



## Free and fair

**ECI must not view calls for transparency as attempts to undermine it**

The Election Commission of India (ECI) seems to have softened its stand about disclosing absolute numbers of booth-wise votes cast in elections. Last year, when the question arose in the midst of the multi-phase general election, the ECI took the position that it had no legal mandate to disclose details of Form 17-C, part one, which contains the total number of electors in each booth and those who had actually voted, to anyone other than the candidate or its polling agent. In a recent hearing, it has said the Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, who took over recently, is open to meeting representatives of organisations and individuals who have sought a direction to the ECI to upload scanned, authenticated and legible copies of Form 17-C on its website. The Supreme Court of India has asked Trinamool Congress Member of Parliament Mahua Moitra and representatives of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) to give a representation to the ECI and seek a meeting. While it may not mean that the ECI has already agreed to make absolute numbers of voters universally available, it may result in evolving a system of disclosure about turnouts, both in terms of numbers and percentages. In 2024, the ECI did release some details about turnout through its voter turnout app, but it also became a source of endless speculation as the percentages given were seen to be unusually higher than what was disclosed at the close of polling.

The prevalence of a difference of five to six percentage points between the turnout declared on polling day and subsequently revised figures, based on inputs from all booths, was noted at the end. This is normally explained as the result of a delay in collation of data from all booths, including those located in far-flung areas. However, the petitioners before the Court argue that Form 17-C is collected by available booth agents by hand, and it would not be a major problem for election officials to scan and upload it within 48 hours. The main ground of political parties and activists is that the discrepancies, in the absence of the absolute number of votes cast but with only turnout percentages in hand, would raise suspicions about the whole process when the final results are released. The ECI has done well to offer to meet the petitioners on this question. There can be no dogmatic opposition to a procedural step to reduce the apprehension about any election being less than fair. It is futile to hold the position that every step demanding greater transparency in the electoral process is aimed at undermining its integrity or casting the process in a bad light. There ought to be a constant reassessment of existing procedures and practices to increase transparency and reduce the time taken to do so.

## Coming of age

**The IPL is setting new standards in cricket's shortest format**

Indian cricket's summer spectacle is entering its eighteenth season. The Indian Premier League (IPL), which debuted on a warm night at Bengaluru's M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in 2008, has evolved into a global sporting juggernaut with immense commercial clout. The sheer volume and pace of matches may render individual moments fleeting, yet the tournament has deep roots and an ardent fan base. When defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders face Royal Challengers Bengaluru at the Eden Gardens on Saturday night, the commentary box will inevitably amplify the hype. Over the next two months, culminating on May 25, 10 teams will criss-cross India, battling for T20 supremacy. While similar leagues thrive in Australia and elsewhere, the IPL remains the gold standard. Beyond the on-field drama, the IPL continues to be a game-changer, with other cricketing nations struggling to retain their stars as freelance players increasingly prioritise IPL contracts. While the league runs on high stakes and intense performances, the Indian government's recent move to ban alcohol and tobacco companies from leveraging IPL telecasts for surrogate advertising is a welcome decision. Given the tournament's massive youth following, such restrictions are both necessary and responsible.

Once, the Ranji Trophy was the primary gateway to India's national team; today, the IPL serves as an escalator, fast-tracking talent into the international arena. From R. Ashwin in the early years to Hardik Pandya now, the league has been a launch pad for future stars. The once-daunting experience of sharing a dressing room with global icons has diminished, as young Indian cricketers now arrive at the highest level fully prepared. Longevity, too, is a hallmark of the tournament stalwarts including M.S. Dhoni, Virat Kohli, and Rohit Sharma have been part of the IPL since its inception. At 43, Dhoni may be playing his final season for Chennai Super Kings, but with him, retirement predictions often go awry. While big-hitting batters dominate headlines, enigmatic spinners and lethal pacers command attention too. More than just watching Jasprit Bumrah in Mumbai Indians' colours, fans will be eager to see when the injured speedster can make a full-fledged return. The same scrutiny will follow Pat Cummins and other key players, as the IPL not only sets the tone for the cricketing calendar but also provides crucial insights into the form and fitness of the game's biggest names when the time comes for performance on the international stage.

On November 18, 2024, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) issued a landmark order imposing a fine of ₹23.14 crore and forcing several behavioural remedies on Meta. This included a five-year ban on sharing user data collected on WhatsApp with other Meta companies such as Facebook and Instagram, for advertising purposes. In turn, Meta approached the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) in an appeal against CCI's order. The NCLAT, on January 23, 2025, granted a stay on the five-year ban from sharing user data and the penalty, subject to Meta depositing 50% of the total penalty.

The CCI's order found that the privacy policy update introduced by Meta's subsidiary, WhatsApp, in 2021 was an abuse of dominant position in the "Over-the-Top (OTT) messaging services for smartphones" and "Online display advertising" markets in India. This display required users to mandatorily consent to expanded data-sharing, allowing Meta to provide access to such data to all of its other platforms; forcing users to accept a data-sharing agreement on a "take-it-or-leave-it" basis, combining with the competitive advantage this data provides in online digital display advertising, constitutes an abuse of dominant position. The updated policy was viewed as a strategy to strengthen the market power of WhatsApp, potentially harming competition and hindering other messaging platforms from competing on equal terms.

**The era of data**  
In the 21st century, the economy has become digital and data is the new oil, but unlike oil, the utility of data is virtually limitless. It can be collected, analysed, and reused indefinitely. In digital markets, data plays a foundational role in creating and sustaining dominance due to its unique characteristics and the competitive advantages it provides. Data is both the source and the enabler of dominance in digital markets. Platforms such as Meta leverage vast data pools collected from billions of users to refine algorithms, offer hyper-targeted advertising, and create personalised experiences, thereby locking consumers into their ecosystems. This dominance is further amplified by data-driven network effects, where more users generate more data, enhancing the platform's value and deterring competitors.

Meta is not the only tech giant to face scrutiny from the CCI. In 2022, Google was fined ₹1,337.76 crore for abusing its dominant position across several markets, including licensable operating systems for smart mobile devices, app stores for Android devices, non-OS-specific mobile web browsers, online video hosting platforms, and general web search services in India. Google was found to have abused its dominant position by

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There are lessons from the Meta case, which highlight the need for a more forward-looking approach to competition law

mandating the pre-installation of its apps on Android devices. This penalty was later upheld by NCLAT in 2023.

### Global actions

The challenges posed by Meta's market dominance are not confined to India and have been a global regulatory concern. The Majority Staff Report on "Competition in Digital Markets" (by the U.S. Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial and Administrative Law of the Committee on the Judiciary) highlighted the urgent need to reform antitrust laws to address the unprecedented market power of tech giants. Meta faces antitrust litigation in the U.S. over its acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp, accused of creating barriers to entry for competitors, while Google has been sued for monopolistic practices. In 2024, the US District Court for the District of Columbia found Google in violation of the Sherman Act due to exclusive agreements in search and advertising markets.

Australia has also taken steps to address the dominance of digital platforms. In Europe, the Facebook-Germany case stands out, where the Bundeskartellamt (Federal Cartel Office) found Meta had abused its dominant position by combining user data from various sources without explicit consent, violating both European Union (EU) competition law and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This decision accentuates how data misuse can erode consumer privacy and hinder competition by creating entry barriers.

In addition, Meta is under scrutiny in the EU for its ad-supported subscription service, while Google has already been fined over €8 billion across three major antitrust cases, including those targeting its anti-competitive practices in the mobile operating systems and app markets. The parallels between the regulatory actions against Meta and Google emphasise the importance of addressing data exploitation, vertical integration, and anti-competitive practices through a multidisciplinary approach. Together, these approaches illustrate the challenge of harmonising regulatory philosophies to effectively tackle the monopolistic practices of global tech giants.

Google and Meta are not even the first tech giants to face policing for dominating markets in the U.S. In the past, a ruling in an antitrust lawsuit required AT&T to divest 22 operating companies, dismantling its monopoly. Similarly, anti-trust proceedings against Microsoft resulted in oversight, ensuring API access for third-party developers and greater flexibility for PC manufacturers.

The CCI orders against Google and Meta represent just a small chapter in the broader, well-documented concerns about the overwhelming dominance of "tech monopolies"

in key markets such as advertising, e-commerce and smartphone services. While the orders are a great beginning, a cycle of disputes across jurisdictions indicates that they may be stop-gap measures in regulating the free market in this context.

### On India's laws

India's competition law, namely, the Competition Act, 2002, currently lacks explicit provisions to address data-centric monopolies. While traditional frameworks focus on price-based dominance, digital markets often witness dominance arising from data aggregation. To address this gap, amendments to the Act should introduce "data monopolization" as a parameter for assessing market dominance by redefining key concepts such as "market power" and "dominant position" to reflect the realities of data-driven dynamics. The Act should also incorporate global best practices for addressing the concerns, such as mandating interoperability and data-sharing agreements or separation of integrated services. These measures could serve as effective solutions for entrenched monopolies and help level the playing field for smaller competitors while maintaining innovation incentives.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 provides an opportunity to complement competition law by regulating data collection, consent, and usage. However, the absence of explicit coordination mechanisms between the CCI and the Data Protection Board of India limits the effectiveness of addressing overlapping concerns. India could draw inspiration from the EU's integration of competition law with the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and GDPR to create frameworks that tackle data exploitation and anti-competitive practices comprehensively.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for India to fully harness the potential of its digital transformation, ensuring inclusive growth and equitable access to digital resources across the nation. The Economic Survey 2024-25, recently tabled in Parliament, underlines India's rapid digital transformation, and emphasises the critical role of artificial intelligence (AI) in shaping the nation's economic landscape. These developments underscore the imperative for India to adapt its regulatory frameworks, including competition law. As the digital economy continues to evolve, regulatory frameworks must not only catch up but also anticipate emerging challenges posed by rapidly advancing technologies and the ever-expanding influence of tech giants.

While the Meta case serves as a pivotal moment in India's efforts to regulate digital markets and address the complexities of data-driven monopolies, it also highlights the need for a more comprehensive and forward-looking approach to competition law.

# The assault on multilateralism and international law

The mantra of 'America First' is shaping U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, marking a significant turning point for multilateralism and international law. Since the beginning of his second term, a series of measures have signalled the U.S.'s withdrawal from the very multilateral institutions and agreements it once helped establish. These include calls for withdrawal from key entities such as the World Health Organization, the UNHRC, and the Paris Climate Agreement and sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its officials. The most recent addition in this series is the introduction of the Disengagement Entirely from the United Nations Debate (DEFUND) Act by Republican Senator Mike Lee from Utah, which would allow the U.S. to withdraw from the United Nations. The new American approach has serious consequences for an international order based on multilateral cooperation and respect for international law.

**Back to political and economic isolationism**  
First, the proposed DEFUND Act poses a threat to the legitimacy of the UN, which, despite its shortcomings, remains one of the most remarkable examples of international cooperation in the post-Second World War era. Should the DEFUND Act pass, it could sever the U.S.'s relationship with the UN by repealing critical legislation such as the United Nations Participation Act of 1945 and the United Nations Headquarters Agreement of 1947. This would halt all financial contributions to the UN and prohibit U.S. participation in UN peacekeeping operations.

Additionally, it would revoke the functional immunity of UN officials from other countries' work in the U.S., making it difficult for the UN to effectively carry out important functions such as peacekeeping and the protection of human rights. These possible measures against the UN represent an attack on multilateral political cooperation, which is the bedrock of a rules-based international order.



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The U.S.'s unilateral actions are a turning point and could invite global retaliation, but this is also a chance for non-western nations to take up leadership roles

Second, a February 6 Executive Order imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC), located in The Hague, which serves as the first permanent court punishing individuals for crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Following the Second World War, the U.S. was instrumental in establishing the Nuremberg Tribunal to hold individuals accountable for such atrocities. The U.S. Chief Prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, Robert H. Jackson, famously stated that "the willingness to submit enemies to the rule of law marked a triumph of reason over power".

The legacy of Nuremberg is echoed in the mission of the ICC, notwithstanding the fact that the U.S. is not a member of the ICC and has not ratified the Rome Statute. The executive order accuses the ICC of engaging in "illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America" and its close ally, Israel. Such accusations undermine the court's purpose and function to ensure accountability and prevent impunity for perpetrators of grave crimes violating human rights.

### Trade troubles

Third, the reinvigorated economic nationalism in the Trump administration has led to the implementation of aggressive tariffs in the name of American safety and national security. A historical parallel can be drawn to the era of the 1930s when trade protectionism, triggered by the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act enacted by the U.S., had dire economic consequences and saw the world spiralling into the chaos of the Second World War. It was this recognition of the economic and political vulnerabilities of countries due to isolationism that led to the adoption of a rules-based multilateral trading order in the form of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) of 1947, which later evolved into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Today, the WTO is also facing an existential crisis due to the U.S. blocking on appointments to the Appellate Body of the WTO Dispute

Settlement, and a looming threat of U.S. withdrawal.

### Action and reaction

Overall, the growing anti-internationalist sentiment in the U.S. and the unilateral actions taken by the Trump administration are bound to jeopardise multilateral political and economic cooperation among states. This, in turn, would lead to the devaluation of international institutions that govern and facilitate global cooperation. These institutions, founded on the principle of shared sovereignty, play a crucial role in creating and interpreting international law while maintaining a rules-based international order. Withdrawal from, and restricting the functioning of international institutions and agreements would have significant repercussions for the pressing issues of our time, such as climate change, environmental degradation, public health, respect and accountability for human rights, and economic stability and growth.

Furthermore, the U.S. risks facing retaliation from other states and may find that initiatives such as MAGA, or 'Make America Great Again', cannot thrive without the support of multilateral cooperation. Consequently, resistance from the international community is essential, as mutual enrichment among nations can only be achieved through cooperation rather than coercion. On the positive side, this scenario offers non-western nations such as India, the chance to assume leadership roles.

India has consistently emphasised the importance of multilateralism and adherence to international law. Aptly, during the G-20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting (February 2025), in Johannesburg, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reiterated the need for an inclusive and multilateral approach to global challenges and called for prioritising international law and peaceful resolutions. Additionally, this also serves as an opportune moment to reform the UNSC, as India has been consistently demanding.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Back on earth

The safe return of Sunita Williams, Barry Wilmore and the two other space crew from two space underlines the link between human resolve and international collaboration. Ms. Williams in particular has inspired millions to reach for the stars. It was a pleasant

surprise to see visuals of dolphins circling the Dragon capsule during recovery procedures from the ocean — NASA's live broadcast highlighted the scene as a symbolic and heart-warming moment. The extraordinary courage of Ms. Williams and Mr. Wilmore, spending over

nine months in space, needs acknowledgement. It is also about the indomitable human spirit that thrives against all odds.

**R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai

Nine months of stay in space only points to the power of endurance —

which in the case of Ms. Williams and Mr. Wilmore is to the power of 100. We do not need any other example to demonstrate the significance of endurance and patience.

**S. Ramakrishnasayee,**  
Chennai

The ordeal that Ms. Williams

and Mr. Wilmore experienced cannot be imagined. The mission has also exposed the dangers that space missions face and the importance of contingencies and planning, stringent testing procedures, and the high relevance of safety standards. The

eleventh-hour support by a relatively new upstart company, to come to the rescue of an old aerospace giant, adds another dimension to this saga.

**A.P. Thiruvadi,**  
Chennai

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



## Should immigrants have the same right to protest as citizens?



Happymon Jacob

Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and founder-director of the Council for Strategic and Defense Research



Prabhash Ranjan

Professor at Jindal Global Law School

## PARLEY

**R**anjan Srinivasan, an Indian doctoral student at Columbia University, left the U.S. on March 11, 2025, following the revocation of her student visa by the U.S. State Department. Her departure followed a raid on her campus residence by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, who have accused her of being a "pro-Hamas sympathiser". Earlier, on March 8, immigration authorities arrested Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian student activist and green card holder, for allegedly violating his terms of residency by supporting a U.S.-designated terrorist organisation. Should immigrants have the same right to protest as citizens? Prabhash Ranjan and Happymon Jacob discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

**Do immigrants have the same right to protest as citizens under international human rights law?**

**Prabhash Ranjan:** Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) enshrines freedom of expression as a fundamental human right, extending to both citizens and immigrants. Article 19(2) specifically guarantees the right to seek, receive, and disseminate information across borders through various media. However, Article 19(3) qualifies this right by imposing special duties and permitting states to impose restrictions when necessary to safeguard national security or public order. Additionally, other provisions of the ICCPR explicitly prohibit war propaganda and the advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that incites violence.

While international law affords immigrants the same right to protest as citizens, the extent of this right depends on the host country's domestic legal framework. Some states enforce stricter regulations, whereas liberal democracies may adopt a more permissive stance.

**To what extent do foreign policy and national security considerations constrain immigrants' right to peaceful protest?**

**Happymon Jacob:** The application of international human rights law is deeply influenced by domestic politics. The critical question is what happens when international legal norms and expectations collide with national political realities. For instance, in the U.S., a long-standing tradition of free speech has created a global expectation that Americans will consistently uphold this right. However, instances where American actions diverge from these expectations expose a disconnect between historical tradition and contemporary reality. This phenomenon is not unique to the U.S.—across Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe, non-citizens often do not enjoy the same degree of free speech as citizens. Moreover, the ability to exercise free speech or participate in peaceful



Protesters march near Arizona State University against the ICE's detention of Palestinian student activist Mahmoud Khalil. REUTERS

protests frequently depends on an individual's legal status—whether they are a natural-born citizen, a permanent resident, or an undocumented immigrant. The social contract that binds a government to its citizens does not necessarily extend to non-citizens in the same way, further entangling the legal and political framework governing these rights.

**Does the crackdown on protesting foreign students in the U.S. violate First Amendment rights?**

**PR:** The Immigration and Nationality Act, 1952 authorises the denial of entry and deportation of non-citizens who endorse or support terrorist activities or organisations. President Trump's executive order, issued in January directing federal agencies to combat antisemitism on campuses, is rooted in this law. Thus, its issuance does not exceed constitutional authority. However, the critical question is whether the order itself is constitutional.

U.S. law extends First Amendment protections to non-citizens, regardless of their immigration status, particularly in matters concerning criminal penalties and law enforcement investigations. However, it remains uncertain whether non-citizens enjoy the same level of First Amendment protection as citizens when facing deportation proceedings. This is where Happymon's argument becomes relevant—each case must be evaluated based on the individual's legal status. For instance, a green card holder would have stronger legal protections than someone on a student visa. Historically, during the Cold War, legal aliens in the U.S. were deported for their affiliation with the Communist Party. While the U.S. legal system has since become more robust, past precedents highlight the enduring legal complexities surrounding such deportations.

**The Trump administration has revoked nearly \$400 million in grants for Columbia University. Do you think this could deter foreign students from studying in the U.S.?**

**HJ:** I don't believe measures such as these will significantly influence the decisions of international students, including those from

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The U.S. has long been perceived as a nation that upholds the rule of law and champions the freedom of speech and expression. If it begins weaponising laws to target individuals it disfavors, it risks legitimising similar actions by governments worldwide.

PRABHASH RANJAN

India, to study in the U.S. Only a small fraction of Indian students are likely to engage in such protests, making it an unlikely deterrent. However, a more pressing concern is whether reductions in university funding could ultimately discourage international talent from enrolling in American institutions. If that happens, it could pose a serious challenge for a nation that relies on immigration-driven innovation and expertise.

**U.S. immigration judges operate within the Department of Justice, where the Attorney General has the authority to remove them. Could executive influence compromise the fairness of deportation proceedings?**

**PR:** Yes, executive control over immigration judges is deeply problematic. Law and politics are not as divorced as we might wish to believe. While judges are ideally expected to operate in depoliticised courtrooms, the reality is that legal interpretations often unfold within a broader political context. That said, my confidence lies less in individual immigration judges and more in the U.S. judicial system as a whole. At the appellate level, independent review and judicial scrutiny of executive actions can help ensure fairer outcomes. However, for immigrants caught in this system, the process itself can feel like a punishment—perhaps by design.

**The Trump administration has reportedly invoked Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the 1952 Act to justify the arrest of Mr. Khalil. It empowers the Secretary of State to deport a foreign national if their "presence or activities in the United States would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences". Is this provision susceptible to a constitutional challenge on grounds of vagueness?**

**PR:** Yes, it does. The application of a rarely invoked statute to a Palestinian political activist raises serious due process concerns, potentially amounting to arbitrary enforcement. In *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project* (2010), the U.S. Supreme Court held that independent advocacy or mere membership in a government-designated terrorist organisation is protected speech under the First Amendment. Criminal liability arises only from providing material support, not from association alone. Thus, for the U.S. government to justify prosecution under this statute, it must present substantial evidence of actual criminal conduct.

In Mr. Khalil's case, the legitimacy of the government's actions depends on the evidence it has and whether it can demonstrate genuine wrongdoing. If he is merely expressing a viewpoint aligned with a particular group, that remains constitutionally protected speech.

**Can this provision be weaponised against those the administration disagrees with?**

**HJ:** As Prabhash pointed out, this provision grants the government significant authority, with no clear definition of what constitutes "adverse foreign policy consequences" for the U.S. Its vague language allows almost anything to fall within its scope, making it highly susceptible to misuse. That said, most countries maintain such sweeping laws, ostensibly reserved for exceptional circumstances. If an administration chooses to exploit them, judicial intervention remains the only real safeguard. Moreover, the invocation of such rarely used provisions is inherently political—how the executive frames an issue dictates the response. Protests perceived as part of routine political discourse will elicit a different reaction than those framed as law-and-order threats or national security risks. Parsing the nuances of such provisions has limited utility, as these laws inherently permit extreme measures in extraordinary situations. However, what qualifies as an "extreme case" is a matter of political interpretation.

**Will such incidents erode U.S. soft power and weaken its stature in the global order?**

**HJ:** If the U.S. continues on this path, it risks losing the moral authority to advise other nations on their domestic affairs. American soft power will decline, along with its international standing. Such actions could also contribute to the erosion of democratic and liberal values worldwide. Additionally, they will weaken the U.S.'s ability to build coalitions based on shared democratic values.

**PR:** The U.S. has long been perceived—rightly or wrongly—as a nation that upholds the rule of law and champions the freedom of speech and expression. This perception has played a crucial role in fostering a global culture of liberal values and open discourse. However, if the U.S. begins weaponising laws to target individuals it disfavors, it risks legitimising similar actions by governments worldwide. This would contribute to a more repressive global environment, where political expression becomes increasingly precarious. That said, I still have faith in the U.S. legal system—it remains robust. Whether a single administration can upend it entirely remains to be seen. The unfolding deportation proceedings will be telling.



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## NOTEBOOK

## The art of translating editorials

Translating the newspaper's editorials into the Hindi language has been an enriching experience

Jitendra Kumar

**I**n July 2022, when Amit Baruah, a senior journalist from *The Hindu*, rang me, I was driving and could not take his call. He then sent me a message that read: "Something important. Call me back". A few minutes later, I spoke to him, he told me that the newspaper wanted its editorials translated into the Hindi language and that he had been tasked with finding a good translator. "Would you like to do this? You will have to begin from August 1," Mr. Baruah said.

My journey from being a journalist to a translator had begun with a stroke of luck more than two decades ago. It was 2001, and I was working as a political reporter. The editor of *Frontline*, N. Ram, had interviewed Arundhati Roy, and their conversation had been published under the headline, 'Scimitars in the Sun: Arundhati Roy on writer's place in politics'. My editor wanted to publish that interview in Hindi. I contacted Ms. Roy. She agreed to a translation, but was worried that words would be lost or misinterpreted in the process. She insisted on seeing the interview before it went to print. When I shared it with her, she told me that she was happy. Over the years, I have translated the writings of thinkers such as Arundhati Roy, Nandini Sundar, Ashutosh Varshney, and Surinder Jodhka.

You would imagine then that I would agree immediately to Mr. Baruah's request. But I was apprehensive: I was only used to translating social and political writings. As a voracious reader of *The Hindu*, I knew that editorials are written on a range of subjects and I was somewhat terrified of this editorial diversity. The next day, I shared my apprehensions with Mr. Baruah. He assured me that it would be fine: I could share my first draft with him and he would send it back with

corrections, if needed. I finally agreed.

I began translating the editorials using simple Hindi words and Hindustani idioms. Initially, I would send the translated editorial to Mr. Baruah and he would return it to me with some changes. I would then send the copy to the desk. Four-five months later, he asked me to send the copy directly to the desk—a clear signal that he had become confident of my skills.

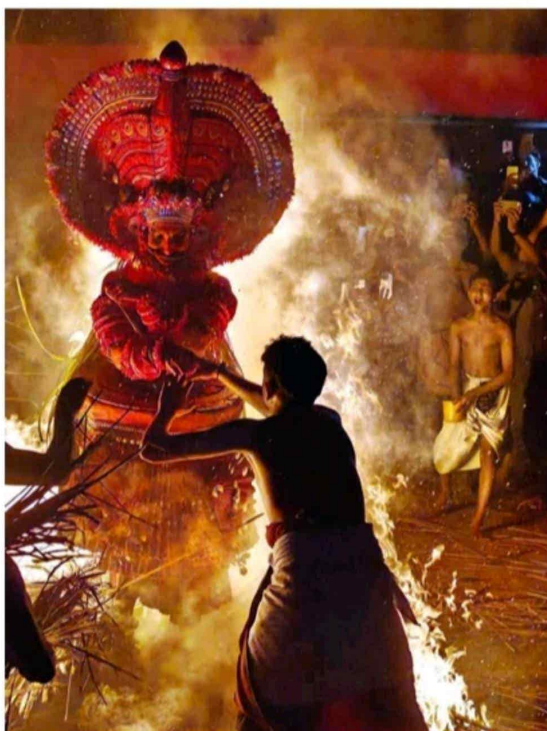
While I did this religiously every day, I had no idea who was reading these translations. One day, I happened to overhear five civil service aspirants talking in a train. They seemed to be on their way back home from a coaching institute. Earlier, they said, editorials of several English language newspapers would be translated into the Hindi and handed out to them at the beginning of class. But now, they were being given photocopies much later, sometimes only at noon, because translated editorials were anyway uploaded on the newspaper's website by then. A young woman in the group said that this was useful and the translations were good. I smiled to myself.

But I also realised that one cannot please everyone. Days later, someone objected to the use of Urdu words in the translated editorials and said Hindi could not be "saved" if this kept happening. I argued that the English we speak today contains several words of French origin.

Translating the editorials of *The Hindu* has enriched my own language skills. Now I can translate almost any text, except perhaps medical jargon. I may not have produced great original writing in Hindi, but I am happy to know that good writing in English is now reaching a wider audience in another tongue. After all, making factually accurate information and balanced views available to the public is the duty of a responsible citizen.

## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

## Rising from the ashes



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This theyyam performance at the Kaliyattam festival at Ettikulam in Kannur, Kerala, tells the story of a warrior who was reborn from his ashes. According to the legend, Kandanar Kelan, an archer-warrior, was burning vegetation to prepare land for farming when he got engulfed in flames. To escape, he tried to climb up a tree and was bitten by two snakes. Another theyyam, Vayanattu Kalavan, resurrected him. THULASI KAKKAT

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 21, 1975

## Rousing reception to Indian team

Madras, March 21: The high and low of Madras rubbed shoulders with one another in acclaiming the achievement of Ajitpal and his men in winning the World Cup at Kuala Lumpur last Saturday. India's hockey heroes were taken in a procession from Anna Statue in Anna Salai (Mount Road) to Hotel Woodlands, where a reception was held for them last evening.

Crowds lined up the entire route in thousands, which truly reflected the pride and joy felt in the whole country at Indian hockey taking its place as the leader of the world after a big break. There was all the paraphernalia of a royal welcome, with the Commissioner of Police, Mr. K.R. Shenai himself greeting and garlanding the players to signal the start of the procession. The motorcade passed through the roads escorted by the Mounted Police and with the Police band in attendance right through.

Welcome arches hailing the victory had been put up at a few points and at various places, the crowds sent the lusty cheers which rent the air. It was all reminiscent of the victory parade which was held here when Dalbir Singh (now the Manager of the team) and his men passed through Madras after winning the Olympic title at Melbourne in 1956.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 21, 1925

## Burma Council

Rangoon, March 20: When the Council resumed to-day, Mr. H.C. Khee, whip of the Nationalist party, moved a motion for reduction of Rs. 1,000 under excise. In the course of the speech, the mover referred to the Salt industry of Burma and said that it was one of the oldest in Burma and during the war, supplied practically half of Burma. Now, however, it was nearing extinction. He said the fault was not of the local Government but of the Central Government, whose policy is to get the maximum of revenue irrespective of the source for sustaining local industry.



## AP CM'S TRANSFORMATIVE POVERTY ALLEVIATION MODEL PROMISING

ANDHRA Pradesh has long been at the forefront of economic and technological transformation, and once again, its political landscape is witnessing an ambitious vision—P4 Zero Poverty—championed by Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu. The P4 model, which stands for People, Public, Private, and Partnership, aims to eradicate poverty by leveraging collective efforts across multiple sectors. If implemented effectively, this concept has the potential to redefine governance and development not just in Andhra Pradesh but across India.

traditional welfare programs that rely solely on government intervention, the P4 model integrates four key stakeholders: People: Direct participation of citizens, ensuring community-driven initiatives; Public Sector: Government policies and resources to facilitate implementation; Private Sector: Corporate investments, innovation, and job creation; Partnerships: Collaboration with NGOs, international organizations, and academic institutions.

By aligning these forces, P4 seeks to create a self-sustaining ecosystem where economic growth directly translates into poverty reduction. The potential benefits of P4 Zero Poverty are job creation and skill development. A strong emphasis on public-private collaboration can lead to the establishment of skill development centers, industrial hubs, and entrepreneurship programs, ensuring that the workforce is equipped for emerging economic opportunities.

Financial Inclusion And Digital Empowerment: Naidu has always been a strong proponent of technology-driven governance. By integrating digital financial services, microloans, and fintech solutions, the model can ensure better financial access for marginalized communities. Smart Governance and Transparency: A data-driven governance framework, leveraging AI and blockchain, can enhance the efficiency and accountability of welfare schemes, ensuring benefits reach the intended recipients without leakage.

Sustainable Infrastructure and Rural Development encouraging corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects in rural areas can lead to better healthcare, education, and infrastructure, reducing regional disparities in development. While the concept of P4 Zero Poverty is promising, its success depends on overcoming several challenges: Coordination among stakeholders: Ensuring seamless cooperation between the government, private sector, and civil society organizations can be complex. Corporate participation: Incentives: Private players may hesitate to engage in projects with low immediate returns, necessitating strategic incentives. Scalability across urban and rural areas: Adapting the model to different socio-economic conditions will require localized policy adjustments.

## LETTERS

### Sunita's indomitable spirit wows all

SUNITA Williams' focus and determination during her extended mission are remarkable. Her experience highlights the challenges of space travel and the vital role of astronaut training. The insights gained from her mission will help NASA improve future long-duration space missions. Her return has sparked celebrations worldwide, especially in India, where she is seen as an inspiration to aspiring astronauts and scientists. The mission underscores the unpredictability of space travel and the need for continuous advancements in technology and contingency planning. Sunita Williams remains a role model, proving that perseverance and dedication can overcome even the most unexpected challenges.

Dr Krishna Kumar Vepakomma, Hyderabad

As an astronaut, engineer, and role model for aspiring students worldwide, Sunita Williams' journey is an embodiment of resilience, passion, and unwavering dedication to science and technology. Her comeback from space marks a significant milestone, reinforcing the importance of persistence and continuous learning. She was part of a mission that was initially planned for just eight days but was prolonged to over nine months due to technical issues with the return spacecraft. After spending approximately 286 days in space, Williams and her colleague Butch Wilmore's resilience highlights the unpredictable nature of space exploration and the importance of adaptability in achieving great heights.

N Sudhish Reddy, Bengaluru

The much-awaited return of Sunita Williams and Willmore to earth from International Space Station has brought immense joy and relief to one and all. Indians are a little happier than others as they own Sunita Williams as their own daughter of soil for having Indian origins. She has become a role model for human excellence and grit. It could have been a routine affair if she had been able to return to earth according to original schedule or planned one. But she had to wait and spend nine months in space station in an odd environment, instead of only eight days. It's hard to think the amount of mental pressure one has to undergo to wait endlessly. Still she could maintain mental balance and physical fitness and carried out research work which needs high cognitive function. One can easily throw out the books on space management, time management, stress management and personality development to the winds and read the story of Sunita Williams to emulate the mindset. Kudos.

Dr DVG Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

An original 8 day space odyssey for Sunita Williams & others turned out to be a nightmare. Space scientists the world over and its entire fraternity must have worked really hard to see her back. The safe and soft landing of the spacecraft is a remarkable and historic achievement in itself as the world witnessed the tragic crash while Kalpana Chawla was getting back. Space scientists who were behind this crucial but equally dangerous life-saving mission need to be highly commended. 19th March 2025 will be a historic day to cherish and celebrate for long by the world, India and by the state of Gujarat.

N R Rajuram, Hyderabad

### World War clouds gathering on horizon?

THE world seems to be heading toward yet another World War. The Russo-Ukraine war rages on with no letup even as world leaders are taking to the negotiating table to resolve the conflict and buy peace. The fragile ceasefire in West Asia has been broken with renewed Israeli airstrikes in Gaza. Commitment of heads of government to strive for peace seems to be failing, as these war theatres continue to witness loss of lives and gory injuries while a clueless UN seems to be missing.

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

### AP move to foster academic excellence

As Andhra Pradesh takes a significant step towards encouraging private universities, we must acknowledge the transformative power of education. Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom, as George Washington Carver once said. Minister Nara Lokesh's initiative to introduce the Establishment of Private Universities and Regulation Second Amendment Bill, 2025, is a commendable effort to foster academic excellence. By embracing private universities, Andhra Pradesh can provide students with diverse opportunities for growth, innovation, and success. As Nelson Mandela aptly put it, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Sridevi Tejaswani K, Kakinada

thansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Will order high level probe into 'honey trap' cases: HM

BENGALURU: Home Minister G Parameshwara on Thursday said he will order a high-level probe into the "honey trap" cases in the state. He insisted that there is a need to put an end to such tendencies. "If we have to save the dignity of our members, we have to put a brake on such incidents. It's a serious issue," the Home Minister told the Assembly. "I will order a high-level probe into it," he added. Karnataka Minister for Cooperation K N Rajanna said he came to know that at least 48 people have been "honeytrapped" and their obscene videos have been made.

During the discussion on budget, BJP legislator Banaganodri Patil Vittal said a trend has started to finish off the political opponents by blackmailing them. BJP MLA V Sunil Kumar said people who could not defeat their opponents on policies and ideologies have resorted to blackmailing to achieve their political goals. BJP MLA Munirathna alleged that he has been wrongly framed in a rape case. He demanded that his case should be handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation.

