven by global elites, including Russian oligarchs. Among the 66 Indians who got their "golden passport" is Vinod Adani, Gautam Adani's elder brother, reports the *WIRE*.

As Cyprus is set to assume the EU Council presidency next year, it has become a pivotal link in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), said Brahma Chellaney, a noted security analyst. Modi's visit to Cyprus — the first by any Indian PM in 23 years — saw the two sides discussing efforts to scale up cooperation in defence, security, and connectivity with focus on IMEC. Consignment may avoid Haifa port and sail to Cyprus from Saudi Arabia. Shipping cargo by sea from Jeddah to Limassol, Cyprus, takes roughly 1 day and 17 hours.

> Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Cyprus is likely to be perceived as a sign of India's proximity with its regional rivals by Turkey

As India is actively negotiating with the European Union for an India-EU FTA, Limassol port in Cyprus will be a strategic port for IMEC. But Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Cyprus is likely to be perceived as a sign of India's proximity with its regional rivals by Turkey. This assessment of PM Modi's visit to Cyprus, by security analysts, comes on the back of two broad contexts: Turkey's backing of Islamabad during the India-Pakistan conflict, and Ankara and Nicosia's strained relations. It may be mentioned that Turkey is a member of NATO. China also enjoys very cordial relations with Cyprus.

If one analyses the ill-conceived foreign policies of the Modi government, it will indicate the absence of strategic thinking in the policy-making group. A strategic doctrine outlines the overarching principles, policies, and methods a nation or organization employs to achieve its strategic goals, particularly in the context of national security and defence. India's silence when ten million residents of Tehran, the capital of a sovereign nation, are threatened to 'evacuate immediately' by the elected President of the USA and when India abstains from voting for cease fire to save thousands of innocents people from genocide in Gaza, indicates that Modi's India has become unprincipled, weak and spineless.

Views expressed are personal

MONEY MATTERS

VIJAYASREE RADHAKRISHNAN

THE WRITER IS CURRENTLY WORKING AS A PROGRAM MANAGER AT THE CONVERGENCE FOUNDATION

Chasing a Mirage

India's ascent to become the world's third-largest economy in GDP terms may be inevitable, but unless growth translates into equitable well-being, it risks becoming a hollow milestone

What is the implication of being the world's third-largest economy? Over the past week, discussions around India's ascent to soon overtaking Japan, based on the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) 2024 projections, have received significant media traction. According to the IMF, India's nominal GDP is expected to reach USD 3.94 trillion, overtaking Japan's USD 3.87 trillion. The NITI Aayog's further assertion that India is already the world's third-largest economy in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, and is on track to do so in nominal terms rekindles old questions with new urgency: Is aggregate GDP a meaningful measure of development?

India's rise to the fourth place in global GDP rankings must not obscure the persistent weaknesses in employment, healthcare, and income distribution

At the heart of the issue lies the dominant use of nominal GDP based on market exchange rates as a benchmark for comparing economies. As early as the 1970s, Simon Kuznets warned that "The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income". This is especially relevant in the case of developing economies. For lower-cost economies like India, even PPP-based metrics can artificially inflate GDP.

Back in the days of glory of MDBs as primary funders, high GDP growth figures even with minimal resources as policy signaled to attract funds as a lever for development. In a world where multilateral development banks (MDBs) no longer play the dominant funding role they once did, why does policy discourse remain obsessed with GDP growth?

It is high time we expand the lens to include per capita considerations. While India may appear formidable with a projected USD 4.1 trillion GDP in 2025, its per capita income—about USD 2,800 (nominal) and USD 9,000 (PPP)—tells a far more modest story.

> While India may appear formidable with a projected USD 4.1 trillion GDP in 2025, its per capita income—about USD 2,800 (nominal) and USD 9,000 (PPP)—tells a far more modest story

India's ambition to reach a USD 30 trillion GDP by 2047 hinges on sustaining 6–8 per cent real growth annually, coupled with 4–5 per cent inflation. Mathematically, this trajectory seems feasible and inevitable. But the question of substance over scale is important. Even if India reaches USD 30 trillion in GDP, the per capita implications would be strained. With a projected population of 1.6 billion, nominal per capita income may still be under USD 20,000—well below today's high-income thresholds. Worse, if income inequality worsens, median incomes may not rise significantly, meaning the average Indian might not feel richer despite impressive macroeconomic figures.

