

Physics of light-based computers could change the way AI works

Researchers studying nonlinear interactions between intense light pulses passing through glass fibres uncovered something unusual: they found it is possible to use the physics of light in optical fibres to perform AI tasks potentially much faster and using less energy than traditional computers

Qudsia Gani

Modern computing banks on conventional electronics and algorithms to process data. But because the hardware operates according to the laws of physics, data processing has a physical speed limit. The availability of power further constrains this speed, especially if the software being run is a power-guzzling artificial intelligence (AI) model. Thus one major preoccupation of scientists worldwide is coming up with new kinds of computers that increase the speed limit by operating differently.

One promising kind is light-based, a.k.a. optical, computing. These computers use photons, the particles of light, rather than electrons. Because photons travel at the speed of light and photonic devices generate less heat than electronic devices do, optical computing promises to be faster, have more bandwidth, and be more energy-efficient.

An important part of an optical computer will be the optical fibres that transmit data from one component to another within the machine. This particular technology is already in use worldwide: it transmits billions of bytes of data between countries and continents and enables superfast internet services.

A new door

But before scientists can use optical computing to supercharge AI models, they need some handles to control certain physical properties of light. Light usually behaves in a regular, predictable way when it passes through media like glass or water. Scientists know this as light's linear response.

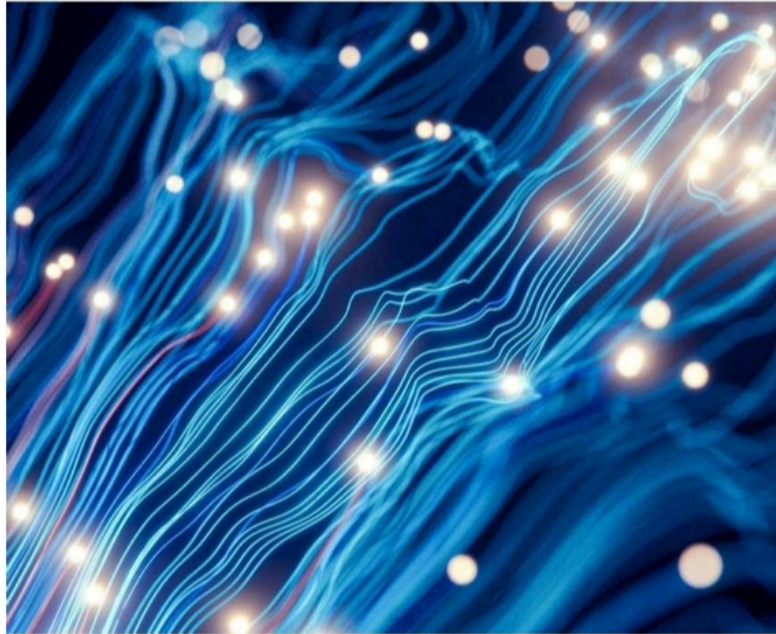
However, when light pulses are very intense, like those issued by a powerful laser, they elicit a different response from the material they are passing through. This is the non-linear regime. Among others, light pulses in this regime can interfere with each other, spread out or converge, and generate new frequencies (colours) of light.

Recently, two research teams – from Tampere University in Finland and Université Marie et Louis Pasteur in France – studied nonlinear interaction between intense light pulses passing through thin glass fibres and uncovered something unusual. The researchers reported that it's possible to use the physics of light in optical fibres to perform complex AI tasks potentially much faster and with less energy than traditional computers. The work has opened a door to new types of AI hardware that can be used in areas where speed and efficiency are critical. The findings were published in *Optical Letters* in June.

Image to numbers and back

In the study, the researchers focused on an AI model called an extreme learning machine (ELM). Instead of using traditional computer chips, they used the physical properties of light travelling through optical fibres to perform calculations. Their main goal was to understand how well this approach worked for recognising images and what factors affected its accuracy.

An ELM is a type of neural network that is fast and simple. It has only one hidden layer (between the input and output layers), and only the output



New research is revealing opportunities within light-based computing, using optical fibres, to meet the growing demand for faster AI. LURE JONES/UNISPLASH

weights are trained. The ELM finds these weights in a single step using a mathematical method, rather than learning through repeated adjustments like in deep neural networks.

In this setup, the input data, like an image, was transformed into a dataset of numbers. This made it easier for the network to separate and classify different types of inputs. Then, the ELM used a simple linear calculation to match the transformed data to the correct label, e.g. which digit an image shows.

The researchers use the unique properties of light in optical fibres to perform the transformation needed for the ELM. Each image was first downsized – like from 28 x 28 pixels to 10 x 10 – to fit the limited bandwidth of the light pulse. The image data was then encoded onto a very short pulse of light, either by changing the phase (how the light wave oscillates) or the amplitude (how strong the light is) at different frequencies.

Fingerprint in the colours

The encoded light pulse was then sent through a length of optical fibre. The pulse fibre interactions were in the nonlinear regime. The researchers tracked how the fibre responded to the pulses and how different colours of light travel at different speeds, a property called dispersion. These changes mixed up the information in the light pulses in a way that was hard to reverse – but useful for the ELM's transformation step.

At the end of the fibre, the team measured how much light there was of each colour. This spectrum contained a 'fingerprint' of the original image, transformed by the fibre's nonlinear

By using the speed and efficiency of light, computers of the future could think and learn in ways that may make the AI models available to us today seem crude

effects. The team used it as the hidden layer in the ELM – the computing layer between the input and the output that gave rise to the machine's 'intelligence'.

In this way, the team trained the ELM on thousands of labelled images. Then they tested the model on new images to see how accurately it could classify them.

With optimal settings, the team found that the ELM was more than 91% accurate at recognising handwritten digits using the optical fibre's anomalous dispersion regime and more than 93% accuracy in the normal dispersion regime. These results were close to those achieved by traditional computer-based ELMs but were achieved using the physics of light instead of electronics.

Let there be light

According to the published paper, increasing the strength of the nonlinear effects and the fibre length improved accuracy, but only up to a point. Too much of an increase caused the system to become unstable and less accurate. There is thus an optimal range for these parameters.

In sum, the study demonstrated that optical fibres can be used as powerful tools for machine learning, specifically for tasks like image recognition.

By carefully tuning the system's parameters and understanding the effects of noise and encoding, it's possible to

achieve high accuracy using the natural properties of light.

This approach could lead to new, faster, and more efficient AI systems in the future. The scientists who led the teams behind the study said in a statement: "This work demonstrates how fundamental research in nonlinear fibre optics can drive new approaches to computation."

The study paper did note some limitations it said could be overcome in future research.

For example, the team's model didn't include all possible real-world effects, such as changes in the light's polarisation (the direction in which its electric field oscillates). It said future work could also explore encoding information on different polarisation states or using more complex optical fibres.

There is also a stated potential to improve the system by measuring not just the spectrum's intensity but also its phase.

This said, the study highlighted the opportunities within light-based computing with optical fibres to meet the growing demand for faster as well as smarter AI. By using the speed and efficiency of light, computers of the future could think and learn in ways that may make the AI models available to us today seem crude. But this will take many more years as experts and businesspersons design and test new technologies like photonic integrated circuits and optical neural networks.

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Waves batter Basco, in the northern Philippines, as Typhoon Ragasa made landfall on Monday. AP

China to evacuate 400,000 as Super Typhoon Ragasa approaches

Associated Press

The Chinese city of Shenzhen began preparing to evacuate 400,000 people while residents of the northern Philippines sought shelter from gale-force winds Monday as Super Typhoon Ragasa continued on a collision course with southern China.

The typhoon made landfall on the Philippines' Calayan Island, part of the sparsely populated Babuyan chain, at 3 pm (0700 GMT), according to the Philippine weather service.

As of 2 pm (0600 GMT), maximum sustained winds of 215 kph were reported at the storm's centre, with gusts reaching as high as 295 kph, the national weather service said.

"I woke up because of the strong wind. It was hitting the windows, and it sounded like a machine that was switched on," said Tirso Tugagao, a resident of Aparri, a coastal town in northern Cagayan province.

Cagayan disaster chief Ruell Rapsing told AFP his team was prepared for "the worst". Just over 10,000 Filipinos were evacuated across the country, with schools and government offices closed Monday in the Manila region and across 29 other provinces.

A much larger operation will take place in China's Shenzhen, where authorities said late on September 21 they planned to move hundreds of thousands of people from coastal and low-lying regions.

Multiple other cities in Guangdong province announced classes and work would be cancelled, and public transportation suspended because of the typhoon.

Maximum sustained winds of 215 kph were reported at the storm's centre, with gusts at 295 kph

Hong Kong-based Cathay Pacific said it expected to cancel more than 500 flights as Ragasa threatened the financial hub.

A spokeswoman for the airline said passenger flights in and out of Hong Kong International Airport would be halted from 6 pm Tuesday, "resuming during daytime hours on Thursday".

'Extremely torrential'

In Taiwan, the state weather service predicted a chance of "extremely torrential rain" in the country's east.

"Its storm radius is quite large, about 320 kilometres. Although the typhoon's centre is still some distance away, its wide, strong wind field and outer circulation are already affecting parts of Taiwan."

James Wu, a local fire department officer, told AFP that evacuations were ongoing in mountainous areas near Pingtung.

"What worries us more is that the damage could be similar to what happened during Typhoon Koinu two years ago," he added, describing a storm that saw utility poles collapse and sheet-metal roofs sent flying into the air.