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

# When cure is worse than disease

VANAM JYALAK NARASIMHA RAO

On March 15, 2025, Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy delivered an impactful, strategic, and well-articulated two-and-a-half-hour reply during the Motion of Thanks to Governor Jithu Dev Varma's address in the State Legislative Assembly. Covering a wide range of social issues, especially media accountability, alongside the state's financial health he calculatedly made observations and critiques on the role of digital media, its disconnect with accepted norms, and the use of derogatory language, he underscored the evolving challenges in the unethical information dissemination ecosystem and need for regulatory clarity.

The context was the conduct of two women YouTube journalists, referring to them sarcastically quoting subtly but pointedly the specific incident using indecent language against him. He disclosed that the two journalists were arrested for allegedly posting defamatory content against him in personal and offensive manner. The Chief Minister unequivocally condemned such behavior, stating that while criticism of public figures is acceptable in democracy, personal attacks, and abusive language amount to crossing ethical boundaries. He sternly warned YouTube users and digital media channels that the government would adopt zero-tolerance policy against those uploading abusive content or using derogatory language against the government. "Whatever I do, I will do within the ambit of the law," he asserted.

The CM pointed out that proliferation of social media and YouTube-based channels, the lines between genuine journalism and personal propaganda have blurred, raising the fundamental question of who qualifies as a journalist. He suggested that the Assembly, regulatory bodies, and journalist unions initiate a discussion to define journalism and compile a list of mainstream journalists. "Anyone not considered a journalist and engaging in defamatory propaganda

If politicians cannot hold themselves to a higher standard, why expect restraint from YouTube or Social Media Journalism. The precise threatening words used by CM Revanth Reddy on the floor of the Assembly, perhaps directed only at those abusing him, came as a shock even to those who strongly opposed the video content. Former Vice President of India M Venkaiah Naidu once said that 'Decency, Dignity and Decorum' are the three ingredients of democracy, upheld through 'Debate, Discuss and Decide.' Few political leaders seem to remember this cardinal principle. It is hard to see how a YouTube video, however irresponsible, warrants such moral outrage beyond legal process.



will be treated as a criminal, the CM cautioned. He also proposed introducing a legislation in the Assembly to punish digital media journalists, especially those running YouTube channels, for posting abusive content. Meanwhile, the two women journalists were granted bail by a local court on March 17.

The CM, however, favored press freedom, paradoxically arguing for ethical and respectful journalistic conduct. As against this, BRS working president KTR preferred to describe it as an attack on press freedom. Both are debatable. It requires state level and nationwide debate on freedom or limits to media. It needs to ponder on mooting an independent civil society and professional group to monitor it. Indian press played crucial role in sustaining democracy, before undergoing dramatic and traumatic changes, often crossing limits due to provocations and temptations, why this change?

Most democracies exert restraint on the media, even though they operate free from government interference. In India, a free and independent media is protected under the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech. It assumes that the media is free, fair, and responsible, operating under certain checks and balances, the hallmark of Indian democracy. Media is expected to observe standards of objectivity, responsibility, and responsiveness, inherent in the concept of the Fourth Estate. The media itself is expected to maintain its own code of conduct and philosophy of self-restraint.

An independent body to promote responsibility, behavior standards,

and self-discipline deserves consideration. No forum can function unless it balances rights and privileges with duties and obligations. The question is, who should regulate and implement this? who should hold the cat? Should it be working journalists, managements, government, independent organizations, or someone else? Should the situation be allowed to drift further? Should we think of some corrective measures? This is where CM Revanth Reddy's suggestion is valid and highly relevant in this context.

However, the precise threatening words used by CM Revanth Reddy on the floor of the Assembly, perhaps directed only at those abusing him, came as a shock even to those who strongly opposed the video content. His statement that they would be 'Stripped Naked, Thrashed, and Paraded in Public' was jarring. His outburst, notwithstanding the defamatory reporting, which undoubtedly is no small matter, brings to mind an age-old problem or adage that, 'The Cure Becomes Worse than the Disease.' It is like setting the house on fire to kill an infectious mosquito, dramatic, destructive, and ultimately self-defeating. No one disputes that journalistic integrity matters and misinformation cannot be left unchecked. But taking the moral high ground by using sharp words on the Assembly floor, a 'Sanctum Sanctorum' or the 'Temple of Democracy' is like making a paper cut with a chainsaw. It is akin to dealing with a leaky tap by smashing the sink or curing a headache with a hammer blow.

The two YouTube journalists undoubtedly crossed a line, and legal action would have been justified. But Revanth Reddy's sharp rebuke crossed the norms, the floor, and possibly the entire building.

In the battle between misinformation and state accountability, the latter must respond with calm precision, not emotional detonation. If the journalists' work was misleading, a fact-based rebuttal or legal recourse would have been better sufficed. CM's decision to launch a verbal missile attack from the legislative podium not only amplified the issue but also risked turning sympathy toward the very journalists he sought to discredit.

Ironically, this entire episode unfolded in the same Assembly where Honorable Members by and large, routinely engage in verbal free-for-all, slinging accusations, and venomous insults at each other. Though these exchanges often occur outside the Assembly, they do not match the content of the YouTube videos, personal attacks, character assassinations, and vulgarity are often shrugged off as part of the political game. If such unchecked tirades are deemed acceptable, it is hard to see how a YouTube video, however irresponsible, warrants such moral outrage beyond legal process.

Political figures often face unfair criticism and it comes with the job. But reacting with unchecked aggression not only elevates the opponent's platform but also shifts the narrative from facts to feelings. If the goal was to protect the individual's reputation, this approach may have

done more harm than good. It is hard to look like the grown-up in the room when you are the one throwing the tantrum. When political mudslinging within and outside the Assembly reaches rock-bottom levels, with slurs and accusations flying faster than legislative bills, outrage over two journalists' videos begins to look less like a stand for truth and more like selective outrage.

If politicians cannot hold themselves to a higher standard, why expect restraint from YouTube or Social Media Journalism. It is, however, debatable and none to be accused look, stock, and barrel.

For instance, in a recent outburst, CM Revanth Reddy said that his predecessor K Chandrababu Naidu and BRS leaders who were talking about 'Stature' were already sent on the 'Stretcher' and would soon end up in the 'Mortuary.' His clever wordplay reflects the very brand of mockery that politicians are quick to condemn when directed at them. Reducing political discourse to schoolyard taunts while demanding dignity and decorum from the press is a classic case of 'Do as I say, not as I do.' If the legislature itself resembles a comedy stage more than a law-making body, it is no wonder the press takes creative liberties. If political speech descends into parody, can journalistic satire be far behind?

Former Vice President of India M Venkaiah Naidu once said that 'Decency, Dignity and Decorum' are the three ingredients of democracy, upheld through 'Debate, Discuss and Decide.' Few political leaders seem to remember this cardinal principle while making public statements. This trend seems to be catching up, particularly in Telangana. But who can teach these fly-by-night operators in politics to behave properly?

Ultimately, the CM's outrage might have been justified, but the intensity and tone of his response should have been different. Political maturity lies in knowing when to attack and when to be silent. In the battle for truth and accountability, precision and restraint are powerful than outrage. After all, a controlled response often speaks volumes than an emotional outburst.

ASHER KAUFMAN

THE ceasefire in Gaza appears to be over. And while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought to blame Hamas for the resumption of fighting that killed more than 400 Palestinians on March 18, 2025 – "only the beginning," Netanyahu warned – the truth is the seeds of the renewed violence are to be found in Israeli domestic politics.

Withdrawing from the Gaza Strip runs counter to the maximalist ideologies of key members of Netanyahu's government, including some in his own party Likud. Rather, their stated position is for Israel to remain in control of the enclave and to push as many Palestinians as possible out of it. It is why many in Netanyahu's government cheered when President Donald Trump indicated that Palestinians should be cleared from Gaza to make way for a massive reconstruction project led by the United States.

As an expert on Israeli history and a professor of peace studies, I believe the far-right vision for post-conflict Gaza shared by parts of Netanyahu's government is incompatible with the ceasefire plan.

## 'The Gaza ceasefire is dead'

### ISRAELI DOMESTIC POLITICS KILLED IT

To secure the vote for the annual budget and stave off elections, Netanyahu needs support – and if it isn't going to come from the ultra-Orthodox parties, then he needs to shore up far-right members of the coalition. As a result of the resumption of war, Otzma Yehudit – the far-right party that left Netanyahu's government in January to protest the ceasefire agreement – has returned to the fold



hard-right government has made significant efforts to turn independent institutions such as the attorney general's office and the police into compliant arms of the government by seeking to place government loyalists in charge of both.

#### Prolonging the war

In 2023, a sustained and massive protest movement slowed Netanyahu's attempts to overhaul the country's judiciary. And then came the Hamas massacre on Oct. 7. Many Israeli commentators hoped that the attack would force the government to reconsider its efforts to carry out what some

described as a legal coup, in a show of national unity.

But Netanyahu and his government had other plans. After an initial hostage deal in November 2023 failed to yield a wider breakthrough, people gradually began to question whether Netanyahu's primary interest was to prolong the war in the belief that doing so might be the best way to save his political career and revive his assault on the judiciary...

Meanwhile, war also provides cover for Netanyahu to neuter some of his fiercest critics. In the months after the Oct. 7 attack, Netanyahu systematically removed from

office antagonistic members of the security and political leadership, accusing them of being responsible either for the Hamas attack or for the mismanagement of the conflict.

This purging of anti-Netanyahu elements in Israel has ramped up in recent months with Netanyahu and his allies seeking to replace Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara and fire Ronen Bar, the head of the powerful security agency Shabak, or Shin Bet, which has been carrying out sensitive investigations into Netanyahu's closest aides.

#### Shoring up coalition

The apparent breakdown of the ceasefire now also coincides with growing pressure on Netanyahu from the political right in his ruling coalition. Under Israeli law, the government must approve its annual budget by the end of March or face being dissolved, something that would trigger fresh elections.

But Netanyahu is facing headwinds among ultra-Orthodox parties over the issue of army drafts. Since the start of the war, there has been tremendous pressure from the wider Israeli public to end the draft exemption for ultra-Orthodox men, who unlike other Israelis did not have to serve in the military. Ultra-Orthodox parties, however, are demanding the opposite: to pass legislation that would formally exempt them from military service. To secure the vote for the annual budget, Netanyahu needs support – and if it isn't going to come from the ultra-Orthodox parties, then he needs to shore up far-right members of the coalition. As a result of the resumption of war, Otzma Yehudit – the far-right party that left Netanyahu's government in January to protest the ceasefire agreement – has returned to the fold. This gives Netanyahu a crucial battle votes. But in effect, it signals that the coalition has no intention of implementing the second phase of the ceasefire plan, withdrawing from Gaza. In effect, it has killed the ceasefire.

(Full report at <https://theconversation.com>; Writer is Professor of History and Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame)



# Making community service a credible penalty



KP SINGH  
FORMER DGP, HARYANA

**I**N January 2025, the court of the third additional *munaff* in Jamnā sentenced a person, who was found guilty of obstructing traffic and causing public annoyance, to one week of community service (CS) involving cleaning, sweeping and mopping at a Community Health Centre in Dausū. The same court, in a similar matter, ordered the guilty to clean and maintain a public park at Jhajjar Kotli daily for three hours for one week. In both the cases, the Station House Officer of Jhajjar Kotli Police Station was tasked with ensuring compliance and submitting a report with photographic evidence.

In the third case of the same nature in the same month, a sub-judge court in Katra ordered the offender to perform CS by cleaning and maintaining a park at Katra for three consecutive days; the chief executive officer of the Katra Development Authority was directed to oversee compliance of the punishment order.

In yet another case, on March 6, the Chief Judicial

Magistrate, Chandigarh, ordered a habitual traffic violator to do CS for five days under the supervision of the reader to SSP (Traffic).

'Community service' has been added to the list of punishments under Section 4 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, (BNS) for the first time for six offences of public servants engaging in unlawful trade (Section 202), non-appearance in compliance of proclamation (Section 209), attempts to commit suicide (Section 226), minor theft where the stolen article is returned and value of the property is less than Rs 5,000 (Section 303(2)), public mischief while intoxicated (Section 355), and defamation (Section 356(2)).

The inclusion of CS as a substantive sentence under the BNS is a reflection of non-custodial correctional measure subscribing to the philosophy of 'restorative justice' in the Indian criminal justice system. The term CS is defined by adding an explanation to Section 23 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNS), stating that community service shall mean the work which the court may order a convict to perform as a form of punishment that benefits the community, for which he shall not be entitled to any remuneration.

This definition is ambigu-



**GAP:** Since community service as a sentence was included recently in the BNS, it does not find mention in the prison rules and regulations. *Image photo*

ous and needs to be examined, especially in the background of Article 23 of the Constitution of India, which prohibits 'begar' and similar forced labour practices. Even convicts undergoing rigorous imprisonment in jail are paid wages for the work they do while serving their sentence.

The words 'work which the court may order' and 'that benefits the society' are non-specific and surrounded by uncertainties as a lot has been left to the imagination of the trial court, having individualised perceptions about events in life. There is always a scope left for the presiding officer faltering in assigning the suitable task for CS. This issue may be resolved by

The inclusion of community service as a substantive sentence under the BNS subscribes to the philosophy of 'restorative justice' in the Indian criminal justice system.

including a suggestive list of such works in the High Court Rules and Orders.

A lot of confusion is prevailing about designating the execution agency for the purposes of monitoring, supervising and reporting back compliance on the CS sentence as a variety of government and public functionaries are being given this task by the courts without realising that such employees are not trained to perform such duty, nor do they possess proper skills for handling such convicts.

Moreover, in the absence of rules/guidelines, they are completely ignorant about the documentation required to perform such an important

duty. It must be remembered that CS is a substantial punishment under the BNS and, hence, its execution squarely falls within the domain of the agencies of the criminal justice system (CJS).

In the 'Rules of Business' of the government, law and justice are listed as subject matter of the Home Ministry. It would be an administrative blunder to assign the duty to execute CS sentence to an agency outside the jurisdiction of the Home Department. It is desirable that CS should be included in the list of business of the Home Department and necessary modalities prescribed.

The execution of the sentence in criminal cases is the primary responsibility of the Prison Department. The rules and procedures for the same are prescribed in the jail manual of the states. Since CS as a sentence is included recently in the BNS, it does not find mention in the prison rules and regulations. Therefore, some prison administrators and magistrates often mistake the execution of CS punishment on a par with that of monitoring a person found guilty but not sentenced and released temporarily on probation under the supervision of the District Probation Officer as per the provisions of the Probation of Offenders Act 1957.

It is to be understood that the releasing of a guilty person on probation is not a pun-

ishment, it is an order before sentencing (*rooka hua faisla*), as a correctional measure by offering an opportunity to a first-time offender to reform.

At the same time, it is not to be forgotten that the police and the Prison Department are the repository of all records of crime and criminal convictions. If a convict is awarded punishment to do CS and the subject is directed to report to an authority other than the prison authorities for monitoring and supervision, it would be impossible for the jail administration to know about the proper serving of such a punishment.

This is very well evident from the experience of record keeping of persons released on probation for good conduct; it is in disarray and nobody is in a position to give the data of such probationers for want of institutionalised mechanism. Non-institutionalisation of the processes and modalities to execute the punishment of CS would result in inadequate and faulty execution as well as inappropriate or no recondemning of such a substantive criminal punishment.

Awarding punishment is within the domain of law courts. How the sentence would be served is the exclusive jurisdiction of the state. Ideally, the state should create the mechanism and prescribe procedures for the execution of all sentences in criminal cases.

## How NEP bridges the education-employment gap



JASWINDER SINGH BRAR  
PROFESSOR, PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

**T**HE draft of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) attained finality after five years of consultations under the leadership of former ISRO Chairman K Kasturirangan. The policy was adopted by Parliament on July 29, 2020, thereby replacing the National Policy on Education of 1986.

The necessity for a paradigm shift stemmed from the critical challenges in educational dispensation. It was felt that the existing policy had been losing relevance, with the emergence of a growing army of unemployable job-seeking graduates who did not have the relevant skill set and knowledge base.

The policy was not in tune with the requirements of the knowledge economy of the 21st century, which is based on the market being the anchor of economic decision-making. The 'massification' of education with selected schemes, interventions and programmes with compromised quality had resulted in what is called degree inflation.

During this period, only a few Indian universities got recognition in the global rating and accreditation systems.

Ironically, the non-absorption of graduates into jobs as per the qualification certificates has often been sighted as a shortcoming of the growth model adopted since 1991.

The NEP-2020 is structured around the five core principles of access, capacity, quality, affordability and accountability, all aiming to align with the emergent socio-economic and global demands. Its vision has been operationalised by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) developed by the Kasturirangan-headed 12-member committee.

The policy acknowledges the inter-connection and mutual dependence among various stages and domains of education. The outputs of different stages and subjects of education serve as inputs for the subsequent stages.

The NEP-2020 aims to draw its strength from a multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary process of learning, skilling and knowledge acquisition. To achieve this, the policy emphasises the replacement of the rigid structures of the old system with flexible ones. This transformation has to be facilitated through a robust digital infrastructure, system of academic credits and awards, a blended mode of learning, the initiation of more liberal subject combinations and boosting academia-industry interactions.



**VITAL:** NEP draws its strength from a multi-disciplinary process of learning and skilling. *Image photo*

The policy upholds the Kothari Commission (1966) and subsequent education policy recommendations (1986, revised version 1992) to invest up to 6 per cent of the GDP in the education sector by the Centre, states and union territories' budgets. Notably, the public expenditure by the education department and other government departments on education and training in their respective domains was equivalent to 4.04 per cent of the overall GDP of the country during 2019-20; which constituted 13.03 per cent of the overall budgetary expenditure. Further, during the same year, 24.67 per cent of the overall budgetary expenditure on education (by education and other departments) was incurred by the Central government and the rest by the states and UTs.

Following the new policy, the educational landscape, more particularly in the higher edu-

A student's learning experience gets a boost when he is allowed a chance to creatively combine the core domain knowledge with other subjects of his choice.

cation domain, has gone through cataclysmic changes.

A student's learning experience gets a boost when he is allowed a chance to creatively combine the core domain knowledge with other subjects of his choice. The cross-fertilisation of ideas with greater conceptual clarity breaks the mental silos. The NEP-2020 enables this through the multi-disciplinary higher education framework, portable credits, multiple entry and exit options and re-entry provisions.

The policy also introduces a structured certification system where students receive certificates, diplomas and degrees based on the duration and extent of the completion of their under-graduate course.

The policy seeks to synchronise India's higher education sector with the global best by incorporating flexibility in both classroom and experiential learnings. To improve educational management,

technology has been introduced for the digital storage of credentials, along with the facilitation of online and offline learning by transferring the credits earned.

The policy also envisions that the affiliation of colleges will be gradually faded out by granting graded autonomy. Further, standalone institutions will be encouraged to evolve into multi-disciplinary institutions through strategic collaborations, dual-degree programmes, joint research activities and international exchange programmes.

Flexibility and multidisciplinary approach are the hallmarks in the design of educational programmes, learning strategies and career pathways under NEP-2020. A well-developed higher education system contributes to national growth by supplying a skilled workforce. It also holds intrinsic value as a global industry.

The NEP-2020 holds transformative potential as it unfolds. However, its success hinges on its execution, requiring high standards of implementation, rigorous monitoring and consistent reinforcement. Recognising these aspects, policymakers have facilitated dialogue among stakeholders and also conducted reality checks by collecting data via digital portals.

The NEP-2020 must adopt a flexible framework that fosters competitiveness, enabling institutions to attract teaching and research talent and offer meaningful

student incentives.

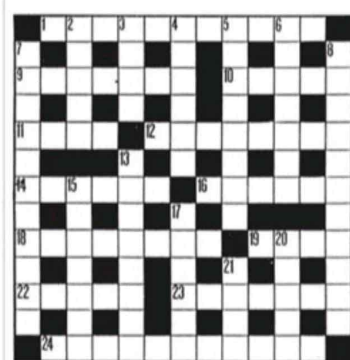
A key challenge for any policy is overcoming the psychological barrier of the announcement effect, which often triggers scepticism among stakeholders. Well-intended reforms risk trivialisation as opportunistic actors repackaging old routines as new initiatives. Such probability is high in curriculum-designing, evaluation, assessment and pedagogical practices.

One of the most pressing concerns is curriculum modernisation as institutions are not accustomed to designing syllabi in a modular format, where the level of complexity increases progressively at every stage. Additionally, resource constraints are an impediment for many institutions, impacting lab infrastructure, internship programmes, training and mentorship initiatives.

Further, institutions need to evolve a mechanism that goes beyond traditional written tests, where students can showcase their skills through practical applications, projects and problem-solving to acquire real-world competencies. This needs more public funds, alumni contributions, industry partnerships, community involvement, donations, etc.

Thus, sustained efforts in governance, faculty training, industry collaboration and student skill development are essential for translating the ambitious vision of the NEP-2020 into a tangible educational transformation.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



#### ACROSS

- Actress in main female role (7,4)
- Corroborate (7)
- Work at a loom (5)
- No more than (4)
- Affording no prospects (4,3)
- Shakespearean comedy (2,3,4,2)
- Provide the background (3,3,5)
- Unduly strict formality (8)
- Keep secret (7)
- Type of sponge (6)
- An established principle (5)
- Boast (4)

#### Yesterday's solution

**Across:** 1 Homage, 4 One-sided, 9 Rarely, 10 Standing, 12 Silk, 13 Civil, 14 Less, 17 In the long run, 20 Postponement, 23 Apex, 24 Means, 25 More, 28 Prodigal, 29 Coming, 30 Somebody, 31 Snatch.

**Down:** 1 Hardship, 2 Morality, 3 Gale, 5 Nothing doing, 6 Send, 7 Drivel, 8 Digest, 11 Lie of the land, 15 Let on, 16 Pure, 18 Derelict, 19 At length, 21 Pampus, 22 Reform, 26 Limb, 27 Moon.

### SU DO KU



#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

#### CALENDAR

MARCH 21, 2025, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Phalgun Shaka 30
- Chaitra Purnavasi 8
- Hijri 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 7, up to 4:24 am
- Siddhi Yoga up to 6:42 pm
- Jyeshtha Nakshatra up to 1:46 pm
- Moon enters Sagittarius sign 1:46 am

### FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	30	14
New Delhi	35	17
Amritsar	30	14
Bathinda	30	15
Jalandhar	30	12
Ludhiana	31	14
Bhivani	32	14
Hisar	33	15
Sirsa	32	15
Dharamsala	26	07
Manali	18	05
Shimla	21	11
Srinagar	18	04
Jammu	30	13
Kargil	04	-01
Leh	0	-02
Dehradun	31	15
Mussoorie	18	09



## Indian Railways: Powering India's growth

With strategic investments, technological advancements and a visionary public policy approach, Indian Railways is redefining connectivity, efficiency, and sustainability

FIRST  
Column

The Indian Railways, often regarded as the crouching tiger of India's growth story, is one of the world's most remarkable yet under-discussed examples of how strategic investments in infrastructure and connectivity-focused public policy can yield exponential dividends for national development. The progress made by Indian Railways (IR) over the past decade (2014-2024) could well be considered its golden period of growth and transformation, making it one of the fastest-growing railway networks globally.

What sets India's railway story apart, making it a lesson for countries and regions with similar growth ambitions? The key lies in a public policy approach best summarised as: planning for the railways has been done with Bharat and for Bharat.

This approach recognises that the railway system must remain both world-class and affordable, fulfilling its essential role as the common person's mode of transport while simultaneously supporting India's industry, commerce, and the ambition of a \$5 Trillion economy. Every day, 22.4 Million people rely on Indian Railways as an integral part of their economic lives, and the system must grow in tandem with their aspirations.

This transformation required revolutionising business operations. Historically, Indian Railways faced criticism for slow modernisation and infrastructure constraints. However, major fail to recognise the crucial shift in priorities. While the total network length has gradually increased to 68,000 km since 1950, a more significant achievement is the expansion of track kilometers, which has grown to an impressive 132,000 km today, enhancing capacity and efficiency.

A decade-on-decade comparison highlights the scale of progress. Between 2014 and 2024, Indian Railways laid 31,000 km of new tracks compared to just 14,900 km in the preceding decade (2004-2014). Similarly, cumulative freight loading surged from 8,473 million tons to 12,660 million tons, revenue generation soared from ₹8.64 Lakh Crore to ₹18.56 Lakh Crore, and electrification expanded from 5,188 km to over 44,000 km, significantly reducing carbon footprints. The development of world-class Dedicated Freight Corridors (2,741 km, compared to none in the previous decade) has further bolstered efficiency. Locomotive production nearly doubled from 4,695 to 9,168 units, while coach manufacturing rose from 32,000 to 54,000 units. Across all productivity and performance indices, Indian Railways has set new benchmarks.

A major reform was the merger of the Railway Budget with the General Budget—a decision still lamented by some who hold onto outdated per-



spectives. Historically, inadequate financing led to a thin spread of resources across a vast backlog of pending projects. However, focused investments have changed the landscape, with Gross Budgetary Support (GBS) soaring to ₹8.25 Lakh Crore over the last decade, compared to just ₹1.56 Lakh Crore in the preceding 10 years.

One of the most significant upcoming milestones is the completion of the railway link to Srinagar, featuring some of the world's tallest bridges and longest tunnels, seamlessly connecting the valley to the national network. Additionally, Indian Railways is on track to become the first major railway system to achieve 100 per cent electrification, ensuring seamless connectivity while reducing dependence on fossil fuels and drastically cutting carbon emissions.

The proliferation of the KAVACH anti-collision system across the network is the most extensive implementation in any mixed-traffic railway system globally. Meanwhile, Indian trains are surpassing "world-class" standards, blending advanced global technologies with domestic priorities to create safer, faster, cleaner, and more comfortable travel experiences—all while maintaining affordability to keep rail services

POST-2014, THE GOVERNMENT HAS ADOPTED A PROGRESSIVE AND AMBITIOUS APPROACH TOWARD INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT. A MODERN INDIA DEMANDS A NATIONAL TRANSPORTER FREE FROM OUTDATED CONSTRAINTS, FOSTERING INNOVATION AND GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS

accessible to all.

A unique aspect of Indian Railways' business model is its ability to subsidise passenger travel using freight revenues while remaining profitable. In contrast, major railway systems in developed countries are either privatised with the freedom to set high tariffs or reliant on government subsidies to cover losses. Despite stiff competition from other transportation modes and its dependence on derived demand, Indian Railways continues to meet ambitious revenue targets, delivering record-breaking performance year after year.

This transformation may come as a surprise to those who remember an era when anything labeled "export quality" was reserved for affluent nations, while Indians settled for substandard goods and services. Generations of citizens were conditioned to lower their expectations, even for crucial services like Indian Railways. However, post-2014, the government has adopted a progressive and ambitious approach toward infrastructure development. A modern India demands a national transporter free from outdated constraints, fostering innovation and global competitiveness. This progress has been achieved while maintaining high levels of localisation for essential railway components and scaling up domestic manufacturing to unprecedented levels. While Vande Bharat trains have captured public attention, Indian Railways' transformation extends

far beyond these high-speed marvels.

India is now set to roll out the world's most powerful hydrogen trains in the coming months, a feat comparable to Operation Smiling Buddha, which established India as a nuclear superpower. At 1,200 horsepower, these locomotives far surpass those being developed by "advanced" nations still struggling with half as much power. To ensure safety, Germany's TÜV SÜD has conducted third-party audits of India's hydrogen trains.

With the establishment of the world's longest hyperloop test facility, India is emerging as a global leader in futuristic transportation. Following the completion of a 422-meter test track in December 2024, India is now developing a nearly 50-km test track to assess hyperloops' commercial viability. Agreements with SwissPod (backed by Elon Musk) and France's SYSTRA underscore India's commitment to leading hyperloop innovation. Even China has recognised the strength of the 'Make in India' initiative. CRRC India is actively localising metro coach manufacturing for the Bangalore Metro, achieving over 75 per cent domestic content, with plans to reach 90 per cent. Furthermore, the facility is set to handle export orders for West Asia and Africa.

While bullet train rolling stock supply agreements with Japan are being finalised, India has already embarked on domestic high-speed train manufacturing. Beyond rolling stock, Plasser India, a subsidiary of Austria's Plasser and Theurer, is revolutionising railway maintenance with locally produced track machines, enhancing self-reliance while supporting global exports.

Indian Railways is also spearheading ambitious connectivity projects. The BBIN initiative aims to enhance rail connectivity across South Asia, while the 'Act East Policy' envisions linking India with ASEAN. The 'IMEC initiative' is set to establish a Rail-Sea-Rail corridor connecting India with Europe. Meanwhile, Indian Railways' public sector undertakings (PSUs) are exporting rolling stock, undertaking track infrastructure projects, and providing consultancy services across Asia and Africa. With its new trains, modernised stations, faster speeds, dedicated freight corridors, and high-speed network, Indian Railways has solidified its place as a world-class transportation system. This success story serves as a model for other nations yet to fully leverage the transformative potential of railways in national growth.

The motto 'Viksit Rail, Viksit Bharat' (Developed Railways, Developed India) is not just a vision for 2047; it is an ongoing journey for Bharat and with Bharat, with new records, milestones, and achievements being set every day.

(The writer is a distinguished fellow at CRF and former member, Traffic Railway Board. Views expressed are personal)



M. JAMSHED

## Foreign interference in India's farmer protests: A threat to national sovereignty

Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's recent call to ban Sikhs for justice underscores a growing consensus within the Indian establishment that foreign-backed elements are actively working to destabilise the country's internal social fabric. His statement is not a reaction to isolated incidents but a recognition of a broader, orchestrated effort to exploit India's challenges for geopolitical leverage. At the heart of this manipulation lies the Open Society Foundations (OSF), led by George Soros, which has been systematically influencing India's internal affairs through financial backing, ideological infiltration, and political maneuvering.

The farmer unrest in India over recent years is not merely a reaction to domestic policy, it is closely linked to Soros's global network, which exploits social fault lines to exert influence and undermine sovereign decision-making.

Indian agriculture has undergone a transformation with direct government support and market interventions, yet the farmer protests are increasingly entangled in international financing and hidden political agendas. What started as grassroots struggles for farmers' rights have been infiltrated by foreign forces with interests far beyond agriculture.

Historically, Indian farmers have fought for better prices, market access, and protection from exploitative policies. Their movements have centered on resisting corporate encroachment and demanding fair subsidies. However, recent years have seen a shift where external funding has played a role in redirecting these movements. OSF has strategically injected capital into India's rural protests, not to empower farmers but to destabilise internal governance and promote an agenda aligning with Western geopolitical interests.

The 2020-21 farmers' protests exemplify how Soros's network infiltrates domestic movements. What started as a call for fair pricing quickly evolved into a sophisticated and well-funded political movement, backed by global media campaigns and international endorsements.

This escalation was not organic—it was engineered. OSF-linked entities have funneled funds into Indian non-profits and activist groups under the pretext of supporting democracy and human rights, but the real intent was to use these protests as a tool against the Indian state.

Financial backing from international sources raises concerns about whether genuine farmer grievances are being amplified or manipulated. Soros's OSF, known for its involvement in "regime change" operations across Eastern Europe and Latin America, has been accused of funding civil unrest in developing nations. Similar patterns have emerged in India. The well-funded nature of the farmer protests, from logistics to media coordination, suggests significant financial and

strategic backing. The question remains: Why are these protests so well-funded, and what is the ultimate objective?

The consequences of such interference are multifaceted. While real farmer issues persist, external involvement risks overshadowing them with hidden political motives.

The movement, originally meant to empower farmers, risks becoming a tool for destabilisation. What began as a struggle for fair Minimum Support Prices (MSP) has transformed into a political agitation aimed at discrediting the Indian government and fracturing social cohesion.

The farmer protests received significant support from Canadian politicians, particularly in areas with a large Punjabi diaspora. Public endorsements, fundraising campaigns, and rallies abroad highlighted how a local agricultural movement turned into an international diplomatic issue.



BINOD ANAND

Canada's Liberal Party, influenced by OSF-backed think tanks and lobbying groups, played a key role in amplifying the protests. Radical elements with foreign funding further intensified tensions, raising doubts about the protests' true motives.

The Sovereign Guarantee Fund (SGF) is another financial mechanism under scrutiny. Designed to provide security for agricultural projects, it has drawn concerns that foreign governments and financial institutions may be using it to influence farmer movements and shape internal policies.

Soros's network has been linked to sovereign funds in various developing countries, often tying them to policy shifts favoring Western financial interests over local farmers. This creates economic dependencies that align with Western strategic goals rather than the welfare of Indian farmers.

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For Indian farmers, this situation presents both opportunities and risks. While they demand fair prices and financial aid, there is a danger of being drawn into international power struggles.

The growing influence of foreign-backed transnational corporations (TNCs) is particularly alarming. These firms, often supported by sovereign guarantee agreements, introduce patented farming solutions that increase dependency, eroding farmers' autonomy.

What is presented as modernisation frequently results in escalating costs for farmers, reduc-

ing their control over their own practices.

The fingerprints of OSF are evident across these movements—international media coverage, coordinated social media campaigns, and well-timed statements from Western governments align with Soros's strategy of influencing emerging markets.

The influx of foreign-backed corporations undermines domestic agricultural enterprises, shifting control from Indian farmers to multinational conglomerates. Small farmers, in particular, bear the brunt of rising input costs and decreasing market power.

This is not about democracy or civil rights—it is about strategic geopolitical manipulation. The objective is clear: to weaken India's internal social cohesion, influence policymaking, and create economic dependencies that serve Western interests.

The increasing presence of foreign-backed elements in India's farmer movements is no accident; it is a calculated strategy to erode India's sovereignty and dictate internal policies.

At the core of these complexities is a fundamental truth—Indian farmers require genuine policy support, direct financial aid, and reforms that prioritize their interests over corporate or geopolitical agendas.

Their protests should not be battlegrounds for international diplomacy but platforms for real agricultural change. India's agricultural sector must remain sovereign, with policies driven by national interests rather than foreign capital.

As Rajnath Singh's statement suggests, the time for vigilance is now. The Indian government must safeguard its agricultural sector from external influences and hidden financial agendas. Protecting Indian farmers is not just about agriculture—it is about preserving national sovereignty, dignity, and economic independence. The future of Indian farming must not be dictated by foreign interests but shaped by the resilience and determination of India's farmers.

Their fight is not just for today—it is for the generations that will inherit their land, knowledge, and legacy. Ensuring a self-reliant agricultural sector is essential to achieving the vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047.

India's farmers deserve genuine support, not foreign interference. The influence of external forces threatens national sovereignty, turning rightful protests into geopolitical tools.

As Rajnath Singh warns, vigilance is crucial. India must protect its agricultural sector from hidden agendas, ensuring that policies prioritise farmers' welfare over external manipulation, securing a self-reliant future.