Indicative of this is the per capita income bias seen in the latest released HDI index. Despite rising GDP, India's Human Development Index (HDI) rank remains low (though we climbed up three ranks forward). This raises a crucial question: Will India grow equitably—or merely grow large? Life expectancy and literacy rates are improving, but gross national income (GNI) per capita remains low, and the bottom 40 per cent of Indians continue to struggle with access to healthcare, employment, and sanitation.

India would not be the first country to climb the GDP rankings without achieving high-income status. This situation would be ideally termed as the 'middle-income trap'. Brazil, South Africa, and Malaysia all grew rapidly, only to stagnate at middle-income levels. The "middle-income trap," the concept by Gill and Kharas (2007), describes how countries fail to transition from low-cost manufacturing to innovation-led economies. India, with its low R&D spending, skills mismatch, and poorly formalised labor markets, may risk the same fate, if institutional and structural reforms are not in place. Currently, India's growth remains factor-accumulation driven, not productivity-led—a model that is ultimately unsustainable. Growth should be propelled endogenously, following the Solow Swan route so as to escape the trap.

Celebrating nominal GDP milestones may be politically useful, but they are developmentally insufficient. India's rise to fourth place in global GDP rankings must not obscure the persistent weaknesses in employment, healthcare, and income distribution. It is imperative for media and policymakers to move beyond GDP fetishism and adopt a composite scorecard of national performance.

As Dani Rodrik reminds us, economic development is a national project, built on institutions—not just statistics. For India, reaching USD 4 trillion or even USD 30 trillion in GDP is less important than ensuring that a billion people live better, fuller lives. The USD 30 trillion GDP dream may be inevitable in scale, but elusive in substance.

India's journey shall shift from symbolism to substance, from aggregates to averages, and ultimately toward inclusivity and resilience. The coming decades offer not just an opportunity to grow—but a chance to transform: economically, institutionally, and socially.

Views expressed are personal

THE ASIAN AGE

20 JUNE 2025

Will he strike Iran, or not? Trump keeps all guessing

It is not often that US President Donald Trump sits for too long on the horns of any dilemma. It is being reported that he had approved a plan to attack Iran and then hung back only to give Iran time to ponder on whether to end its nuclear programme, or probably he is just timing an American offensive on military advice. But there will be no U-turns once he decides to go into another of the "forever wars" that he promised to avoid while campaigning for the President's job in 2024.

A third US aircraft carrier group is on its way to the Middle East, but it is far from certain Trump will take the United States back to 2003 when his predecessor George W. Bush ordered a full-scale invasion of Iraq. But then, as Trump said, no one knows what he will do, not even Trump. "I mean, you don't know that I'm going to even do it. You don't know. I may do it, I may not do it. I mean, nobody knows what I'm going to do," Trump said. And that explains everything — or nothing.

Trump may be facing resistance from within his inner circle, his Republican party base and the American community in general. His stints in the Situation Room and his comments about the Ayatollahs of Iran have made everyone uneasy about where this is heading. The word is that while he may be reluctant to be drawn into a full-scale war, he might still be considering taking out the nuclear facility in Fordow.

Apart from angling for the Nobel Peace Prize, which might be worthless in this conflicted world of raging wars, there seems to be no place in Trump's mind about off-ramps for creating negotiating space

The potential consequences of a direct US strike on Iran, with heavy bunker-buster bombing that only America can carry out and which will obviously be done only through stealth bombers piloted by Americans, are too grave to contemplate. The repercussions could go far beyond Iran retaliating on US bases in the Middle East. There is a chance that the world itself would be destabilised if the Iran regime is brought down.

Far from not being the era of wars, it would appear this is the era of no-holds-barred bombing, which began with Vladimir Putin dropping bombs on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, while sending in troops on the ground and Israel taking retaliation against the October 7, 2023, Hamas terror strike to disproportionately high levels in carpet bombing of the Gaza Strip, taking on the Hezbollah in Lebanon and now attacking Iran's nuclear facilities.

There is no leader in today's multipolar world whose word may be sufficient to bring adversaries to the negotiating table. Apart from angling for the Nobel Peace Prize, which might be worthless in this conflicted world of raging wars, there seems to be no place in Trump's mind about off-ramps for creating negotiating space. And yet he makes egotistic claims that everyone, including the Iranians, wants to come to the White House to meet him.

Iran has been clear enough in its stand that so long as the aggression continues — along with its retaliation measures that even struck hospitals and schools in Israel — there is no space for engaging with adversaries across the table. At a time when peace is at a premium, there appears to be no room for dialogue and diplomacy. We must fear for the world if the "anything can happen" position continues to define the present.