Philippine government weather specialist John Grendier Almario said Sunday that "severe flooding and landslides" could be expected in the northern areas of the main island Luzon.

The threat of flooding from Ragasa comes just a day after thousands of Filipinos took to the streets to protest a growing corruption scandal involving flood control projects that were shabbily constructed or never completed.

The Philippines is the first major landmass facing the Pacific cyclone belt, and the archipelago is hit by an average of 20 storms and typhoons each year, putting millions of people in disaster-prone areas in a state of constant poverty. Scientists warn that storms are becoming more powerful as the world warms due to the effects of human-driven climate change.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Applications of lasers

Yasudevan Mukundth

QUESTION 1

A popular application of lasers is in _____, which is a technique to record and then recreate the set of all points in a wave that are in phase. While it's used in many areas of physics, it's perhaps best known in security features. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 2

The technique known as X spectroscopy uses a laser as the light source. The shorter this light's wavelength, the higher the technique's resolution. It's used to determine the energies at which molecules vibrate and composition of corrosion on the surface of paintings. Name X.

QUESTION 3

When light from space nears the earth's surface, some of the information it contains becomes distorted in the atmosphere. So ground-based telescopes shine a laser upwards and which their optics use as a reference point in the sky. What are these points called?

QUESTION 4

Space laser _____ are powerful tools with which to measure the shape of the earth's surface. A satellite shines a laser beam down and measures its reflection time. Variations in this time indicate ups and downs on the surface. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 5

Y, of which there are currently two in the world, with a third set to come up

in India, detects gravitational waves using a pair of Michelson-Fabry-Pérot interferometers, each 4 km long and operated with laser light. Name Y.

Answers to September 18 quiz:

1. Visualising surface vibrations using patterns in sand on top - **Ans: Cymatics**

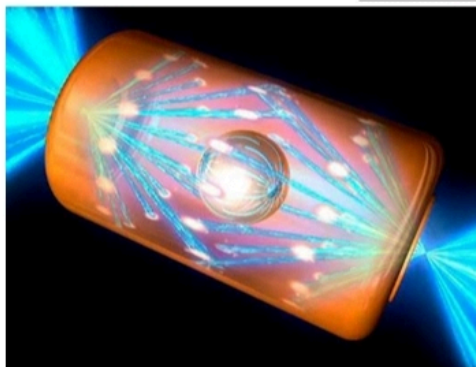
2. Loud event when a vehicle breaks the sound barrier - **Ans: Sonic boom**

3. Stable waves in guitar strings, flute pipes, etc. - **Ans: Standing waves**

4. When vibrations amplify when driven at natural frequency - **Ans: Resonance**

5. Engineered materials that can guide sound waves - **Ans: Metamaterials**

Visual: Auricle
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Hari Lakshmi | Sandeep Kumar | Dhruwad Dave



Visual: Name the nuclear fusion technology illustrated here, where laser beams blast a capsule, producing X-rays that compress a capsule (sphere) to fuse hydrogen nuclei. PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

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A conundrum

Household spending can boost the economy, but it needs a jump-start

The government's push this year to spur consumption in the economy is a much-needed policy re-prioritisation at a time when several other engines of growth are either flagging or plateauing. The economy is a composite of household consumption, private investment, government expenditure and net exports. Of these, only government expenditure has witnessed robust growth over the past few years, thanks to the Modi government's infrastructure push. It has also made available interest-free loans to States to do the same. However, as Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has indicated in the last two Union Budgets, even though the Centre will increase its capital expenditure, it will not be at the blistering rate of 30%-35% that the early post-COVID-19 pandemic years saw. The government has other developmental and defence priorities that need funds too. It is time for the private sector to step up its investments. Private investment has grown, but not nearly at the rate needed to move India from 6%-6.5% growth to the more than 8% needed to meet the targets. Given that industrial capacity utilisation has not crossed 80% since March 2011, the only way to induce more private investment is to increase demand substantially. Net exports, especially merchandise, are struggling due to the global uncertainty around trade, and the U.S.'s 50% tariffs imposed on Indian imports. That is, demand from abroad is petering out, which leaves household consumption to do the heavy lifting.

There are two ways to encourage people to spend – increasing their incomes and lowering prices. The GST rate reforms, with effect from September 22, are a significant step in executing the latter. According to a study published by FICCI, more than three-fourths of rural monthly expenditure will attract either nil or 5% GST rates. This was previously 56%. For urban Indians, this proportion has been increased from half to two-thirds. On the income side, the government tried to put more money in people's pockets by reducing income-tax rates in Budget 2025. This was a welcome and necessary step, although it is not enough to encourage a change in spending behaviour. People are more likely to save than spend that extra amount. The other way disposable income will rise substantially is if companies decide to increase wages. However, apart from a few niche sectors, India has an oversupply of labour, and wages will simply not grow fast enough. There is also a skill deficit that needs to be urgently addressed. This is the unfortunate predicament that the Indian economy finds itself in: consumption is the only driver of growth that is largely immune to global factors. But it also has high inertia, needing relatively more fiscal investment before it can get a jump-start.

Basic structure

There can be no restriction in a public event on the basis of religion

The Supreme Court of India recently reaffirmed that secularism is a fundamental principle and part of the basic structure of the Constitution of India. While this is a welcome statement, it is concerning that the Court has to periodically reiterate this foundational aspect of Indian nationhood. The need arose from a misguided petition that sought to communalise a moment of celebration for all Indians. The Karnataka government had invited International Booker Prize-winning Kannada writer Banu Mushtaq, who is Muslim, to inaugurate the Yasa Dasara festival at the Chamundeswari Temple – which she did on Monday. This festival, a State-sponsored cultural event that is not purely religious, serves as an occasion for all communities to come together and share in the joy of the festival. The petition filed in the Court alleged that Ms. Mushtaq's participation violated Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution, which guarantee freedom of religion. A Bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta rightly dismissed the petition, clarifying that the Dasara festival is a State event, not a private religious ceremony. The Court emphasised that the State cannot discriminate based on religion when organising public events and questioned whether the petitioner had even read the Constitution's Preamble, which unambiguously promotes equality and secularism. The Karnataka High Court had previously upheld the government's decision, stating that a person of one faith participating in the events of another does not violate anyone's constitutional right.

The constitutional right to practise and profess religion cannot be interpreted as a right to restrict others from participating in a faith's practices. Restricting participation in any public gathering based on religion is indefensible in a pluralistic society. Although some places of worship still limit access to certain groups, such practices remain a source of legal and ethical debate. Those who perceive a threat to their religion from someone who is voluntarily and happily joining its festivities are either cynical or cunning. In fact, over many centuries and across different geographies, festivals and pilgrimages have united India's diverse population, often transcending social barriers. The acceptance of this shared, mixed cultural heritage is a common thread among all Indian political parties, even amid their disagreements. However, a new group of political opportunists is exploiting this harmony by creating communal rifts, turning the logic of coexistence on its head. As the Supreme Court has demonstrated, these individuals need to be held accountable.

PHC doctors — a case where the caregivers need care

Primary Health Centre (PHC) doctors form the unshakable foundation of the Indian public health system. They serve not merely as doctors but also as planners, coordinators and leaders. For millions in India's hinterlands, they are the only accessible face of medicine.

Their role extends far beyond clinical care – from public health programmes to disease surveillance. PHC doctors bridge the health system and the last person in a remote village. They stand at the intersection of community needs and policy intent, holding together a vast and fragile health-care network.

A PHC typically serves a diverse population of around 30,000 people, including women, children, the elderly with chronic illnesses, and other vulnerable groups. In hilly and tribal regions, it is around 20,000 people; in urban areas, it stretches to 50,000 people. With a modest team and finite resources, PHC doctors shoulder the care of entire communities. Their work draws upon the founding principles of primary health care: equitable access, community involvement, intersectoral coordination, and pragmatic use of technology, delivered not just in policy papers but in the actual lives of people.

Their responsibilities go well beyond the examination table. They coordinate immunisation campaigns, conduct door-to-door surveys, manage vector control, run school health programmes along with Medical Officers from the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK), and respond to field outbreaks. They organise health education sessions, engage in inter-sectoral meetings, and participate in gram sabhas to promote community health.

Visiting Anganwadis and sub-centres, mentoring Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANM), and village health workers, conducting review meetings and audits are all a part of their daily rhythm. These are not checkboxes. They are the threads tying public health programmes to people, and keeping national health policies alive at the grass-root level.

Yet, these efforts are rarely acknowledged in workforce metrics or planning. While national programmes lean heavily on field-level execution, the pressure these duties place on already stretched personnel often goes unnoticed.

A crushing clinical load

On a busy day, a PHC doctor sees around 100 outpatients. In centres far away from a Basic/Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric and Newborn care (BEmONC/EmONC) facility, nearly 100 pregnant women attend antenatal outpatient (OP) service on designated days. Each consultation is a race against time. In that brief time, they must listen with care, examine the patient thoroughly, arrive at a diagnosis, and offer the right treatment, without compromising clinical rigour or compassion. The burden of meeting programme-driven targets only



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intensifies the strain.

Unlike specialists focused on one domain, PHC doctors must stay updated across the entire medical spectrum – from newborn care to geriatrics, infectious diseases to mental health, and trauma and chronic illnesses – and are expected to treat emergencies of every specialty without having time to summon help. Added to this daily crush, they are expected to keep pace with updated treatment protocols, national guidelines and the steady churn of medical knowledge.

The space for learning or reflection has become a rarity, a quiet casualty of a system that never slows down. Hence, even simple research becomes a luxury, despite being the primary contributors of health data.