(The writer is secretary general, Confederation of NGOs of Rural India and Member, PM-MSP Committee, Government of India. Views expressed are personal)

## Raisina dialogue 2025 convenes amid global uncertainty

The not-so-subtle changes in international diplomacy are quickly becoming the leitmotif within the first 50 days of President Trump's inauguration. While there have been some major embarrassments in the Oval Office—such as an ugly spat between President Zelenskyy of Ukraine and US Vice President JD Vance, as well as Vance's controversial statements in Europe regarding European politics—the explosion and deportation of several international students and academics for their ideological leanings, travel bans on multiple countries, and a semi-trade war have all contributed to destabilising the global order.

Amidst this backdrop, the Ministry of External Affairs hosted its prestigious annual foreign policy event, the Raisina Dialogue, this week.

The tone was set by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary, and the event's organisers, ORF, who underscored the constant evolution and reshaping of the global order. In his welcome note, EAM Jaishankar wrote: "In a world where relationships are no longer mutually exclusive and every nation seeks to benefit from the best the international order can offer, there is a constant flow of geopolitical convergences, alignments, turbulence, and transitions."

It is these shifts, with their continuities and discontinuities, that the Raisina Dialogue 2025 will deliberate upon. We are also living through an era of globalisation fatigue, where older partnerships are being remade and new ones forged.

The world is experiencing a wave of intense economic competition, where interdependence and de-risking struggle to find a balance. There are no lasting landing points, underscoring the continuing nature of competition. Since 2020, instability and conflicts around the globe have continued or escalated, whether in Ukraine, the Middle East, South Asia, or Africa. Divergent approaches toward climate action have created deep fissures.

Meanwhile, emerging technologies, particularly AI, have become a driving force in contemporary geopolitics, triggering a new tech race with the potential to shape the destinies of people and nations. The need to strive for peace, progress, prosperity, and security has never been greater."

The reshaping of the old world order was further emphasised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he sat down for a first-of-its-kind podcast with US computer scientist Lex Fridman. During the interview, he stated:

"We must also understand that the world has become one small village today. No country can thrive in isolation. Today, we all depend on one another. No one can make it far alone. That is why

you must learn to synchronise with everyone, and everyone else must learn to synchronise with you. That's the only way to propel this initiative forward."

Organisations like the United Nations came into being after the First World War, but they failed to evolve with the times, and this inability to adapt has sparked a global debate on their relevance in the 21st century.

PM Modi dedicated an entire segment of the conversation to his relationship with President Trump, sending a bold message to global leaders about their close affiliation. He said: "When he was shot during the recent campaign, I saw the same resilient and determined President Trump—the one who walked hand in hand with me in that stadium."

Even after being shot, he remained unwaveringly dedicated to America. His life was for his nation. His reflection showed his 'America First' spirit, just as I believe in 'India First'. That's why we connect so well."

These are the things that truly resonate. And I believe that, across the world, politicians are covered so much by the media that people mostly perceive each other through its lens. People rarely get the chance to truly meet or personally know one another, and perhaps third-party intervention is the real cause of tensions."

Regarding his negotiating skills in comparison to President Trump, PM Modi added: "It's his graciousness and humility—it is very kind of him to openly appreciate me on various occasions and in different contexts. But when it comes to negotiation, I always put my country's interests first."

That's why, in every forum, I speak up for India's interests—not to harm anyone, but in a positive manner. And because of that, no one takes offense. People know that if Modi is present, he will strongly advocate for these things. After all, the people of India have given me this responsibility. For me, my nation is my high command, and I will always honor their will."

It was no surprise that a top official from the Trump administration, the US Intelligence Chief, was in New Delhi this week.

She highlighted the personal bond between the two leaders and also spoke about the rise of the Islamic Caliphate while stressing the need to address the continued atrocities against religious minorities in Bangladesh.

New Delhi is pleased this week, but it will proceed with cautious optimism.

(The writer is a political analyst. Views expressed are personal)





# Opinion

FRIDAY, MARCH 21, 2025

## Customer is king

In the race to increase customers and balance sheet size, banks and NBFCs can't ignore service quality

**R**ESERVE BANK OF INDIA (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra has a good reason to worry about the quality of customer service at Indian banks. The number of complaints under the RBI's Integrated Ombudsman Scheme has increased at a compound annual growth rate of 50% over the past two years. Worse, 57% of the maintainable complaints last year required mediation or formal intervention by the RBI ombudsman. No wonder, the governor had to remind bankers at a recent event that it's not fair to treat customer complaints as a nuisance. The number of complaints could actually be much higher because there is a large section of people who don't have the wherewithal or aren't even aware of the processes to make complaints — something that the regulator, along with the industry, needs to address urgently. In fact, one simply has to browse through social media to see the large number of complaints against leading banks. These include repeated demand for know your customer (KYC) documents, and of course, mis-selling of products. And, as the RBI governor rightly pointed out, though all changes in address gets updated in the Central KYC Registry, most banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) have not enabled the same in their branches, leading to further harassment of customers.

As far as mis-selling goes, it is not just the RBI, even the insurance regulator and the finance minister have warned the industry during the past year. Former Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India chairperson Debashish Panda said a few months back that banks are a very useful channel, but a lot of ills had crept into the system. "You have to give the option to the customer. No mis-selling, no force-selling," he had added. In the race to add customers, especially through the online route, many seem to have lost the plot. More customers also mean more grievances — something that the financial sector needs to take into account. What is worrying is the reduction in the number of employees in public sector banks. While the government claims that 95% of the sanctioned clerical and subordinate positions have been filled, employee unions say banks are relying more on temporary workforce due to a manifold rise in workload. According to data, the clerical workforce between 2013 and 2024 shrank by 150,000. Private sector banks score here, as the number of employees has risen from 170,000 to 846,000 between 2011 and 2024.

There is no doubt that the workload of the banking sector has risen significantly, especially due to the government's two grand projects in the past decade — demonetisation and the Jan Dhan Yojana, which has a whopping 530 million account holders. Currently, the sector is grappling with re-KYC of accounts that were opened in 2014-2015. The race to add customers and increase balance sheet sizes has also led to non-adherence to RBI regulations. Even leading banks and NBFCs have erred and received a rap on the knuckles from the banking regulator. At a time when the government and the central bank are working overtime to increase financial inclusion — a good example being the proliferation in the number of Jan Dhan accounts and recent usage of central bank digital currency for government programmes — the banking industry as well as NBFCs and the fintech industry have to treat the customer as a stakeholder, and their complaints as catalysts for improvement. Service quality, after all, is increasingly becoming a key differentiator.

## Nike Killshot is the next Adidas Samba

NIKE HAS FINALLY found its Samba.

Everyone is searching for what comes after the Adidas sneaker that has been the hottest shoe for the past couple of years. Nike has delved into its archives for some serious contenders: the Killshot and Cortez. Both are ageing leftovers, and they have a good chance of picking up from where Adidas' viral shoe left off.

If Chief Executive Officer Elliott Hill can take advantage of the buzz, it could ease the pain of clearing out stale models like the Air Jordan 1 and the Dunk. The damage to revenue and profit from this clean-up exercise will be laid bare when the company reports third-quarter earnings on Thursday.

But Hill will have serious competition from his counterpart at Adidas, Bjorn Gulden, who won't give up the retro shoe crown without a fight, and is now encouraging fashionistas to dress for the boxing gym rather than the football terraces.

When it comes to revived styles, Adidas' sneakers, led by the Samba but also including the Handball Spezial and SL72, still dominate, bolstering the company's sales and helping it lift operating profit by €1 billion (\$1.1 billion) last year.

But Samba mania appears to have cooled. The craze peaked in March 2024, as per market intelligence company Trendalytics. Since then, Google searches for the Samba began to fall steadily, with Trendalytics ascribing a 70% likelihood that the trend will continue to decline over the next three months. It's a similar picture on TikTok.

Some Nike models, meanwhile, look to be in the ascendant, particularly the Killshot, a gum-soled tennis shoe, with a distinctive "Swoosh".

The Killshot is now enjoying stronger demand than the Samba, according to retail intelligence company EDITED. However, both lag Adidas' throwback running shoe, the SL72, a slight variation from shoes that took inspiration from football fans.

Another wild card is Vans' checkerboard skate shoes, which have faded since their heyday a decade ago. These have been building on TikTok and popping up again in real life, but have yet to enjoy broad adoption. Vans sales have improved over the past year, although they are still falling.

As well as producing the Cortez in a wide variety of colours, last year Nike introduced a premium version of the Killshot. Low-rise styles typically sell for about \$100, compared with around \$200 for high-end basketball, running and football shoes, and so have lower margins, according to David Swartz, analyst at Morningstar. But Nike pumping out the more popular models could cushion the blow from the pull-back from over-exposed styles.

As for Vans, last year VF appointed Sun Choe as brand president. The former chief product officer of Lululemon Athletica has already taken a leaf out of the Adidas playbook, with collaborations with Proenza Schouler, for example. But Adidas isn't letting go of its lead. The company is continuing to push the SL72, according to EDITED's data, part of a broader move into fashionable running. It's now also managing the supply of Sambas into some markets so that they don't become saturated.

Last year, Gulden delayed the relaunch of the Superstar, because there was so much interest in the Samba. He's now moving ahead, with a raft of collaborations, including with Pharrell Williams. The executive, who displays a merchant's instinct for what is hot, is pushing sneaker boundaries in other ways too, with models that sit low on the ankle and have very slim soles, such as the Japan, Tokyo, and Taekwondo, and even a high-top boxing shoe. The Taekwondo, leading the "barefoot" trend, was relaunched last year, and is gaining particular traction according to EDITED.

Ultimately, Nike's recovery depends on developing must-have performance shoes that have the power to not only be hits on the field or track, but part of everyday wardrobes too. After all, Nike and Adidas are fashion brands as well as sports-wear companies, something that Gulden clearly understands.

Given that products can take 18 months from design to delivery to stores, new Nike blockbusters could be some ways off. For Hill, finding the next viral sneaker, before consumers' obsession with archive styles dissipates, is a useful interlude.



ANDREA FELSTED

Bloomberg

## HEALTHCARE FOR ALL

Microsoft ex-CEO Bill Gates

India is not just building for itself, it is creating solutions that have the potential to transform global health and development



## INTERVENTION IN UKRAINE

MEDIATION EXPOSES LIMITATIONS OF A TRANSACTIONAL APPROACH TO RESOLVING GLOBAL CONFLICTS

# Trump's ceasefire bet

HARSH V PANT  
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defence — may prove to be a strategic boon, reducing reliance on Washington. In the immediate future, Europe's security architecture remains ill-equipped to fill the potential void left by America's shifting stance. Ukraine, in particular, faces significant short-term challenges as European military contributions, even if enhanced, cannot fully compensate for American military, economic, and strategic support.

With the Trump presidency having made it abundantly clear that Europe's security dependence on the US must change, the road to carving its own security arc — pan-European security framework — is a long one for the latter. The Trump administration's proposal of a mineral deal with Ukraine whereby Washington increases its stakes with Kiev signals a sharp pivot, transforming security assistance into an overly mercantile arrangement that prioritises American strategic and financial interests.

Since his presidential campaign, Trump has consistently emphasised the need for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine, playing up his ability to resolve the conflict in 24 hours. More than 50 days into his presidency, his administration's achievements on the front have been sobering, reflecting the fraught

nature of a continental war that has dragged on for more than three years. Yet, the limited ceasefire Trump secured — which hinges on a conditional agreement preventing either Ukraine or Russia from targeting each other's energy infrastructure — may be a good start, especially as the next round of talks between Moscow and Washington is slated to take place in the next few days.

Trump's emphasis on getting a limited ceasefire may not serve the larger purpose of a complete halt to war but rather a tactical pause that allows both sides to take confidence-building measures, rebuild capacities, improve infrastructure, and, perhaps, regroup. While this agreement may ensure that Ukraine's power grid remains intact, it comes post-winter when energy demands may have dwindled. The deal, while heralded by Trump as a diplomatic breakthrough, remains narrow in scope and to establish a framework for a sustainable peace process.

If Trump's handling of West Asia is any template, his administration's first instinct is to offer an olive branch or a face-saving exit from conflict. However, when negotiations stall, it may be quick to adopt a more aggressive posture. This pattern is evident in the administra-

**As things stand, the limited ceasefire may be a good first step but it does not prevent further military engagements beyond energy infrastructure**

tion's engagement with Iran — where an initial diplomatic overture was rebuffed by Tehran, leading to a subsequent hard-line response, including coordinated strikes in Yemen alongside Israel's attacks in Gaza. The near-simultaneous bombings of Gaza and Houthi rebel positions demonstrate this shift from diplomacy to forceful intervention. If necessary, it remains to be seen whether the initial peace overture to Moscow — if not met by steps that ensure peace — draws an uncompromising posture against Russia from the US. Moreover, in Russia, Trump faces a vastly different challenge than with Iran. Moscow remains a nuclear-armed power with a comparatively small but resilient energy-driven economy. Unlike Tehran or non-state actors like Hamas, Russia's strategic calculus cannot be easily altered through economic or military pressure alone. Most of all, Trump's options to retaliate against Russia remains limited in terms of economic sanctions. Perhaps for the same reason, the limited ceasefire negotiated by Trump fails to treat Ukraine and Russia as equal stakeholders. Moscow continues to play the hard ball.

As things stand, the limited ceasefire may be a good first step but it does not prevent further military engagements beyond energy infrastructure, leaving room for continued hostilities.

In some ways, Trump's mediation efforts — while positioned as groundbreaking — expose the limitations of his administration's transactional approach to resolving global conflicts. Whether this ceasefire serves as a stepping stone toward a broader resolution or merely a tactical manoeuvre remains to be seen. However, one thing is certain: the future of European security is being rewritten, and America's role in shaping it is no longer as predictable as it once was.

# Cities designed as air-conditioned hell

K YATISH RAJAWAT

Founder, Centre for Innovation in Public Policy



**WITH SOARING TEMPERATURES** across the country, India is witnessing an early heatwave and a scorching summer ahead. Our glass-covered concrete buildings will become heat traps, and rising energy consumption will add another layer of pollution in urban centres. This is not a one-off summer. The average summer temperature is increasing steadily every year, while rain has become a sporadic instance of cloud bursts. Despite the rapidly rising extreme climate reality, architects, builders, and even city planners continue to make and encourage heat traps in the form of glass-façade-covered offices across the country.

CXOs complain about low summer attendance, and it's not the vacation effect. Glass-covered offices are fundamentally unsuited for Indian climates. They allow heat to be trapped inside, designed to block natural light and air. The heat inside the building is thrown outside using large energy-guzzling air conditioning plants or diesel generators during power outages. Air conditioning recirculates the same air again and again, and the lack of fresh air inside offices makes the occupants anxious and irritable all through the day. This is not a new revelation.

In the early 1940s, American novelist Henry Miller warned of an "air-conditioned nightmare" upon his visit to the US. Today, Indian cities — Delhi, Gurugram, Mumbai, Bengaluru — have embraced this nightmare, now trapped in an endless loop of cooling our glass buildings that heat our streets. We have designed our way into

an air-conditioned hell for our cities. It's increasingly clear that modern architecture in Indian cities is less about human comfort and more about shiny, extravagant glass façades and towering aesthetics. Glass façades, though visually appealing, have become our Achilles' heel, driving our energy consumption sky-high. Research by the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, demonstrates that glass-clad buildings can consume nearly 10 times more energy than conventional buildings, primarily due to their dependence on air conditioning.

Our cities' skylines, studded with glass towers, are turning into heat islands, trapping heat during the day, throwing hot air out through air conditioning, and radiating it at night, perpetuating an endless cycle. Buildings in Gurugram and Delhi are particularly emblematic of this phenomenon. These structures were never designed with the tropical Indian climate in mind, and were copied blindly from Western templates.

Tara Hipwood of Northumbria University points to the emergence of "deep-plan" buildings — vast, chunky structures that discard courtyards and natural air circulation in favour of large, mechanically ventilated spaces. Architects now design with air conditioning assumed as a given rather than a luxury. Hence, buildings become these deep caves without any natural

air circulation.

Yet, all is not lost. The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Jodhpur, campus, designed by Sanjay Prakash of Studio for Habitat Futures (SHIFT), provides a compelling alternative. SHIFT has created buildings that remain cool without air-conditioning in a region known for scorching summer temperatures. By employing thermal labyrinthine beneath buildings to pre-cool incoming air, utilising earthen berms to protect structures from harsh winds, and designing north-south oriented buildings to reduce heat gain, SHIFT demonstrates that passive cooling strategies are feasible and highly effective.

Locally-sourced Jodhpur stone, extensive shading, and ecological landscaping further enhance cooling, illustrating a path from mechanical dependency.

The government's "Guidelines on Use of Glass in Buildings: Human Safety" mentions the necessity of energy-efficient designs and carefully selecting glass materials. Yet these guidelines are mere suggestions rather than enforced regulations. The glass façade industry lobby continues to offer multiple glazing options in the name of climate control.

Sustainable solutions have long existed. Renowned Malaysian architect Ken Yeang and Singapore's WOHA Architects have consistently demon-

strated that comfort can coexist with sustainability. Yeang integrates ecological considerations directly into his buildings, using shading and green layers to reduce heat gain, while WOHA emphasises vertical greenery and passive cooling techniques. Tan Lok Mun, with the S11 House in Malaysia, has proven that buildings in humid tropical climates can thrive without extreme reliance on air conditioning.

The heart of the issue lies in reuniting architectural design with environmental engineering. We should ignore research sponsored by glass lobbies that advocate choosing the right glass and not sustainable design and the right materials.

Our addition to glass façade and air conditioning has allowed architects and developers to bypass climate-responsive design. We have inadvertently created spaces hostile to human occupancy without mechanical cooling. Yet, examples like IIT Jodhpur show a viable path forward. Cities must embrace stricter building codes mandating climate-responsive designs, integrate passive cooling techniques, and fundamentally rethink the relationship between architecture, climate, and energy. It's time for building codes to be defined as per the regional climate requirements, and not be one code from Ladakh to Lucknow.

Unless our cities break free from their addiction to glass façades and unrestrained air conditioning, our urban dream risks descending into a permanent nightmare — an air-conditioned hell we pay dearly for, both environmentally and economically.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Space odyssey

The entire world is overwhelmed with relief at the culmination of the remarkable journey undergone by astronaut Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore, who recently returned from the International Space Station (ISS) after an extended 286-day stay. Their mission was delayed due to issues with their spacecraft, showcasing the complexity and unpredictability of space travel. Despite the challenges,

their extended stay was not unprecedented. The ISS, continuously occupied for nearly 25 years, has hosted astronauts from around the world conducting vital scientific experiments in space. Their return highlights the evolving nature of space exploration. As private companies like SpaceX and Boeing increasingly take on roles traditionally handled by National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the future of space travel is shifting. It's inspiring to

see how astronauts and private firms are working together to push the boundaries of space exploration. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### The peace mirage

Apropos of "Academic ceasefire" (FE, March 20), Donald Trump's intervention to bring an end to the Ukraine war may bear only short-term fruits. Trump thinks that the war will come to an end by just sloppily ordering the Ukrainian President and

pressuring the nation economically. A deep-rooted animosity exists between Ukraine and Russia since the Crimean annexation, and this has persisted with the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territories. The willingness of both the countries to have peace talks across the table with neutral country mediation may be a far-fetched hope after all. —HR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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## IN THE LIMELIGHT

A screengrab of Monica Barbaro as Joan Baez and Timothee Chalamet as Bob Dylan in *A Complete Unknown*.

# On Joan Baez, the woman who made a legend and a muse of Bob Dylan

A look at the woman who propelled the Nobel Prize laureate to stardom, her place in Western songwriting history, and her mingling of storytelling and emotion that cemented her status regardless of Dylan's legacy or approval

Nitika Francis

As the last leg of the discussion surrounding the 97th Academy Awards runs its course, James Mangold's biopic *A Complete Unknown* continues to spark conversation, much like the man it based on, revolutionary songwriter and Nobel Prize laureate Bob Dylan.

Timothee Chalamet, a charmer, rising above the ranks of a dwindling Hollywood in desperate need of its next movie star, carried the film with his polarising depiction of Dylan. His performance roused mixed reviews and a coveted Oscar nomination for Best Actor (losing to Adrien Brody's performance in *The Brutalist*). Chalamet's Dylan was lauded as accurate in some ways (his musical renditions of Dylan's hits) and gimmicky in others (his one-note impression of the 60's Dylan accent).

While Chalamet's reprisal of Bob Dylan in the film fell in line with all the other iconic roles he has portrayed so far, the role that proved itself a showstopper however, garnering a Best Supporting Actress nomination, was Monica Barbaro's iteration of Dylan's tumultuous lover, and legend in the folk music revivalist movement, Joan Baez.

## The tradition of Western songwriting

The trade of songwriting has long relied on two key elements: storytelling and human emotion. The lyrics of popular Western music in the 21st century tend to use details to set scenes the audience is likely to have never been a part of (for example, 'dancing barefoot on the grass' in Ed Sheeran's 'Perfect', Shakespearean parties and ballgowns in Taylor Swift's 'Love Story'). This feature stems from the tradition of cowboy songs sung around campfires in 19th century Texas, whose narrative-oriented lyrics borrowed from

traditional European folk ballads.

These cowboy songs were published in songbooks, with *Songs of the Cowboys* by N. Howard 'Jack' Thorp being the first ever book of Western music, at the turn of the 20th century. These books were unaccompanied by notations or any musical structure, which indicates an emphasis on the story rather than the means of conveying it.

Eventually, songs began to embody a variety of experiences and became vessels for emotion as well. A culture of rural African-American Blues music began to develop simultaneously with cowboy songs. This music features balladistic chords, yells, emotionally-charged singing, which, over time, combined with the complex narratives of folk music to form the foundations of Western popular music.

## The role of the muse

As celebrity culture began to take shape in the mid-to-late 20th century, the confessional songwriting of Western music found itself warped with the persona of its writers. Even the biggest artists of this era, The Beatles, let go of their easily relatable, feeling-heavy love songs from the early 1960s and gave way to documentations of their escapades with certain substances ('Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'), Paul McCartney's sincerity, John Lennon's activism, George Harrison's spirituality, and Ringo Starr's absurdism found their place in the lyrics of their music.

And so, their very public love lives also clung onto their lyrics. Harrison's wife, Pattie Boyd, is famously associated with The Beatles' 'Something', widely regarded as one of the greatest love songs of all time. She is also the subject of Harrison's then-buddy Eric Clapton's 'Wonderful Tonight', which is also regarded as one of the greatest love songs.

These very public affairs were fodder for much sensation and folklore.

Boyd is a prominent example of a musician's muse. Similarly, Courtney Love came to be known as Kurt Cobain's muse, and Carrie Fisher Paul Simon's. Songwriting became a means of airing dirty laundry, a means of humanising and isolating the celebrity behind the lyrics.

Bob Dylan had a slew of muses himself. His ex-wife Sara Lownds (in 'Sara'), 60's it-girl Edie Sedgwick ('Like a Rolling Stone'), and Joan Baez. But Baez was never one to let the last word go.

## Against all odds

Joan Baez is an artist who cannot be flattened to a mere muse or a side character in Dylan's rise to fame. *A Complete Unknown* depicts Baez's integral role in Dylan's rise to fame, but brushes her to the sidelines once Dylan blows up, reserving all its space for his idiosyncrasies. Her presence in the history of Western music is far more pronounced than her on-and-off love and now-and-then collaborations with Bob Dylan. His lines from 'She Belongs To Me', describe this best: "She never stumbles / she's got no place to fall / She's nobody's child / the law can't touch her at all". While Dylan pulled crowds with his protest music ('Blowin' in the Wind') in the early 60s but eventually moved away from such subject matters, Baez continued lending her operatic vocals and razor-sharp pen for the movement.

From opening organisations, teaching non-violent protest to getting arrested multiple times in the 60s for her participation in anti-war marches, Baez never stopped showing up, risking her security, and performing music for those who she believed to be disadvantaged and targeted. But her music undoubtedly forayed into her personal life, and much to her audience's pleasure, Dylan. Her

songwriting magnum opus, 'Diamonds and Rust', of its eponymous 1975 album, has a meta quality to it, showing an awareness of how invested the listener would be in Bob Dylan as a muse.

She lyrically asserts herself as a catalyst to Dylan's rise to stardom with sarcasm (You came onto the scene/ already a legend). This refers to her covering his earlier songs, such as the seminal 'Blowin' in the Wind', and inviting him onstage at various folk music festivals, where she used her established fame to draw ears to Dylan's tunes. Where Dylan's storytelling summarises, Baez's elaborates. While the central idea of 'Diamonds and Rust' is Dylan's dismissal of her and her writing, the primary emotion is the pain that 10 years of memories can bring.

"As I remember, your eyes were bluer than robin's eggs / my poetry was lousy, you said". These lines show Baez's affinity to snarkiness, inserting an undeniably "lousy" comparison of Dylan's eyes to robins' eggs to assure Dylan and the listener that she is talented enough to determine the quality of her writing without his approval.

She has, to this day, maintained this attitude towards Dylan, and has never let his towering success undermine her idea of who she is. She expressed positive sentiments about Monica Barbaro's depiction of her in the film, saying this about her role: "When he walked into the room, he took up all the oxygen. And so my part was always diminished in his presence. And in that sense the film is accurate."

While *A Complete Unknown* barely scratches the surface of Joan Baez as a person, and a writer, it captures her unwavering belief in herself and her need to assert her status regardless of who she confronts. This can be seen in her retorts to Chalamet as Dylan, as she tells the legend to his face, "You're full of s\*\*\*".

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
Upendran

"Sujatha is crazy, I tell you."  
"What did she do this time?"  
"Nothing, really. But she thinks she knows everything. Today she was trying to convince me that there is a difference in meaning between 'Are you going to Madras tomorrow?' and 'You're going to Madras tomorrow, aren't you?'."

"She's right, you know."  
"What? You mean there is a difference in meaning?"

"Yes, there is. You see, when I ask you 'Are you going to Madras tomorrow?', I want you to give me an answer."

"You want me to say 'yes' or 'no'?"  
"That's correct. I want you to answer because I'm not really sure if you're going to Madras or not."

"But when you ask, 'You're going to Madras, aren't you?', don't you expect an answer?"

"Not really. 'You're going to Madras, aren't you?' isn't really a question. It may sound like a question, but it's not. When I ask you that, all I'm doing is confirming that you are indeed leaving for Madras tomorrow."

"What you're saying is, you already know I'm leaving for Madras tomorrow and you're asking just to check?"

"Exactly! I'll give you another example. Suppose I say, 'It's a nice day, isn't it?', I don't expect you to say, 'No, it isn't', I expect you to agree with me..."

"...that it is a beautiful day."

"That's right."  
"So if I say, 'My girl friend is very beautiful, isn't she?', I am asking you to agree that my girl friend is really beautiful."

"Yes. Shall we change the subject?"  
"If you want to. So, did you play tennis yesterday?"

"Yes, we played a couple of games."  
"A couple! Only two games! Is that all?"

"I played several games actually. You see, in informal situations, the word 'couple' can mean 'several'. For example, although there was a bandh, a couple of shops remained open."

"Meaning there were more than two shops open."

"There were several shops open."  
"I see. Well, in that case, I have a couple of things to do. First of all, I have to apologise to Sujatha and then..."

Published in *The Hindu* on November 7, 1995.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

## The 2025 Indian Premier League will kick off on March 22. A quiz on the tournament

Soorya Prakash, N

## QUESTION 1

Which umpire has stood as an on-field umpire in the last six consecutive finals?

## QUESTION 2

Which two umpires have stood as on-field umpires in most number of matches in IPL history?

## QUESTION 3

Who has officiated as a match referee in the most number of IPL finals?

## QUESTION 4

Which overseas player has won the most IPL titles?

## QUESTION 5

Which overseas player has won

the IPL title playing for two franchisees?

## QUESTION 6

Who holds the record for playing for multiple teams in the IPL?

## QUESTION 7

Which Indian player holds the record for playing for different teams in the IPL?

## QUESTION 8

Who is the only player to have won the Player of the Final award despite ending up on the losing side?

## QUESTION 9

Who is the only player to have won both the Orange Cap and the Emerging Player of the Year award in the same edition of the IPL?



## Visual question:

This player is the only one to have won both the Purple Cap and Player of the Series award in the same edition of the IPL. He also took a hat-trick in the same edition. Name him. PTI

## Questions and Answers to the previous

day's daily quiz: 1. This film directed by Puttanna Kanagal is said to have become the first film to complete 100 days in three theatres in Bengaluru. **Ans: Nagarahavu**

2. This Kannada actor was the first to win a National Film Award for Best Actor. **Ans: M.V. Vasudeva Rao**

3. This actor-producer is known as the first woman producer in the history of Kannada cinema. **Ans: M.V. Rajamma**

4. This 2006 film starring Ganesh was the first Kannada film to cross the ₹50 crore box office collection mark. **Ans: Mungaru Male**

5. This 2022 film became the highest-grossing Kannada film of all time. **Ans: KGF Chapter 2**

6. The only Dadashah Phalke Awardee in Kannada cinema. **Ans: Dr. Rajkumar**

Visual: Identify the director who directed this 1977 film which had the distinction of being shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. **Ans: Girish Kasaravalli; Ghatashradha**  
Early Birds: Erfanally Osmanny| Tom Alan Faith| C. Saravanan| Sadhan. K Panda| Varghese Joseph

## Word of the day

## Presage:

a foreboding about what is about to happen; a sign of something about to happen; indicate, as with a sign or an omen

**Synonyms:** omen, bode, forecast, foreshadow, foretell, portend, predict, prefigure

**Usage:** She had a strong presage that he would get into an accident if he left the house.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/presagepro

## International Phonetic

Alphabet: /ˈpreɪsɪdʒ/, /ˈpɪːsɪdʒ/

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## SCIENCE

# The TB crisis and women: why gender issues matters more than ever

Gender differences and inequalities play a critical role in how people access and receive TB-related services in the public and private sectors, in India. Women find themselves squeezed between their roles at home and at work. It takes time, prolonged care and money to treat TB and many women have neither

## WORLD TB DAY

Rindu Shajan Perappadan

**"I** was 24 when I was diagnosed with MDR-TB. The two-years spent in recovery, from 2021 to 2023, was a time when COVID-19 made even the smallest task a logistics nightmare. However, with help from my parents and medical staff, sustained treatment and care was possible," says Akshata Acharya, an MDR-TB survivor from Maharashtra. "But wasn't logistics or access to treatment and good nutrition that was a challenge; for me, hurdles came in the form of my skin discoloration and becoming physically weak, which made going out an impossible task – it was the mental toll that eclipsed my life. Negative comments about my changed physical appearance, and advice from a grassroots healthcare worker to keep the disease 'hidden' opened my eyes to the discrimination and disparities that the disease brings along."

Ms. Acharya adds, "As an actor, writer, and director, TB took away two years of my life. But then, I was more fortunate than some other TB patients. I remember a woman who, after being diagnosed with TB, was sacked from her job (she worked as a house help); also, her family abandoned her. TB I learnt it can be very isolating and more so if you are a woman."

## Under-diagnosis, finances

Sadly, Ms. Acharya's is not an isolated or stray case. Gender differences and inequalities play a critical role in how people access and receive TB-related services in the public and private sectors in India. The Union Health Ministry's India TB Report 2023 indicates that men are more affected by TB compared to women. This higher risk of men developing TB could be attributed to risk factors including smoking and the use of intravenous drugs. Also, men are more likely to be in occupations that expose them to TB, such as mining, quarrying, metals, and construction industries. However, in India, women face challenges such as underdiagnosis and financial barriers to accessing treatment.

A recently published paper titled 'Women and tuberculosis care in India: a scoping review' notes that while the variables that impacted women in the past, particularly gender roles and norms, seem to be waning over time, they cannot be ignored in the present. The focus that the government of India is placing on gender equity serves as a reminder that

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In India, women face challenges such as under-diagnosis and financial barriers while accessing treatment. File photograph used for representational purposes

only THE HINDU

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these problems are still relevant for TB elimination efforts among women.

The author of the paper, Janmejaya Samal, explained that studies spanning 20 years (2004 to 2024) were reviewed to understand the changes, if any, around women and TB care in India. "The draft national strategic plan of India for TB 2017-2025 has estimated that about 3 million women would be affected by TB every year, and TB is one of the top 5 leading causes of death among adult women globally," he said. He added that women in India deal with multiple

hurdles, including stigma, lack of health-seeking behaviour and poverty, when it comes to accessing diagnosis, treatment, and care for TB.

"Normalisation of symptoms, less prioritisation, and the role of caregiver in the family put women in a compromised state and need focused attention. This situation remains unchanged after COVID," added Mr. Samal.

Public health specialist Chapal Mehra notes that at the grassroots level, women have multi-layered problems when it comes to accessing medical care. "Across India there are multiple cases of women being abandoned when diagnosed with TB; there are cases of symptoms not being attended to and the condition being allowed to worsen; women also are prone to stopping treatment mid-way when they feel that symptoms have waned," he said.

Speaking about the plight of women who do manage to access diagnosis and treatment, Mr. Mehra said that if society and family do not accept and support women diagnosed with TB, they are unlikely to disclose the condition. "Many suffer, knowing that disclosing the disease

**An estimated 331,000 deaths occurred due to TB in 2022, representing 23 deaths per 100,000 population. India accounts for a significant portion of the world's TB cases, with 27% of the global incidence. Also, 2.5% of new cases and 13% of previously treated cases are estimated to be drug-resistant and 2% of patients are estimated to be HIV positive.**

would result in a loss of income. The pressure of housework and little social support are the two major hurdles that we often witness. We have also seen that when women lose their partners to TB, families often abandon them, and they are also plagued by the fear of passing on the disease to their children," he added. NGOs working in this field say that Centre and states must ensure that benefit schemes are implemented in a robust manner with essential medicines and nutritional support reaching the poorest.

## India's targets

India has set itself a target of eliminating TB by 2025. An estimated 331,000 deaths occurred due to TB in 2022, representing 23 deaths per 100,000 population. India accounts for a significant portion of the world's TB cases, with 27% of the global incidence. Also, 2.5% of new cases and 13% of previously treated cases are estimated to be drug-resistant TB (DR-TB), and approximately 2% of TB patients are

estimated to be HIV positive.

In 2020, the Revised National Tuberculosis Control Programme (RNTCP) was renamed the National TB Elimination Program (NTEP) to emphasise the resolve of the government of India to eliminate TB in India by 2025, five years ahead of the global targets of 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets regarding TB (baseline 2015) include an 80% reduction in incidence. The NTEP focuses on early detection, effective treatment, and prevention. The Union Health Ministry runs targeted programmes for elimination, including Nikshay Poshan Yojana, under which it provides a direct benefit transfer of ₹1,000 each month to TB patients for the entire duration of their treatment, and the Pradhan Mantri TB Mukh Bharat Abhiyan, a first-of-its-kind initiative to provide additional nutritional support to those on TB treatment, through contributions from the community, including individuals and organisations. Meanwhile, the India TB Report 2023 notes that for the government, prevention is one of the four critical pillars of India's fight against TB.