Pass for faster highway travel

The new FASTag Annual Pass, introduced by Union road transport and highways minister Nitin Gadkari on June 18, represents a qualitative improvement to India's existing highway toll collection system. It will save the time and effort of frequent users of national and state highways in the country, and therefore, it is a welcome initiative.

The concept of FASTags, which utilises Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology for making cashless toll payments, was introduced by the Narendra Modi government in 2016. It allowed the vehicles to pass seamlessly through the toll plazas, making the users save on time as well as fuel.

Following the dramatic improvement in the toll collection process, the government made FASTags mandatory from January 1, 2021, giving a big boost to the issuance of RFID cards. The number of FASTags increased phenomenally from 2.49 crores in January 2021 to 10.98 crores in May 2025, which validates people's adoption of the new toll payment system.

The average toll paid by a person is ₹50 per trip. As the average toll paid for 200 trips would be ₹10,000, the FASTag Annual Pass could also help people to save up to ₹7,000 annually.

Though the people have adopted the RFID toll payments, the requirement to keep wallets adequately funded has created problems for frequent travellers. If they forget to add funds to the wallet, drivers could get stranded at the toll plaza, resulting in traffic congestion and a waste of time. The FASTag Annual Pass is expected to address this problem as it would be valid for 200 trips or for one year, whichever is the earliest.

The average toll paid by a person is ₹50 per trip. As the average toll paid for 200 trips would be ₹10,000, the FASTag Annual Pass could also help people to save up to ₹7,000 annually. On the flip side, however, it would not be of any great help for people who use highways occasionally and will not be acceptable for airport toll charges amongst others. If the government makes it acceptable for all types of road-related payments, including parking fees, it would become a truly ubiquitous card.

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Subhani

Do lower fertility, poverty rates improve well-being?

Sanjeev Ahluwalia

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that India's population will reach its peak by 2060, with the fertility ratio (the average live births per woman between 15 to 49 years of age) already 1.9 — lower than the commonly assumed sustainable level of 2.1. This cheers the hearts of all Indians born before the year 2000 who grew up blaming the growing population for slow economic growth. To put this in context, fertility rates are declining, and the global population is expected to peak before 2100. The global fertility rate in 2025 is 2.2, varying from 1.5 in high-income countries to 3.8 for the least developed countries.

India is ahead in this transition compared to less developed countries, which have an average fertility rate of 2.4. This correlation between development and a lowering of the fertility rate reflects a consensus arrived at since the 1970s.

At the time, explosive population growth created a global "fertility boom", bringing managing population growth front and centre in development policy, including in India. In the second decade of this century, "population anxiety" has captured the public and political imagination, even in low fertility developed countries, manifesting as anti-immigration activism mixed as a front for maintaining the dominant racial identity.

Even America, the poster boy of immigration-led development, sustained economic growth and innovation since the mid-20th century, and the favoured destination for most Indians, has succumbed to this anxiety.

"Population anxiety" induced coercive population control was most notable in China, with deleterious outcomes. India's brief copycat attempt was fortuitously terminated in the mid-1970s. Coercive attempts to reduce fertility have been short-lived. Most such ended within forty years. Declining fertility and populations induce a swing to the other extreme of incentivised birthing, as in China and Singapore, because low fertility results in uncompetitive labour costs and a shrinking domestic market — both are damaging for economic growth. The UNFPA good practice asserts that a normative fertility rate is ephemeral, and it must be contextually determined. Plans to achieve the desired fertility rate must never be coercive because such regulations tend to deprive women of their reproductive rights.

"The Real Fertility Crisis" (UNFPA 2025) personalises the fertility transition in India by tracing three generations of an Indian family. A grandmother who lived under patriarchal control in the 1960s, had no awareness of contraception or voice in the timing or number of children she had. Her daughter in the 1990s had some knowledge of contraception methods but little agency to decide the number of children which catered to the preference for a boy child. Her recently-married granddaughter in the 2020s has already decided with her husband, to have two children (slightly below the replacement rate) so that they can give them their best.

This vignette exemplifies why and how India has transitioned demographically even at low per capita income levels — via extensive government outreach, support for public health and medical facilities for pre- and post-natal care, and by an extension of public and private educational facilities for women. This task is incomplete, and results vary significantly across communities and regions. The trend line for gender-sensitive development policy, however, is drawn. It includes reservation for women of one-third of seats in India's Parliament to increase their representation from the existing 14 per cent — an instance where even UNFPA would support a "forced choice" by legal means.