Administrative work, burnout

Perhaps the most overlooked burden is administrative work. What began as a support task has quietly grown into a parallel job. PHCs today maintain over 100 physical registers: outpatient records, maternal and child health, non-communicable diseases, drug inventory, and sanitation, among others.

To this, digital systems have been added: the Integrated Health Information Platform (IHIP), Population Health Registry (PHR), Ayushman Bharat Portal, Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP), Health Management Information System (HMIS), and UWIN for immunisation. These were meant to streamline documentation. In reality, they have created duplication. Many doctors now enter the same data twice – on paper and electronically. The wrangle between digitisation and physical records is a false dichotomy; PHC doctors are made to juggle both, with neither system fully supporting them.

Support staff receive devices for data entry, but the need for parallel paper records persists. With limited assistance, physicians often stay late to complete documentation after their clinical duties. The second shift, filled with paperwork, has become routine. Ironically, those trained to treat are now consumed by computers.

The result of this multi-dimensional burden is a slow, invisible erosion: burnout. It is not a term widely used in the Indian public health context, but the signs are hard to miss.

The Lancet has termed physician burnout as a global public health crisis, marked by emotional exhaustion, detachment and a sense of futility.

The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) recognises it as an occupational phenomenon, underscoring the need for systemic, not just clinical, solutions. Dr. Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States, wrote in *The New England Journal of Medicine* that burnout stems not just from long hours but from the growing gap between a health worker's calling and the system they are trapped in.

A meta-analysis in the WHO Bulletin found that

in low- and middle-income countries, nearly one-third of primary care physicians report emotional exhaustion. In Saudi Arabia, a Ministry of Health study cited administrative overload as a key driver of burnout among PHC doctors.

The mismatch between expectations and systemic support is glaring. Physicians are tasked with delivering quality care, driving national programmes, and maintaining detailed documentation, with little staffing, compensation, or recognition.

Even in States such as Tamil Nadu, known for its commitment to primary care, where around 650 PHCs were National Quality Assurance Standards (NQAS) certified by January 2025, systemic stressors remain. Certification, though commendable, often emphasises checklists. True quality must mean care that is enabling, humane and sustainable.

What is needed is not just external validation, but internal reformation.

Rethinking the system

Strengthening primary care requires more than new buildings and names. It requires redesigning systems with empathy. Documentation must be meaningful. Redundant registers should go. Where possible, automation must replace manual entry. Non-clinical tasks must be delegated.

Global efforts offer direction. The 25 by 5 campaign, led by the U.S. National Library of Medicine and Columbia University, aims to reduce clinician documentation time by 75% by 2025. India must adopt similar, implementable goals.

The Bhoré Committee rightly envisioned that primary health care must rest on preventive services and community involvement. Nearly eight decades on, PHCs remain central to that vision. But its flag bearers are caught in a web of tasks that the system was never designed to hold. We must shift from a culture of compliance to one of facilitation. Primary care must be supported by systems, not smothered by them.

Primary health care is the gateway to Universal Health Coverage (UHC), enshrined in Target 3.8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). It promises access to essential health services, safe medicines, and financial protection. Without strong PHCs, SDG 3, which aims to ensure health and well-being for all, will remain aspirational.

Any investment in public health must begin with those who make it work. A system cannot be built on the backs of fatigued doctors. Their physical and emotional well-being is not a fringe concern. It is the foundation. We must value not just what physicians do, but what they endure. Only then can we build a system that is not just responsive, but resilient.

India has the opportunity and the responsibility to reimagine primary care not as a cost centre, but as its most vital investment. If care is to be truly Ayushman, it must start with those who deliver it.

The views expressed are personal

The growing relevance of traditional medicine

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that traditional medicine is practised in 88% of its member-states – 170 out of 194 countries. For billions, particularly in low- and middle-income nations, it remains the primary form of health care due to accessibility and affordability considerations. Yet, its significance extends beyond treatment, supporting biodiversity conservation, nutrition security, and sustainable livelihoods.

Market projections underscore this growing acceptance. Analysts estimate that the global traditional medicine market will reach \$583 billion by 2025, with annual growth rates of 10%-20%. China's traditional Chinese medicine sector is valued at \$122.4 billion, Australia's herbal medicine industry at \$3.97 billion, and India's Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH) sector at \$43.4 billion.

This expansion reflects a fundamental shift in health-care philosophy – from reactive treatment models to proactive, preventive approaches that address root causes rather than symptoms alone.

India's Ayurvedic transformation

India's traditional medicine sector has witnessed remarkable transformation. The AYUSH industry, comprising over 92,000 micro, small and medium enterprises, has expanded nearly eight-fold in less than a decade. Manufacturing sector revenues have grown from ₹21,697 crore in 2014-15 to over ₹1.37 lakh crore currently, while the services sector has generated ₹1.67 lakh crore in revenue.

India now exports AYUSH and herbal products worth \$1.54 billion to more than 150 countries, with Ayurveda gaining formal recognition as a



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is Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH) and Union Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, Government of India

The ancient system can offer sustainable health-care solutions in an era of climate change and lifestyle diseases

medical system in several nations. This represents both economic opportunity and soft power projection on the global stage.

The first comprehensive survey on AYUSH by the National Sample Survey Office (2022-23) revealed near-universal awareness – 95% in rural areas and 96% in urban centres. Over half the population reported using AYUSH systems in the preceding year, with Ayurveda emerging as the preferred choice for rejuvenation and preventive care.

Scientific validation, global expansion

India has invested significantly in research through institutions including the All India Institute of Ayurveda, the Institute of Teaching and Research in Ayurveda, the National Institute of Ayurveda, and the Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences.

These institutions focus on clinical validation, drug standardisation and developing integrative care models that combine traditional knowledge with modern medical practices.

India's global Ayurveda outreach has achieved unprecedented scale through the Ministry of AYUSH's International Cooperation Scheme. India has signed 25 bilateral agreements and 52 institutional partnerships, established 43 AYUSH Information Cells across 39 countries, and positioned 15 academic chairs in foreign universities.

The establishment of the WHO Global Traditional Medicine Centre in India represents a significant milestone. Supported by the Government of India, the centre aims to harness traditional medicine's potential through modern science, digital health and emerging technologies including artificial intelligence.

WHO's recent publication on AI integration in traditional medicine highlights how advanced technologies can strengthen clinical validation, enable big-data analytics, and enhance predictive care within Ayurveda and related systems.

The theme this year

Ayurveda's core philosophy of balance – between body and mind, humans and nature, consumption and conservation – offers relevant solutions for contemporary challenges. As the world grapples with lifestyle diseases and climate change, Ayurveda provides a framework that addresses both personal and planetary health.

The system's principles extend beyond human wellness to encompass veterinary care and plant health, embodying a holistic approach to nurturing all life forms. This comprehensive vision makes the theme for the year 2025, "Ayurveda for People & Planet", particularly timely (September 23 is observed as Ayurveda Day).

As India leads efforts to mainstream traditional medicine globally, the approach emphasises health care that is preventive, affordable, inclusive and sustainable. Ayurveda represents not merely a medical system but a wellness movement that bridges traditional knowledge with contemporary needs.

The convergence of ancient wisdom with modern science and technology positions traditional medicine systems to play an increasingly important role in global health architecture. Ayurveda Day this year serves as a reminder of the potential for traditional knowledge systems to contribute to a more balanced and sustainable future for people and the planet.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GST 2.0, the reality

The tax cuts of essential goods and services, effected as part of GST reforms, have been hyperbolically termed as a "festival of savings". However, it was the same government that introduced the GST with "several" slabs that financially burdened the common man. It should not be forgotten that poverty/low income is still a lived reality for millions of

our compatriots. A lot more needs to be done to enhance the purchasing power of a majority of people. We must bring about structural changes and evolve a just social and economic order – "just" being the operative word. **G. David Milton,** Maruthanode, Tamil Nadu

Gaza genocide

It is unfortunate that most

of the world has remained a passive spectator to the genocide committed in Gaza. Even more tragic is that India remains tight-lipped. The Nazi Holocaust appears stunted compared to the genocide in the Gaza strip committed by Israeli Jews. One hopes the world will awaken ("World" page, "U.K., Australia and Canada recognise Palestinian state

in a seismic shift", September 22). **Tharcus S. Fernando,** Chennai

Care for senior citizens
Tamil Nadu has a significant

Corrections & Clarifications

An article, "The age of India's leaders has steadily risen" [Opinion page – "Data Point", September 22, 2025], said Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru died in 1966. Nehru died in 1964 while he was still in office.

The Reader's Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-2621541/2621542/2621543. E-mail: readereditor@thehindu.co.in

and growing elderly population, projected to be about 18.2% of the total population by 2031. To protect the rights, welfare and rehabilitation of the elderly, the Government

must constitute a Tamil Nadu Elders Rights Commission. It should have all the powers of a civil court. There also needs to be more old age homes and day care centres in rural areas. **Empower Sankar,** Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address.

Trans people deserve better

As both a trans woman and a woman, I have come to understand that policy is not an abstract document drafted in bureaucratic chambers; it is the scaffolding of our lives. For gender minorities, whose existence is often questioned or ridiculed, the absence of inclusive, enforceable, and humane policy is not just a governance gap; it is a denial of dignity.

Families may abandon us, schools may shut their doors, and workplaces may feign diversity while keeping us at the margins. Gender transition is expensive and requires resources most cannot access. The cost of abandonment, coupled with hunger, often leaves little choice but to walk into situations that endanger dignity and safety. A hungry body rarely waits for laws to catch up; it succumbs to survival.