"India is running several initiatives, including identifying technical and administrative challenges faced by states/UT and providing course correction, introducing direct benefit transfer to beneficiary accounts, partnerships for private sector engagement and advocacy, communication and social mobilisation, including community engagement to tackle TB," said a senior Health Ministry official.

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## THE GIST

Post treatment women face the challenge of skin discoloration and weakness, which makes a return to a routine very difficult. "It was the mental toll that eclipsed my life. Negative comments about my appearance exposed me to the discrimination that the disease brings with it"

Women in India deal with multiple hurdles, including stigma, lack of health-seeking behaviour and poverty. 'Normalisation of symptoms, less prioritisation, and the role of caregiver in the family put women in a compromised state'

'Across India there are multiple cases of women being abandoned when diagnosed with TB; there are cases of symptoms not being attended to and the condition being allowed to worsen; women also are prone to stopping treatment midway when they feel that symptoms have waned'

## HUMERUS



## Engaged communities are key to ending TB

Chapal Mehra  
Vashita Madan

**I**t's World TB Day again on March 24 and despite bold claims tuberculosis (TB) remains one of the most pressing global health challenges, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities. Despite being preventable and treatable, TB continues to take a significant toll on humanity. According to the World Health Organization's Global Tuberculosis Report 2024, an estimated 10.8 million people developed active TB in 2023, resulting in approximately 1.25 million deaths worldwide. While medical advancements in TB treatment and diagnosis play a crucial role, they alone cannot eliminate TB. What we need is the power of community engagement to ensure TB prevention, timely diagnosis, treatment adherence, and public awareness. The health system forgets that TB is not a medical condition alone; it exists and is fought in a social context and within families and communities. This makes active community participation a fundamental part of an effective TB response.

So what does community engagement in TB care mean? It involves those most impacted – TB affected, survivors, families, communities and grassroots organisations. Their participation is essential at multiple levels – in co-designing care models, shaping awareness campaigns, and creating treatment support pro-



TB exists and is fought in a social context and within families and communities. Photograph used for representational purposes only

grams that address both the medical and also the social and economic barriers in TB care.

If we integrate the lived experiences of those affected by TB into our healthcare response, communities can accurately define gaps, challenges and also what kind of support systems those affected need, what messages resonate with them, and how best to design services to ensure equitable access to care. The role of communities is not just to contribute ideas but also to actively participate in TB care itself. Survivors, for instance, can play a key role in sensitising healthcare workers and volunteers, helping them understand the lived realities of those affected.

**Community engagement key** Beyond improving care access, community engagement also plays a crucial role in reducing TB-related stigma. Stigma remains one of the biggest barriers

to early diagnosis and treatment, as fear of discrimination often discourages affected individuals from seeking medical help or speaking about their experiences. Survivor-led advocacy and family and community-driven narratives can transform public perceptions of TB. Despite the clear benefits, meaningful community involvement in TB policy remains absent. Individuals affected by TB are excluded from advocacy, policymaking, and communication efforts due to persistent stigma. Additionally, national TB programmes often find it difficult to integrate community members into their medicalised, expert-led frameworks.

Often, community participation is reduced to tokenism, where engagement is sought only for validation rather than equal partnership. Also, without adequate funding and institutional support, grassroots organisations struggle to create impact and bring about long-term change. Many TB programmes still operate within a rigid, top-down structure, where policies are created without meaningful input from the communities they aim to serve. This disconnect weakens effectiveness and perpetuates barriers to care.

## Where the model has worked

There are notable examples where community-driven initiatives have successfully demonstrated the power of community engagement. In India, Survivors Against TB (SATB), India's first survivor-led advocacy movement, has effectively

raised and advocated for patient rights, policy changes, nutritional and mental health support, and public awareness. In South Africa, the Desmond Tutu TB Centre has combined research, community participation, and policy advocacy, with innovative programs like the 'Kick TB' campaign, which uses soccer to educate schoolchildren about TB. These initiatives prove that when communities are given leadership roles, they can drive sustainable change.

The fight against TB requires a shift in mindset that puts those affected first, before numbers. This is a difficult transition. Medical interventions alone will not eliminate TB. By placing those affected at the center of TB policy, care provision, and research, we can move away from tokenism and towards substantively redefining the TB care paradigm, making it empathetic, equitable, and person-centered.

(Chapal Mehra is a public health specialist and the convener of Survivors Against TB (SATB), a collective of survivors, advocates, and experts working on TB and related comorbidities. Vashita Madan is the communications lead with SATB. [chapal.mehra@gmail.com](mailto:chapal.mehra@gmail.com))

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# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Cost of procuring advanced towed artillery gun systems**

**7,000**

In ₹ crore. The Cabinet Committee on Security has approved a mega deal to procure advanced towed artillery gun system for the Indian Army at ₹7,000 crore, marking a major step in the indigenous manufacturing of such howitzers. **PH**

**Number of refunds made for faulty toll collections in 2024**

**12.55**

In lakh numbers. The government said 12.55 lakh refunds were made in 2024 for faulty toll collections on National Highways. Union Minister Nitin Gadkari said penalties of more than ₹2 crore have been levied on user fee collecting agencies. **PH**

**Number of journalists who died due to COVID-19 in Odisha**

**50**

Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi on Thursday informed that 50 journalists died due to COVID-19 in the State. Replying to a question by BJD legislator Souvic Biswal, Mr. Majhi said ex gratia of ₹15 lakh each was given to the next of kin of 49 journalists. **PH**

**Houses which got illegal construction notices in Sambhal**

**33**

A mosque and 33 houses have been sent notices alleging illegal construction on municipal land in the Waris Nagar area of Chandaus in Sambhal. The action came after a complaint was lodged, which led to an inspection by the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police. **PH**

**Sweden's investment in school security after a mass shooting**

**30**

In \$ million. Sweden's government said that it would be dedicating 300 million kronor (\$30 million) for school security measures, following the country's worst mass shooting at an education centre last month. **AP**

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## How do habitual offender laws discriminate?

How are habitual offenders deemed so? What is the history behind denotified and nomadic tribes being seen as 'criminal tribes'? Why are States such as Gujarat not keen to repeal the habitual offender laws? Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+Bu7senHpQdhlODg1>

## EXPLAINER

Abhinav Lakshman

## The story so far:

**M**onths after the Supreme Court of India questioned the need for decade-old laws that have classified a section of criminals as "habitual offenders" across India, the Government of India has revealed in Parliament that such laws continue to operate in as many as 14 States and Union Territories.

## What has the SC said about the matter in the past?

In October last year, while deciding a matter on caste discrimination within Indian jails, the Supreme Court of India had called into question the very basis of the "habitual offender" classification, noting it was "constitutionally suspect" and used to "target members of denotified tribes".

The recent information revealed in the Lok Sabha on March 11 by the Union Social Justice Ministry showed that some States like Gujarat have argued for the continuation of the law given that the "intent" of its use is not suspect, while others are in the process of discontinuing its application, like Punjab. States like Haryana have already repealed it. The government has said that the Union Ministry of Home Affairs communicates with States on these laws and the status of their repealing from time to time.

## What is the origin of the 'habitual offender' classification?

According to the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic tribes headed by Bhiku Ramji Idare, which submitted its report in 2017, the beginning of "criminalising" communities in India began with Regulation XXII of 1793, which gave magistrates "summary powers" to put to work or imprison certain communities or tribes based on suspicion alone. The Indian Penal Code of 1860 and the Criminal Procedure Code of 1861 further set up the mechanism to maintain a register of "dacoits and thugs", before culminating it in the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. It was through this Act, the Idare Commission notes, that "the phrase 'criminal tribe' was first concocted, and the system of registration began". The law provided for "a gang, a tribe, or a class of people" to be declared criminal, and was strengthened throughout the next few decades. In 1924, the law was applied to all of colonial India which increased the number of communities declared "criminal" exponentially, according to the Idare report.

Just as the Constitution of India was being adopted, the government's Criminal Tribes Act Enquiry Committee Report (1949-50) was published, which recommended the repealing of the CTA, and encouraged "central legislation applicable to all habitual offenders without any distinction based on caste, creed, or birth". In 1952, based on this report, the Government of India repealed all criminal tribes laws across the country, leaving the communities notified under these laws to be classified as "denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic" (DNT, NT, SNT) tribes.

By this time, States had already started enacting "habitual offender" laws across the country, such as the Madras Restriction of Habitual Offenders Act, 1948, which was extended to Delhi in 1951. Rajasthan passed a similar law in 1953, and over the next two decades more



**Criminal by 'habit'** Members of various denotified tribes take an oath during the first conference of Itinerant People's Rights Organisation in 2012. FILE PHOTO

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States – Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Karnataka, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, etc. – adopted laws on "habitual offenders". All of them moved away from the premise of classifying communities as "prone to crime", by defining a "habitual offender" in terms of the convictions they have had.

However, even though the CTA Enquiry Report had led to the reframing of habitual offender laws, by centering individuals over communities, more than a decade later, when the Lokur Committee in 1965 was looking at denotified tribes, it saw them as communities with an "anti-social heritage". Some specific communities were even described as having an "affinity for crime".

## What were some of the crimes which made one a 'habitual offender'?

Habitual offender laws have a schedule of crimes for which the classification could be invoked. Across States, this included crimes like "being a thug", "belonging to a gang of dacoits", "living on the earnings of prostitution", and half-a-dozen entries on "lurking".

Registers were maintained, and rules and regulations were formulated by States on how 'habitual offenders' were to be treated within prisons, leading to jail manuals across the country adopting the language of "habitual offenders", with some of them explicitly allowing for erstwhile "criminal tribe" community members to be designated as "habitual offenders" (for example in Rajasthan). But in 1998, the custodial death of Budhan Sabar, a member of a denotified community in West Bengal, led to national outrage over the concept of "habitual offenders" and how it was being used by the police.

## When did change start?

From the outrage over Mr. Sabar's death, an advocacy group was formed known as the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG) by writers Mahawadev Devi and G.N. Dewy, who also spearheaded the launching of a magazine named after Budhan, which wrote on issues faced by these communities. The

DNT-RAG studied the conditions of denotified tribes and prepared a report.

In 1998, the DNT-RAG wrote to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in India and the United Nations Secretary General, noting that even though the CTA had been repealed, "the police as well as the general public continue to treat most of these unfortunate communities as 'born criminals' and 'habitual criminals'", citing the habitual offender law in Bombay. "Every day brings in instances of mob-lynching, arson, and police atrocities enacted upon the innocent and helpless DNTs," the letter said.

Reacting to this letter, the NHRC formed an Advisory Group which in 2000, concluded that these "habitual offender" laws can be repealed. Since then, every National Commission that has dealt with the issue of DNT, NT, SNT communities has mentioned the adverse effect of "habitual offender" laws on these communities.

In March 2007, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted the way "habitual offender" laws were being applied and called for its repeal. In 2008, the National Commission on DNT, SNT, NT headed by B.S. Renke noted the negative effect of the laws on the lives of these communities.

In 2014, the High-Level Committee of the Tribal Affairs Ministry, headed by Professor Virginius Xaxa noted, "The tag of criminality attached to DNTs and to the nomadic way of life of nomadic tribes persists to the present day. The explanation lies, in good measure, in the Criminal Tribes Act being replaced in many States by the Habitual Offenders Act." In 2020, journalist Sukanya Santha reported on widespread caste-discrimination within Indian prison systems, including the treatment meted out to those who have been classified as "habitual offenders", based on which she filed a petition in the Supreme Court.

## How have States reacted?

Deciding this case in October 2024, a Bench headed by then-Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud had noted that while "habitual offender" laws were not the

subject of the matter specifically, it felt compelled to make some observations.

It said, "The 'habitual offender' legislations were enacted to replace the Criminal Tribes Act. However, in States such as Rajasthan, they were used to refer to members belonging to criminal tribes/denotified tribes. Applying that logic, several Prison Manuals/Rules have also referred to 'habitual offender' to mean members of Denotified Tribes or wandering tribes... This cannot be accepted. A whole community ought not to have either been declared a criminal tribe in the past or a habitual offender in the present. It would not be wrong to say that the classification of 'habitual offender' has been used to target members of Denotified Tribes."

Further down in the judgment, the Supreme Court went on to "urge" the State governments to review whether there remained any need for such "habitual offender" laws in the country.

According to the latest information provided by the States and UTs to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Punjab has said that it has not implemented the law for over five years and neither had any register been maintained in this time. Similarly, the Odisha government has said that no case had been registered under the law in the last five years and Andhra Pradesh has said that no one in their jails currently was imprisoned under the law.

Some States like Goa have argued that since there are no DNTs in their State, there is no scope of the law being misused to target them and have indicated that they may be allowed to continue using them. Gujarat has opted against repealing it saying it "does not intend" to harass. Telangana has called the law preventative, whereas Uttar Pradesh has said that since all "habitual offender" provisions had been covered under their Goondas Act, it does not matter if it is repealed.

According to the latest available records of the National Crime Records Bureau (for 2022), about 1.9% of India's 1.29 lakh convict population have been classified as "habitual offenders", with the highest proportion seen in Delhi, where 21.5% of convicts are classified as such.

## THE GIST

▼ In October last year, while deciding a matter on caste discrimination within Indian jails, the Supreme Court of India had called into question the very basis of the "habitual offender" classification, noting it was "constitutionally suspect" and used to "target members of denotified tribes"

▼ Habitual offender laws have a schedule of crimes for which the classification could be invoked. Across States, this included crimes like "being a thug", "belonging to a gang of dacoits", "living on the earnings of prostitution", and half-a-dozen entries on "lurking".

▼ In March 2007, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted the way "habitual offender" laws were being applied and called for its repeal.



## SPOTLIGHT



Buffer zones, created by the Kuki-Zo and the Meiteis where their populations merged, now have additional layers of security manned by Army and Central Armed Police Forces. VIJAITA SINGH

# Manipur's long road to recovery

President's Rule was imposed in Manipur on February 13, 2025, after 21 months of violence and arson, fuelled by tensions between the Kuki-Zo tribes and the Meitei community, leaving 62,000 people displaced. With trade, health care, and education hit, and businesses facing extortion and reduced demand, the Centre now has a 13-point agenda to restore stability. **Vijaita Singh** finds that many on both sides of the ethnic divide, however, long for peace

**S**itting outside a small eatery constructed with tin sheets and iron mesh, Kundram Memori, 55, adjusts an assortment of vegetables spread on gunny bags on a footpath in Manipur's Bishnupur district. Sprinkling the stock of cabbages, beans, and carrots with water as she waits for buyers, Memori recalls how less than two years ago she lived a comfortable life, around 15 kilometres away in Churachandpur, where she owned a grocery store and her husband taught in a school.

Memori's life changed on May 3, 2023, when ethnic violence erupted between the tribal Kuki-Zo and the Meitei people in Manipur. It was triggered by a Manipur High Court order seeking the State government's response on the inclusion of the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list. Her home in Churachandpur, dominated by the Kuki-Zo people, was burnt down. The family of four had to escape overnight.

Now, she lives in a relief camp in Bishnupur, and she says the family's income has dropped by 80%. "My son is a research scholar; my daughter is pursuing a master's degree in Imphal. After the violence, my husband developed hypertension. We do not have a home. I need to support the family now. We manage with whatever vegetables I sell here during the day. Evenings are spent in the camp, where we take turns to cook food and do the other chores," says Memori.

In Churachandpur, Holkim, 70, sits quietly on a thin mattress on the floor of a community centre. The centre was converted into a relief camp in May 2023. She stares blankly when asked about her life in Sognou, a Meitei-dominated area from where she was displaced in May 2023. "She was born in Sognou, where she owned a shop and a small hotel. Everything was razed during the violence," says a relative.

Forced to stay in a large hall with broken windows along with 102 others, bedsheets and plastic sheets doubling as walls, Holkim's relative says that she hopes to go back home one day. "While the men go out to do odd jobs during the day, we stay back, cook meals and maintain the camp, clean the toilets. There is no running water; we store it in buckets. For the past few months there has been a shortage of medical supplies," said Gracy Ningneihlaing, 36, another camp resident whose house in Imphal was destroyed by a mob. She says the community members lean on each other for support but also that there is no privacy.

Memori and Holkim are among the 62,000 people still living in relief camps, more than 21 months since ethnic violence erupted in the State. They have no opinion about President's Rule in the State. All they want is to go back home.

**On February 13, 2025...**

Manipur was placed under President's Rule following an impending political crisis. The Congress party, in Opposition, was to move a no-confidence motion in the Assembly, which was set to be supported by the sitting Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislators. On February 9, Chief Minister N. Biren Singh was summoned to Delhi in a chartered flight. Following a meeting with the Union Home Minister Amit Shah, he resigned.



After the violence, my husband developed hypertension. We do not have a home. I need to support the family now. We manage with whatever vegetables I sell here during the day.

**KUNDRAH MEMORI**  
Resident, Bishnupur district camp, Manipur

The valley, with 10% of Manipur's landmass, is dominated by the non-tribal Meitei ethnic group, mostly Hindus, who account for over 64% of the State's population. The hills comprise 90% of Manipur's area but send only 20 MLAs to the Assembly, mostly Kuki-Zo and Naga members.

As per the 2011 Census, the population in the State stood at 27.21 lakh and the decadal population growth from 2001 to 2011 was 18.65%. Other than the Manipur police and the Army, 288 companies of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) are deployed in the State. The strength of each company may vary from 80-120 personnel.

The point where Bishnupur and Churachandpur districts converge has been one of the most volatile areas with armed men or 'village volunteers' aiming at each other frequently. To keep the warring communities away, 'buffer zones' were created. These buffer zones, where the Meitei areas in the valley and the Kuki-Zo areas in the hills converge, are secured by the CAPF and the Army, but not the State police. When *The Hindu* visited the Bishnupur-Churachandpur buffer zone, there were at least six checkpoints on a 2-km stretch. The Army and the CAPF personnel take photos of all the visitors and note down personal details such as phone and Aadhar number.

After Central rule was imposed in the State, bunkers – sandbags and tin sheds – built by village volunteers in buffer zones to protect their communities have been removed. Some have been occupied by Central security forces.

"We had a meeting with civil society groups. Some bunkers were voluntarily dismantled, and some were destroyed by the security forces," says a police officer in Churachandpur.

According to a senior government official, around 450-500 bunkers have been destroyed in the past 22 months. "Sometimes they are rebuilt. Since President's Rule, it is being ensured that none of the bunkers exist in the buffer zones to prevent confrontation between the two communities," says the officer.

The government is working on a 13-point road map to end violence and restore peace in the restive State. The road map includes disarmament,

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Kuki-Zo women protest at Kangpokpi against the free movement of vehicles; a relief camp at Moirang, Bishnupur; Kundram Memori, a resident of Churachandpur in Manipur, whose house was burnt down during the May 2023 ethnic violence. VIJAITA SINGH

arrest of armed miscreants and extortionists, rehabilitation of internally displaced people, restoration of damaged and destroyed religious places, and free movement on highways.

On March 8, after National Highways 2 and 37 – which connect the valley to Nagaland and Assam respectively – were opened for all vehicles, violence was reported in the hill district of Kangpokpi, leaving one protester dead and 40 others, including 27 security personnel, injured.

**Since May 3, 2023...**

Since ethnic violence began, cases of extortion and abductions by armed groups have seen a rise, particularly in the valley areas. On January 26, 2025, as India celebrated Republic Day, the Manipur government established a dedicated Integrated Anti-Extortion Cell to deal with the "significant" law-and-order threat in the State, as a government press release put it. It said that people, including government officials, had been threatened with severe consequences via calls, messages, or letters from unlawful organisations if extortion demands were not met.

Post February 13, billboards and posters have been put up across the State displaying the helpline number of the Anti-Extortion Cell.

The trader community, many of who migrated to Manipur at least 100 years ago, have been the softest target of armed gangs. Those from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar say they are contemplating migrating from the State, which has become home to them.

"Even at the height of insurgency and violence in the State in the 1980s and 1990s, the situation was not this bad. People no longer have the purchasing capacity. With daily blockades, goods cannot move. First, we pay in the hills to move vehicles, then we have to pay sundry armed gangs in the valley. I do not accept calls from unknown numbers as those may be from extortionists," says a trader from Uttar Pradesh on condition of anonymity. He notes that extortion calls and visits have stopped since President's Rule was imposed.

Under a glass table at his shop in Thangal Bazaar in the heart of Imphal, the trader has a receipt of ₹4,500 acknowledging payment to Arambai Tenggal, a radical armed Meitei group, whose popularity has shot up in the past two years, coinciding with the period of violence. The trader says it is a pass to save him from other extortionists, as a few days after he paid the amount, another group arrived at his shop seeking money.

"It is 6 in the evening now. The market should be bustling with activity. But what do you see here? Many shops are shut, while many have started rolling down their shutters," says another trader of Marwari origin at Thangal Bazaar.

Anil Haorokcham, secretary of the Manipur Chamber of Commerce and Industry, says they have been pursuing the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the State and Central government for a moratorium on bank loans. "Up to 99% of entrepreneurs here will fall in the category of non-performing assets (NPA) if a financial package is not announced by the government," he says.

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He says the government is yet to publish data on financial losses incurred in the State. "More than 50% of regular transactions have been lost. As the main city (Imphal) is cut off from satellite towns (hill areas) of Manipur, the towns are also facing collateral damage," Haorokcham says.

He says the vegetable vendors at Ima Keithel (mother's market), the all-woman-run market in Imphal, whose average turnover per day was ₹10,000 before May 2023, are not able to sell ₹2,000 worth of produce now. The exodus of Kuki-Zo people from Imphal has had an impact on health care, hospitality, and other sectors too.

"Private hospitals are contracting their businesses because Kuki-Zo people are not coming. Private schools are affected; tourism is wiped out from the State. A hotel owner said they are running the hotel at a 20-30% occupancy. The staff is on a rotational basis. They can't fire the staff, nor can they employ them full-time. Salary is based on working days," he says. His list of economic troubles continues: FMCG distributors say demand has gone down by 50% because people have lost purchasing power.

Ch Priyaranjan Singh, a professor in Manipur University's economics department, says many businesspeople from the valley are moving to neighbouring Guwahati in Assam, to Manipur's west. "First the pandemic and then the violence have set back the economy by several years. A mineral water bottling plant shut down two of its units after rampant extortion calls," Singh says.

Manipur has a sizeable Nepali population. Devi, a clothes shop owner who came to Imphal after she married 12 years ago, says her family is considering moving back to Nepal. "We came to India as the education here is much better. But the other day my son was talking about guns and bombs. Last year, he heard gunshots outside his school. Many families from Nepal are now thinking of going back," Devi says as she waits for customers to come.

**On February 20, 2025...**

After President's Rule was imposed, Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla appealed to members of all communities to surrender looted police weapons at the nearest police station within seven days or face strict action.

Since May 2023, around 6,020 police weapons and lakhs worth of ammunition were looted from police armouries, almost 90% in the valley areas dominated by the Meitei people. Since 2023, there have been multiple advisories by the government to surrender the weapons.

The amnesty period was extended until March 6. From February 20 to March 6, as many as 1,063 weapons, 15,027 pieces of ammunition, 684 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and 5,971 other items such as bullet-proof jackets and helmets were surrendered.

A police officer says that the deadline is not extended as people would stop taking the administration seriously. "A message had to be sent that the police mean business. The image of the police had taken a hit after Arambai Tenggal members abducted and assaulted a police officer on February 28 last year. After the deadline to surrender arms was over, it was made clear that the police and security forces would crack down on people hoarding them," says the officer. Since February 18, around 90 people have been arrested for extortion-related activities.

Meitei civil society groups argue that the Kuki-Zo people are backed by armed insurgent groups that are in a Suspension of Operation (SoO) pact with the Centre. They also want this protection.

In Churachandpur, most Meitei homes have been flattened after the arson. In Imphal, Kuki-Zo properties have either been gutted or occupied by members of the Arambai Tenggal. The Tru-lock Theological Seminary, run by the Kuki Christian Council, located metres away from the office of the Manipur Rifles, has "mobile unit of AT" scribbled on its wall, pointing to its current occupants.

Mutum Yoiremba, a political consultant, feels the way forward is through an agreed collective amnesia, "a forgetfulness, even if not forgiveness". "The government must enable, encourage, and protect those who are willing to come out and engage in this dialogue. The military way of resolving things with an iron fist has failed in the past. It was through political dialogue that the Northeast had finally seen peace after nearly half a century of turmoil. The Government of India must act as an enabler for peace," said Yoiremba.

Haorokcham says that a deteriorating economy does not discriminate on caste or religion. "There are many Kuki women married to Meitei men. When they want to have a family gathering, they go to Guwahati or Delhi. I wish normalcy comes back soon," he says.

Sharad Leishangtham, 46, who used to work as a welder in Churachandpur, now sells sugarcane juice in Bishnupur, and lives in the relief camp. "They tore down my house. I have lost just about everything. But there should be no more fighting in Manipur," says Leishangtham.

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## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Govt vs farmers

Escalation in hostilities bodes ill for Punjab

PUNJAB is on tenterhooks after the eviction of protesting farmers from Shambhu and Khanauri. This new flashpoint has hardened the battle lines and widened the trust deficit between the state government and the farming community. The former has justified its crackdown on the grounds that industries and businesses were hit hard by the prolonged closure of two key highways, while farmer leaders have termed it a repressive move to deprive them of their democratic right to protest. In any case, the confrontation has taken a worrying turn for the worse.

It is unfortunate that the two sides have failed to find common ground. In the best interests of Punjab, they should have joined hands to intensify pressure on the Central Government over the farmers' demands, particularly a legal guarantee of MSP for all crops. Instead, they are fiercely at loggerheads. Warring public support for farm unions has also emboldened the state government to go for the jugular, with the Centre watching it all from the sidelines.

The key stakeholders can no longer afford to go round in circles. It's a no-brainer that they must hold talks with the firm commitment of resolving the crisis in a time-bound manner. For that, a flexible approach can be mutually beneficial. The Centre needs to learn lessons from its poor handling of the kisan agitation at Delhi's borders in 2020-21. The three contentious farm laws were eventually repealed — after over 700 protesting farmers lost their lives — but the MSP imbroglio was allowed to fester. And the state government owes an explanation for the way it has changed tack after having consistently projected itself as a mediator and a custodian of farmers' interests. There is no doubt that Punjab badly needs a trade booster, but it also can't do without agriculture, which remains the backbone of its economy. Earnest efforts should be made to take everyone along and bring about reconciliation, failing which the perpetual state of unrest will only push Punjab deeper into the mire.

## A disturbing verdict

If this isn't attempt to rape, what is?

THE ruling by the Allahabad High Court which downgraded charges against two men accused of sexually assaulting an 11-year-old girl is deeply troubling. By holding that grabbing a minor's breasts, breaking the string of her pyjama and attempting to drag her beneath a culvert do not amount to an attempt to rape, the court has sent an alarming message about how sexual violence is viewed under the law. In its order, the court distinguished between "preparation" and "actual attempt" to rape, claiming that the prosecution failed to establish that the accused had crossed the threshold into an actual attempt.

This legalistic interpretation ignores the terrifying reality of sexual violence. If forcefully restraining a child, violating her bodily autonomy and attempting to isolate her are not enough to establish intent, then what is? The perpetrators' inability to complete their crime due to external intervention should not dilute the gravity of their intent. The ruling also contradicts the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, which was specifically enacted to address crimes against minors with a stricter legal framework. The court's failure to fully recognise the gravity of the crime under the POCSO Act raises serious concerns about its approach to child protection laws.

The ruling not only weakens the fight against child sexual abuse but also sets a dangerous precedent. Survivors already struggle for justice in a system where legal technicalities often favour the accused. This verdict risks normalising predatory behaviour by reducing its legal consequences. Furthermore, it reflects a deeper problem within judicial reasoning — one that often fails to understand the psychological and physical trauma of sexual violence survivors. This case demands urgent intervention from the Supreme Court. The judiciary must remember that laws exist to protect the vulnerable, not to provide loopholes for the guilty.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 1925

## Swarajists and Independents

THE tendency on the part of the Swarajists and the Independents in the Legislative Assembly, both to drift apart in certain essential matters and to indulge in mutual recrimination, which has been noticeable all through the present session, reached its culminating point on Wednesday. The Finance Bill was passed by a substantial majority, and the foremost leaders of the two parties treated the House and the country to a supremely undignified exhibition of what one of them justly and truthfully described as the process of "washing one's dirty linen in public." In itself, the passing of the Finance Bill was a matter of no serious concern; and for our part, we should not have attached any great importance to it if it had not been for the fact that a similar Bill was actually thrown out last year. What one ordinarily expects in such matters, where the relations between the Government and the Opposition remain substantially unaltered, is not a gradual relaxation but a gradual stiffening of the attitude of the latter towards the former. From this point of view, the natural thing would have been for the House to have accepted the Finance Bill last year and rejected it this year. Again, so far as the rejection of the Bill last year was the outcome of the solidarity between the two wings of the Nationalist Party, one would have expected that solidarity to grow and not diminish with time. But this reversal of the natural process is, from the public point of view, less regrettable than the detestation which the two parties have now for some time been affording to their common opponents by mutual fault-finding, amounting at times almost to vilification.

## Speaking truth to power is passé

The news that we are fed round the clock is to be taken with more than a pinch of salt

TRYSTS AND TURNS  
JULIO RIBEIRO

I recently read the book *Pratap — A Defiant Newspaper*, which was sent to me by Jyotsna Mohan Bhargava, the daughter of Chander Mohan, the last Editor and owner of the Urdu-language newspaper that was published from Lahore before Partition and later from Jalandhar. Jyotsna herself is a journalist with 30 years of experience. She reminded me that she had interviewed me for the book.

I could not put down the book till I had finished it. The newspaper was launched by Chander Mohan's grandfather Mahadaya Krishan shortly before the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. It was voluntarily shut down in the 1960s. *Pratap's* readership had dwindled in later years as Urdu is not widely read in the Indian Punjab.

The reader gets a ringside view of events that unfolded when India fought for Independence, and right up to the 1980s and 1990s when Punjab was in the throes of terrorism. Since I myself was inducted into the nation's battle against the terrorist menace in the mid-1980s, my initial interest centred on what the book had to say about my contribution to that fight.

Though they were not unkind to me, the authors observed that my successor as the chief of the Punjab Police, KPS Gill, was the real hero who put paid to the Khalistani attempt to secede from the Indian Union through a low-cost war, as terrorism has been defined in textbooks on the subject.



FIRM RESOLVE: Pratap's owners &amp; editors were men of high principles who stuck scrupulously to the truth, ensure more

After reading the book, I concluded that *Pratap's* owners-cum-editors were men of high principles who stuck scrupulously to the truth, whatever the circumstances. Since it was their finding (and that of many others), I concede that Gill had succeeded where I had failed!

Gill had taken the liberty of telling my wife when I was out of earshot that my methods and philosophy of policing were not going to work in Punjab. "I am a Jat Sikh," he told Melba. "Only a Jat Sikh knows how to deal with his own people. Your husband is incapable of wielding a stick. It is only the stick that works here in my part of the country."

Gill wanted Melba to relay his thoughts to me. That she did promptly, adding for good measure her own view that he was not a person that she would include in her list of friends. Gill's methods were what led Jat Sikh farmers to finally confide in the Punjab Police and turn against "the boys," as they used to call the terrorists.

It is an established fact that

Newspapers and TV channels are being bought over by business magnates whose commercial interests lie in toeing the govt's line.

no terrorist movement can survive without the support of the community. The classical method of ending terrorism is to win the hearts and minds of the community to which the terrorists belong. In Punjab, this could only happen after the community was boxed into a corner by the methods adopted by Gill.

The authors have also mentioned that their family built

its reputation for speaking truth to power, no matter who wielded that power. The reference to the capitulation of the media, both electronic and print, and the overt and the not-so-overt threats and temptations that those in power had put in their path only confirms what the country already knew — the news that we are fed round the clock is to be taken with more than a pinch of salt.

Speaking truth to power, which was the principle followed by editors and journalists in Jawaharlal Nehru's time, is no longer the norm. What is even more worrying is that newspapers and TV channels are being bought over by business magnates whose commercial interests lie in toeing the government's line. The authors are all praise for an ex-Editor of Outlook magazine, Ruben Banerjee, who lost his job but remained true to his profession. Not many individuals like Banerjee can be found today in the profession of journalism as in most other professions. As their numbers diminish, the country loses its spine!

Chander Mohan's father Virendra was jailed nine times by the British. He was a freedom fighter of the revolutionary kind, ideologically opposed to the non-violence advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. The activities of the revolutionary club led by Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad, are recounted in greater detail in this book than what I had read earlier.

Since Virendra was himself privy to the plans to target British officers and even Governors, this book provides the reader with another takeaway. Virendra was in the Lahore jail where Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were hanged on March 23, 1931. They had been accused of shooting an English police officer outside his office.

Bhagat Singh is adored in every village of Punjab, the state from which he hailed. But it was 22-year-old Shivaram Hari Rajguru, born in Khedi in Maharashtra's Poona district, who was said to be the first to put the noose around his neck. For the past 25 years, I have been the chairman of an NGO called the Bombay Mothers and Children Society, run by an intrepid Mumbai-based doctor, Madhav Sathe. The society runs a hospital in Rajgurunagar — the name given to Khedi as a tribute to the martyr's sacrifice.

The Director of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) at the time of the hanging was Horace Williamson. Writing about Bhagat Singh, he noted, "For a time, his popularity rivalled that of Mr Gandhi." Bhagat Singh was opposed to communalism and casteism, two evils which our popular leaders today in the government and the Opposition use for electoral gains. I doubt if our Prime Minister's rising popularity at home and abroad can propel India to the main table of the comity of nations when these two evils, added to the pernicious evil of corruption, are allowed to grow and flourish.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

You can't serve the public good without the truth as a bottom line. — Carl Bernstein

## The real tribute to martyrs

SANJEEV TRIKHA

ON board my return flight from London to New Delhi, three youngsters were seated a couple of rows ahead of me. They were speaking Punjabi and their T-shirts bore the signature image of Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh. No sooner was the plane airborne that they started ordering drinks and making a scene. Their raucousness troubled other passengers, who commented bitterly on the decadence of today's youth. I got restless and waited for a chance to speak to them.

I spotted one of them walking down the aisle. As he neared me, I beckoned to him. He leaned forward to listen to me. Pointing at the martyr's picture, I said, "I guess he is your role model." He promptly nodded. Affectionately but candidly, I asked him, "Then why are you not trying to emulate him or imitate his great values? Perhaps it's fashionable for your generation to flaunt that you hero-worship him. The dire need is to nurture him in your heart and engrain him into your soul. You don't deserve to be the legend's follower in your drunken state."