Formally adopting the PPP$4.2 level prescribed for lower middle-income countries seems appropriate for universal coverage of the poor, even though the resulting poverty levels would increase statistically

Together with reaching sustainable fertility rates, India has also reduced poverty. The World Bank assesses that the share of the poor in India declined from 27.1 per cent in 2010-11 to 6.25 per cent in 2022 based on $PPP 3.0 (2021) per day per person poverty line. Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) differs from the market-based currency exchange rate. It estimates the income required for a similar quality of consumption across countries. It neutralises high subsidies and lower labour costs (as in India and most developing countries) which boost the real income of households even if they are lower in dollars at the exchange rate. This is a useful guide for equalising pay for employees across countries, as is necessary for multinationals and the World Bank.

PPP in India quadruples notional nominal income and doubles it in China. But anyone would rather earn the equivalent in dollars than enjoy a higher notional (PPP) value of a lower income in INR or yuan. This is why nationalist economists prefer that countries should develop their own poverty line, relating well-being to minimum income levels in local monetary terms. There is a logic to that. One reason this acquires urgency is that even as per World Bank formulations, the appropriate current poverty line level for India is 2021 PPP$4.20, up from the earlier 2017 PPP$3.65, corresponding to living conditions across lower middle-income countries, like India.

On this basis, poverty in India declined from 57.8 per cent in 2010-11 to 23.89 per cent in 2022. Economist Surjit Bhalla, earlier a member of the PM's Economic Advisory Council, advocates an upward revision in the poverty line.

About 27 per cent of India's population already benefits now from multiple welfare measures. This incoherence between claimed low poverty levels and much higher subsidy levels is often, erroneously, used to question the earlier reduction in poverty from 16.22 per cent in 2011 to 2.35 per cent in 2022 at the earlier 2017 rate of PPP$2.15 (in 2021 revised to PPP$3.0) applicable for low-income economies.

Formally adopting the PPP$4.2 level prescribed for lower middle-income countries seems appropriate for universal coverage of the poor, even though the resulting poverty levels would increase statistically.

Measuring well-being is far more complicated. The OECD has a "Well-being Framework" to assess social progress. The UNDP's "Human Development Index" evaluates well-being from life expectancy, education, and income metrics. The World Happiness Report ranks countries on social support, freedom, and corruption metrics. India does not fare well on any of these indices, relative to its achievements in reducing fertility, poverty and boosting economic growth. The 2020 partnership between Well Being for Planet Earth, a Japanese charitable foundation, and Gallup, a US polling specialist, generates survey data from 150,000 respondents annually, on how they view well-being. India could collaborate with Japan to develop globally actionable contextual well-being metrics for evaluating national policies on equity and economic growth — that is, if we can first get around Amartya Sen's 1970 paradox of the "Paretian Liberal" floundering to optimise economic efficiency with individual liberty.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation, and was earlier with the IAS and the World Bank

LETTERS

WORK 12 HOURS!

The Karnataka government's move to legalise a 12-hour workday for IT professionals is irrational. They are already coerced to work beyond legal hours without overtime pay or protections. If the government formalises this under corporate pressure, it will legitimise exploitation and reduce employees to machines. It's proven globally that longer working hours don't improve productivity but cause burnout and deterioration of mental health. This proposal undermines labour rights and shows blatant disregard for employee well-being in a sector that drives the state's economy. Scrap such regressive labour 'reforms'.

N. Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

HOSPITAL CRUELTY

A MAN DIED in hospital bed after his dialysis was interrupted by a powercut in the hospital in Uttar Pradesh's Bijnore. The victim's mother kept insisting the staff start the generator to continue the process, but the hospital authority refused saying the "generator is not to be used frivolously". It was an inhuman crime in a place that is dutybound to provide patients proper treatment on time. Such a heart-wrenching case is heard of rarely. Doctors must abide by a modicum of ethics. They must not discriminate between patients.

Nadeem Aasim
Mumbai

CLIMATE UNREADY

RANCHI'S SCHOOL closures due to extreme heat raise a disturbing question: Is learning now weather-dependent? Education can't be at the mercy of the mercury. While safety matters, knee-jerk closures expose our lack of planning. Where are the heat-resistant classrooms? The shaded play areas? The adaptive school hours? We talk of Digital India, but where's Climate-Ready India? If a few degrees can shut down learning, what happens when climate extremes become the new normal? Temporary shutdowns may offer relief, but they cost children consistency, especially in rural areas. Shouldn't we be investing in infrastructure that ensures education continues, rain or shine?