Hollow quotas

Governments announce quotas for employment, education, housing, and welfare initiatives. But the reality is one of selective dispersal, corruption, and bureaucratic gatekeeping. One only needs to ask how many trans persons have genuinely benefited from these quotas to see the distance between promise and practice.

I recall standing in a queue outside a government office, forms filled in triplicate, my gender identity scrutinised with voyeuristic curiosity rather than bureaucratic neutrality. A quota that exists on paper but requires humiliation to access is not empowerment; it is entrapment.

Beyond the corridors of policy lies the texture of daily life. Try finding a home for rent as a transwoman and you will encounter the labyrinth of prejudice. Landlords hesitate, neighbours whisper, and societies form silent barricades. Housing, a basic marker of stability, becomes a privilege denied.

Even public spaces are fraught with ridicule. On buses, people stare and snigger; in markets,



Apsara Reddy
Official Spokesperson,
AIADMK

whispers follow every step. For many trans persons, the act of boarding a train or buying vegetables is an exercise in courage. To present one's strongest self while enduring relentless humiliation is nothing short of heroic. Yet, policy has not caught up with the reality that safety in public spaces is as much a right as food or shelter.

History shows us the cost of systemic exclusion. When African-Americans were denied civil rights, democracy in the U.S. was hollow. When women were denied the vote, half the world was relegated to second-class. The denial of rights to gender minorities is a repetition of history's cruellest errors. Every time a trans person is denied education, a scientist is lost. Every time a trans person is denied housing, an artist is displaced. Every time a trans person is ridiculed in public, a leader is silenced.

Policy cannot remain something done for us; it must be done with us. For too long, gender minorities have been treated as passive recipients of government benevolence rather than active participants in shaping priorities.

Representation in politics is not symbolic — it is structural. Without trans voices in Parliament, State Assemblies, and municipal councils, our realities remain footnotes in files rather than the focus of legislation. When decisions about housing, healthcare, or education are made without us, they reproduce the blind spots of privilege.

Urgent priorities

Policy is a statement of national conscience. For gender minorities, three areas require urgent reform:

The first is education, including scholarships, inclusive curricula, and anti-discrimination protocols. A child bullied out of school is not just a statistic; she is a future cut short. The second is to provide affordable, state-supported gender transition and mental health care. Transitioning is not cosmetic; it is

survival. The third is employment and housing. Anti-discrimination laws, rental protections, and workplace inclusivity must be enforced with penalties.

Representation must translate into payrolls and property deeds. All these are non-negotiable foundations of equality.

A nation that sidelines its gender minorities sidelines its own potential. The measure of society is not how it treats its powerful but how it safeguards its vulnerable. Denial of human rights is not merely a trans issue; it is a national issue. By excluding us, India loses talent, creativity, and the unique perspectives diversity brings. Consider the flourishing of arts, sciences, and reform whenever societies widened their embrace. When women entered universities, medicine advanced. When Dalits entered legislatures, democracy deepened. When LGBTQ+ persons are allowed to live openly, culture and business innovated with vitality. India cannot aspire to global leadership while silencing voices at home that seek nothing more radical than the right to live with dignity.

As a trans woman, I am reminded daily that resilience is our inheritance, but resilience cannot substitute for rights. Policy must bridge the chasm between personal courage and systemic support. Without it, we remain trapped in cycles of abandonment and ridicule. And most importantly, without seats for us in political chambers and decision-making forums, every law will remain about us but never truly with us. Inclusion in politics is not tokenism; it is the very architecture of justice. The censor board passes derogatory content about us, but a trans person has never been appointed to a mass-media board.

Policy is not paperwork. Policy is life. Until gender minorities are woven into its fabric and its political debates with sincerity, our nation will remain a patchwork of promises rather than a tapestry of justice.

Realising the full potential of GST reforms

Supply side measures are necessary to ensure minimal effect to the States

STATE OF PLAY

Lavu Sri Krishna Devaravala
Yateen Deepak

The Prime Minister and Finance Minister have delivered a true Depravali gift to the citizens of India by reducing the number of slabs under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to only two: 5% and 18%. This is also a strategic response to global trade uncertainty, such as the 50% tariff on Indian goods by the U.S. Yet, the fiscal challenge for the States remains, as 6-8% of collections came from the 5% slab, 5-6% from the 12% slab, 70-75% from the 18% one, and 13-15% from the 28% one. This exposes them to short-term revenue risks.

Andhra Pradesh has demonstrated a strong fiscal performance in recent times, with its GST collections recording a 21% surge in August 2025, reaching a gross collection of ₹3,989 crore. This buoyancy, driven by improved compliance and an expanding tax base, provides a strong foundation. However, some reports estimate the annual revenue loss may range from ₹1,500 crore to ₹7,000 crore as a result of the GST rate cuts.

To ensure minimal effect to the States from these revenue losses, supply side measures are necessary. These will meet the increased demand due to rate cuts. Without them, the anticipated boost in consumer demand might not be fulfilled by the supply side. Therefore, the State and Central government need to actively implement schemes to maximise benefits from the GST rate cuts. Given below are three examples to illustrate this point.

First, the GST reduction on cement from 28% to 18% is a significant victory for the real



estate and construction industry, a major engine of economic growth. This cut, along with reductions on other key materials such as marble, granite, and sand-lime bricks from 12% to 5%, is expected to reduce overall construction costs by as much as 5%. This makes houses more affordable for consumers at a time when housing demand remains strong in major urban centres.

But the reduction in construction material costs will strengthen the economy only if it translates into timely completion of houses sanctioned under schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). A parliamentary answer states that the completion rate under PMAY in the last five years is only 35% in Andhra Pradesh. Thus, while the GST cut serves as a macro-level financial incentive, effective implementation of PMAY at the State level is crucial to ensure that these rate cuts lead to faster completion of houses and, in turn, generate tangible economic value.

Second, the GST rate cut on handicrafts from 12% to 5% is a significant lifeline for traditional artisan communities. In Andhra Pradesh, artisans producing Kondapalli wooden toys, Etikoppaka toys, and Mangalagiri and Dharmavaram sarees will benefit from the reduced tax burden, which will make their products more affordable and competitive. However, the

supply chain must be robust and well-supported. The Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI) is the government's key instrument for providing supply-side support. In the last five years, SFURTI has benefited over 2.18 lakh artisans nationwide, including 8,492 in Andhra Pradesh. According to a parliamentary answer, the continuation of SFURTI has been awaiting approval. As a result, no new proposals are being approved. The full potential of the GST reform on the handloom and handicrafts sector is at risk until SFURTI is extended.

Third, in agriculture, GST on various farm machinery has been reduced from 12% to 5%, while GST on key fertilizer inputs such as sulphuric acid, nitric acid, and ammonia has been slashed from 18% to 5%. These measures lower input costs for farmers, thereby incentivising higher production. However, this boost in production will generate real economic value only if supply chain infrastructure is strengthened to handle the increased output. For instance, the Agri Infrastructure Fund aims at providing post-harvest infrastructure financing. As of June 2025 under this fund, over ₹66,000 crore has been utilised across all the States combined, despite a total debt financing facility of ₹1 lakh crore being allocated for each State and Union Territory.

It is only through this synergistic approach combining macro-level tax policy with on-ground scheme implementation India can turn this Depravali gift into fireworks for the economy.

Lavu Sri Krishna Devaravala, Lok Sabha MP, Narsaraopet; Yateen Deepak is a Legislative Researcher

H-IB's new \$100k entry cost: why young Indian women are most at risk

The impact will be particularly felt by women H-IB beneficiaries as they generally earn less than men

DATA POINT

Yignesh Radhakrishnan

The U.S. government's latest decision to impose a one-time \$100,000 fee on new H-IB visa applications — a steep jump from the current fee of a few thousand dollars — is likely to hit young Indian women applicants the hardest, according to data.

H-IB visa workers are predominantly male. In FY24, among workers approved for continuing their jobs (extending or changing their jobs), 74% were men and only 26% were women (Chart 1). Among workers approved for initial employment, 37% were women. This indicates that while men historically dominated the pool of H-IB holders, women are catching up as their share is relatively high among fresh applications. As the new fee targets new applicants, women's prospects look dim.

Also, the annual salaries earned by those seeking initial employment through the H-IB route are relatively low. For instance, if we line up 100 H-IB beneficiaries approved for initial employment in FY24, the bottom quarter (25th percentile) earned about \$77,000, the middle worker (50th percentile) earned \$97,000, and the top quarter (75th percentile) earned around \$1,30,000 or more. Among continuing workers, the bottom quarter earned about \$1,02,000, the middle-range salary was \$1,32,000, and the top quarter earned about \$1,69,000 (Chart 2).

With the new visa cost consuming most or even all of the workers' annual pay, sponsoring initial employment beneficiaries may become economically unviable for employers. This raises questions about the future of the H-IB programme for new entrants. For instance, if a company sponsors a new beneficiary, the total cost in the first year will far exceed that of sponsoring an experienced worker seeking continued employment.

This impact will be particularly felt on women beneficiaries, as they generally earn less than men in the H-IB programme, especially in the bottom quarter of workers. If we line up 100 H-IB beneficiaries who were approved for initial employment in FY24, the bottom quarter of women earned about \$71,000 compared with the \$80,000 that men earned. At the median level, women earned \$91,000, while men earned \$99,000. In the top quarter, women earned \$1,25,000, while men earned \$1,31,000 (Chart 3). Across all percentiles, women H-IB workers earned less than men, which makes it an even tougher choice for employers to sponsor them.