"OK, sir," was his reply as he headed sheepishly towards the washroom.

When he returned to his seat, his friends seemed to enquire in whispers about his conversation with me. After a discussion that lasted a few minutes, they pulled out a bag from the overhead storage compartment and went towards the washroom. Later, I was pleasantly surprised to see that they had changed their T-shirts. They greeted me with a humble smile filled with repentance and self-knowledge. I smiled back at them.

At the New Delhi international airport, as I waited for my luggage on the conveyor belt, the trio approached me and felt sorry for their behaviour on the plane. Appreciating their gesture, I emphasised the importance of the sacrifices made by the martyrs and expressed concern over the errant ways of today's generation, which paid superficial respect to the legends. I urged them to ponder over this matter and confront the ground reality.

"Adopting their principles in our life would be the greatest tribute to the immortal souls," I advised them. They promised to give up their bad habits.

I am still in touch with them, and I say it with immense pride that their life has undergone a sea change. This demonstrates the power of our national icons to inspire us decades after they departed. Long live the martyrs — in our deeds, hearts and souls.

## Welcome crackdown

APROPOS of Quick, surprise eviction after 399 days, political compulsions compelled the AAP government in Punjab to launch an eviction drive at the Shambhu and Khanauri borders after over a year. The government acted after Ludhiana traders warned AAP's national convenor of losing political ground if the farmers continue to create inconvenience to the public, especially the business community. The pressure created by the industrialist lobby seems to have worked amid the heavy losses it was incurring. Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann remained soft towards farmer leaders for a long time, but their rigid attitude compelled the government to take a tough stand.

VIJAYA SHARMA, BY MAIL

## Good move by the govt

The Punjab Government has done a wonderful job by clearing the Punjab-Haryana border of the temporary structures put up by the farmers. Commuters were facing a lot of inconvenience. They had to wade through village lanes and potholed roads in the hinterland. Ambulances could not reach their destination in time; patients and their attendants, too, had a difficult time reaching hospitals. Business suffered due to the blockade as raw material and finished goods were not delivered on time.

OP GARG, PATIALA

## Hold meaningful dialogue

The drastic action taken by the Punjab Police to dismantle farmers' camps at Shambhu and Khanauri has caused significant distress among the protesters. The sudden police crackdown seems not only unjustified, but also harsh. While the Punjab Government had assured that it would not disturb the protesters, swift eviction by the police, accompanied by forceful detentions and dismantling of the camps, contradicts these assurances. Police action has left farmers feeling betrayed, undermining their trust in the ongoing dialogue. The government's commitment to farmers' welfare should reflect in both words and actions. The government must take an empathetic approach towards farmers and engage in meaningful dialogue.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Reprieve for jail inmates

REFER to 'Primacy of bail', the Supreme Court's concern over the rejection of bail pleas in cases where investigations have been completed is valid. However, another pressing issue that needs urgent attention is the plight of inmates who have already served their punishment period but remain in jail due to their inability to pay penalties or fines. This is not only inhuman but also a grave violation of human rights. The government must take immediate steps to address this issue, ensuring that no individual is deprived of liberty beyond the prescribed sentence. NGOs working for human rights should come forward to provide legal and financial aid to such prisoners. Justice should not be a privilege only for those who can afford it.

NARESH KUMAR NUHAWAN, KARNAL

## Misplaced national pride

The return of American astronaut Sunita Williams from space is undoubtedly a remarkable achievement in space exploration. However, the hype created by politicians and the media over her Indian ancestry is unreasonable. While her accomplishments deserve recognition, she represents NASA and the US, not India. Instead of glorifying individuals with no remote ties to the country, India should focus on celebrating and supporting its own space scientists and astronauts. Misplaced national pride does little to inspire scientific growth. It is time to shift our attention from symbolic victories to substantive advancements in India's space programme.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

## Misleading information

In many offices of bureaucrats in the Haryana Government, a plaque reads 'Mile ka samay: 11 se 12 baje' (Visiting hour: 11 am to noon). The fact is that they are not available to meet the public during the designated hour. He/she is either busy with a minister or senior officer on tour, or has gone out on a 'visit', or has called a meeting of his/her subordinates. The result is that people, who may have come from far-off places, have to wait outside their offices for hours and are still not able to meet them.

LALIT MOHAN, GURUGRAM



<sup>a</sup>The Fed promptly downplayed



## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## FED'S DELICATE DANCE

Slowing economic growth and high inflation complicate choices before the US central bank

**T**HE US FEDERAL Reserve chose to keep interest rates unchanged Wednesday, noting that "uncertainty around the economic outlook has increased". The target range for the federal funds rate remains at 4.25 to 4.5 per cent. While the central bank signalled the possibility of two interest rate cuts during the course of this year, Chairman Jerome Powell struck a note of caution, saying, "We're not going to be in any hurry to move." He also said that the "current policy stance is well-positioned to deal with the risks and uncertainties we face... (and that) the right thing to do is to wait here for greater clarity about what the economy is doing".

The projections released by the Fed, which point towards slower economic growth, higher inflation and unemployment, underline the challenging environment in which the central bank is operating. In December, (median) projections of GDP growth in 2025 stood at 2.1 per cent. In the latest meeting, these were revised down to 1.7 per cent. Alongside, inflation is now expected to pick up, touching 2.7 per cent, up from the earlier assessment of 2.5 per cent. And the unemployment rate is expected to inch upwards to 4.4 per cent, from 4.3 per cent earlier. In recent weeks, fears have been voiced of a deeper economic slowdown. Sentiment has weakened and there is considerable uncertainty over how US President Donald Trump's policies, especially on tariffs, deficits and immigration, will play out, and their impact on the broader economy. The issue of reciprocal tariffs, to be effective from April 2, is weighing heavy. This uncertainty will impact household and firm spending. In February, The Conference Board's consumer confidence index fell to 98.3, while the uncertainty index of the St Louis Fed has been edging upwards. Powell echoed the sentiment, saying that there is "just really high uncertainty. What would you write down?" (when making projections). "I mean it's just... really hard to know how this is going to work out." The Atlanta Fed's GDPNow model has pegged US GDP growth at -1.8 per cent in the first quarter of 2025 (seasonally adjusted annual rate as on March 18).

Trump was quick to criticise the Fed's policy stance. He posted on a social media platform Wednesday: "The Fed would be MUCH better off CUTTING RATES as US tariffs start to transition (ease) their way into the economy. Do the right thing." While Powell has sought to assert the Fed's independence, the pressure from Trump is unlikely to abate. In an increasingly uncertain global environment, there may well be external considerations to factor in, but monetary policy in India should be driven by the domestic growth-inflation dynamics.

## A FRAGILE TRUCE

A long-lasting ceasefire remains a distant prospect in West Asia, and peace even more so

**W**HEN ISRAEL AND Hamas reached a three-phase ceasefire on January 19, there was a glimmer of hope for the war-torn Gaza Strip, much of which lies in ruins. But building on the deal to move towards a permanent peace was riddled with challenges from Day One. While the first phase concluded on March 1, negotiations for phase two — aimed at ending the war with the total withdrawal of Israeli forces and the release of all hostages — never began. To pressure Hamas into releasing more hostages, Israel cut off aid and electricity to Gaza. It broke the ceasefire on March 18, carrying out airstrikes that killed more than 400 people and left hundreds more injured. Following this, a ground offensive was launched as forces moved up to the Netzarim Corridor, which divides the north and south of Gaza. With the war having all but resumed and the US expected to provide unconditional support to Israel, West Asia, yet again, is being plunged into the dark.

The airstrikes are part of Israel's strategy to force concessions from Hamas, which still has 59 hostages in captivity, and was reluctant to give up leverage without a definitive move to the second phase. This strategy imposes further suffering on a Palestinian population already enduring catastrophic living conditions. The resumption of hostilities does not help the predicament of the remaining hostages either, as Hamas will continue to use them as leverage. Indeed, families of these hostages have accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of "giving up" on them.

The war arguably keeps Netanyahu in power given that he needs the support of right-wing hawks who have rallied against every ceasefire proposal. One far-right politician who quit the government over the ceasefire has returned. Netanyahu's appearance in his corruption trial has been postponed. Votes crucial to his survival are scheduled in the legislature. But the only way forward is not through a continuation of Netanyahu's politics as usual. It is through a negotiated settlement that maps out an end to the war and the return of the hostages. There was some movement towards this when an Arab-led plan for Gaza's reconstruction was presented to the US and Israel, but it was rejected. Reducing Gaza to rubble will not achieve Israel's goal of obliterating Hamas. The US has confirmed that Hamas has already received its final fighters as it had lost. Intensified violence, along with the suspension of humanitarian aid, will only fuel further resistance. Sustained dialogue alone can lead to a long-lasting ceasefire. But until the Israeli Prime Minister stops focusing on clinging to power, a long-lasting ceasefire will remain a distant prospect, and peace even more so.

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## INTO THE LIGHT

In the space odyssey of Sunita Williams and Barry 'Butch' Wilmore, a reminder to focus on the big picture

**A**SWITH ALL efforts to push boundaries, excursions into the unknown come with caveats. In the case of space flights, it is the tacit understanding that there is little that is routine or safe. But for those who can hang in there, buoyed by curiosity, hope and a generous splash of good fortune, there remains not just the possibility of greater glory but also a deeper understanding of the workings of this fragile cosmos that is the human inheritance. For astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry 'Butch' Wilmore, it began with a faulty Boeing Starliner test flight in June last year. But when it ended 286 days later — 278 days more than was intended because of the spacecraft's propulsion failures — it marked not just an expansion of horizons, but also the sheer, amazing potential of human adaptability and endurance.

By the time of their splashdown off the coast of Tallahassee in the Florida Panhandle, Williams and Wilmore had orbited the Earth 45,676 times and travelled 195 million kilometres. It did not qualify their mission as the longest — Russian cosmonaut Valeri Polyakov, who spent 437 days in the Mir space station in 1994, has that honour, followed by Sergei Avdeyev, who spent 379 days in Mir in 1998-1999 after an unexpected mission extension. But Williams surpassed the record of NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson for the most time spent spacewalking by a woman, when she logged 62 hours and six minutes during the mission.

In the time that the astronauts were away from Earth, the world changed one election at a time. As the second Trump administration took office, a political storm erupted over the delay in their return. Throughout, Williams and Wilmore focused on conducting experiments and fixing equipment, trusting NASA with decisions about their return. Perhaps they knew what many earthlings choose to ignore: That in the larger scheme of things, human beings are consigned to the margins, their journey to the centre dependent on empathy and a scientific temper that allow the light to shine through.



RAJAT KATHURIA

"NO TRADE IS free," declares Dani Rodrik, a Harvard economist who writes extensively on globalisation and economic policy. He argues that trade between countries always involves some form of regulation, cost, and/or strategic interest. Several others — including rather famously, Robert Lighthizer, the former US Trade Representative (USTR) in the first Trump administration — have repeated the sentiment. Lighthizer published a tome in 2023 by that title. A lawyer by training, he dug in his heels for "fair trade" rather than free trade, presumably to promote American strategic interests rather than unmitigated market-driven choice.

That trade is not free is analogous to saying there is no perfect competition in the real world. Perfect competition and free trade are artefacts of costless transactions that occur in economics textbooks. That said, both ideas are appealing because in the real world, we try to mimic frictionless markets to the extent possible. Accordingly, trade policy attempts to reduce artificial barriers that act as impediments to the flow of goods and more recently, services. No country, however, will voluntarily reduce tariffs and other barriers and hence, in our collective wisdom, we established the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to oversee smooth trade with the threat of penalties on countries that violated the rules-based system put in place by member nations themselves.

That the rules-based trading system has been undermined primarily by the US would be an understatement. The dispute settlement body has been dysfunctional since 2019 thanks to the US. The aggressive unilateralism by President Donald Trump that we are witnessing today is hardly a new phenomenon. Jagdish Bhagwati was an outspoken critic of American trade policy, particularly in the 1990s. At that time, the US employed its domestic trade laws, like Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, to one-sidedly coerce other countries to change their trade policies outside the multilateral framework. He prophetically stated that aggressive unilateralism risked creating trade wars and fostering retaliation, which could destabilise the global

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ADITHYA REDDY

THE DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT, right from its initial phase, found a link between Hindi and North India on the one hand and Sanskrit and Brahmanism on the other. In other non-Hindi speaking states that were formed after linguistic agitations, the anti-Hindi sentiment never took off because this link was not established. In 1917, long before the anti-Hindi agitations began to break out, Mahatma Gandhi said, "It is not correct to say that in Madras one cannot do without English. I have successfully used Hindi there for all my work." The prevalence of Urdu among Tamil Muslims and the basic Hindi skills of communities making a livelihood near pilgrimage sites and in trade centres meant that Hindi could not be an "alien language". The Dravidian movement seemed to succeed in making it appear alien to most Tamils. That may change with time.

The public response evoked by the DMK government's protests against the National Education Policy, 2020 (NEP) is nothing compared to the mass anti-Hindi protests earlier. Even in 1986, the anti-Navodaya school agitations led to 21 self-immolations and 20,000 arrests. The DMK has picked the wrong policy in a desperate bid to revive that sentiment. After all, the NEP does not even mention Hindi in its language policy. It only talks of the benefits of multilingualism. But the centrepiece of the major anti-Hindi agitation in the late 1960s was also multilingualism. In recent times, however, it has been reported that Tamil Nadu had the highest number of students enrolled with the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha among southern states. While

Trump's threats are destabilising. They can also be a prod to launch much-needed domestic reform

US actions are more political than economic. Make America Great Again (MAGA) will not happen by imposing tariffs all around. America cannot efficiently produce labour-intensive manufactured products, even Apple phones anymore. Yet, it earns the lion's share of the value because of design and intellectual property. The greatness of America lies therein and not in manufacturing stuff that China and India can do better. Paul Samuelson, an American Nobel Laureate in Economics, did say that comparative advantage is a very hard concept for people to understand.

trade order. It encourages other nations to act outside the rules, setting a dangerous precedent. In other words, when America decides on its own that a foreign trading practice is unacceptable and acts outside the rules-based system, disregarding its commitments, the rule of law is effectively replaced by the law of the jungle.

Slapping tariffs on China, Mexico, Canada and India among other countries because the President and his advisors feel aggrieved is akin to a traffic violation in which the wronged party decides to settle the matter on the spot by physically overpowering the alleged perpetrator. In the law of the jungle, the upper hand is always with the class bully. At least to start with. The civilised thing to do would be to settle perceived harms by a process established for the purpose. Bhagwati's advice in 1992 to the US was, "It's the process, stupid".

The Trump administration's gung-ho actions have, as expected, provoked angry responses from Canada, Mexico and China. This will mean additional costs for the US consumer and producer, leading to an adverse impact on GDP. India, on the other hand, has decided to reduce tariffs on American imports, leading Trump to boast that he had "exposed" India and its tariff regime. In an international treaty-based trading regime, in return on give and take, every country feels aggrieved about concessions it has to make.

No policy is ever a win-win, there are winners and losers. India too has a right to feel aggrieved that its agriculture subsidies are illegal under WTO rules while Europe and the US get away with billions of dollars of income support for farmers. That is because the system classifies direct income support as non-distortionary. India can also feel aggrieved that the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) under which it got preferential access to the US market was removed in 2019 when its per capita income was \$2,000. The Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) principle enshrined and agreed to by all member nations was instituted to help developing nations do exactly that — to develop. Airbus would never

have emerged as a competitor to Boeing had it not been for the massive subsidies given by the EU. The list of double standards is endless, but India and other countries do not have the muscle yet to take on a belligerent US. To read between the lines, Lighthizer's comment on "fair play" seems to indicate "all's fair in a trade war" to justify American excess.

To be sure, US actions are more political than economic. Make America Great Again (MAGA) will not happen by imposing tariffs all around. America cannot efficiently produce labour-intensive manufactured products, or even Apple phones anymore. Yet, it earns the lion's share of the value because of design and intellectual property. The greatness of America lies therein and not in manufacturing stuff that China and India can do better. Paul Samuelson, an American Nobel Laureate in Economics, did say that comparative advantage is a very hard concept for people to understand.

How should India respond? India has chosen to accommodate US threats by unilaterally reducing certain tariffs. The US is now India's largest export market, and given the massive uncertainty around the regime, India will be forced to concede, perhaps even more than it has done. So far, we have reduced tariffs on bourbon whiskey and motorcycles. A crisis, they say, is an opportunity. How many times has India launched much-needed domestic reform on the back of a crisis? This is a perfect opportunity to signal to Indian industry that the walls of protection are irreversibly coming down, providing precious preparation for at least two free trade agreements with the UK and the EU that India finds itself negotiating.

US bullying is an opportunity to explore new export markets and agreements, to strengthen domestic industry to live up to our own boast of becoming a developed country by 2047. It is closer than we imagine.

The writer is dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shiv Nadar University and professor of Economics. Views are personal

## TO BE IMBIBED, NOT IMPOSED

The spread of Hindi must be through consent

peoples' attitudes may be changing, the Dravidian resistance is very much alive. In 1903, Gandhi brought out *Indian Opinion* in South Africa to uphold the rights of Indians. Notably, it used to be published in four languages — Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati and English. Some of his closest followers and associates in the Natal Satyagraha were Tamils. After returning to India, he gave a call to make Hindi the national language. In later years, he may have conceded that status to Hindustani. While decentralised polity meant everything to him, he also wanted a national language. A village-centred, diverse society can rise to the challenges of modern times only if its members shed parochial tendencies. He saw learning another language as a sacrifice Tamils had to make for the nation and was equally clear that this should not come at any cost to Tamil.

Gandhi did not call for a state-imposed language policy. In 1918, he issued an appeal for six Tamil and Telugu youths to come forward, learn Hindi and propagate the language in the Madras Presidency. This led to the formation of the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha, a volunteer organisation, which has endured attacks and hostile politics over the decades.

Tamil Nadu's Congress leaders who backed the cause of a national language. Nationalist leader Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar also wanted Hindustani as the national language but with Roman script. The rationale is explained by former Union education minister V K R Rao: "English as a language will continue to be learnt even if it is not the official language; the Roman script will therefore have to be learnt by a growing number of the people. If Hindi could also be learnt in the Roman script... one major obstacle to the learning of Hindi by the non-Hindi regions would have been removed."

Article 351 of the Constitution has another suggestion. It directs the Union to develop Hindi "by assimilating without interfering with its genius, the forms, style and expressions used in Hindustani and the other languages of India specified in the Eighth Schedule".

The government should concentrate on studying and implementing such suggestions, where feasible, through autonomous bodies and encourage more voluntary activities for the spread of Hindi. The change has to happen through consent. One only has to remember Mookerjee's chiding of the pro-Hindi lobby in the Constituent Assembly: "If the protagonists of Hindi will pardon me for saying so, had they not been perhaps so aggressive in their demands and enforcement of Hindi, they would have got whatever they wanted."

In the language policy debates of the past decades, one finds interesting suggestions that don't attract attention nowadays. It was just

by generally peaceful, citing voter apathy, Ershad's virtually assumed mandate and ban on all political activity. Sporadic violence and small demonstrations protesting against the referendum were reported in Dhaka.

The writer is a lawyer practising in the Madras High Court

## MARCH 21, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

## PAK TROOPS REPULSED

PAKISTANI TROOPS MADE some attempts to dislodge Indian troops from positions in the Siachen glacier area of Ladakh but all attempts were thwarted. Defence Minister P V Narasimha Rao told the Rajya Sabha. He said three flag meetings had been held at the sector commanders' level for a ceasefire prior to the delineation of the area that clearly fell within Indian territory. But the meetings had been inconclusive, Rao added.

## AHMEDABAD VIOLENCE

TWO PERSONS, INCLUDING a woman, were killed and nine others injured as the police

fired 40 rounds in the wake of continued mob violence in old Ahmedabad. With two deaths, the toll of the three days' disturbances rose to 10. A state government spokesman said 700 more army men, rushed from Jamnagar, were deployed in the city and Central Reserve Police companies were on the way.

## REFERENDUM EVE

MARTIAL LAW FORCES were deployed to prevent violence on the eve of a referendum on Bangladesh President H M Ershad's policies during his three years of military rule. Underground opposition leaders have called for a general strike and boycott but most political observers predicted the polling would

be generally peaceful, citing voter apathy, Ershad's virtually assumed mandate and ban on all political activity. Sporadic violence and small demonstrations protesting against the referendum were reported in Dhaka.

## INDIA FOR PEACE

AN INDIAN INITIATIVE to halt the escalation of the Iran-Iraq war appears to be taking shape. This is evident from the decision to send the Minister of State for External Affairs, Khursheed Alam Khan, and the Foreign Secretary, Ramesh Bhasani, to Baghdad and then to Tehran. Two emissaries of the Prime Minister are already in the area, having taken important messages from Rajiv Gandhi.







## Learning from a snag in space

The return of the two NASA astronauts – Barry Wilmore and Sunita Williams – who were stuck on-board the International Space Station (ISS) for nine months is a cause for celebration. Their splashdown off the Florida coast marks the end of an extended phase of uncertainty that tested, and validated, capabilities of the premier space agency in handling contingencies during space missions. The Boeing Starliner took off on its first crewed flight with the astronauts in June 2024 on what was conceived as an eight-day mission. Technical issues in the capsule and the resultant safety concerns that forced the pair to shift to the ISS for an extended period reveal the risks space missions are prone to. Space endeavours have seen deaths, injuries in accidents, and other unexpected events. Preventive, remedial actions have also helped avert such incidents. Wilmore and Williams received particular attention also because repeated attempts to bring them back failed to make headway.

The cheeriness around their return – in a SpaceX Dragon capsule – is palpable. It also comes with a sense of relief because the astronauts had generated global interest on multiple counts: the causes of the snag were widely discussed; there were also concerns about the astronauts' well-being though communication channels were not disrupted. India had a special interest in the situation as Williams is of Indian origin. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has welcomed the return of Wilmore and Williams, calling their long stay "a test of grit, courage and the boundless human spirit." He has also invited Williams to visit India.

Williams is now the American astronaut with the second-longest combined time in space. She has spent 608 days over three visits to the space station. The astronauts have returned safely but their full recovery may take a long time, perhaps months. They have been shifted for various tests to assess the impact of their long stay in space. Their examination can also lead to better understanding of conditions in the station and help address similar situations that may arise in the future. A fresh international crew will now continue the standard six-month mission in the ISS, which is a symbol of international cooperation. While the mission ended with happy waves and thumbs-up signs on touchdown, it was no surprise that some earthly politics was also at play, in the form of claims and accusations regarding reasons that led to the stranding of the astronauts and the delay in their return to earth.

## Crack down on illegal hostels

The tragic deaths of two students following a food poisoning incident at a private school in Malavalli in Mandya district serve as a grim reminder of how even the most well-intentioned acts can spiral into catastrophic outcomes when safety protocols are ignored. What started as a charitable gesture by a local businessman during Holi celebrations – a donation of food to bring joy – turned into a nightmare, claiming young lives and leaving more than 120 people, including the students of Gokula Vidya Samsthe, gravely ill. This incident should act as a wake-up call for philanthropists, educational institutions, and regulatory authorities to prioritise safety over everything else.

The contaminated food prepared and supplied by a local hotel has sparked outrage and raised pressing questions about accountability. While most of those hospitalised have since been discharged, the loss of young lives cannot be undone. The hotel owner, defending his reputation, claims a 16-year history of catering for government events without prior complaints. He has called for a detailed investigation, even suggesting the possibility of sabotage. Given his long-standing service record, a thorough inquiry is indeed warranted to determine whether the tragedy stemmed from negligence or foul play. More importantly, the tragedy highlights the dire need to enforce regulatory oversight in educational and residential institutions. Shockingly, the school in question was operating an illegal hostal, a fact that only amplifies the administrative negligence. The Karnataka Child Rights Observatory has warned that numerous schools across the state run unauthorised hostels, exposing the children to a range of risks – unsafe food being just one.

This bureaucratic apathy is a ticking time bomb, threatening the well-being of countless students.

The government must take decisive action and crack down on illegal hostels immediately, coupled with mandatory regular audits and surprise inspections to ensure compliance with basic safety and hygiene standards. Schools and hostels must be required to maintain certified in-house kitchens, and leftover or unsupervised food donations should be banned. Clear accountability measures, including penal action against management personnel who flout norms, must be instituted. While philanthropy is a noble pursuit, donors should be guided to work through regulated channels, supported by awareness programmes emphasising food safety and liability. The Malavalli incident is not merely a case of food poisoning – it is a failure of the system to protect its most vulnerable. Preventing such incidents in the future demands more than punitive action; it requires systemic reform, heightened community vigilance and a cultural shift towards uncompromising accountability. Only then can we ensure that goodwill does not become a gateway to grief.

**Studying astronauts' extended stay in ISS can enhance preparedness for future missions**

# Balancing women's choice and State's interests

Should declining fertility force the State to intervene in reproductive decisions?

PARAMITA MAJUMDAR AND  
NITIN KUMAR

For decades, the world has grappled with the fear of an impending human apocalypse brought about by rapid population growth. This fear sparked a great number of debates and discussions, some of which led to the formation of family planning programmes across the world. These programmes primarily focused on promoting contraceptive use to delay the intended pregnancies and most importantly, curb the unintended ones. As a result, global fertility started to decline at an unprecedented rate which is now being considered one of humanity's biggest challenges.

The global total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped from around five children per woman in 1950 to 2.3 children per woman in 2023. Similarly, India, where rapid population growth was once a concern for the world, was able to lower its TFR from 4.8 to 2.0 between 1950 and 2021. The developed nations in particular are facing a deep crisis. The TFR has plummeted well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman for countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Germany, Spain, the UK, the US and many others. The repercussions are many – rapid ageing, labour shortage, strain on economic resources to support social security schemes, and overall economic slowdown.

The success of family planning programmes, however, was never solely responsible for the global fertility decline. Immediately post-World War II, there was a 'baby boom'; fertility rates rose sharply as births delayed due to the war and tension eventually took place once stability was restored. In the following decades, there were multiple socio-economic changes in the developed countries in the form of increased literacy, development in women's status and broader attitudinal shifts in individuals, all of which resulted in the dramatic decline in fertility. Hence the success of family planning programmes was an outcome of broader socio-economic and cultural shifts occurring across societies. Improvements in education, growing career aspirations driven by rising individualism, and the increasing costs of child-rearing prompted individuals to delay marriage and childbirth, leading to a dramatic decline in fertility.

The prescription for low fertility is thus far from simple. History has shown that fertility rates are difficult to reverse, as they are driven by deep-rooted social shifts that cannot be easily undone. So far, efforts by various countries to reverse fertility trends – such as offering cash incentives and implementing child-friendly policies – have largely failed. The failure of government efforts to reverse declining fertility underscores the point that the decision to have children ultimately rests with individuals and families. However, this gives rise to a fundamental conflict between personal reproductive choices and state concerns over demographic trends. Should states, meant to uphold



individual rights, intervene in deeply personal decisions like childbearing? Or should women, who have long fought for autonomy and equality, prioritise national interests over their choices?

Low fertility and population ageing are two sides of the same coin, and India is no exception to this global trend. As fertility rates decline across most states, the proportion of elderly citizens is steadily rising. India's elderly population, currently around 10%, is projected to double to over 20% by 2050. While improvements in healthcare and life expectancy contribute towards population ageing, the declining fertility reduces the proportion of young people entering the workforce, preventing the natural replenishment of the workforce. With fewer working-age individuals to support a growing retired population, it will increase the strain on healthcare and social security systems. Unlike developed nations, which grew rich before they aged, India faces the daunting risk of growing old before becoming prosperous.

**Question of balance**  
As India grapples with declining fertility, the state faces a difficult question:

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

# A cut above the rest

Learning anatomy used to mean dissecting rats, but times are changing

SRIPRIVA SATISH

I profess to learn and to teach anatomy not from books but from dissections, not from the tenets of philosophers but from the fabric of nature. This timeless quote by William Harvey, a renowned English physician, stresses the importance of dissection in unravelling the marvels of the natural world. However, it also sparks ethical debates about sacrificing innocent creatures for educational purposes.

This quote reminds me of my high school days when we had to dissect a rat in our biology practical. I vividly recall the first session of our practical class. We lined up in front of the dissection table, each with a rat to dissect and learn from. The smell of formalin, a preservative for biological specimens, still lingers in my mind. Taking the scalpel to

make my first incision was a daunting task, and I remember trembling with hesitation. Some classmates swooned or developed nausea at the sight of the creature to be dissected.

As I recollect these moments, I realise that many of my classmates, including me, hated those practical sessions. But if it were not for our biology teacher's encouragement and support, we would have never withstood our practical classes. I recall a particularly challenging session where one of my classmates had to dissect a pregnant rat. He began to sweat profusely at the very sight of it. Another time, there was a rat on the dissection table with a throbbing heart! As time passed, my sympathy for the creatures surpassed my initial distaste.

While we gained valuable educational insights from all this, the question of ethics remained. Though we can learn the anatomy of a species only through dissection, as William Harvey stated in his quote, seeing creatures cut open and discarded after study was overwhelming.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### History, however irrelevant, cannot be erased

Apologies 'Political aggression cannot erase history' (Apr 20), the editorial serves as a fitting response to RSS national publicity head Sunil Ambekar's statement that Aurangzeb is no longer relevant. This statement has emboldened right-wing outfits and RSS affiliates to demand the removal of Aurangzeb's tomb in Mahashtra's Khuldabad, threatening to raise it like the Babri Masjid. By treating Aurangzeb's tomb as a symbol of

bigotry, intolerance, and aggression, these groups are stirring up unnecessary controversy. Whether Aurangzeb is relevant or not is a matter of personal opinion. However, the fact remains that he is an undeniable part of history. History teaches us that we can grow wiser by learning from past mistakes. It is unfortunate that some people seem to be dwelling in the past.

M Basavaraj, Davangere

### Don't whitewash history

Apologies 'Political aggression cannot erase history' (Mar 20), while it is true that history cannot and should not be erased, it should also not be whitewashed by highlighting only the positives. It is beyond doubt that several places of worship were destroyed by Mughals. Their acts of loot and destruction should also be discussed and understood in the right light.

Shreeram Panjapure, Bengaluru

### Rethink language policy

The NEP 2020 Three-Language Policy seems increasingly irrelevant in the AI era. Advanced translation technologies enable effortless language conversion, eliminating the need for multiple language requirements in early schooling. Instead, by burdening primary school children with excessive language instruction, the pedagogy should focus on building vocational skills, sports, and practical learning. To foster

national unity and cultural diversity, enhancing history and geography curricula would be more effective, ensuring a deeper understanding of India's rich heritage rather than mandating additional language learning.

Sandeep Shandil, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com. In order to be published, letters must be handwritten – will be accepted. All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

## SPEAK OUT

The government has planned the Cauvery Aarti at Sankey Tank as part of its water conservation efforts. This is purely a government programme... This is not a political event.



D.K. Shivakumar, Karnataka Dy CM

Action expresses priorities.

Mahatma Gandhi

## TO BE PRECISE



## IN PERSPECTIVE

# Gabbard visit signals strategic shift

It sets up India-US collaboration in broader areas of defence, intelligence, and counterterrorism

ANAND KUMAR

Over the past two decades, India and the United States – two of the world's largest democracies – have moved significantly closer, strengthening their strategic and economic partnership. Despite US President Donald Trump's tariff wars and policies that have disrupted global trade and strained alliances, India and the US have sought to explore avenues for deeper engagement beyond economic cooperation, particularly in defence, security, and intelligence sharing.

In this evolving geopolitical landscape, the recent visit of Tuli Gabbard, the US Director of National Intelligence, to India has injected new momentum into the bilateral relationship. Her visit signals a shift towards more comprehensive and multidimensional engagement, underscoring shared strategic interests. It comes at a time when India and the US are navigating complex global challenges, including security threats, economic fluctuations, and shifting alliances. While economic cooperation remains a pillar of the relationship, this visit highlights a broader agenda. Her high-level meetings with National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh featured discussions centred on key security challenges including the rising threat of Khalistani extremism. India expressed concerns about the activities of extremist Khalistani groups and urged the US to designate them as terrorist organisations. This marks an important shift, as India seeks greater cooperation from the US in curbing separatist movements that threaten its national security.

Intelligence-sharing mechanisms are also in focus – both countries recognise the need for a robust security partnership to counter emerging threats, including terrorism and cyber warfare. India has been vocal about the destabilising influence of extremist groups operating from foreign soil, particularly those exploiting Western democracies to further their agendas. The Khalistani movement, which has found some support in the US, Canada, and the UK, has been a persistent concern for Indian authorities. Gabbard's discussions with Indian officials indicate a growing recognition within the US administration of the need to curb extremist propaganda and financial networks linked to such groups.

Gabbard took the opportunity to elaborate on the Trump administration's global security approach, particularly in relation to the Russia-Ukraine tensions and Middle Eastern conflicts. She emphasised that President Trump's administration is committed to mediating between Russia and Ukraine, working towards a peaceful resolution of the ongoing con-

flict. Furthermore, Gabbard addressed the threat posed by the Houthi rebels in the Middle East, she defended the US military actions against the Houthi rebels, arguing that their attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea have disrupted global trade and commerce. Her comments reflect the Trump administration's markedly aggressive stance on counterterrorism and regional security which aligns with India's concerns regarding militant groups operating in South Asia and beyond. She expressed serious concerns over the persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh and the rise of extremist groups in the country. India shares similar concerns, given its geographical proximity and historical experience with Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. Gabbard's remarks also signal a greater alignment between the US and India in addressing terrorism in South Asia, an area where deeper cooperation could be mutually beneficial.

**New era in India-US ties?**  
Gabbard's visit marks a pivotal moment in India-US relations, signifying a shift from a primarily economic focus to a broader strategic engagement encompassing defence, intelligence, and counterterrorism cooperation. This multidimensional approach reflects the evolving global security landscape, where emerging threats necessitate coordinated international responses. It also signals a recalibration of US foreign policy priorities under the Trump administration. For India, this presents an opportunity to deepen its strategic partnership with the US, particularly in areas of mutual interest such as counterterrorism, maintaining regional stability, and ensuring maritime security.

Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, Gabbard reaffirmed the US commitment to strengthening ties with India. Underlining the importance of intelligence sharing, cyber stability, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), she stressed the need for timely and relevant intelligence reporting to enhance security cooperation. She described the Trump administration's foreign policy vision as rooted in "realism, pragmatism, and securing peace through strength." Her remarks underscored the strong economic and security foundation laid by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi, reinforcing the significance of India-US collaboration in addressing contemporary global challenges.