Hasnain Rabbani
Mumbai

Bhopinder Singh

Trump turns US military parade to serve partisan, political agenda

The tradition of military parades dates back to the ancient civilisational empires of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, who undertook them to celebrate victories, invoke gods or simply intimidate rivals. But beyond its political and societal rationale, military parades also bore some functional utility — such as instilling martial discipline with an insistence on total coordination, patriotism and loyalty to the "flag". As the concept of the nation-state started emerging, these spectacles became symbols of national remembrance, cultural coherence and deterrence.

The tenor and accompanying essentialities of military parades obviously differed, depending on the sort of nation or political system it represented. In dictatorial or authoritarian regimes like North Korea, China or the erstwhile Soviet Union, they serve a propagandic purpose. However, some parades serve the vital purpose of reminding a nation of its history — such as the Bastille Day parade in France, to celebrate the French Revolution, the Victory Day parade in Russia, to commemorate the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War, and the Trooping the Colour in Britain, marking the official birthday of the reigning monarch. India's Republic Day parade on January 26 every year marks the adoption of the Constitution and the birth of a proud and sovereign republic.

Now, like all participative democracies where the doctrine of civilian control over the military is constitutionally wired, it is critical to balance such militaristic events with a larger national identity, purpose and conflation. Hence, the Republic Day parade is steeped in the symbolism of "unity in diversity" and federalism. Therefore, when the national mood occasionally gets polarised, it is the glorious march of the Indian soldier belonging to the Naga Regiment, Sikh Regiment, Gorkha Regiment, Rajput Regiment, Madras Regiment or Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry advancing in contingents behind each other that reminds a wary nation of the uselessness of societal "divides" on the basis of religion, ethnicity, caste or region that is possible, given the sort of unhinged politics that has been pandered to by all dispensations (without exception) since Independence. This restrained and measured underpinning to the military parade in the Indian context also had its roots in its colonial past, where the Crown was served by tradition-bound, but loyal military.

In the United States, however, the American narratives and opinions were shaped by their own history, circumstances and understanding of democratic imperatives. Even though the grand review of the armies following the end of the Civil War in 1865 led to a massive military march, or more recently, the National Victory Celebration (to mark the success of the Gulf War) was held — displays of military might were seen to militate against the American notion of democratic ideals. Such parades were, typically, the standard instruments deployed by the "other side" during the Cold War, and so these were shunned.

Due to relative lack of history, given America's long history of immigration, and with no real danger of implosive societal "divides" (at least, earlier), Americans never felt the need to hold such spectacles. Importantly, the US military needed no such public valorisation either as it was always a deeply respected institution. The professional and emotional aspects of the "patriotic duty" of the US soldier was uniquely reserved for the men and women in uniform, which could not be usurped by any politician, unlike countries like India where the imagery of the "Indian soldier" is sought and appropriated to build political muscularity for wily politicians. Therefore, there were always good reasons for countries like India to persist with the tradition, and for countries like the US not to start one.

But President Donald Trump went beyond American traditions and objectives, such as Fourth of July or Veterans Day celebrations, to showcase a personal-political spectacle via a military parade in a bid to serve his own "muscular" desperation. Seemingly intent on drowning the societal dissonance owing to hundreds of simultaneous protests (under the "No Kings" banner) against his illiberal agenda, Mr Trump presided over an unprecedented US military parade on June 14, which tellingly coincided with his own birthday! Despite the draft-dodger Trump's condescending (and inconsistent) homilies to the American soldier as one who drove "bayonets into the heart of sinister empires" and similar theatrics, he has shoved the avowedly apolitical and non-partisan institution of the US military towards the dangerous shores of partisanship.

Attempts to politicise the US military have been long in the making under Mr Trump. From removing senior officers under the pretext of diversity, equity and inclusion to reinstating discharged service members (for violating service norms), to creating military zones on Mexico's borders and unleashing Marines on the streets of Los Angeles, the abuse of the armed forces has been unparalleled. Previous American Presidents (both Democrat and Republican) are aghast and see the US military parade as part of the same political project. Whether in the US, France or India, soldiers would only want to celebrate a national or constitutional cause, and not a partisan or personal one. That is the fundamental difference.

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