This peculiar skew is more pronounced among Indian women beneficiaries than those from most other countries. For instance, if we examine India and China alone, which together accounted for 83% of the beneficiaries in FY24, the gender skew is evident in India but not in China (Chart 4).

The burden of the new fee also falls heavily on younger applicants, particularly women. Among women approved for new jobs in FY24, 75% were under 35 years of age, compared with 65% of men. This means the entry cost will hit a larger share of women who are beginning their careers (Chart 5).

Among women approved for new employment in FY24, 44% had completed a Master's degree, compared with only 39% of men. The share of women with a Bachelor's degree alone was lower. At the doctorate and professional levels, the difference between men and women was negligible. Since the new fee applies only to new petitioners, it will impact women more heavily, despite their higher educational qualifications relative to men (Chart 6).

While much of the above data refers to H-IB beneficiaries in general, the picture is largely shaped by Indians who made up 60% of the female and 75% of the male beneficiaries in FY24.

Slamming the door on young women

The data for the charts were sourced from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services



Chart 1: Approved H-IB beneficiaries by type of petition and gender in FY2024 (in %)

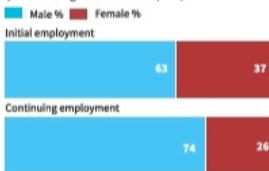


Chart 2: Annual compensation of H-IB beneficiaries by petition type in FY2024 (Figures in \$)

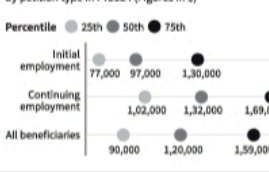


Chart 3: Annual compensation of H-IB beneficiaries (initial employment) by gender in FY2024 (Figures in \$)

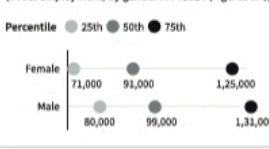


Chart 4: Approved H-IB beneficiaries by type of petition and gender in FY2024, among Indians and Chinese (by place of birth)

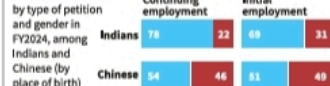


Chart 5: H-IB petitions approved (initial employment) by age and gender of beneficiaries in FY 2024

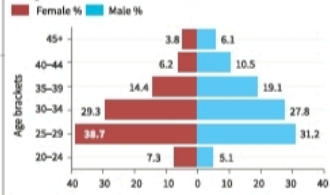
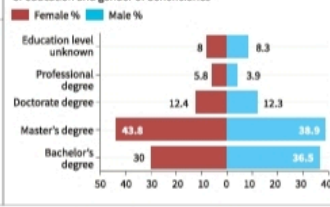


Chart 6: H-IB petitions approved (initial employment) by level of education and gender of beneficiaries



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindustan

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 23, 1975

Japanese market for Indian garments

Madras, Sept 22: Japan offers a sizable potential for Indian readymade garments, as its consumption had shown a rise and the actual level of expenditure on these is expected to increase three fold in 1985 as compared to 1970.

Notwithstanding the depression in textile trade in 1974, imported garments including Indian goods continue to enjoy a share of the Japanese market. This is due to their tendency to adopt latest fashions.

A survey by the Trade Development Authority shows that the foreign label is still very much a symbol of prestige and quality in many products including apparel. The growth in Japan's imports is likely to be shared by developing countries, which enjoy the preferential tariff having an edge of lower wage rates.

The survey recommends exports of selected items of quality casual ware from India, because Japanese have not been satisfied with the quality of Indian readymades. Their complaints relate to shrinkage, lack of colour, embroidery and stitching defects.

The garment industry in the country should open laboratories in Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and Madras, besides inviting Japanese importers to India to study production techniques.

The record shows that Indian exports have not so far enjoyed any substantial or stable demand in any single market for any appreciable length of time, but have had to switch markets.

The West European and U.S. markets for women's western style fashion garments which are small now are being cultivated.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 23, 1925

Burma company's proposal

London, Sept. 22: Presiding over a meeting of the Burma Ruby Mines Co. Sir Hugh Barnes said that there was a net deficiency of 48,235. He declared that rubies were difficult to sell, owing to trade depression. The value of rubies was found during the year to be considerably less than half of that in the previous year. The shareholders would be circulated with regard to a proposal to go into voluntary liquidation. Their mine was the only ruby mine in the world and if they ceased working, the price of rubies would undoubtedly increase.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Projected savings in grocery expenses due to GST reforms

13 in per cent. As per government estimates, stationery, clothing, footwear and medicine purchases would bring in savings in the range of 7-12%, while savings would go up to 18% in the case of individual health and life insurance policies, which have been exempt from GST effective Monday. PTI

Share of low-income regions that continue to live near coasts

46 in per cent. About 46% of the world's low-income regions, especially in Africa and Asia may be forced to continue living in coastal areas or move closer to the coast, revealing a large gap in adapting to and addressing risks due to climate change, a study has suggested. PTI

Centre's expenditure on infra projects in Arunachal Pradesh

5,100 in ₹ crore. These projects, to be developed on the Yarjap river, are part of a larger effort to expand Arunachal Pradesh's hydroelectric capacity, contributing significantly to regional energy security, officials said. PTI

Number of years since a President of Syria has attended UNGA

57 Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa arrived in New York to take part in the UN General Assembly, the first president of Syria to do so in nearly six decades. The last time a Syrian head of state attended the UNGA was in 1967. That was before the 50-year rule of the Assad family dynasty. PTI

Number of pro-Palestine protesters in Milan

50 in thousand. People across Italy organised a day of action to denounce the genocide in Gaza, which included port blockades. The demonstrations came the same day as many countries prepared to recognise a Palestinian state. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Why is India not importing corn from the U.S.?

Has the ethanol blending of petrol increased demand for maize and corn? From which countries has India been importing maize? How different is the US's farming industry when compared to India? Why has China stopped importing soybeans from the US? What is India's stance on U.S. corn?

EXPLAINER

M. Kalyanaraman

The story so far:

Among the key areas of disagreement between the U.S. and India regarding trade is a demand that India should import U.S. corn. U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has said that India has 1.4 billion people but does not import a single bushel of corn from the U.S. (25 kg approximately).

Does India import corn?

India's maize yield is quite poor and is below four tonnes per hectare whereas the world average is six tonnes. Despite that, India has been largely self-sufficient and has sometimes even exported maize, mainly for poultry and other livestock feed as well as for human consumption.

With the ramp up of ethanol blending of petrol, India has had to balance between its food needs and ethanol production. For instance, it has to decide between sugar manufacture versus diverting sugarcane products to ethanol production. Similarly, India has also had to ramp up maize feedstock for ethanol production. This Kharif-Rabi-Spring season, the maize crop is expected to supply some 10 to 12 million tonnes for ethanol production out of an overall 50 million tonnes production, says H.S. Jat, Director of the ICAR-Indian Institute of Maize Research in Ludhiana. He adds that there will not be any need to import maize this year given the bounty crop expected.

India has, however, been importing maize in recent times, apparently for ethanol. For instance, overall maize imports were some one million tonnes in 2024-25 (60% from Myanmar and much of the rest from Ukraine). This represents an almost eight times increase over the previous year.

India doesn't import U.S. corn, much of which is Genetically Modified (GM). India has allowed only GM cotton cultivation, with GM brinjal and mustard cultivation remaining in the investigation stage. Some critics say that fears over cultivating GM crops such as alleged toxicity and diseases will apply to imported GM corn produce as well if it enters the food chain.

Why does the U.S. want to export to India?

In India, farming is the occupation of the masses and is primarily targeted at removing hunger and enhancing nutrition. In the U.S., however, farming is essentially capitalist and characterised by high productivity (U.S. maize yield is three times that of India), very large land holdings (typically 500 acres per farming family or operation, as it's called there), and high levels of mechanisation since only a little more than three million people are engaged in the two million farming operations.

U.S. agriculture is largely a feedstock producer for massive agribusinesses. This is a sharp change from the era of the Great Depression when, as hunger mounted amidst high production, the U.S. government under President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved in to institute hunger-nutrition programs through food stamps to boost consumption and ensured subsidies to pay farmers for not producing. Another key government spend within the hunger-nutrition scheme that continues today is school lunch programmes.

The 1960s and 70s saw a strengthening



Search for markets: A farmer dumps corn in a grain trailer as he harvests a field, near Clear Lake, Iowa in 2013. AP

of hunger-nutrition programs. However, a little later, the focus of U.S. agriculture again shifted towards making it increasingly capitalist, though the government steps in from time to time, such as during the recession of the late 2000s, to beef up the food stamps programme.

As the World Trade Organization rules began to be enforced that required U.S. and other developed nations to cut farm subsidies, there has been a bigger thrust towards capitalist farming. Huge payouts such as counter-cyclical payments to farmers and agribusinesses has led to the growth of giant agri-multinationals. The dominant crops in the U.S. are the cash crops of corn and soybean whereas fruits, vegetables and wheat that often go towards direct human consumption are considered "specialty" crops. Overproduction of cash crops is characteristic of U.S. farming and there is a constant need for expanding export markets. Out of a total 350 million tonnes of yearly corn production, some 45 million tonnes are exported.