The National Intelligence Director's visit to India has reinforced the growing depth and complexity of India-US relations. By addressing India's concerns about Khalistani extremism, advocating for stronger measures against Islamist terrorist groups, and highlighting the US interest in global peace and security, she has helped set the stage for a new phase of collaboration between the two countries. (The writer is an associate fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis)



## Rajasthan's coaching centre Bill, why it has been criticised

HAMZA KHAN  
JAIPUR, MARCH 20

FOLLOWING YEARS of demands for such legislation, a Bill for regulating coaching centres was tabled in the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly on Thursday.

The creation of a high-pressure academic ecosystem in cities like Kota and Jaipur, with coaching centres and residential schools to aid students in preparing for competitive exams, has prompted calls for regulation. For more than a decade now, several cases of student suicides have been reported every year.

However, the Rajasthan Coaching Centres (Control and Regulation) Bill, 2025, has received some criticism for diluting certain provisions of earlier drafts and sidestepping some of the Union Education Ministry's guidelines on the issue.

### What does the Rajasthan Bill say?

The government said the Bill aims to "curb the commercialisation of coaching institutes and ensure that they operate within a framework prioritising the well-being and success of students".

It seeks to mandate minimum quality standards, the registration of coaching centres, and psychological counselling for students. The Centre's January 2024 guidelines for the regulation of coaching centres proposed a penalty of Rs 25,000 for the first violation of provisions and Rs 1 lakh for a second violation, followed by cancellation of registration for subsequent violation(s).

The tabled version sets the first fine at Rs 2 lakh and Rs 5 lakh for the second offence, followed by cancellation of the centre's registration. This is one aspect where the Bill's provisions are more stringent compared to the drafts or guidelines.

### And what are the differences?

In line with guidelines, an earlier draft specified that only students who are 16 years of age or have completed secondary school examinations can be enrolled in coaching centres. However, the tabled version has no mention of the age criteria.

Coaching centres could stand to benefit in the absence of such a provision, especially those in Kota. Having become a hub for engineering and medical college aspirants, the city has witnessed a decline in student enrollments more recently. The Centre's guidelines, in addition to bad press over student suicides and the emergence of new hubs in other parts of the country, are seen as the likely factors.

Here are some of the other key points of difference:

■ In some cases, students went missing

from the centres and their families found out much later. An earlier version of the Bill mandated biometric attendance through face recognition technology. If a student was absent for more than two days without prior intimation, the centres were to "inform the parents", it said. The Bill has no such provision for attendance.

■ A draft also stated that coaching centres "shall abide by the orders issued by the state government regarding national holidays, local holidays as declared by the District Collector and festivals". While the tabled version states that centres should try to customise leaves to coincide with festivals, it omits mention of national and local holidays.

■ The guidelines had pushed for greater inclusivity and accessibility, stating that the coaching centres "shall not discriminate

against any applicant/ student on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, descent etc, during the admission and teaching process".

■ Centres may also make special provisions to encourage greater representation of students from vulnerable communities, including female students and differently abled students. The centre's building and surrounding premises should comply with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Both these points were included in the draft, but have been omitted in the Bill.

### What happens next?

Certain parents' associations have flagged the need for specifying punishment for centres in case of student suicides and demanded measures to curb the arbitrary fees they charge.

Criticising the Bill, parents' organisation

Sanyukta Abhishek Singh alleged that the Bill has been drafted "in guidance of the coaching centres". Its spokesperson Abhishek Jain Bittu said that the Bill should have a provision for a committee to determine the fees charged by coaching centres.

The Bill is expected to come up for debate and passage on Friday. Leader of Opposition Tika Ram Jyoti from the Congress said that the earlier draft had mentioned the 16-year minimum age criteria "but now the government is again planning to burden the students".

"It seems as if the state government has connived with the coaching centres to again relax the age criteria," he said, pointing to differences between the guidelines and the Bill. "It seems the government doesn't want to bring a strong Bill. We will oppose this and give our suggestions and would hope that they are included," he said.

## EXPLAINED SCIENCE

### VOYAGE OF THE IGUANAS: HOW THEY TRAVELLED FROM AMERICAS TO FIJI

FOR DECADES, the native iguanas of Fiji and Tonga have presented an evolutionary mystery.

Every other living iguana species dwells in the Americas, from southwestern US to the Caribbean and parts of South America. So how could a handful of reptilian transplants have ended up on two islands in the South Pacific?

In research published on Monday in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Simon G. Scarpetta, an evolutionary biologist at the University of San Francisco, and his colleagues make the case that the ancestors of Fiji's iguanas crossed on floats of floating vegetation.

Such a voyage across nearly 8,000 km of open ocean would be the longest known by a non-human vertebrate.



A Fijian crested iguana on a coconut palm on the island of Fiji in the South Pacific. The NYT

species — which belong to a distinct genus, *Brachyophis* — split off from their closest relatives.

After sampling the genetics from 14 living iguana species, the researchers found that the Fijian species' closest living relatives were the genus *Dipsosaurus*, a group of desert iguanas found in the American Southwest and northwestern Mexico. The team's analysis suggested that the two lineages split around 30 million and 34 million years ago.

That timing is important. This was roughly the time when the Fijian archipelago was born. More importantly, the cold and ice around the poles at that time would have made it impossible for any lineage of temperature-sensitive iguanas to make it to Asia or Australia from the Americas, and then hop to the Pacific Islands.

This means that after rafting is the "best supported" mechanism for explaining how the American reptile landed in Fiji. This argument is further bolstered by the fact that a three-to four-month crossing would have been roughly the length of creatures' winter hibernation, meaning the lizards could have made the voyage without starving. Also, travelling on vegetation would have provided the herbivores with a steady source of food.

Evolutionary geneticist Hamish G. Spencer of the University of Otago said the study adds to a growing body of research suggesting that "long-distance dispersal is far more important in the evolutionary history of many animal groups than had previously been appreciated".

THE NEW YORK TIMES

### An incredible tale

Rafting — the term scientists use for hitching a ride across oceans on uprooted trees or tangles of plants — has long been recognised as a way for small creatures to reach islands. But this is generally seen among invertebrates, whose small size means they can survive a long way in an uprooted tree trunk. Among vertebrates, lizards and snakes seem to be able to raft farther than mammals, perhaps because their slower metabolism allows them to last for a long time.

Iguana species have proved adept at making shorter crossings. In 1995, scientists observed at least 15 green iguanas rafting more than 300 km on hurricane debris from one Caribbean island to another. And researchers have long agreed that the ancestors of the iguanas of the Galapagos Islands made the nearly 1,000 km trip from South America to bobbing vegetation.

A crossing to the South Pacific Islands, however, represents an almost unimaginable challenge. This has led many scientists to argue that the iguanas were the remnant of an extinct group, one that had possibly crossed over land from the Americas to Asia or Australia, and then made the relatively easier crossing to Fiji and Tonga.

### Timing is everything

Scarpetta's team tackled the question by trying to work out when Fijian iguana

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## EXPLAINED POLICY

### The looming power shortage

As the summer closes in on India, grid managers are worried. There's a generation squeeze in non-solar hours, and the expansion of renewables has not been matched by increase in storage capacity

AGGARWALIA & ANIL SASI  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 20

THE FOCUS on rapid expansion of renewables in the absence of energy storage systems, especially over the past decade, is now resulting in increasing instability in the country's electricity grid, with power shortages projected to rise sharply in May and June.

The problem has been compounded by the policy decision taken about 10 years ago to scale down thermal expansion, which provides critical baseload support to the grid during evenings in the summer months, when solar generation dips and demand remains high.

The mess in the distribution side — almost entirely on account of the unwillingness of states to plug revenue leaks in the retail end of the electricity sector — is made worse by the regular bankrolling of the losses of distribution companies (discoms) by two central lending utilities, government officials said.

### There's a thermal squeeze in the non-solar hours...

More than 21 gigawatt (GW) of renewable energy capacity, excluding large hydro, was added between April and January of the ongoing fiscal, more than doubling year-on-year. Total capacity is now 165 GW — and with large hydro, it is a little more than 212 GW. In comparison, coal-based thermal capacity stands at 220 GW.

However, unlike thermal capacities, which can be ramped up and down as required, renewable energy sources like solar and wind rely on specific atmospheric conditions to generate power. So, solar power is produced only during the day, and wind when speeds are sufficiently high.

In summer, solar generation typically peaks in the afternoon and drops off by evening, leaving a supply gap at the time when households across North India switch on air conditioners.

To meet high demand in non-solar hours, baseload capacities like thermal are ramped up. However, since India's coal-based thermal capacity has grown just 7% from the 205 GW in 2019-20, it is increasingly unavailable to bridge the shortfall.

Until recently, grid operators had the room to ramp up the plant load factor (PLF) of thermal capacities, including gas — this was because about 92 GW of thermal capacity was added between 2012 and 2017.

Now, thermal plants are already running at high PLFs during non-solar hours, and stepping up further is more difficult.

### ...And power shortages are expected this summer

India's peak power demand has surged



State Chief Ministers at the Global Renewable Energy Investors' Meet and Expo in Gandhinagar in September 2024. Bhupendra Ranu/Archive

Join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RGJOKH6aB0f> from 169 GW in 2018-19 to 250 GW in 2024-25, and is projected to touch 270 GW this summer.

But with rising demand and increasing reliance on solar and wind, which have grown from 72 GW in 2019-2020 to more than 150 GW in February, grid stability is a growing concern.

In late February, unseasonal cloud cover over northern India caused solar generation to plummet, triggering a sharp dip in grid frequency, and a scare for grid managers. Rapid demand-supply imbalances, especially in the absence of energy storage systems, can cause grid frequency deviations, which, if not controlled, may necessitate forced load shedding to prevent system instability.

India's top grid operator is anticipating power shortages from April to October, and May and June have been flagged as "high-risk months". According to the National Load Despatch Centre (NLDC), unmet electricity demand could reach 15-20 GW, especially during non-solar hours.

"May 2025 is the most critical month, followed by other high-demand summer months. The data suggests that system vulnerabilities are heightened during these periods, likely due to peak demands and potential variability in renewable generation," NLDC said in a report released in January.

In the best-case scenario, the loss of load probability (LOLP) — a measure of the likelihood that electricity demand will exceed supply — is estimated at 10% for May, in the median scenario, the LOLP rises sharply to 31%, meaning there is almost a one-in-three chance that supply will fall short.

For June, the probability of a shortfall

### Energy storage systems are key to ensure grid stability

Recognising the grid-stability challenge posed by intermittent renewables, the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), a state-owned planning body for the power sector, issued an urgent advisory on February 18, calling for energy storage systems to be co-located with solar projects.

Battery energy storage systems (BESS) and pumped storage plants (PSP) can store surplus solar power during the day and release it when demand surges outside daylight hours.

While India's total renewable energy capacity has crossed 200 GW, the installed energy storage capacity was just under 5 GW (4.75 GW of PSP and 0.11 GW of BESS) until end-2024.

"The timely commissioning of BESS and PSP... is crucial to ensuring grid stability and managing peak demand efficiently. Any delays in their deployment could exacerbate energy shortages, particularly during high-demand months and non-solar hours. Ensuring these resources are available as planned will enhance system flexibility, support renewable integration, and mitigate reliability risks," the NLDC report noted.

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Over the years, BESS prices have come down significantly, making them financially viable for developers. Still, capacity addition in India has been slow.

In 2024, tenders to develop projects with 3.6 GW or 8.1 GW-hour, of standalone BESS were floated by various agencies, according to Mercom. India needs 208.25 GW of BESS by 2030, according to an estimate by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEV).

In the final quarter of the ongoing fiscal, the NLDC projected an addition of 4 GW of BESS and 7.3 GW of PSP. In 2025-26, it expects another 13 GW of BESS and 8.9 GW of PSP to come online.

### After policy missteps, an emergency suggestion

To help increase active generation capacity, NLDC has suggested invoking emergency powers under Section 11 of the Electricity Act, 2003 to require imported coal-based plants to run at higher capacities.

"Given their higher generation costs, these stations are generally dispatched less frequently. However, during periods of system stress, their active participation can play a crucial role in meeting peak demand," it has said.

To manage intermittency, utilities are keeping aging thermal units on standby, but this comes at a high cost.

"The concept of renewables achieving grid parity is proving to be a false. If the cost of standby thermal power is taken into account, renewable power is now almost twice its cost on paper," an expert closely associated with the capacity addition plan told The Indian Express.

Policy missteps over the past decade are now coming home to roost. The Union Power Ministry's National Electricity Plan (2017-22) had effectively ruled out fresh thermal capacity additions beyond 2022, apart from the 50 GW of under-construction projects.

The plan focused almost entirely on scaling up renewables. Also, imported coal-based projects were actively discouraged, primarily in the wake of spiralling global coal prices.

In January, The Indian Express reported that multiple under-construction thermal plants were facing delays due to theft and fire, slow civil works, and raw material shortages.

Since the planning misstep of 2016-17, some corrective measures have been taken — a renewed push for nuclear generation in fast mode, a belated drive to add large thermal capacities, importing coal to restart idle plants, and policy shifts such as the latest CEA directive mandating storage for all new solar projects.

## Aurangzeb's tomb in Khuldabad, at the centre of violent protests in Nagpur

YASHEE  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 20

A PROTEST by Hindutva organisations demanding the removal of the tomb of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb led to violence and arson in Nagpur this week.

Aurangzeb, who ruled for almost a half century from 1658 until his death in 1707, is buried in Khuldabad in Maharashtra's Aurangabad district, a place of considerable Muslim religious and spiritual significance in medieval times.

Mughal territories reached their farthest extent under Aurangzeb; however the emperor spent the last years of his life trying to prevent his vast empire from collapsing around him.

Aurangzeb was on a campaign against the Marathas in the Deccan when he died, aged almost 90 years.

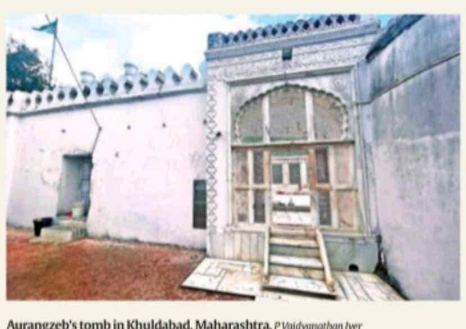
### Simple, open-air tomb

Aurangzeb was a deeply puritanical orthodox Sunni Muslim, who abjured ostentation of all kinds.

"It was Aurangzeb's wish to be buried in a simple tomb, in keeping with Islamic austerity. His grave lies inside the complex of the dargah (shrine) of Sheikh Zainuddin, a 14th-century Chishti saint," historian Ali Nadem Rezavi of Aligarh Muslim University said.

Also buried in the complex are Azam Shah, one of Aurangzeb's sons who briefly succeeded him as emperor, the first Nizam of Hyderabad, Asaf Jah I (1724-48), and Asaf Jah's son, the second Nizam, Nasir Jung (1748-50).

The American historian Catherine B. Asher described Aurangzeb's grave: "The emperor's open-air grave, in accordance with his final wishes, was marked by a simple stone cenotaph, although in the early twen-



Aurangzeb's tomb in Khuldabad, Maharashtra. P. Vaidyanathan Iyer

tieth century it was faced with white marble. The top was filled with earth so plants might grow" (The New Cambridge History of India: Architecture of Mughal India, 1992).

Rezavi said the white marble screen was erected on the orders of Lord Curzon, who was the Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905.

### Buried with a Sufi saint

A detailed description of Aurangzeb's burial is found in Saqi Musta'd Khan's *Mazzir-i-Alamgiri*, a contemporary account of the emperor's reign.

"According to His Majesty's last will, he was buried in the courtyard of the tomb of Shaikh Zainuddin [at Rauza, near Daulatabad] in a sepulchre built by the emperor in his own lifetime... The red stone platform (dabistan) over his grave, not exceeding three yards in length, two and half yards in breadth, and a few fingers in height, has a cavity in the middle. It has been filled with earth, in which fragrant herbs have been

planted" (translated by Sir Jadunath Sarkar). Rauza was later renamed Khuldabad, as Aurangzeb was given the title of Khul-Ma kani, or one who resides in eternity.

### Other Mughal graves

Aurangzeb's simple grave is the most similar to the one of his sister Jahau Ara, who lies buried in the complex of the Nizamuddin dargah in Delhi. It is very different from the sprawling garden tombs of his predecessors, the first five Mughals, Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan.

The best known Mughal tomb is the Taj Mahal in Agra, where Shah Jahan and his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal are buried. Akbar too, is buried in Agra, in a large garden in the suburb of Sikandra.

The magnificent tomb of Humayun is in Delhi, while Babur and Jahangir are buried in garden tombs in Kabul and Lahore respectively.

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[ OUR TAKE ]

## Time for a reset in India-Canada ties

New contexts provide ballast for both nations to cement a relationship based on mutual respect and commitment to free trade

With Justin Trudeau stepping down as Canada's prime minister, a shift in the country's politics was expected, especially its engagement with India. A recalibration in bilateral relations was also expected because of the radical shift in the Donald Trump administration's approach towards Canada. Trump's transactional foreign-policy stance has Canada in the crosshairs, and his challenge to Ottawa's sovereignty itself has changed the dynamic of the once close relationship. The India-Canada relationship cratered after Trudeau alleged that Indian government agents were involved in the killing of pro-Khalistan separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023, and since then, both sides have expelled diplomats and taken steps that amounted to a downgrading of diplomatic relations.

However, even through the worst patches in the diplomatic relationship, security agencies on both sides continued their behind-the-scenes conversation to address a range of concerns. After yet another rupture last October, the two sides appear to have picked up the pieces again, a move no doubt hastened by Trudeau's exit. This conversation has produced some results, including cooperation in combating trans-national crime and possibility of high commissioners being sent to each other's capitals as reported by *Hindustan Times*.

There are compelling reasons for getting the India-Canada relationship back on track, including the presence in Canada of one of the largest Indian diaspora communities. In addition to nearly 1.8 million Canadians of Indian origin, the country hosts one million non-resident Indians. Two-way trade in goods and services was worth about \$18.18 billion in 2023 while Canadian pension funds have invested more than \$52 billion in India. Canada's growing trade ties with the US offer an opportunity for New Delhi and Ottawa to resume negotiations for a trade deal.

At the same time, the resumption of contact between security agencies should be used to address the Khalistan issue away from the public glare. For far too long, a small band of pro-Khalistan separatists have benefited from the oxygen provided by the focus on their activities. Canada will need new friends and it suits New Delhi and Ottawa to reset their ties after the short blip following the noise over the killing of a pro-Khalistan separatist. Hopefully, Canada would also understand the folly of encouraging individuals, groups and ideologies inimical to Indian interests. Both countries have much to gain by cementing a relationship based on shared democratic values, mutual respect and commitment to free trade.

## Farm reforms need a new imagination

Protests are an important component of a thriving democracy. But, at times, they can lose salience and appear bereft of logic. The mobilisation by some farmers' organisations in Punjab, which has achieved next to nothing except a quasi-closure of the national highway section that connects Punjab and Haryana for more than a year, falls in this category.

The protesting farmers are now being forcibly removed by the Punjab government. Indian agriculture faces a serious viability crisis. This is true even the relatively more prosperous states such as Punjab and Haryana. The crisis in these states is more complicated because of sustainability issues, which have worsened because of counter-productive policy nudge. This calls for urgent discussion and resolution.

Farmers prevailed when the government tried to push pro-market reforms in the sector during the pandemic. This victory should have prompted a more open-minded dialogue on the rejuvenation of farming in the country. The subsequent obduracy around guaranteed MSP by protesting farmers was the exact opposite of what was required. It is not surprising that the so-called movement made more news about the health of those on hunger striker than content (a farm policy that benefits everyone). Meanwhile, non-NDA parties have used this to target the Centre rather than engage in a much-needed debate on agriculture.

Agriculture's future cannot be redeemed by demands such as guaranteed MSP for all crops or repeatedly asking for farm loan waivers. This is in the realm of impractical and the equivalent of popping pain killers without curing the disease. Our farmers deserve better than this. Imagining a new farmers' agenda requires political honesty and foresight on all sides.

## Aggressor's peace with windfall for mediator

Ukraine's only hope of survival is the revival of Europe as a credible guarantor of Kyiv's and its own security

The American and Russian presidents have spoken about a ceasefire in Ukraine. Russia has agreed to a limited ceasefire, restricted to stopping attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. And America has expressed hopes that their ongoing talks could ultimately produce a "full ceasefire and permanent peace". This appears to be progress. But in reality, we may be seeing the makings of an aggressor's peace and a mediator's windfall.

The stated goal of American diplomacy since Donald Trump took office is to stop the daily killings of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers in a war that has likely claimed close to a million casualties. A noble goal, but ending any war requires much more than ending the killings. It requires a sense of justice restored to the wronged. And justice can only come when the aggressor and the victim are correctly identified. Unfortunately, moral reasoning over the Ukraine war is so distorted by power and anti-Westernism that the victim and the aggressor have been misidentified, making the looming sundering of Ukraine take the appearance of justice.

Facts are not facts in the post-truth world. President Trump has called

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky a dictator and blamed Ukraine for causing the war. He has also questioned Zelensky's legitimacy given the latter's presidential term ended last year. The falsity of these alternative facts becomes plain upon comparison: Between Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin's leadership styles and records between the Ukrainian and Russian political systems and between Russian and Ukrainian behaviour since February 2022.

The reason all this falseness feels like facts is because it is part of a widely popular anti-Western narrative that blames the West for the war. In this story, an imperialist America expands the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) eastwards, to the doorstep of Russia, ignoring Russian warnings of an approaching crisis, and most dramatically delivered by Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

Popularity is not the guarantee of a sound story, and this one does not address some key questions. First, why does it not give any agency to the eastern European countries that wanted to join Nato after the Cold War? Why isn't their fear of a revived Russia — based on decades of experience of stifling occupation, subjugation and domination — factored into this narrative? Ask the Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, the Poles, and the Hungarians (though not Viktor Orbán), and you'll have a more nuanced picture. These peoples wanted Nato because they didn't want to experience what Russia has done —

yet again — to one of its neighbours.

And second, the assurance — and not an agreement or a guarantee since it was not codified in a treaty — about not expanding Nato eastwards was forged with a Russia that held the promise of democracy and human freedoms and not the entity that it has become since 2000. That assurance was a product of a milieu of optimism over Russia-West relations. Facts began changing in the 2000s, when the *casus belli* is claimed to have crystallised.

Furthermore, this narrative does not ask questions of the Russian response to the alleged threat. Recall the approximately 60-kilometre-long Russian convoy that was headed towards Kyiv soon after the war began. It was aimed at subjugating Ukraine by taking the capital and perhaps installing a Moscow-friendly regime. Russia changed strategy and went for territorial conquest only after this plan failed.

Ukraine's military neutrality would have addressed Russia's security concerns. Moscow had a range of coercive options short of outright war, which it could have used to pressure the West and Kyiv into conceding neutrality. These included declaring that mobilised Russian troops at scale would remain indefinitely on Ukraine's borders; moving nuclear weapons to Belarus and Crimea; and blocking Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea. If Russia's aim was not to destroy Ukraine, as the narrative claims, then why were coercive options not exhausted?



Atul Mishra



The narrative that the West is responsible for the war has such hold on public imagination that the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and the abduction of its children have failed to appeal to global moral sense.

The fact is that over the past three years, we have seen a sovereign state aggressed upon by a neighbour that is a military hyperpower. But the narrative that the West is responsible for the war has such hold on popular imagination that the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, the destruction of its territorial integrity and economic system, plain land grab and abduction of its children have all failed to appeal to the global moral sense.

And it is set to get worse. After telling Zelensky in the Oval Office that he had "no cards", Trump said that Russia had "all the cards". Russia's progress on the battlefield has been similar to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of a large but halting economy — and if that's a card, it is not a very strong one. The strong cards were given to Russia by the Trump administration.

Even before the negotiations began in Saudi Arabia, America declared that Ukraine will not join Nato; it effectively ceded Ukrainian territory

captured by Russia; it marginalised Europe, even though the continent is indispensable to Ukraine's survival as an independent nation; and it adopted Russia's talking points on the causes of war and Zelensky's legitimacy as Ukraine's leader. The result is a Russia firmly in the driver's seat.

It is hard to not see that America is mediating the aggressor's peace and securing a windfall for itself. The infamous deal for Ukraine's critical minerals, a glaring illustration of neocolonialism that should disappoint those who thought Trump will put an end to the American empire.

Ukraine's only hope of surviving this aggressor's peace is the revival of Europe as a credible guarantor of Ukrainian and its own security. And in a race against a few weeks, the continent is already delayed by years.

Atul Mishra teaches international relations at Sri Narayana Institute of Eminence, Delhi-NCR. The views expressed are personal

## Air India's flight into training turbulence

In the last few weeks, Air India (AI) added a few more black marks to its not so stellar report card. The Tata-owned airline was in the news after a flight bound for Delhi had to return to Chicago airport after eight out of its 12 lavatories were found clogged and unusable, an embarrassing state of affairs by any yardstick and one that reeks of some kind of sabotage. AI was also in the news for having denied a wheelchair to an elderly passenger, prompting the civil aviation minister to say a show-cause notice would be issued to the carrier.

Almost no week goes by without a minister, politician, celebrity, senior media person, or regular fliers complaining about the airline's service and/or poor handling. Many of these incidents blow up, thanks to social media.

But a more serious incident received much less attention than it deserved, compared to the dogged toots — AI fired a simulator trainer instructor, possibly removed 10 pilots trained under him from flying duty after finding evidence of poor training practices and flouting of standard procedures earlier this month. While the company complaints led to an internal investigation and the incident was reported suo motu to the directorate general of civil aviation (DGCA). Actions against the officials involved has ostensibly been taken by the airline. This is by far the most worrisome problem the airline faces, given ensuring passenger safety is the cornerstone of the business.

What is disturbing is that many in the airline and outside argue that this is just the tip of the iceberg as far as training practices and safety norms in the airline are concerned. Former and serving commanders and airline insiders say that this did not happen overnight and has been building up for a few years. In short, AI's training standards have not been on a par with most competitors for a while. Three or four legacy allegations have been made over a period, some of which might have been resolved; others might require a more thorough investigation, just like the case with the simulator training.

One, unlike IndiGo and Jet Airways, AI has no fixed prescription of how many sessions its trainees need before they take command of a new aircraft type. DGCA prescribes a syllabus for full flight simulator (FFS) training for a co-pilot who hopes to take command. This involves a co-pilot flying a particular type moving from the right seat to the left seat. But when pilots are moving from one type of aircraft to another, the operator can also add a few Fixed Base Simulator (FBS) sessions to familiarise trainees before commencing the more expensive FFS sessions.

THE ALLEGATION THAT SOME INSTRUCTORS SEE TRAINING AS AN AVERAGE FOR ADDITIONAL INCOME AND LITTLE ELSE HAS PERSISTED. A DGCA AUDIT FOUND THAT SOME TRAINERS WERE LOGGING IN HOURS BUT WERE NOT IMPARTING ANY TRAINING

This is left to the discretion of the airline; in AI's case, it has been left to what the head of training deems appropriate at that point in time. This has led to varying pilot competencies, based on how rigorous their training was or wasn't. A senior airline commander said that, at times, he is wary of letting the co-pilot do one leg of the journey as he is not fully convinced of his abilities. While this is understandable in inclement weather or other complicated situations, it is unacceptable in the normal course of things. Real-time practice is critical for a co-pilot who is poised to take command, as a simulator cannot replicate real flying experience.

A second worrying aspect is the change in the process of instructor selection for training remains unchanged. Earlier, the entire simulator training was conducted by a dedicated instructor who also supervised line flying. This ensured continuity and accountability as each instructor would be responsible for the trainees as their responsibility. In 2017, a circular had been issued internally to this effect.

But, over time, this was watered down, and the concept of a dedicated instructor was done away with. As a result, no one assumes any responsibility or can be held accountable. Moreover, the handover of a trainee lacks due diligence as the reports of one instructor are not very detailed. Even in other airlines, a trainee can end up being assigned to more than one instructor, but in more professionally managed airlines, even if a trainee is assigned to more than one instructor, the instructor will write detailed reports about the trainee's performance, giving a good insight to the next instructor. In AI, instructors rarely write such detailed reports. Whether that has changed under the new management remains unclear.

The allegation that some instructors see training as an avenue for additional income and little else has persisted. It may be more an aberration than a rule, but a recent DGCA audit found that some trainers were logging in hours but were not imparting any training. Reports about the trainer's performance, giving a good insight to the next instructor. In AI, instructors rarely write such detailed reports. Whether that has changed under the new management remains unclear.

Lastly, senior managers in the airline argue that after privatisation, there has been a "rush-hour" approach taken by the new management. The focus is on expansion. Aggressive training of batches is on, and this many argue, is a concern since safety could be compromised.

The airline has consistently maintained that its trainee pilots are released as co-pilots only after they have flown under the supervision of qualified trainers for the duration deemed adequate and successfully completed training sessions on the simulator. They are authorised to perform take-offs and landings only if their performance is found satisfactory. Yet, the recent sacking of the trainer based on the airline's own internal investigation leaves observers with many doubts.

Anjali Bhargava writes about governance, infrastructure and the social sector. The views expressed are personal

FILIPPO GRANDI | UNHCR CHIEF

Brutal funding cuts in the humanitarian sector are putting millions of lives at risk. The consequences for people fleeing danger will be immediate and devastating



## A role for private schools in transforming education

India's school education system has seen multiple crises in the last decade, yet the crisis in learning outcomes persists. While access has expanded, foundational literacy remains low. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) yet again highlights that half of class 2 students struggle to read a simple class 2 text. Unlike China, which reaped the benefits of strategic investments in elementary education over decades in the 20th century, India is yet to take a data-driven approach to school education reform. The country's obsession with global assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since 2009 only delays the reality check we need. Without a structured approach to assess and correct, systemic change will remain distant.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges these gaps and proposes significant reforms — from third-party assessments to technology integration and K-12 redesign. Yet, execution still lags. None of the four key themes of the NEP can be addressed in silos. An education system that struggles at the foundational and ecosystem level can't deliver the structural transformation we need to meet the Viskit Bharat goal.

Against this backdrop, the role of private schools has expanded significantly. While the State gradually stepping back, private institutions have filled the gap. Today, over 50% of children in several states attend private schools. However, the sector remains fragmented, limiting spread of innovation. Schools compete rather than collaborate, and successful models often remain confined to a handful of institutions. But many private schools have also introduced multilingual education, international curricula, and global exposure, preparing students for an interconnected world. Collaborations with ed-tech companies have made classrooms more engaging, personalised and future ready. These gains, however, are unevenly distributed, primarily benefiting urban, high-fee schools.

A strategy of defining an elevated purpose and responsibility, reinforcing trust, promoting data-led public-private-private engagement is crucial.

Defining an elevated purpose and responsibility: Governments deploy long-term systemic reform. This is where private schools

must step up — not just in improving their own institutions but shaping the broader ecosystem. While they run as social enterprises, most have the resources and flexibility to drive change. They must do so with a sense of responsibility that goes beyond commercial interests. And these schools, despite private ownership, must see themselves as essential partners in nation-building.

Reinforcing trust: Despite their contributions, private schools continue to be viewed with scepticism. The dominant narrative — and in many cases, rightly so — frames them as profit-driven entities. Regulatory policies often reinforce a transactional approach, limiting deeper collaboration. Yet, history shows that private initiatives have driven innovation in other sectors. The school system cannot afford to remain an exception.

Data-led engagement: We should change how the State, private schools, and edtech companies engage. A new model of partnership, built on performance orientation and shared accountability, is essential. While the State can create and transparently run such models, private schools too must move beyond their vendor mindset and work with private partners within an enabling framework that prioritises learning outcomes, competency-based education, and employability. We must bring in Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven assessments, adaptive learning, and personalised instruction to scale quality education. This is a long overdue need to drive innovation in India's school education system.

The urgency to act cannot be overstated. India's demographic window of opportunity is shrinking, and if it is to achieve the Viskit Bharat vision by 2047, school education must be reimagined. The role of private schools must go beyond being centres of academic instruction to becoming hubs of innovation, data-driven decision-making, and large-scale transformation. By reimagining how they engage, with more trust and an elevated sense of responsibility, they can address our learning crisis and create thousands of schools of the future.

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# Trump's cryptic quote and the looming constitutional crisis

M J VINO

On February 15, 2025, United States President Donald Trump posted a cryptic quote on his platform, Truth Social, attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte: "He who saves the country does not violate the law." Trump appears to have dramatically reimagined the scope of his executive powers. The same post was also shared on the official White House account on X. This quote first appeared in a book published in 1838 authored by Honoré de Balzac, written seven years after Napoleon's death. This Napoleonic quote posted by Trump has ignited a firestorm on social media and is the focus of this article. Predictably, the Democrats were quick to capitalise on the controversy. The battle lines seem to have been drawn because Trump appears to be positioning himself

above the law and arguing that his actions fall outside the discussions of constitutional law. Almost 20 lawsuits have already been filed against the Trump administration over federal worker dismissals.

Perhaps Napoleon meant—and Trump implied—that critical actions and decisions taken in the national interest can justify legal and ethical transgressions. But does this suggest that no judge should have the constitutional/legal authority to restrain the president? Trump's cryptic remark has opened up a Pandora's box in US intellectual and legal circles. By implication, it suggests that in the pursuit of 'Making America Great Again', laws, though necessary, are not always obligatory. This sets the stage for a potential head-on collision between the president (executive branch) and the judiciary, possibly leading to a constitutional crisis. In the

process, it could also lead to the usurpation of the powers of the US Congress.

The timing of Trump's post is unlikely to be coincidental. Incidentally, on the same day Trump posted this, a federal judge for the District of Rhode Island, John J. McConnell Jr ruled that the federal government had not fully complied with his order to unfreeze federal spending. Some courts had previously blocked spending tied to Trump's executive orders. Many Republicans, however, view these rulings as judicial overreach, arguing that Trump is simply trying to curb wasteful government expenditure. The stage now appears set for a showdown at the Supreme Court.

While Trump insists that he will abide by the decisions of the Supreme Court, some of his colleagues have taken to social media to attack the judges and even

call for their impeachment. Vice President JD Vance has gone so far as to claim that "judges are not allowed to control the executive's legitimate power." This is a dangerous maxim. In other words, whatever the president does cannot be illegal, as long as they do it for the common good. Trump's post is arguably one of the most controversial ever made by a sitting president. It is profoundly disturbing. The fact is that the president's office is a creature of the law and subject to checks and balances.