Maize is only marginally consumed directly by the people in the U.S. but it feeds a range of industries such as the manufacturing of processed products like high fructose corn syrup; ethanol production; plastic-making; as well as animal feed. Corn is a key feed for massive Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) that raise cattle in confined spaces for slaughter. CAFOs are essential to America's nearly 30-million-tonne meat production every year. The U.S. therefore is specifically eyeing ethanol blending in India for its corn exports.

What are the political stakes behind corn and soybean exports?

The corn belt is practically synonymous

with the U.S. midwest region. So is soybean production. This region is the Republican heartland and the core of U.S. President Donald Trump's voter base. California is the base for specialty crops such as fruits and vegetables and a Democrat stronghold. In the U.S., Democrat-Republican differences run deep and echo not just in political and economic viewpoints but also in lifestyles, type of power plants, agriculture crop choices and so on.

With a good forecast for corn and soy crop this year, export markets are key to keeping the agribusiness chain well-oiled. Even during the Biden administration, corn lobbyists visited India to promote American corn for ethanol. Though there has been a move to increase interest in farm legislation for its impact on food consumption, agribusiness lobbying groups still heavily influence Congress and Senate decisions.

The U.S. election cycle kicks off with primaries in Iowa, a key corn-soy producing State in the midwest. Party candidates for the post of the President are decided through primaries that happen successively in various States. Iowa broadly decides the line-up if not the eventual winner, and therefore the corn lobby wields considerable power in U.S. politics.

Moreover, following the China-U.S. standoff, China has stopped buying soybean from the U.S. China, a major soy user, imports three-fifths of its needs and is turning to other producers such as Brazil. This year's soy crop in the U.S. has no orders from China. This has set off a crisis in midwestern States such as North Dakota.

What are the stakes for India?

Even if GM corn were safe, India's freezing of GM crop cultivation will make

it politically difficult to import GM corn produce. Moreover, India will be wary considering what happened with Mexico.

Following the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the 1990s, Mexico had to import massive amounts of cheap U.S. corn, which drove more than a million Mexican farmers out of business who then had to take up employment as workers in U.S. factories. Even now, Mexico continues to import nearly 25 million tonnes of U.S. corn despite concerns over GM crop.

U.S. corn price is just about 70% of Indian maize without taking into account shipping, marketing costs and business margins. This would be equivalent to dumping.

Also, India has built a maize ecosystem for ethanol, as Mr. Jat points out. Annual maize production has nearly doubled in the last two-three years. "Maize acreage this Kharif saw a 10.5 lakh hectare increase compared to last Kharif. We will be destroying the ecosystem if we commit to cheap maize imports, leading to much distress to new maize farmers," he said.

Bihar farmers have taken to maize and the State will go for elections soon. Allowing maize imports could play against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) there.

Further, importing feedstock for ethanol blending defeats a key purpose of the ethanol programme. Besides the potential to cut carbon emissions, ethanol-blended petrol serves to cut the oil import bill. Import substitution through ethanol blending of 20% of petrol can potentially prevent \$10 billion of forex outgo every year, which could in turn go into the pockets of Indians including farmers.

Corn imports would defeat the purpose of India's ethanol blending programme.

THE GIST

India has, however, been importing maize in recent times, apparently for ethanol. For instance, overall maize imports were some one million tonnes in 2024-25 (60% from Myanmar and much of the rest from Ukraine).

India doesn't import U.S. corn, much of which is Genetically Modified (GM). India has allowed only GM cotton cultivation, with GM brinjal and mustard cultivation remaining in the investigation stage.

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BUILDING BLOCKS



GETTY IMAGES

How does glue work: the physics of what makes glue so sticky

We all know that like charges repel while unlike charges attract. However, for charge neutral molecules to attract each other, the Van der Waal force, secretely of the electromagnetic variety, is needed. It's named after the Dutch physicist Johannes Diderik van der Waals

Adhip Agarwala

The other day I received a letter from a friend. My love for letters is very old. These magical spacetime capsules bring in thoughts of a person written in a different location about a different period of time in their lives. And while reading that piece of paper, one can slowly be transmitted to that zone, as if by a time-machine – a becalming feeling very different from the disturbing tingling you get when you receive a one-line WhatsApp message on your phone.

An important part of the letter writing ritual, however, is to buy stamps of your choice and fix them on the envelope. Stamps are magical things in their own right. To affix one, you only need to moisten the blank side with a few drops of water (or, if no one's watching, your spit) and it's ready to stick.

Why is it so simple, though?

Forces of nature

Any two things stick to each other due to attractive forces between them. These forces can arise due to multiple reasons. For example, when you jump, you fall back to the earth. What brings you back? That's the gravitational force, one of the fundamental forces of nature. The heavier the object is, the stronger the force is.

How much force does the whole earth exert on any of us? That quantity is what we measure as our weight. A 60 kg of weight means about 600 newtons (N) of force. If you're worried about your weight, it's just the earth pulling you towards itself with that much more attractive force.

Another important force we see around us all the time is the

electromagnetic force. It contains two types of forces that are interrelated: electric and magnetic. Electrical forces happen due to electric charges. We know electrons are negatively charged while protons are positively charged, and electrical forces arise between them. Similarly, magnetic forces occur between magnetic charges that we call north and south. Like charges repel while unlike charges attract.

When refrigerator magnets stick to the fridge door or electric forces from your battery drive a current in your fan, it's all due to electromagnetic forces.

There are two other fundamental forces, called the weak and strong forces, but they are only important at very, very small distances, like inside the nucleus of an atom. We don't experience them in our daily lives.

The question now is: which of these fundamental forces keeps the stamp stuck to the envelope?

World of glue

This question takes us inside the world of glue. What we call glue is really a chemical compound called polyvinyl-acetate (PVA). That name may not say much: it's really a material with long, chain-like molecules of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. These molecules look like noodles and tend to stick to each other – and also to other surfaces.

Atoms are usually charge neutral because they each contain an equal number of positively charged protons and negatively charged electrons. Every molecule, which is made of multiple atoms, is then also charge neutral. We know that like charges repel and opposite charges attract. The puzzle here is to figure out how one charge neutral

molecule can attract another charge neutral molecule.

The answer has to do with a beautiful piece of physics discovered in the early 1900s. Even though every molecule is charge-neutral overall, it can fluctuate such that one part of it can be slightly more negatively charged than another. And when such a molecule comes close to another charge-neutral molecule, it can slightly distort the distribution of charges in the second molecule.

Thus the molecule, which was until recently overall charge-neutral, now starts feeling attracted to another charge-neutral molecule – all because they have opposite charges at different parts of their bodies. This kind of force, while it's secretly of the electromagnetic variety, goes by the name Van der Waal force. It's named after the Dutch physicist Johannes Diderik van der Waals.

This brings us to the final piece of the puzzle: why do we need those few drops of water?

Swimming in water

Imagine you want to stick one piece of paper to another. You'll find the glue bottle and inside you'll see that it's a liquid. This is important.

It turns out that manufacturers mix the PVA molecules with water to prevent them from fully sticking to one another. This way, the PVA is swimming in a small pond of water.

Since these molecules attract each other due to fluctuating charges, they can stick to each other only if they're relatively close. But if there's enough water around them, these molecules will swim far apart and not feel each other's attraction.

On the other hand, when you take

some glue and spread it around a surface, the water evaporates, bringing the PVA molecules closer to each other. Imagine there are a bunch of people in a swimming pool: you can make it more crowded by reducing the pool's size instead of adding more people. It's the same principle.

If you're quick enough, you can bring the two pieces of paper you need to stick together before the glue dries. This way, the PVA molecules will stick to both surfaces as well as to each other, sealing both pieces of paper together.

The glue will thus have done its job.

Quantum stamps

The same glue trick works on stamps as well – just that the back side of a stamp already has dried glue. A few drops of water just makes these molecules separate out and become more dilute, allowing you to place the stamp on the envelope. Then, the water molecules dry up again and allow the stamp to stick to the envelope.

In all this, you might have wondered: what causes the changes in the PVA molecules to fluctuate, leading to the Van der Waals forces? Understanding this requires us to learn a bit of quantum mechanics. If you're interested, you should consider taking a course in physics, for example here in IIT Kanpur, where some of us teach.

The next time you receive a courier or a letter from a friend, don't just thank the person bringing it to you. Also whisper a word of gratitude to the molecules hard at work behind the stamp, and which probably also kept it safely sealed all the way to your doorstep.

Adhip Agarwala is an assistant professor of physics in IIT Kanpur.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On International Sign Language Day, let us look at this fascinating realm of natural languages complete with their own grammar and lexicon

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1

What are the five 'parameters' often used in linguistic descriptions of sign languages?

QUESTION 2

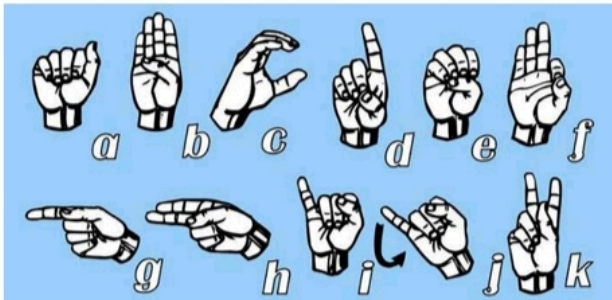
Which is the most-used sign language in the world, in terms of users, according to ethnologue?

QUESTION 3

In the context of sign languages, what does the term "classifier" refer to?

QUESTION 4

What is the primary purpose of fingerspelling in sign languages?



Visual question:

Identify which sign language is pictured here. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. Tokyo hosted the World Athletics Championship for the first time in this year. **Ans: 1991**

2. The only World Record to be set at the 20th edition of the event. **Ans: Mondo Duplantis' record in men's pole vault**

3. This nation came a distant second to the U.S. with 11 medals that included seven gold medals. **Ans: Kenya**

4. The name of the official mascot. **Ans: Riku One, inspired by the Shiba Inu breed of dog**

5. Of the 19 Indian athletes who took part, this athlete had the best showing in this event. **Ans: Sachin Yadav's fourth-place finish in men's javelin throw**

Visual: Name this athlete who claimed three gold medals at the championships. **Ans: The U.S.'s Melissa Jefferson-Wooden**

Early Birds: Tamal Biswas; Neil Lalji; Piyali Tulgi; Manesh TJ; Dodo Jayaditya



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

Upendran

"You look tired. Studying hard?"
"I have been studying really hard. My final exams start on next Monday."
"Your final exams start next Monday. There aren't many days left. You'd better work hard."
"I know! I said 'on next Monday' and you said 'next Monday'. Which is correct?"

"Next Monday". Whenever you use 'next', 'last', 'this', or 'any' before days of the week, you do not use 'on'. For example, I played cricket last Sunday. You do not say, I played cricket on last Sunday."

"I hope to play tennis on Thursday. I hope to play tennis this Thursday. Are both sentences correct?"

"Both are correct. Here's another example. We plan to be in Bombay next Tuesday."

"Does the same rule apply to months and years too?"

"Yes, it does. For example, Let's meet in April. Let's meet next April. Here you drop the preposition 'in'."

"I visited the U.S. last December. I visited the U.S. in December, 1997."

"Mohan graduated in 1976. Geetha graduated last year."

"I hope to graduate this year."
"Good luck! Are you prepared for your Physics exam?"

"I am never ready for that one. I always study really hard for the Physics exam. Even though I never do well."

"Not even though", but "even so."
"What's the difference between the two?"

"Even though" has the same meaning as "although" and "though". For example, even though I study really hard for my Physics tests, I never do well."

"Even though Ram failed the exam, he still remains cheerful."

"Even though Shyam is plump, he runs fast."

"But he cannot outrun me! Now tell me, what does 'even so' mean?"

"It means 'however'. For example, I study really hard for my Physics tests. Even so, I never do well in them."

"Vinod Kamblji has been in excellent form this season. Even so, the selectors didn't pick him for the first test against Australia."

"My cousin lost a lot of money in a recent business venture. Even so, he remains very optimistic."

"My cousin runs two miles every day. Even so, he hasn't lost any weight."

"He runs in this weather?"
"Yes. He goes to the beach every day. Would you like to join him?"

"No way! I am afraid sea air doesn't agree with me. You..."

"...sea air doesn't agree with you?"
"...if something doesn't agree with you, it makes you feel ill or unwell. For example, this hot weather doesn't agree with me. I feel tired all the time."

"Can I say, Chinese food doesn't agree with me?"

"You certainly can. In this case, what you mean is that eating Chinese food upsets your stomach. Here's another example. I love onion bhajis. But of late, they don't agree with me."

Published in The Hindu on March 10, 1998.

Word of the day

Expostulation:

the act of expressing earnest opposition or protest

Synonyms:

objection, remonstrance

Usage:

Despite the expostulations of her friends, she decided to start a business.

Pronunciation:

newsth.live/expostulationpro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/ɛks/pɒstjuːlɪt/

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Invest more in R&D

THE SHRILL OF THE GROWING DIVIDE IN AMERICA HAS NOW REACHED A CRESCENDO

A pointer to a strife within

With a concerted effort at innovation, Indian firms will forever hope for an open door abroad

INDIAN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) companies may still survive the jolt from the steep hike in H-1B visa fees, but there is no denying that it's time for some deep introspection. For all its success as a software services exporter, Indian IT has little innovation to its credit. The lack of a world-class product or technology is often attributed to the absence of a Silicon Valley-like ecosystem. That may be partly true but the real reason is that companies have not tried hard enough because there was easy money to be made by doing simpler work. With artificial intelligence (AI) pretty much taking over, software firms will need to reinvent themselves. Indeed, so will companies in other sectors as they realise that depending on imports of rare earth magnets or high-end electronics technology can be risky. So far, however, Indian companies have shown very little interest in research and development (R&D). Pharma manufacturers have played the generic game, waiting for blockbuster drugs to go off patent and have depended on China for active pharmaceutical ingredients. Top-tier Indian IT services firms spend only 0.4-1.3% of revenue on R&D, a ratio that has barely moved since FY19. This is unsustainable.

India's R&D spending has historically hovered around 0.7% of GDP, leaving very meagre resources for any meaningful scientific or innovative breakthroughs. In contrast, China's R&D investment reached 2.68% of GDP in 2024 and there are signs that this will only increase. Indeed, it's little consolation that India has improved its ranking in the frontier technologies readiness index from 48th in 2022 to 36th in 2024 out of a total of 170 economies. Frontier technologies are advancing rapidly, with the opportunity estimated to grow six-fold to \$16.4 trillion by 2033. The fact is that today China and the US dominate knowledge generation in frontier technologies, with around one-third of peer-reviewed articles and two-thirds of patents. The AI-related divide between developed and developing countries is already huge and could widen. One hopes the hike in H-1B visa fees, which will force AI start-ups that were hiring teams in the US to rethink their growth strategies, will only prove to be a temporary setback.

But it's not just technology. India Inc's spends on R&D have been negligible. A study says for a sample of 912 companies, spends were up at ₹66,733 crore in FY23. This was an increase of 17% over the previous year but amounted to just 0.44% of their turnover. Sadly, of the 842 private sector companies in this universe, only 472 actually spent on R&D; the rest did not. In fact, the vast majority have little inclination towards R&D as seen from the fact that the top 10 companies accounted for nearly 60% of the total spend.

Not surprisingly, among the sectors, the pharma pack is committing the most. Companies including Alembic Pharma, Dr. Reddy's Labs, and Lupin are among the biggest spenders having committed more than 10% of their sales to R&D in FY23. In other spaces, firms like Tata Motors, Hindustan Aeronautics, Bionoco, and Bharat Electronics too have allocated fairly meaningful amounts to R&D. Excluding them, however, private sector investment in R&D has been abysmally low. This is unfortunate because India has talent in its large pool of scientists and engineers. Without a concerted effort at innovation, Indian firms will be forever dependent on global players for technology and unable to compete globally.

THERE IS A growing chasm in the American socio-political landscape, which is aggressively manifesting in the changes we see unfolding in the country today. The American identity, along with the politics rooted in it, is turning a corner—perceptibly for the worse. Race, identity, and religion have come to take centre stage in a vengeful manner amidst a churn that has divided the country like never before. If the victory of Donald Trump in his second term was a premonition of what was to come, the developments that have followed suggest even more acute crises, and possibly a fundamental one. Two prominent shifts are leading the charge in defining the characteristics of a transforming America. First is the top-down, assertive executive leadership under the Trump administration, which is enforcing policy changes, reversals, and even backlash. The second is the bottom-up swell in American domestic politics, fuelled by the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement, which is not only deepening the divide between Republicans and Democrats but also fuelling internal divisions within the American right. These two factors have converged in the executive order signed by President Trump, which seeks to restrict and regulate the entry of non-immigrant workers through the H-1B visa. The implications of these decisions have direct and ripple effects on the Indian diaspora in the US, as well as on India-US relations.

On September 19, President Trump signed an executive order aimed at regulating, and in effect, nearly ending the H-1B programme by imposing a significant fee hike of \$100,000 on this category of visas, which allows skilled workers to work in the United States. Initially, the announcement seemed poorly thought

● H-1B CRISIS

THE SHRILL OF THE GROWING DIVIDE IN AMERICA HAS NOW REACHED A CRESCENDO

HARSH V PANT
VIVEK MISHRA

Respectively vice-president, studies and foreign policy, and fellow, Americas, Observer Research Foundation



out, as it lacked clarity, leaving thousands of H-1B holders—especially those travelling outside the US or planning to do so—in a state of confusion. A clarification stating that the fee increase would only apply to new applicants in the next cycle was a necessary step. Politically, this decision marks the culmination of internal strife within America, where Trump's hardcore MAGA base opposes immigration as a principle, while tech industry backers of Trump—who rely on skilled foreign workers—push back. Trump himself has wavered between wanting to eliminate H-1B and calling it a "great programme".

The new visa fee hike could effectively cripple the H-1B programme, severely impacting the mobility of workers from India to the US—a trend that has long been a key feature of bilateral relations. In 2024, India accounted for 71% of approved H-1B visas, making it the largest recipient. The skilled Indian workforce, particularly in the information technology (IT) sector, has carved out a significant niche in the US, both by serving as a bridge for tech and innovation between the two countries and by contributing to the growth of the American economy. In fact,

at least 65% of those working in the US IT sector are on H-1B visas, with the majority hailing from India.

The real impact of these developments is still being assessed, but what is immediately apparent is the potentially massive financial impact these changes could have on the American economy.

The first major challenge facing US tech companies like Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft, Apple, and IBM will be determining a strategy to either retain their foreign talent currently on H-1B visas or develop a mechanism to comply with the Trump administration's directive to train Americans for the same roles. Given Trump's historically unpredictable stance on the H-1B programme and his shifting goals with tech entrepreneurs, it's possible that Trump could revise his hard-line position to accommodate some of Big Tech's concerns. However, he is likely to remain torn between appeasing his MAGA base—who are viscerally against immigration, especially for relatively higher paid jobs—and navigating these concerns.