Some legal scholars argue that this cryptic remark could imply laying the groundwork for something far more serious, like refusing to comply with federal court decisions and violating the rule of law. This should not be an alibi for violating court orders or for making America great again. Many law experts, like Kate Shaw, a law

professor at the University of Pennsylvania, described the post as demonstrating "maximum contempt for core constitutional values" like separation of powers, freedom of speech and rule of law. Pamela Karlan, law professor at Stanford, argues that "while presidents might act unconstitutionally in particular cases, I never had the sense that there was a president for whom the constitution was essentially meaningless". Trump's post is like a trial balloon and a provocation, and he has been toying with the idea of being above the law. Trump is caught between the need to abide by legal order on the one hand and his notion of the sanctity of the vote on the other. Hence, to Trump, any action taken to save the country is inherently lawful. However, it's difficult to do that by ignoring ethical and legal implications. Disregard of the court rulings can lead

to a constitutional crisis, as even some Republican lawmakers have indicated. To what extent Trump's post will lead to a constitutional crisis remains to be seen. The dilemma is whether one should take Trump's comment literally or seriously or both. The question is whether all leaders who claim to save their country can be above the law. Trump seems to believe that it is not necessarily illegal if he can save the country. Make sure Trump's posts are not just a passing thought. This could result in precedents that are unwarranted. In a democracy, laws are not necessarily arbitrary constraints. Rather, they inherently constitute the foundation of governance and justice.

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## With a string of failures in his space endeavours, it is clear that Musk's self-proclaimed stature as a trailblazing innovator is being tested like never before

CLIVE IRVING

Elon Musk is demonstrating that a business dependent on one man can have a serious downside. Electric carmaker Tesla, once beloved by progressives, has become, for many, a poisoned brand amid Elon Musk's turn to the hard right, and its value is falling fast. What is meant to be his great leap into space, the new Starship, has had two successive and spectacular test failures. Using his own flippant term, Musk's wunderkind status could be experiencing a "rapid unscheduled disassembly".

In rebuttal, he could point to a recent achievement: providing the vehicle for the safe return of two astronauts from the International Space Station. The astronauts had been marooned for nine months because of a flawed Boeing crew capsule, adding to the long list of Boeing fiascos.

The contrast between Musk and Boeing fits into the folklore of pioneering American businesses, in which the determined risk-taker supplants a doddering legacy competitor. Superficially, that is true—Musk's SpaceX has eclipsed Boeing in aerospace just as Tesla, at least for a time, outstripped the conventional auto business. Those were singular achievements. As you look deeper, it's clear that Musk's innovative willpower can become, in the public eye, as much a liability as an asset.

That is clear from the test failures of Starship, a giant rocket designed to be fully reusable. Both of them sprayed flaming debris over the Caribbean and disrupted commercial air traffic, while garnering fewer headlines than the astronauts' safe return. Behind Musk's casual brushing away of these incidents lies a serious test of his approach to building space vehicles. The objective is to deliver a version of Starship that NASA will use as part of its Artemis programme to return astronauts to the moon's surface. This would require a ship that not only can be launched into orbit, it would also need to be refuelled once there. Clearly, the goal date of 2027 is highly unrealistic.

The first stage of the flights, using Super Heavy booster rockets, is not the problem. That has worked, including the recent spectacular recapturing of the expended booster to the launchpad. But failures near the engines that get Starship into orbit are what's causing the ship to explode in ways that, according to experts, will require extensive (and expensive) redesign.

SpaceX has never been a one-man show. Its success has as much to do with its current president, Gwyneth Holt, as it has with Musk. She gathered a brilliant team of engineers and underpinned his imagination and appetite for risk-taking with disciplined management, while never coming between Musk and the lime-light. Starship, however, has become like a personal shot of testosterone for him, the most audacious expression of his intention to go beyond the moon to Mars. His challenges have intensified just as he switched his attention to the Department of Government Efficiency.

In his Inaugural Address, President Trump declared that America would pursue "our manifest destiny to the stars" and said that astronauts would plant the



SpaceX's Starship lifts off from Starbase near Boca Chica, Texas, on March 6, during its 8th test flight. It quickly lost contact with the vessel as it roared over the Gulf of Mexico. "Can confirm we did lose contact with the ship. Unfortunately, this happened last time too," SpaceX officials said, alluding to a launch in January in which the same upper stage of the rocket exploded over the Caribbean, raining debris. FILE PHOTO/APP

## So what if Elon Musk rescued the astronauts?

American flag on Mars. Though Trump has said this would happen by the end of his term, the troubled trajectory of Starship shows just how fanciful that ambition is. Returning to the moon is perhaps, for the moment, as much as NASA can deliver by that date. Colonising the moon is also a rich commercial prospect, as China also realises.

The moon became a symbolic measure of the exceptional American spirit in July 1969. With the first lunar landing, the Apollo program became a triumph of the analogue age. Boeing provided the enormous rocket that lifted the astronauts into space. In 2014 NASA, trusting Boeing's reputation, called on it to provide the new generation crew capsule, as well as employing SpaceX.

But 2014 was also the year that the then-Boeing chief executive, Jim McNeerney, disavowed the moonshot level of risk-taking that helped make the company an icon. Boeing's former strategy of shooting for game-changing new models, he said, is "the wrong way to pursue this business. The more-for-less world will not let you pursue moonshots."

That upheaval the company's switch from a collegiate style of management to one in which pumping money back to shareholders had priority. Slashing costs cut quality control. Two fatal crashes of the new 737 Max jets followed, and Airbus succeeded Boeing as the benchmark for new jets.

That reversal of fortunes was also the making of the alternative Musk legend, of a risk-tolerant business leader who de-

livered to NASA on budget, on time and with a consistently safe performance. And SpaceX's earlier launches of Falcon 9—reusable rockets that land majestically on earth after launching their capsules into orbit—demonstrated mastery of a trick that Boeing has still not managed.

Now, the failures of Starship cast a shadow over that legend, the first sign that SpaceX's next challenge takes Musk into far more demanding territory. Meanwhile, his Tesla problem has been brewing for a while. The company was losing its novelty and momentum long before he boarded the Trump ship. China is flooding Europe with inexpensive and high-quality electric vehicles, taking Musk's original concept and mass-producing a model that the people who build it can actually afford.

Even then, Tesla could have held its place in the luxury market segment alongside the likes of BMW. But then Musk saw fit to applaud the rise of ultrarich parties in Europe and organise his squads of disrupters in Washington. That produced a public revulsion for which Tesla became a sitting target, something vulnerable to attack in a way that the other parts of his empire were not—he has received billions in business with the government, including an array of work that is classified, the Starlink satellite constellation that is indispensable and the Starshield satellites that serve the highest level of American intelligence gathering.

Turning buyer remorse into a political movement is unusual. Henry Ford was a rabid antisemite, as were other titans of

industry in the 1920s and '30s, but he was not, like Musk, a man with much political agency. Musk has chosen to be a different kind of mogul—an avatar of what could be called the new magic born in Silicon Valley. As his record in rockets and cars suffers reverses, we can only hope that the same comes true for his predatory assault on the guts of the United States' government.

Elon Musk declared last month that the federal government was engaged in "utterly insane" activity, claiming without evidence that it had distributed \$100 billion to people without Social Security numbers. Two days after Musk's comments, one of his key lieutenants, Steve Davis, began pressing the Social Security Administration for information. Davis gave the agency's leaders to insist they call a young engineer from Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency access to databases that contained sensitive information about Americans.

Davis's demand was "unprecedented," Tiffany Flick, a former Social Security official, said in a sworn statement this month for a lawsuit filed by federal employees trying to block access to that data. She added that she could feel Davis grow impatient in the hours before the DGE engineers eventually permitted to investigate "the general myth of supposed widespread Social Security fraud." Deploying staff into federal agencies is just one task that Davis has carried out recently for Musk, as the world's richest man continues an all-out effort to reshape the US government.

The New York Times

## AAP's decline spells out the limits of alternative politics

GANESH DATT PODDAR

Indian politics has long witnessed the formation of new political parties by leaders who either leave their parent party or are expelled from it by its leadership.

In recent years, the Democratic Progressive Azad Party, founded by former Congress veteran Gulam Nabi Azad, and the Jan Suraj Party, launched by former Janata (Dal) leader Prashant Kishor, readily came to one's mind. Against this backdrop, the emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was remarkable. Its roots in the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement in 2012 gave it a distinctive character. It was born from independent India's romance with the non-party political process—where civil society activism shifted its gear to enter the terrain of the formal party system to reform the system from within. AAP captured the interest of the intelligentsia, ignited the imagination of the middle class, and raised the hopes of the aam aadmi (common man), winning two consecutive landslides in the 2015 and 2020 Delhi assembly elections. However, its debacle in the recent Delhi polls, coupled with the Bharatiya Janata Party's resounding victory, calls for an examination of what went wrong with this experiment in alternative politics.

According to journalist Ajay Singh, who has studied the organisational capacity of the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi, AAP's failure lay in its inability to build a robust party structure. Soon after its inception, AAP faltered organisationally when it could not retain its founding members together. In April 2015, Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav were expelled from the party for alleged "anti-party activities". Prashant Bhushan later accused the founder, Arvind Kejriwal, of turning AAP into a "high command-oriented" party. In subsequent years, AAP's internal culture of personality-driven politics at the expense of organisational depth. Within a few years, AAP lost its distinctiveness and soon revolved entirely around the personality of Arvind Kejriwal.

AAP experiment demonstrates the need to search for alternative politics from the romanticism of the non-party political process. More crucially, its drubbing in Delhi polls highlights that challenging the BJP requires more than short-term electoral calcu-

lations; it demands factoring in the logic of competitive politics, realistically working with other opposition parties, and developing a long-term perspective.

Soon after getting ensnared in power in Delhi, AAP got enmeshed in serious allegations of corruption against its top functionaries and came to resemble any other mainstream political party. Its failure to take a stand on the abrogation of Article 370 and silence during the Delhi riots smacked more of a calculated electoral strategy aimed at garnering the majority vote than a result of principled politics. Kejriwal's public display of religiosity—visits to temples, exhorting the citizens of Delhi to partake in the celebration of Hindu festivals, announcement of financial assistance to pujari (priest in a Hindu temple) and granthi (priest in a Gurudwara) in the run-up to Delhi assembly elections, etc.—did not strike a chord with the AAP's core constituency, who could see through his machinations as electoral gimmicks to make up for the AAP government's underperformance on the other fronts. Through such acts and utterances, it seemed, Kejriwal was trying to follow a template set up by the BJP for electoral victory.

The Delhi verdict has implications for national politics beyond the city-state and the 2025 Delhi assembly elections. First and foremost, it has robbed the AAP of perhaps its last chance to course-correct and remain relevant as an alternative to mainstream political parties. Second, the results show society's acquiescence to Hindu nationalism and the relentless march of Hindutva politics. Third, it has exposed the weakness of the Opposition, the INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) bloc, which, at this juncture, is no match for the organisational capacity, electoral strategy, and appeal of the BJP among the voters. Fourth, it is indicative that the electorate are discerning, and the voters will go by the results that the contestants show, by what they do, and not by what they say. And, last but not least, it is yet another wake-up call for all those who believe in universal brotherhood and constitutional democracy to resume their fight against the ills of religious nationalism with renewed vigour and channel their energies into building robust institutions in the cause of fraternity and the public good.

*(The writer is adjunct faculty, Department of Social Sciences, FLAME University)*

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1975

Chief Justice AN Ray escapes attempt on life: assailant flees

New Delhi, March 20  
Chief Justice A. N. Ray of the Supreme Court had a miraculous escape when two hand-grenades were slipped into his car but failed to explode. The hand-grenades were slipped through an open window at the back seat where the Chief Justice and his son, Mr. Ajay Ray, were sitting. The car was at the Tisk Mary and Bhagwan Das Road cross, when the red light appeared and the car stopped. The miscreant slipped the grenades into the car, and ran towards Carnaght Place on the Bhagwan Das Road.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2000

PM, Clinton to sign Vision Statement

New Delhi, March 20  
India and the United States are expected to "institutionalise" bilateral political and security dialogue when Prime Minister A B Vajpayee and President Bill Clinton sign a "Vision Statement" tomorrow. The Vision Statement, billed the most important document that will emerge out of the first presidential visit in 22 years, will envisage institutionalisation of the expanding Indo-US engagement in all important areas, especially political, security, trade and other commercial fields, official sources said. It will set the direction for a new level of bilateral ties in the coming years.

### OASIS | NAZEER AHMED KAZI

## Freedom of expression and its sacred power

Freedom of expression stands as one of the most fundamental rights in any democratic society. It empowers individuals to voice their thoughts, ideas, and opinions without fear of censorship or persecution. This freedom not only promotes personal growth and self-expression but also fosters healthy public discourse, driving social and political progress. It enables societies to challenge injustices, hold leaders responsible and cultivate innovation and creativity.

Freedom of expression is about more than just speaking out—it encompasses the right to access information, share ideas, and challenge established norms. It serves as the backbone of democratic institutions, enabling citizens to participate actively in shaping their societies. Without this liberty, the essence of democracy weakens, leading to unchecked power and suppressed voices.

While freedom of expression protects a wide range of ideas, speech can be restricted if it violates the rights of others, advocates hatred, and incites discrimination or violence. The concept of freedom of expression is deeply rooted not only in modern democratic ideals but also in the world's major religions. The Bhagavad Gita highlights the importance of understanding, dialogue, and self-expression in pursuit of truth and righteousness. Sri Krishna advises Arjuna on the value

of speaking with clarity and compassion. "Speak words that are truthful, pleasant, beneficial, and do not cause agitation to others" (Bhagavad Gita 17.15). This teaching underscores the significance of responsible and respectful speech in fostering harmony and wisdom, reminding us that words have the power to heal or harm.



The Quran encourages dialogue and respectful discourse, stating, "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best" (Quran 6:125). This verse emphasises the importance of speaking with kindness and wisdom, promoting a culture of re-

spectful dialogue. It reflects the Islamic principle that discussions, even with those who disagree, should be rooted in patience and understanding. Christianity also upholds the virtue of expression rooted in love and truth. The Bible encourages believers to speak honestly, with compassion. "Speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15) is the guiding principle, promoting dialogue that fosters understanding and community while respecting others' dignity. Freedom of expression, when shared with kindness, can strengthen relationships and build trust within communities.





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

— Ramnath Goenka

## LET'S FOCUS ON GRAVE CURRENT ISSUES THAN A CENTURIES-OLD GRAVE

It's a sign of regression that the grave of a 17th century ruler is gobbling up an inordinate amount of political oxygen in 21st century India. But it's a serious problem when a proposal to relocate it is rupturing communal harmony and triggering violence. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis added fuel to fire last week when he proclaimed merit in BJP MP Udayanraje Bhosale's demand to remove Aurangzeb's grave from the small town of Khuldabad, not far from the Ellora caves. Resentment had built up after the release of a film fictionalising the travails of Shivaji's son Shambhaji at the hands of the Mughal emperor. The latest political moves led to violence in the nearby Shambhaji Nagar (earlier Aurangabad) and Nagpur almost 500 km away.

There may be reasons to keep a dark cloud of judgement hanging over the Mughal's reign. But there are also two big lessons from history that should deter us from acting on it. First, not far from Aurangzeb's unloved grave is the brownstone mausoleum of Malik Ambar, the Ethiopian-origin Muslim general of Ahmednagar sultanate who mentored Shivaji's grandfather Maloji and set off the Bhosale clan's glorious saga. Second, historians have shown that the Mughal emperor showed more religiosity to draw a contrast with others as his failures mounted—including on the battlefield against the Marathas' Muslim commanders and the Muslim rulers of Bijapur and Golconda. Today's rulers would do well to avoid the crutch of piety and answer more consequential questions such as why Kailash Arjun Nagare, winner of a young farmer award in Maharashtra, died by suicide last week after complaining about a lack of irrigated water.

Let Aurangzeb lie in a corner of his spiritual master Zainuddin Shirazi's courtyard. The emperor's remains must have gone back to the elements long ago. The bit of stone and lattice installed around the grave centuries later by a Hydrabadi nizam and a British viceroy would be all that can be physically removed. A plaque in the corner says the grave cost Aurangzeb 14 and three-fourths rupees, which he paid for by sewing caps. Its 'relocation' now would cost Indian taxpayers an enormous sum, not to speak of the violence it has and still can cause. It's definitely not worth the cost.

## CENTRE WILL HAVE TO HELP T'GANA BALANCE GROWTH

THE budget document of any government indicates, at a glance, whether the direction it's headed in is realistic. In that sense, Telangana Deputy Chief Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka's budget for 2025-26 is tinged with a cautious optimism. Though it's the first Telangana budget to cross the ₹3-lakh crore mark, the PM has stretched it only by about ₹15,000 crore compared to the last fiscal. Despite a plethora of welfare schemes, the fiscal deficit is pegged at ₹54,000 crore. If the actual numbers at the end of the year land close to the estimates, Bhatti will have done a fine balancing act.

The lion's share of ₹1,04 lakh crore went to the Congress's six guarantees and other welfare schemes. Capital expenditure has been pegged at ₹36,504 crore, including over ₹10,000 crore for Hyderabad and a proposed fourth large city. The emphasis on accelerating and spreading out industrialisation, and the Mega Masterplan 2050 for it must be appreciated. It's imperative for Telangana to not solely focus on Hyderabad. Only 22.5 percent of its workforce is engaged in the industrial sector, while 42.7 percent works in agriculture; the services sector including IT remains the main contributor, employing 34.8 percent of the workforce. Seen in this perspective, the state's high per capita income isn't a real barometer to assess the demography's economic strength. While welfare schemes surely do empower a long-term plan is also needed. Besides, the artificial intelligence revolution might prove disruptive for both the services and industrial sectors sometime soon.

Hence, the government's focus on a proposed AI City, up-grading skills and industrialisation is as important as its welfare schemes. The main challenge is to ensure seamless transition to the age of AI in all sectors including agriculture. One big hurdle will be a shortage of funds. While the state will have to mobilise funds without getting into a debt trap—with the outstanding debt at over ₹5 lakh crore—the onus will also be on the Centre. As Bhatti rightly pointed out, Telangana's share in the central pool of taxes decreased from 2.43 to 2.1 percent under the 15th Finance Commission. His call for rational tax devolution that does not punish performing states must be debated.

### QUICK TAKE

#### BEYOND BYZANTINE INTRIGUE

STANBUL, which houses a fifth of Türkiye's population, has always wielded immense power in the country's politics. So a former mayor—Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now president—trying to crush the incumbent—challenger Ekrem Imamoglu—is just another episode of Byzantine court politics. It comes when Türkiye seems on the verge of clinching peace with the Kurds, its largest ethnic minority and matters also because the NATO member is a close backer of the new Syrian regime. Now that its ruler for more than two decades has detained yet another opponent, one wonders whether the world's most volatile region has just added another crisis of political and diplomatic faith.

BOTH natural and economic ecosystems have one thing in common—they evolve through a process of 'creative destruction'. The inefficient are weeded out over time and replaced by those that are more competent. Thus, the competitiveness of an economy is critically dependent on its ability to encourage and enable a churning of all the disruptions it may cause in the short run. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that India still does not have a level of churn that one expects of an economy based on high levels of innovation and risk-taking.

One simple way to gauge creative destruction is to look at the churn in the top 10 companies by market capitalisation. Comparing those who made the top 10 in March 2005 to those in March 2025, it is quite striking that seven of them are the same—Reliance, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, State Bank of India, Bharti Airtel, Hindustan Unilever and ICICI Bank. Of the new entrants, Life Insurance Corporation is an old public sector enterprise that happened to be listed recently. The other two—HDFC and Bajaj Finance—are hardly examples of new blood.

Contrast this with what happened in the US over the same period. Only one company—Microsoft—managed to stay in the top 10 by market capitalisation. Companies like General Electric, Exxon Mobil, AIG and Walmart have been replaced by Meta, Alphabet, Amazon and Tesla. It is not just the companies, but the successful sectors that have changed. This is what has allowed the US to remain an economic superpower.

A similar dynamism is visible when one looks at China's top 10 companies. Seven of them have changed over the last 20 years. Only three state-owned banks are common to both lists. Meanwhile, old heavyweights like PetroChina, Sinopec and China Mobile have been replaced by the likes of Tencent, Alibaba and Kweichow Moutai. Ranked at number eight, BYD has completely disrupted the world of automobiles. Notice again how both companies and sectors have churned.

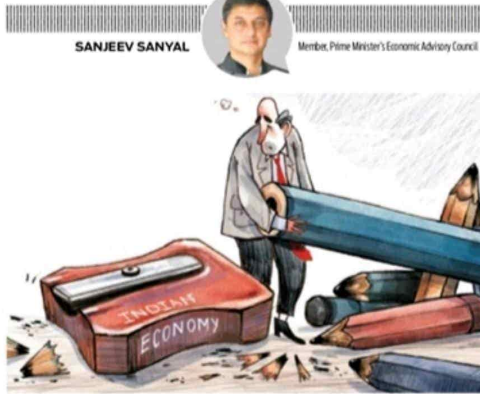
The importance of young and energetic companies is visible in both the US and China. Most of the currently high-performing companies in the US were set up after 1990: Alphabet (established in 1998 as Google), Meta (2004 as Facebook) and Amazon (1994). Microsoft and Apple, set up respectively in 1981 and 1977, are old companies by American standards. With the exception of the

Bringing in fresh blood often requires purging old systems. But that has hardly been the case for the Indian economy, where protection has been prioritised over risk-taking

## THE NEED TO USE CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

SANJEEV SANYAL

Member, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council



SOUBHAY ROY

state-owned banks, China's top companies are also young: BYD (2007), Alibaba (1999) and Tencent (1998) among them.

Contrast this with India's big companies: SBI (established in 1921 as Imperial Bank), Tata Consultancy Services (1968), Reliance (1973), Life Insurance Corporation (1956), Infosys (1981) and Hindustan Unilever (1933). The only top-10 company established after 1990 is Bharti Airtel (1995).

This is not to suggest that India has not experienced any creative destruction at all. In the last decade, several large companies such as Jet Airways and Essar Steel have disappeared even as new ones like OYO and Zomato have emerged. The introduction of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code in 2016 and

the subsequent closing up of the banking sector led to some amount of churn. There has also been a boom in startups in recent years. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that India, now at the threshold of becoming the world's third largest economy, still does not have the same level of dynamic churn as the top two.

So what needs to be done? In my personal view, the first step would be to change a deeply engrained social attitude that looks with suspicion at risk-taking and innovation. Indeed, insolvency is often seen as a moral failure rather than a business failure. It is common during bankruptcy procedures that pleas are made to somehow save an insolvent company. It is as if we were dealing with a much-loved relative who needs urgent

## THE IMPERIAL AGENDA BEHIND TRUMP'S GREENLAND GAMBIT

WHY is US President Donald Trump hyperventilating about Greenland? He spends not a single week without reasserting that its annexation by the US is inevitable, despite the fact that such a move would defy every rule of sovereignty known to humankind. "I think it will happen," he repeated as recently as March 13, forcing the chairman of the Danish parliament's defence committee to remark: "It would mean war between two NATO countries."

Trump is focussing on appropriating what is annexation by the US is inevitable, despite the fact that such a move would defy every rule of sovereignty known to humankind. "I think it will happen," he repeated as recently as March 13, forcing the chairman of the Danish parliament's defence committee to remark: "It would mean war between two NATO countries."

Trump's harping on Greenland being essential for "national security" takes its inspiration from a United States Geological Survey text (What is a critical mineral?). "The Energy Act of 2020 defined critical minerals as those that are essential to the economic or national security of the United States..." According to the USGS's 2022 list of 50 critical minerals/elements, more than a dozen of these are nestled untouched by human hands in Greenland. And many of them are abundant in Ukraine.

Greenland's critical mineral and energy assets are estimated at \$4.4 trillion, of which \$1.7 trillion are oil and gas. The value of minerals is, therefore, roughly \$2.7 trillion. More important is that Greenland's resource fortune and strategic location, both untapped, is potentially worth hundreds of billions—perhaps trillions—of dollars in the medium-term, especially with Arctic shipping routes opening up and climate change making resource extraction possible there.

But if there is one thing that the future resists with all its caprice and might, it is being reliably priced. In 2016, it was estimated that 35,000 sq km in Greenland (1.6 percent of its land area) were under mining and mineral exploration. Then, in 2021, Greenland stopped issuing licences for oil and gas because of concerns about climate change and drilling costs, and the exploration area shrank.

It isn't as if Greenland always kept the US out of the picture. (Or not!) In 1946, before Donald Trump threatened to forcibly annex the island, Greenlanders



KAJAL BASU

Veteran journalist

viewed the US positively—despite having turned down the US's proposal 79 years ago to buy Greenland for a paltry \$100 million in gold bullion, equivalent to \$1.3 billion today. In fact, BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Eni, Equinor and Shell were granted exploration/exploitation licences for Northeast Greenland in 2013. In the early 2000s, Cairn Energy blew more than \$1 billion drilling deep wells in offshore Greenland.



Donald Trump is eyeing Greenland for its natural resources that are potentially worth trillions of dollars. But annexing it, as he claims he intends to do, would defy every rule of sovereignty known to the modern world

But the dalliance with the US didn't last. Four exploration licences are currently active in Greenland, none of them given to an American company: one field in the western Davis Strait is held by the UK's Panoecean Energy and the partly-Danish national oil company (NOC) Nunoil, and three more land-based fields are held by the UK-based Greenland Gas & Oil. These four blocks expire in 2027 and 2028. Greenland's goal is 100 percent dependence on clean energy by 2030.

That's five years from now. Trump will remit office, never to return, in four years' time, in January 2029. For him, time is running out. An act of imperialist regency, eight decades in the waiting, would be his legacy.

Barely 11 years ago, Brookings had wildly misread the winds by predicting that "because of the slowdown in investments in new mining activities, it is less certain that Greenland will be able to get major mining projects off the ground". The GIG might hesitate about estimating Ukraine's reserves, but according to Kyiv, about 5 percent of the world's "critical raw materials" are in Ukraine. The World Economic Forum says only about 15 percent of Ukraine's 20,000 mineral deposits covering 116 sites were being mined when Russia attacked in 2022.

This is why Europe wants to defend Ukraine against Russia. It doesn't want the minerals to leave Europe. Ukraine is home to a third of the continent's lithium deposits. It also has about 19 million tonnes of graphite, used to make EV batteries.

Ukraine also has other critical minerals such as titanium sponge, uranium, and ilmenite. According to a 2023 study by Forbes Ukraine, the country's rare earth and other critical minerals could be worth as much as \$14.8 trillion.

Neither Greenland nor Ukraine is exploiting its reserves, for reasons ranging from war in Ukraine and climate-change concerns in Greenland, and nor are they immediately exploitable. But they exist, tantalisingly easy pickings. The US wishes to secure resources for its continued growth in a global future it views as both fossil-fuelled and battery-driven. An act of warlike but not boots-on-the-ground neo-imperialist superiority over both countries is a small price to pay for a continuing economic status of first among equals.

(Kajalbasu@gmail.com)

medical care rather than a practical resolution for a financial problem.

Second, financial regulations and processes need to allow for a lot more creative destruction as well as emergence of new kinds of financing. Today's regulations are so focused on so-called 'investor protection' that they do not allow for the risk-taking that generates cutting-edge innovation. By the same token, the bankruptcy process needs to focus on fast resolution rather than 'revival'. Regulators, bankruptcy courts and policy-makers need to accept that all risk-taking entails some amount of failure. The sensible approach is to clear the debris as soon as possible so that a new round of risk-taking can begin.

Third, there should be less protection for the established incumbents in most sectors. India's economic policies have, since the 1950s, been inordinately oriented towards protecting inefficient incumbents from global and domestic competition. This has been done through licences, permits, regulatory complexity, import tariffs, government contract requirements and other protection against competitors.

I can say from experience that industry associations rarely demand economic reforms and mostly demand protection. Since they represent incumbents, their goal is not global competitiveness or efficiency, but the building of a moat. Protection is sometimes needed for national security or for an infant industry, but this must be carefully calibrated. Any attempt to protect everything will effectively protect nothing.

Incidentally, the above argument for creative destruction also holds true for government where defunct agencies, laws and regulations need to be periodically removed. This is the focus of a systematic effort is being currently done in the central government under the banner of 'process reforms'. Hundreds of old laws and regulations have been removed, outdated agencies such as the Tariff Commission have been shut down, and default lists—such as those for industrial monuments—are being revisited.

To sum up, India needs to celebrate creative destruction in the economy. The central philosophical idea has existed in India for millenniums in the form of Shiva and Kali. We now need to incorporate it into our policy-making, and cultural attitudes towards risk-taking, failure and renewal.

(Views are personal)

### MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@mornstandard.in

#### Fanning flames

Ref: Not piecemeal deals, West Asia needs lasting solutions for peace (Mar 20). Religious extremism runs deep in West Asia. As long as it does, the violence will continue. Western states must stop supplying arms to such conflict-ridden regions. Their weapons are fanning the flames of conflict.

Sankara Venkata Raman, Chennai

#### Reduce plastic

Ref: Scientific management of waste is lucrative (Mar 20). Scientific waste management is crucial, but proactive steps need to be taken to minimise waste generation. Plastic packaging is the biggest villain. Promoting eco-friendly alternatives and adopting a 'reduce and reuse' option for plastic packaging can help to some extent.

Nabin Panigrahi, Rayagada

#### City infrastructure

Ref: Attaching strings: Centre to states & states to cities (Mar 20). The column made for an interesting read. With poor infrastructure plaguing our cities, a third language would be of least concern to a common citizen. Our wish is to see the governments utilise our tax contributions more efficiently to improve our lives through better urban infrastructure.

Anand Hosmane, email

#### Preventing dropouts

Ref: Why punish students for systemic faults (Mar 20). The curriculum should explicitly state the objectives for each class, and teachers should employ simple and effective teaching techniques so as to impart knowledge effectively. Both parents and teachers must take the responsibility to identify and address the factors contributing to student dropouts.

Anvishappa Nylsami, Coimbatore

#### Sunila's resilience

Ref: Joy all around as Sunila's back home (Mar 20). Sunila Williams deserves high praise for displaying extraordinary courage and resilience during her 9-month-long stay at the International Space Station. Space research holds immense potential, and our youth can draw inspiration from Sunila to pursue careers in this field.

Gowdhartha Myneddu, Vijayawada

#### Temple entry

Ref: Non-Hindu believers should be given entry into temples, says Sivagiri Mutt chief (Mar 20). Swami Sachchidananda's demand that non-Hindus who revere Hindu gods be allowed to enter Hindu temples is reasonable. There should be no restriction as long as they adhere to the code of conduct. I feel this would be good for social and religious harmony.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad



## Editor's TAKE

### Welcome back to Earth, Sunita

The safe return of Sunita Williams to Earth has brought immense relief to her admirers

The prayers of millions of admirers and fans were finally answered when NASA astronaut Sunita Williams, along with her colleague Butch Wilmore, returned to Earth after an unplanned nine-month mission aboard the International Space Station (ISS). Originally slated for a brief eight-day stay, their mission was extended due to technical issues with Boeing's Starliner spacecraft, underscoring both challenges within NASA's commercial partnerships and the resilience of its astronauts. Launched on June 5, 2024, aboard Boeing's Starliner for its inaugural crewed flight, Williams and Wilmore were expected to return after approximately a week. But that was not to be, as a technical glitch left Sunita stranded on the space station for nine long months, testing her resilience and the acumen of NASA scientists.

However, during the mission, Starliner encountered propulsion problems and helium leaks, rendering it unsafe for the astronauts' return. Consequently, NASA opted to keep the crew aboard the ISS while addressing these issues. Boeing's Starliner has faced multiple setbacks since its development, including delays and technical malfunctions. The propulsion system anomalies and helium leaks experienced during this mission highlighted significant concerns about the spacecraft's reliability. These issues not only delayed the astronauts' return but also raised questions about NASA's strategy of partnering with private contractors for crewed spaceflight missions.

The astronauts finally returned aboard SpaceX's Crew Dragon capsule, which landed off the coast of Florida. Throughout the extended mission, Sunita Williams demonstrated exceptional adaptability and commitment. She continued to contribute to various scientific experiments and participated in spacewalks, maintaining her professionalism despite the prolonged stay which can be tough psychologically as well as physically. Her ability to navigate the uncertainties of space travel exemplifies the resilience and mental fortitude required of astronauts. Back home in India, there was great relief, as images of the Space Shuttle Columbia explosion—in which Kalpana Chawla lost her life—flashed on people's minds.

Sunita Williams, the Indian-American astronaut, has become an emblem of perseverance, determination, and excellence for millions of young girls across India and beyond. With her extraordinary achievements in space exploration, she has shattered stereotypes, proving that no dream is too ambitious if one has the will to pursue it. Born in 1965 in Ohio, US, to an Indian father and a Slovenian mother, Sunita Williams' journey to space is a testament to hard work and resilience.

A graduate of the US Naval Academy, she served as a naval officer and test pilot before being selected as a NASA astronaut in 1998. Her achievements include holding records for the longest spacewalk time by a female astronaut and commanding the International Space Station (ISS), making her one of the most influential figures in space exploration. Sunita Williams' success story is a beacon of hope for countless Indian girls who aspire to excel in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Her journey sends a powerful message—that with courage and dedication, any barrier can be overcome. Coming from an Indian heritage, she represents the vast potential that lies within young minds across the country, encouraging them to dream beyond societal expectations.

Though the story has a happy ending, it also serves as a wake-up call for NASA to recalibrate its processes, ensuring that such glitches do not happen again—potentially costing human lives and shattering the dreams of millions.

## Leaderspeak

Glorifying invaders means strengthening the very roots of treason. New India will never accept those who insult our great ancestors and praise those who attacked our civilisation, violated our women, and struck at our faith. At a time when the world recognises India's cultural legacy, every citizen has an obligation to maintain respect for our distinguished leaders, rather than praise those who attempted to eliminate our identity.

YOGI ADITYANATH, CHIEF MINISTER OF UTTAR PRADESH

## Respect women's right to choose

As the world experiences an increasing number of climate-related calamities, it is high time to move towards the goal of a 'human rights-based economy' to mitigate vagaries of weather

Some recent photographs of Elon Musk, now, heading President Trump's newly created DOGE, in several of the US government Official meetings, including the one with the Indian Prime Minister, showed him with his children and family. A section of the media considered this overtone, apart from showing his familial love, also 'as the promotion for his pro-natalist position', a view shared by many conservative voters who elected Trump to power. Musk also made it clear that 'demographic decline is a much bigger risk to civilisation than global warming'.

While on the campaign trail, the Vice-President nominee, JD Vance's comment 'childless cat ladies' referring to the Democratic presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, and Musk's calling her out as an "extinctionist", for citing 'climate anxiety' as a reason for not having kids, amply indicated about the upsurge of an intense wave of pro-natalism in the US, once Trump comes to power. In Trump 2.0, pro-choice activists apprehend that the Mexico City Policy, or the Global Gag Rule, which banned the US global health funding to non-US organisations, providing abortion care, reinstated during his first tenure, is going to be expanded to all US foreign assistance. Many also expect a nationwide abortion ban this time in the aftermath of the overturning of the 1973 Roe vs Wade decision during his earlier tenure.

Many consider Trump's pro-life stand to be more about controlling women's bodies, rather than a genuine concern for the earliest stages of human life. As the global average number of births per woman hovers around 2.3, a little above the 'replacement level', and population ageing becoming a significant trend, policymakers and economists across the world expressed concern about 'diminishing labour force', upending consumer culture, increased inflation, and the prospect of overstressed government programs for ageing populations.

Around three in ten nations are now pursuing pro-natalist policies, restricting abortion and clamping down on family planning programs. A 2021 report, titled 'Welcome to Gilead', in a reference to a dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood, which examined the policies that promote childbearing in Iran, China, Turkey, Russia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, and the US, reported that 'there is a rise in toxic mix of



nationalism, xenophobia, and racism to serve nationalist, economic and patriarchal interests, instrumentalising women's bodies, though, pronatalism, is not, in and of itself, coercive (Researcher, Monica Scigliano).

Many feminists dubbed such pressures for high birth rates from family, religion, politics and economy as the products of millennia of patriarchal disempowerment of women, considering their bodies as vessels for advancing a growth agenda.

On the other hand, climate protagonists debunk the theory of 'perpetual growth', which treats 'babies as cogs in a growth machine', and overlooks their rights to be born into social and ecological conditions that support their well-being (Nandita Bajaj, Antioch University).

Almost half of the world's 2.2 Billion children live in one of the 33 countries classified as 'extremely high-risk' facing a deadly combination of exposure to multiple climate and environmental shocks. However, despite growing evidence, policymakers, journalists, and academics tend to de-link demographic factors from environmental sustainability concerns. As the world is besieged with rhetorics of pro-growth narratives and the racist 'great

replacement theory', author Laura Carroll, an exponent of reproductive rights and ethics, in her book, 'The Baby Matrix' urged people to make 'the most informed decisions about parenthood, as a society can no longer afford to leave pronatalism unquestioned'.

Many climate economists also discard the bogey of 'Ponzi demography', based on the 'more is better' philosophy for sustained economic growth. Several development economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, found the current yardsticks of the GDP-based economic growth on only material consumption, and not quality-of-life factors, as 'inadequate' in measuring human well-being.

Many espoused for a new economic model which can work on declining populations, and also on the ageing demographics.

Researchers revealed that 'fears about ageing population are often guided by the false idea that older people are homoge-

neously ill, dependent, and unproductive'. The recent economic analyses also disclosed that the costs connected with an ageing society are 'manageable', while the economic, social, and environmental benefits of smaller populations are substantial.

Moreover, a shrinking labour force is less likely to threaten economic growth as new technologies can take over more tasks. In the book, 'Decline and Prosperity', the demographic expert, Vegard Skirbekk, argued that 'low fertility is on the whole a good thing, and the outcome is good for people, particularly women, and beneficial for the planet'.

In 2021-22, the UN recognised the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a fundamental human right, which has been enshrined into law by 161 countries, barring the UK, US and Russia.

As the world experiences an increasing number of climate-related calamities, it is high time to move towards the goal of a 'human rights-based economy', which proposes to give women the option of 'free choice' about childbirth and work for economic prosperity without compromising ecological concerns.

(The author is former Director General, Doordarshan and All India Radio. Views expressed are personal)

## Women entrepreneurs plant the seeds of health

### SECOND Opinion

The children are getting fidgety. The suspenseful music blaring from the speakers near a small makeshift stage on the playground of their primary school in Samta Tarah village, Bahraich district, Uttar Pradesh, adds to the excitement as they eagerly await the arrival of Salman, the magician. As parents, the village pradhan, and other residents—men and women, young and old—settle down behind the rows of children, a sudden silence falls. All eyes are riveted on a snazzy dressed man wearing a long, flashy red and gold cape with a matching turban, making a dramatic entrance from behind a curtain. "Do you know there is another magician like me who lives in your village? How many of you know her and want to meet her?" Salman asks. As the audience responds enthusiastically, he waves the wand in his hand, mumbling some magical words. Just as the music reaches a crescendo, a woman, simply dressed in a cotton sari, stands up from the audience and makes her way to the front of the stage. Pointing to her, he announces, "This is Shashi Devi, the didi who makes your illnesses vanish with her magical vegetable plants from her nursery."

Her saplings are chemical-free and full of nutrients. The health of those who have set up poshan vatikas (nutrition gardens) in their homes with her saplings has vastly improved—

just like Shashi Devi's family. For those who haven't yet experienced this magic, all you need to do is get vegetable saplings of your choice from her and reap the health benefits. While the magician's deft weaving of magic tricks with health and nutrition messages has successfully raised awareness and curiosity about Shashi, she is not the only one creating magic. Ever since 24 women from marginalised communities, like Shashi, in 24 villages across four blocks were trained to become vegetable nursery entrepreneurs under the Aga Khan Foundation's Poshan Purna and Aspirational District Programme, they have been sowing multiple seeds of health and empowerment—both within and beyond their villages—thanks to their nurseries. Initiated to address the health and economic challenges faced by rural families in Bahraich, the programme, implemented with support from Induslud Bank, has not only created new income opportunities for these women but also improved their health.

In fact, these nursery entrepreneurs are proving to be life-savers for other women as well. When frontline health workers and the AKF team monitoring pregnant women found the Purna Devi, a resident of Balaha village in her third trimester, was anaemic and needed nutritional support, they immediately reached out to the AKF team, as there was no nursery entrepreneur in her village. A direct link was established with the nearest entrepreneur, and high-impact saplings of cauliflower, brinjal, cabbage, chili, tomato, long gourd, bitter gourd, spinach, and coriander—rich in essen-

tial nutrients like iron, calcium, and vitamins—were provided to establish a nutrition garden in her backyard. Regular monitoring of her nutritional intake by a proactive panchayat, ASHA workers, ANM, AWW and the AKF team yielded significant results, including weight gain and an increase in haemoglobin levels. Our data indicates a 17.1 per cent reduction in anaemia prevalence among pregnant women in areas where linkages were established between panchayats actively supervising health and nutrition indicators and vegetable nursery entrepreneurs. Increased consumption of iron-rich foods, combined with IFA supplementation, has also contributed to this positive trend, states Ashok Singh, District Programme Officer, Health. Learning about the nutritional value of saplings and receiving AKF training on organic methods for pest and disease management to ensure chemical-free growth has significantly boosted the entrepreneurs' incomes as well. Each entrepreneur was provided with 130 trays containing 15,000 saplings free of cost. According to Raghendra Singh, the district coordinator for skill development, each woman earned approximately ₹20,000 over a six-month cycle spanning two seasons, increasing their annual family income by nine per cent—a remarkable achievement for a district ranked as the second most backward in India. Their achievements are not only making them economically independent but also empowering them to take charge of their own health—conjuring magic one sapling at a time.

(The author is a journalist writing on development and gender. Views are expressed are personal)

## Letters to the Editor

### Are farmers' demands justified?

Madam — Refer to news report, 'Farmers MSP talks with centre in deadlock, Punjab police detain key leaders' (March 20). Farmers in Punjab receive free electricity, heavily subsidised seeds, and fertilisers from the government. They do not pay income tax but receive significant financial support from their relatives abroad. Additionally, they easily obtain loans from banks on lenient terms, allowing them to buy expensive tractors fitted with music systems.

Many farmers have leased their lands to contractors or given them on rent for farming, while they hire poor labourers from UP, Bihar and Jharkhand at low wages. With minimal personal involvement in farming, they have ample free time for politicking.

Due to their free time, many farmers actively engage in politics, frequent protests and movements. Earlier, they staged a nearly year-long sit-in at the Delhi border, severely inconveniencing the general public.

Now, for over a year, they have been blocking roads at the Kharauri and Shamhali borders in Punjab, creating hurdles for commuters, traders, and industrialists.

These roadblocks have caused significant economic losses and daily hardships for travellers and business owners alike. While Punjab farmers have the right to fight for their demands, it is unfair to violate the rights of other citizens.

### The decline of education system in MP

Madam — The data presented in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly paints a grim picture of the state's education system. The government has lost not a stone thrown in increasing education expenditure—rising from ₹25,953 Crore in 2021-22 to an estimated ₹36,581 Crore by 2025-26. Yet, the number of students in government schools has seen a drastic decline. Over the past decade, student enrollment has dropped from 7.896 Million to just 5.817 Million. The most alarming fact is that in the 2024-25 academic session, not a single student enrolled in the first grade in 5,301 schools. Meanwhile, private school enrollments have surged, clearly indicating that parents are losing faith in government schools.

The government has attempted to attract students by offering free books, uniforms, mid-day meals, and laptops, but these measures have failed. Experts believe that the 'Child Tracking System' has revealed the true figures, but the core issue remains the lack of quality education, inadequate infrastructure, and the growing preference for private schools. This is a wake-up call for the government. Increasing the budget alone is not enough, appointing more teachers, improving school infrastructure, and enhancing education quality are crucial. Winning back parents' trust is now the biggest challenge. If effective steps are not taken soon, the future of government schools could be in deep crisis.

### The cost of divisive politics

Madam — The quicksand of communalism presents a balanced and logical points to ponder over. Organisations without constructive ideas and ideologies seek to take divisive factors like regional, communal or caste or colour as a fertile ground to flourish for themselves. After incurring heavy loss of men and materials those trapped in the tussle realise their mistakes and return to a peaceful reconciled life. But the damage they cause is immense and the pains are borne for long time. Identify seekers find communal and caste platforms as potential ones for their instant response. Such leaders or organisations seeking identity in communal or caste grounds can be easily identified by the absence of any constructive agenda like removal of poverty, equality, redistribution of wealth and peaceful co-existence.

But the history makes it clear that any advancements and achievements such elements make will be only ephemeral. Those who find fault with the Muslim rulers for their over-activist communal activities against Hindus should remember that more such activities can be counted upon as Sivaites against Vaishnavites, Vadakalai Vaishnavites against Thekhalai Vaishnavites and so on. Those who take oath to preserve the Constitution with spirit and essence openly promote communal hatred and the concerned authorities sit muted as number ones.

## HEALTH HAZARDS OF PESTICIDE RESIDUES IN INDIAN FOOD SUPPLY

Pesticide residues in food are small amounts of pesticides that remain on or within foods after they have been used on crops. These residues can potentially pose health risks, depending on the specific pesticide and its concentration. India is one of the top consumers of pesticides globally, using them extensively in agriculture to protect crops from pests and diseases. However, the detection of pesticide residues in food has emerged as a significant health issue. Research shows that most foods in India contain these residues, some of which have levels higher than safe limits.

This situation raises serious health concerns and highlights the need for better food safety regulations and greater public awareness.

The recent appeal by the Union Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare for a comprehensive national strategy for monitoring pesticide residues in food is important to enhance public health and food safety in India.

Contamination of food with pesticides poses a serious health risk, which is further worsened by modern farming practices and reckless use of chemicals. Although several regulatory measures are in place, there are gaps in monitoring, enforcement, and public education, which require stronger government action at both the central and state levels.

Reports from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and various independent studies show that pesticide residues have been found in more than 50 per cent of food samples tested in India. Some foods, such as vegetables, fruits, cereals, pulses and spices, have been found to contain pesticides in excess of the maximum residue limits (MRLs) set by regulatory bodies.

Pesticides are used on crops to control insects, fungi and weeds and can be transported through water, soil and air, affecting nearby crops.

SATYAWAN SAURABH | BHIWANI



## THE ASIAN AGE

21 MARCH 2025

## Nagpur violence: Stop 'irrelevant' squabbles

Aurangzeb must be sleeping peacefully in his grave in Khuldabad, Aurangabad/Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar district, while people fight over it three centuries after his death. The people over whom he ruled have come under the reign of several foreign powers, including the British, after his demise. They fought valiantly sacrificing tens of thousands of lives and achieved freedom. They refused to be governed by religious dictators either, and went on to form the world's largest secular democracy despite being partitioned in the name of faith.

Someone now wants to announce that the last powerful Mughal emperor was a brute who tortured, maimed and killed his own kin to achieve power and retain it and hence his tomb should be removed, even when others want to remember him as a frugal man who despised luxuries and that history is being distorted to defame him long after his death. While many say he plundered religious places, others opine that he helped build shrines even representing other faiths. India, being a democracy offering freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right, must ensure all such persons are able to profess their beliefs publicly and in a peaceful manner. They should be able to tell their compatriots to learn the right lessons from the past so that we, as a people, focus on solving our day-to-day problems, unite and prepare a better tomorrow for the future generations. That is what civilisational progress demands; that is what the Constitution asks of Indian citizens.

Sadly, though, this is not the case in India for quite some time now. There is a set of people who discover the wrongs of history as time passes and want them righted now. They place religion in front as a shield so that the people who are really in need of solutions to their problems can be hoodwinked into supporting them. They declare that the rule of law does not apply to issues when matters of religion are at stake.

Such people are back in action in Nagpur and want the tomb of the Mughal emperor demolished. They are willing to be drawn blood to achieve that aim. Then there are the saviours of the honour of the same man who died some 300 years ago. They too have no compunction in resorting to violence to accomplish their mission. It cannot get worse, or in fact more surreal, when the government in power books the admirers of the ruler of a bygone era for sedition.

That religious passions are fuelling this issue should not be the concern of a government mandated to uphold the rule of law. It should ruthlessly apply it to anyone who seeks to do harm to the people and the people miserable. This business of discovering historical reasons to sow seeds of hatred has no place in a civilised society. It is all the more ironic when it is done in the name of a man, who, as an RSS leader put it, is "not relevant today".

## Industry, climate T'gana goals

The A. Revanth Reddy-led Congress government in Telangana presented its second Budget on Wednesday. Being a welfare-focused government, the Budget ticked all checkboxes related to farmers, agriculture and weaker sections, among others. The interesting element in the Budget was the government's vision to transform Telangana into an industrial and urban state.

According to the Budget documents, the government aims to industrialise the state through the Mega Master Plan 2050 to decentralise industrial development. Though Hyderabad is currently the main economic engine of the state, the government aims to establish sector-specific industrial clusters across the state for IT, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, engineering, sports, automobiles, garments, metalware, handlooms and jewellery.

If successfully implemented, the cluster approach will create several expert townships that could attract capital from across the world and also reduce stress on Hyderabad.

The state can create at least three major urban zones — one centred around Hyderabad, driving growth in the erstwhile United Mahabubnagar, Medak, Rangareddy and parts of Nalgonda district; a second centred around the erstwhile United Warangal district, encompassing the united Khammam district and parts of the old United Nalgonda district; and a third growth hub centred around the united Karimnagar, Nizamabad and Adilabad districts.

Telangana is the only state in India, other than the National Capital Territory of Delhi, that can turn into an urban state. While unplanned civic development created a mess in Delhi-NCR, the Telangana government is conscious of the fact that urbanisation must be sustainable.

As a result, the Mega Master Plan 2050 also lays stress on promoting solar and wind energy projects and encouraging the use of electric cars in the state. As a proof of concept that could later be applied across the entire state, the government plans to develop the chief minister's pet project, Future City, as India's first net-zero city.

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, states must lead if India is to grow. As Telangana has declared its intent, the Centre must walk the talk and support it in becoming a role model for sustainable development.

## THE ASIAN AGE

KAMISH MEIER

Editor

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Dilip Cherian  
Dilli Ka Babu

## OSDs as political appointees in Delhi govt's new admin playbook

With the BJP leadership not taking any chances regarding governance, the Rekha Gupta-led Delhi government is off to a planned start. Six senior officials are being appointed as advisers, or OSDs, to monitor decision-making and ensure ministers remain on course closely. A senior DANICS officer will also serve as the secretary for each of the six Cabinet ministries.

This clearly indicates that this administration takes business seriously. After winning the election, the BJP is committed to fulfilling its promises, which is challenging in a city with a long history of political rivalry. With a secretary and two special secretaries to assist them, the chief minister's office (CMO) has an organised team in place to ensure smooth governance.

In contrast, the Arvind Kejriwal-led government took a different approach during the previous administration, assigning party functionaries to ministers in various capacities. While political control may have been assured, this often led to an overcrowded secretariat with too many hands in the pot and unclear roles. Reflecting on the Sheila Dikshit era, the contrast is striking. Her governance model collaborated well with the bureaucracy and did not require additional political appointees to oversee operations.

Ms Gupta's new system is evidently an attempt

to provide structure and discipline, but it also raises the question of whether this is a necessary administrative step or merely a means to exert greater political control.

**J&K ARMS LICENCE SCAM MERRY-GO-ROUND**  
The Ministry of Home Affairs is chasing down missing paperwork in the protracted arms licence scam involving senior IAS officers in Jammu & Kashmir. In its latest move, the MHA has requested the J&K chief secretary to resubmit prosecution proposals against three officers — Yashu Mughal, Shabbid Iqbal Choudhary and Niraj Kumar — because some documents remain unaccounted for.

This isn't the first reminder. Earlier in February, the MHA also instructed the J&K administration to expedite the CBI's prosecution requests for two more IAS officers — M. Raju and Prasanna Ramaswamy G. — after obtaining the necessary approval from Ladakh's lieutenant governor. The entire process has been dragging on, with files shuffling back and forth, yet no concrete action has been taken.

Let's not forget that the J&K administration had already recommended prosecution against five officers in December 2024 for allegedly issuing fraudulent gun licences in exchange for financial gains — serious business, if proven true. But

despite all this, the MHA is still awaiting a final response from the J&K government.

Meanwhile, the general administration department (GAD) in J&K is continuing to gather details on IAS officer P.K. Pole, while jurisdictional debates persist over Prasanna Ramaswamy G.'s case, since the alleged violations occurred in Ladakh. Additionally, there's the pending examination of cases against three more officers — Jitendra Kumar Singh, Ramesh Kumar and, once again, Prasanna Ramaswamy G. This is merely another case of bureaucratic lethargy? Or is there an unwillingness to act decisively against senior officers? Whatever the case, this saga is beginning to resemble less an anti-corruption crackdown and more an administrative merry-go-round.

**THE CURIOUS CASE OF AMIT LODHA**  
Amit Lodha's story is one of the most dramatic in the world of Indian bureaucracy. Mr Lodha, a former police officer who is now a best-selling author, rose to prominence with *Bihar Diaries*, which was later adapted into *Khakee: The Bihar Chapter*, a Netflix sensation. However, real-life controversies followed shortly after the arrival of real-life glory. His career appeared to be in danger due to a formal complaint, accusations of disproportionate assets and an ED investigation. And yet, the Bihar government has now elevated

Mr Lodha to the position of additional director general. There are more questions than answers about the move. Was this a tacit admission that the accusations against him were unfounded? Or does it portend a change in the political tide, where his "larger-than-life" persona, previously viewed as a liability, is now being welcomed? It had been conjectured that his popularity in films had annoyed Bihar's political establishment. They obviously missed the script.

Naturally, the ED investigation and the vigilance case remain significant. The ED's case is based on the same grounds as the DA case that the state's own vigilance department filed against Mr Lodha in 2022. Shouldn't these charges matter if they are serious in a system that takes pride in its integrity? Or do babus follow their own version of realpolitik, where decisions are made more by internal calculations, public opinion and influence?

Mr Lodha's promotion is perhaps just another reminder that, in the end, it's not just about crime and punishment — it's also about timing and political calculus in a world where headlines change more quickly than policies.

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Subhani



## Delhi and changing power equations in Indian Ocean



Indranil Banerjee

New Delhi's every move is sought to be thwarted by Beijing, which has successfully wooed African and Indian Ocean states, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and the Comoros

because India views the breakneck speed of Chinese naval expansion in the Indian Ocean as an existential threat and believes its interests lie in working with the Western powers in this region.

The People's Republic of China has made its intentions in the Indian Ocean region very clear and is rapidly ramping up its naval and military space capabilities there in several ways. Today, almost two dozen Chinese naval ships and submarines are dedicated to operations in the Indian Ocean. This is slated to rise significantly in the near future and the day is not far off when its aircraft-carriers will venture here.

The biggest threat to Indian strategic dynamics is China's planned deployment of nuclear-powered SSBNs (nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines) in the Indian Ocean. This will have a devastating impact on strategic outcomes for India, which is still not fully in a position to counter such a move. To quickly enable the positioning of at least one SSBN in the region, the Chinese have been sending submarines and survey vessels to chart the oceans around India.

At the most fundamental level, India's nascent Agalega naval base reflects a profound shift in relative naval power, both at the global and Asian contexts. India's Agalega move comes in the wake of diminishing power and influence of Britain in the Indian Ocean, which at one time was for all practical purposes a British lake.

Even till three decades ago, the Indian Ocean region was utterly dominated by Western powers.

The world's top naval slots were all taken by the Western and Russian navies. Today, in contrast, the world's largest navy (albeit not the most powerful one) belongs to China, which is the world's most aggressively expanding naval power.

In terms of overall naval strength, five of the top ten countries today are Asian, led by China, followed by Indonesia, South Korea, Japan and India. Russia and Turkey also find a place in the top ten, leaving space for just three Western powers — the United States, which retains the number one slot, France and Britain.

However, as Western naval power in the Indian Ocean continues to recede, India's importance as a status quoist power that seeks to uphold a rules-based order can only increase. India can thus be a stabilising force in the midst of dramatic shifts in the balance of world naval power, particularly in the Indian Ocean region.

For New Delhi, this region will continue to be crucial. For, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has remarked in the Sri Lankan Parliament ten years ago, that the "course of the 21st century will be determined by the power of the Indian Ocean". The trouble is that these currents never remain still amidst the frenetic jostling for dominance.

New Delhi's every move is sought to be thwarted by Beijing, which has successfully wooed African and Indian Ocean states, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and the Comoros. India has responded by upgrading strategic ties with Mauritius and restoring ties with the Maldives, Sri Lanka and the Seychelles. It also retains a listening post and radar facility in Madagascar built way back in 2007. Agalega is a response to the geopolitical elbowing that New Delhi cannot afford any time in the foreseeable future.

The writer is an independent commentator on political and security issues

## LETTERS

## HEAR FARMERS NOW

Finally the Punjab police has cleared the Delhi-Amritsar national highway giving relief to the commuters after more than a year. The thrust was created by the industrialist lobby on AAP government for the heavy loss it was incurring caused by obstruction to transport of their goods. Though the clearance action was swift, initiated with gentle words of the DIG at the site requesting the farmers to cooperate, a mild action did take place. The clearance of trolleys and infrastructure will take a few more days. Now a meeting with the farmers is must.

R.S. Narula  
Patiala

## SILLY DEMAND

THE VIOLENCE in Nagpur following protests demanding the removal of Aurangzeb's tomb is a grim reminder of how history is being weaponised for political gains. Regardless of how controversial a historical figure may be, history cannot be erased. It serves as a crucial source of knowledge for coming generations. The ongoing demand to remove his tomb not only disregards the duty of historical conservation but also fuels unnecessary communal tensions. If we start erasing monuments based on present-day ideologies, we risk distorting the past and losing valuable lessons. Maharashtra's leadership should ensure the protection of historical sites, irrespective of political pressures.

Vishal Mayur  
Tumkur

## RESILIENT SUNITA

ASTRONAUTS are a special breed and Sunita Williams is the rarest of them. Originally scheduled as an eight-day mission turned out to be nine months stay for Williams and Wilmore. While being stranded on the International Space Station they conducted more than 900 hours of scientific research besides growing space greens and breaking space-walking records. While it is great that she is back on earth, a long duration space mission will take a huge toll on her physical and mental health. Returning to earth's gravity will force her to relearn control, coordination and walking, and her fortitude would be tested to the core.

Bal Govind  
Noida



## THE IDEAS PAGE

## For those without a voice

There are new opportunities and challenges for journalists, including AI. But journalism based on empathy and human values will never go extinct



DROUPADI MURMU

I AM GLAD to be here with you for the Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Awards ceremony. These awards recognise and celebrate the best of our journalism. With this, we also honour the legacy of Ramnath Goenka, the founder of *The Indian Express* group and a great icon of Indian media. He stood up for the freedom of the press before Independence as well as after Independence. His newspaper refused to buckle during the Emergency. The blank editorial it published became a telling symbol of a free press as well as a sign of hope for the restoration of democratic rights.

Goenka ji's audacity was guided by the values he must have learned from our freedom movement. Many of the great leaders of the nationalist movement had taken to journalism to create awareness among the masses. Mahatma Gandhi was a journalist too among the many professions he made his own. His first long imprisonment in India was due to his writings in his journal, *Young India*. Gandhi ji said, "The sole aim of journalism should be service." Goenka ji's journalism was precisely that — in the service of fellow citizens.

For Goenka ji, the idea of service was not limited to journalism only. His association with the Father of the Nation similarly extended to other activities. In 1933, at a function where Gandhi ji was collecting funds for Harijan upliftment, in the first bid for a basket worth Rs 15, Goenka ji stepped forward with a bid of Rs 100. In 1935, when Gandhi ji was re-elected as president of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, he said this honour must have been due to his work of spreading Hindi in the South. He then named Shri Ramnath Goenka as one of the "custodians" of that mission.

The importance of free and fair journalism for democracy cannot be overestimated. If the citizens are not well informed, the democratic processes lose their very meaning. News media is called the Fourth Estate because it plays a vital role in a modern state. As such, all of us have stakes in the health of this sector. With that concern in mind, I would like to offer some observations about some crucial issues, hoping that these remarks will lead to further discussion.

First of all, a thriving newsroom full of ideas is essential for the business of news. One of my illustrious predecessors, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, had once emphasised in this forum itself the necessity of a research wing associated with the newsroom to ensure quality and accuracy of news. It is satisfying to know that *The Indian Express* has a vibrant newsroom with a research team.

I also feel that news gathering, which is the soul of journalism, must be strengthened. You need to devote more resources in encouraging the culture of reporting from the ground. You cannot do that unless you have a viable "business model" for sustenance. Earlier, newspapers and magazines sought to offer qualitative reporting and analysis, and readers bought their copies. A sufficient number of readers meant a good platform for writers, who subsidised the costs. In recent decades, Join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RCgOKf16oBd0f>



A K RAMAKRISHNAN

PALESTINIANS in the Gaza Strip are being subjected once again to a full-scale Israeli military attack. The latest series of bombings is "just the beginning", said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While the domestic and international circumstances of Israel's brokes of the ceasefire signed with Hamas are significant, what is also noteworthy is the recognition of the prolonged culture of thwarting even the possibility of peace.

Several Israeli domestic political developments may hint at the timing of the new attacks, but the desire of its political leadership to continue the conflict as a regular matter of politics is an overarching theme that makes it easier to understand why Israel is restarting operations.

Netanyahu's move to dismiss Shin Bet director Ronen Bar revealed the conflicting positions within the Israeli government on the strategy to be adopted on the security and military fronts. Bar prioritised the return of the remaining Israeli hostages over starting another military campaign. Netanyahu and his right-wing allies, on the other hand, preferred the military option. The lives of the families of the hostages held in Gaza and demonstrations in support of them, as usual, fell on deaf ears.



## FOR THE RECORD

however, this model has been replaced by many hybrid models. Their success must be measured by their effect on the quality of journalism. It is true that there are only a limited number of sources of funding the world over. It could be the state or corporate entities or the reader. While the first two have their own advantages and limitations, the third option of keeping the reader at the centre is the most preferable option. It has only one limitation: Sustaining that model seems difficult.

I understand leading news platforms around the world have been grappling with this challenge for some time. As stakeholders, we all should work towards creating more awareness on this issue. I believe that profitability, on the one hand, and the responsibility to the readers are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they can be complementary.

On the issue of content creation, we hope that we will soon reach a stage when malicious content will be weeded out, and so-called post-truth will go out of currency. Technological tools are also being applied to that end. We can hasten that process with proactive campaigns to educate citizens about these pitfalls. In fact, the hazard of deepfakes and other misuses of artificial intelligence compels us to sensitise all citizens about this critical aspect of news.

We hope that we will soon reach a stage when malicious content will be weeded out, and so-called post-truth will go out of currency. Technological tools are also being applied to that end. We can hasten that process with proactive campaigns to educate citizens about these pitfalls. In fact, the hazard of deepfakes and other misuses of artificial intelligence compels us to sensitise all citizens about this critical aspect of news.

the future of the nation in general too. AI, meanwhile, is disrupting the world, creating new opportunities as well as new challenges in many sectors including journalism. Machines have already started compiling and editing reports. The day might not be far when they are able to carry out most of the work of journalists. What they lack, however, is empathy, which will be the one ingredient that can help journalists beat AI. Journalism based on human values is not going to be extinct ever.

The work of today's award winners is characterised by such human values in one way or the other. It highlights their concern for fellow citizens and for those who are not in a position to speak for themselves. My congratulations to the winners. As journalism relies on teamwork, I congratulate their colleagues, who too contributed to their work.

I am happy to know that the awards have a section on journalism in regional languages too. This will help highlight more ground reports from those regions of the country that are far from big cities. The Ramnath Goenka Awards have contributed to the process of raising the bar of excellence in Indian journalism, thus enriching the roots of our democracy. My best wishes to all of you for keeping up the kind of journalism that matters.

The writer is the President of India. This is the edited text of President Murmu's speech at the Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Awards for 2023 in New Delhi on March 19

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"We urge Tuls Gabbard and other US government officials to independently examine all available evidence before making sweeping statements that unjustly link an entire country to global terrorism." — THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

## Sunita's homecoming

Williams and Barry Wilmore's return to Earth marks a happy ending — and a hopeful beginning



BIMAN NATH

WE BECAME FIDGETY and desperate if our flight or train gets rescheduled, leaving us stranded. What happens when your planned short eight-day space trip becomes unduly extended to nine months because the return flight gets cancelled at the last moment?

In an uncanny, though partial, mirroring of the plot of the film *The Martian*, a rallying cry for space enthusiasts in recent months has been to bring two astronauts back from the space station, where they have been unduly marooned for months. Beyond space enthusiasts, too, many people's thoughts have been with the forlorn astronauts.

Not that this is the longest time an astronaut has ever spent in space. That record has been held for a long time by the Russian cosmonaut, Valeri Polyakov, who stayed for almost a year and a quarter in the Mir space station back in 1994. But that was a planned mission. Most space missions do not last that long, and the question mark hanging over the return of Sunita Williams and Barry "Butch" Wilmore has been darker than how space itself looks like from the space station window. Their travails, brought alive to earthlings through pictures and video clips, have had almost everyone's eyes glued to the orbiting space station.

"What travels?" one might ask. Before you start thinking of life inside a space station as a vacation in an isolated retreat, lounging in rooms with a spectacular view to boot, consider the plight of spending months in a space station, with thoughts of being rescued gnawing at your brain all the time. One wonders if the sight of the home planet, constantly acting as a reminder of the distressing predicament, is helpful at all. As the recent Booker prize winner Samantha Harvey has described in her novel *Orbital*, astronauts probably often take a second look at the blue planet "to check that the earth and its seas are not just dreams or mirages". Some have described this "overview effect" as an inspiring sight that strengthens the bond between astronauts and fragile humanity; others have murmured their dissent.

Even if one ignores the deep psychological effect of being stranded, the effect of zero gravity on the body is unmistakable. While astronauts are trained to operate under zero-gravity conditions, the hu-

man body is not designed to do so for a significantly long time. We don't realise this in our daily lives, but the pull of gravity is crucial for our bone maintenance. In contrast, bones need not be strong enough to support the body in space, and so new bone cells are not produced at the usual rate. This leads to a loss of bone density, which would be devastating for astronauts after returning, because the damage is irreparable. Muscles everywhere in the body, including the heart, also suffer atrophy. The way our blood circulates changes in the absence of gravity, too, with the head getting more than its share. This reduces blood volume and increases the chance of clots. Not only blood, but other fluids build up in the head — astronauts can experience what feels like a constant cold. The accumulation of fluid also distorts the shape of astronauts' eyeballs, weakening their vision. The upshot is that upon their return, they will have difficulty in walking, problems with their eyesight, and will often feel dizzy.

One might say that the feeling of having a constant cold is a good thing in the space station, though. This is because the smell up there is nothing to write home about. Imagine a room that has not been opened, and where astronauts have been regularly visiting for two decades! One must be thankful for small mercies after all.

Then there is the danger of being exposed to high-energy particles in space. On Earth, we are protected by a sheath of magnetosphere, and the harmful effects of these particles — coming from the Sun and deep space — are minimised for our benefit. There are also particles trapped in the geomagnetic field. While the body being bombarded with such particles certainly increases the chance of cancer, especially during space walks, the extent of this effect has not yet been quantified. This is a major concern for the present mission, particularly because Sunita Williams has checked more space walks than any other woman in history. Scientists have been worrying about the problem of radiation exposure in space for a while, but there are no "case studies" yet. One has to solve this radiation exposure problem to some degree of satisfaction before planning to send astronauts to Mars or the Moon for longer durations. Williams and Wilmore may play an important role in future studies in this regard.

While scientists can plan all these studies in the future, it is now time to celebrate the safe return of the pair. The resilience and reserve of patience of not only the astronauts, but also everyone involved in the rescue mission, have ensured that the story has a happy ending.

The writer is an astronomer, science writer and novelist

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## LASTING PEACE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The work of peace" (IE, March 20). By refusing a full ceasefire and demanding an end to Western military aid for Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin is setting terms that serve only Moscow's interests. The ceasefire focuses solely on energy infrastructure, and even that commitment appears shaky. Mere hours after Putin's call with US President Donald Trump, Russian drones struck Ukrainian cities, including a hospital in Stryi. The White House's handling of negotiations raises red flags. The upcoming peace talks in Jeddah lack clarity on Ukraine's direct participation in the peacemaking. Trump's claim that military aid for Ukraine was "not discussed" contradicts the Kremlin's assertion that it is central to Russia's demands. European leaders rightly emphasise that Ukraine must be fully involved in any settlement.

SS Paul, Noida

## RIGHT TREATMENT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Closer to care" (IE, March 20). When we learn that we have almost 40 lakh cancer patients and our detection rate is amongst the lowest in the world, it is more than essential that we put all the emphasis on early detection so that patients and their families can start the right treatment early and have better chances of survival. Setting up daycare cancer centres across all district hospitals is a welcome move, but not only should these centres be equipped to detect cancer at the early stages, they should also have good oncologists on their rolls. For that to happen, the Government of India will have to provide some incentive to them to be in rural areas and serve the poor patients. The editorial has rightly pointed out the emotional and mental aspect of this disease, and telehealth support for rural patients is a great idea.

Bal Govind, Noida

## SOCIAL HARMONY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Fadnavis' task" (IE, March 19). As observed in the editorial, this is a worrying time for our state, and the need of the hour is to maintain peace and harmony. For this, the state government is required to take steps to ban the various agitations and demonstrations pertaining to religious issues. Provocative slogans are raised by the agitators, and the situation immediately goes out of control, leading to rioting and clashes between two groups, followed by huge loss of public as well as private property. All should take lessons from this. The unity of our citizens is essential for India to move forward.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

Suresh Patwardhan, Kalyan

The writer recently retired as a professor at the Centre for West Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of International Studies. He is the author of *US Perceptions of Iran: Approaches and Policies* (2008)