Much of Trump's campaign for his second presidency was built around an

"us versus them" narrative which was primarily focused on the political divide between Democrats and Republicans. While there were moments during the campaign when this divide took on racial and xenophobic tones, especially within the MAGA ranks, the undercurrents were often less overt. The side-lining of Vivek Ramaswamy from the DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) and the racially charged backlash against Trump's nomination of Sitaram Krishnan as his artificial intelligence advisor were perhaps the two clearest signals of this malaise. Today, however, the shrill of this growing divide in America has reached a crescendo. A programme that allowed the US to attract global talent and configure its services sector is now being targeted in ways that is likely to reshape the US industry and tech sector.

These developments are taking place against the backdrop of the resumed US-India trade talks. India is likely to raise this issue with the Trump administration even as it seeks to turn this crisis into a potentially gainful opportunity. There is, however, a pragmatic understanding in India regarding the question of talent absorption within the country's tech and IT sector. Many Indian outsourcing giants like TCS and Infosys seem to have long anticipated this shift, and have been investing in local talent and expanding offshore delivery capabilities. As employers grow increasingly hesitant to bear the high costs of visa sponsorship, there is likely to be a stronger move toward remote contracting, offshore services, and gig-based work. While this crisis could mark the beginning of the development of a home-grown talent base, it also signals a potential long-term shift in global talent flows.

While there were moments during this divide took on racial and xenophobic tones, especially within the MAGA ranks, the undercurrents were often less overt

MSMEs to power trillion-dollar dream



DHANENDRA KUMAR

Chairman, Competition Advisory Services India LLP

INDIA'S ECONOMIC JOURNEY is measured in GDP growth and export targets, but its heart beats in various human stories of its micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) entrepreneurs. Be it a vendor of hand-painted homeware from Odisha, a small woodcraft unit owner in Rajasthan, a Madhubani painter from Bihar, terracotta artisans from the East and Northeast, or handloom clusters from Kutch to Kanchipuram—one has to look for the human face behind them, and their hard work, resilience, creativity, and enterprise. When a Kashmiri artisan's carpet reaches New Delhi, an Assamese handloom sells to a buyer in Hyderabad, India's trillion-dollar dream is being quietly woven. MSMEs are not just the backbone of the economy, they are its capillaries carrying ideas, skills, and dignity into every corner of India and overseas, with e-commerce providing them an economic backbone.

According to the government's latest official estimates, MSMEs contribute over 30% of GDP. They employed over 120 million people, and comprised over 46% of exports in FY24 through to FY25, as the number of exporting units rose from 53,000 in FY21 to 1.73 lakh in FY25.

Over the past five years, e-commerce has equipped small producers with reach, digital storefronts, logistics, and customer analytics that once belonged only to big brands. Flipkart's Samarth programme, launched in 2019, illustrates what targeted platform support can do. It offers onboarding, training, cataloguing, fee waivers/discounts, packaging guidance, and connects artisans, weavers, self-help groups (SHGs), and micro-entrepreneurs to hundreds of millions of customers.

According to Flipkart, Samarth has impacted nearly 1.8 million livelihoods, and its annual "Big Billion Days" is supporting millions. This is also true of Amazon.

MSMEs double as India's most democratised entrepreneurship engine. Women-owned enterprises are registering in large numbers on the government's Udyam platforms, and policy initiatives are gradually raising participation.

What makes the MSME story distinct is its geography of grit. In Kashmir, artisan cooperatives onboarding to marketplaces have found a channel for GI (geographical indication) tagged crafts beyond tourist seasons. In Varanasi, artisans are experimenting with saris designs, home décor, and wearable formats that fit online customer tastes without diluting authenticity. In Rajasthan, small woodcraft and stone-inlay units pair centuries-old skills with modern branding and global shipping.

These are not fair-weather pivots; they are careful iterations—learning product photography, refining packaging to survive courier networks, and adapting catalogue names so searchworks in Hindi and English. The entrepreneurs decide what to make, who to hire, the changes in design and strategies.

What's working

Market access at scale: Digital marketplaces and social commerce shrink distance. Campaigns like "Crafted by Bharat" compress discovery cycles that used to take years.

Formalisation and credit: Rising Udyam registrations and employment signal formal footprints that can unlock bank credit.

Export momentum: Near-half share in exports and a 3x jump in exporting MSMEs since 2020 show integration with global demand.

Where improvement is needed

Last-mile logistics and compliance burden: Small sellers wrestle with returns, damage claims, and ever-changing labelling/tax norms that eat into margins.

Working capital gaps: MSMEs face credit disbursement, many micro-units rely on informal finance. Faster invoice discounting (TRedS), predictable platform payout cycles, and deeper supply-chain finance can help.

Shifting for digital commerce: Cataloguing, SEO, photography, packaging, data-driven pricing need continuous hand-holding.

Gender gaps: Women-owned enterprises often remain micro, constrained by collateral, care responsibilities, and mobility limits. Dedicated logistics windows, micro-grants, and SHG-to-MSME graduation paths will be helpful. The impact is profound: women's earnings go directly into children's education, healthcare, and better nutrition, compounding MSME benefits for society.

Regulatory support: At times, regulatory bottlenecks eat into time and initiatives involved. India is aiming for a multi-trillion-dollar economy over the next decade, underpinned by erratic tariffs. We have also to protect their designs like Kolhapuri chappals from copycats.

For all their dynamism, MSMEs face systemic challenges: working capital stress (delayed payments and lack of collateral often push units towards informal finance); logistics and compliance hurdles (from GST filings to packaging norms, the cost of compliance eats into margins); and digital readiness gaps (while e-commerce is a boon, many entrepreneurs struggle with cataloguing, photography, SEO, and customer service).

IF MSMEs are to fuel the next phase of growth, policy and platforms must converge on solutions

Supporting MSMEs and their e-commerce backbone is not charity; it is a sound economic strategy to scripting India's growth into a developed nation

Simplify norms: Standardise compliance requirements across states and sectors to reduce red tape.

Link credit with commerce: Enable invoice-level financing tied directly to marketplace orders, reducing working capital stress.

Skill for the digital age: Move from one-time workshops to continuous hand-holding in cataloguing, branding, and customer management.

Strengthen women's participation: Provide targeted logistics, micro-grants, and SHG-to-MSME graduation pathways.

Promote cluster branding: GI-tagged crafts and regional clusters must be marketed as brands so that communities retain value.

Supporting MSMEs and their e-commerce backbone is not charity; it is a sound economic strategy. If we back their stories, the world is scripting India's growth into a developed nation.

Porsche's luxury image is looking threadbare

IS PORSCHE STILL a luxury brand? The question might seem ridiculous or even impertinent to someone yearning for one of its 911 sports cars that cost a minimum of \$130,000 and considerably more for the most thrilling and customised derivatives. But after warning on Friday it will barely scrape a profit in 2025 and announcing a big cut to its medium-term earnings ambitions, Porsche's cachet—at least in the eyes of investors—is now very much up for debate.

The latest profit downgrade—the fourth in quick succession—undermines the German automaker's claim to have a luxury business model, with negative implications for the way the stock is valued.

When Porsche first sold shares in 2022 it emphasised the uniqueness of its "luxury with scale" approach, combining the superpricing power of high-end automakers like Ferrari with the greater sales volumes of merely "premium" manufacturers such as BMW and Mercedes-Benz Group. The word "luxury" appears about 300 times in Porsche's initial public offering prospectus, leaving investors in little doubt about where Porsche's management viewed its positioning on this exclusivity spectrum.

For a while its strategy seemed to gain traction; the following year, it raised its long-term profit ambition to a 20% operating return on sales. But luxury is as luxury does, and since then Porsche has done rather poorly. A mix of collapsing sales in China, slower-than-expected uptake of electric vehicles, the US's 15% import tariffs, and a weakening dollar have hamstrung the automaker's earnings potential.

Having already lowered its medium-term profit guidance in March to 15-17% from 17-19%, investors are now warned to expect somewhere between 10% and 15%. Adding insult to injury, Porsche will from Monday be ejected from Germany's benchmark DAX index, signalling that in the eyes of the stock market it's no longer a blue-chip firm.

Porsche's management insisted on Friday's investor call that from both a product and financial perspective it should still be considered a luxury company. A business facing such severe headwinds would typically formulate a strategy to restore profitability to prior levels. However, the new medium-term guidance includes the various measures Porsche is already taking in an attempt to restore profitability: cutting jobs, reducing EV investments, extending the life of combustion engine models, offering new gasoline SUVs, and elevating its 911 franchise via more derivative versions and greater customisation.

In other words, without its big strategy reset, Porsche's future would be even bleaker.

The new operating margin corridor would suffice for a premium automaker—Mercedes-Benz and BMW both aim for a roughly 10% return on sales in the medium term—but surely Porsche should aspire to more? Ferrari's operating margins exceed 30%, while Lamborghini's are above 25%. Porsche's market value has declined by more than €70 billion (\$82 billion) since the 2023 peak to currently languish at about €36.8 billion, and analysts have already concluded it will struggle to regain prior profitability levels—the new guidance appears in line with their consensus estimates compiled by Bloomberg.

Still, investors may decide Porsche has far more in common with its German premium rivals than Italy's prancing horse, further undermining its stock price. Ferrari is valued at about 40 times its expected earnings in 2026, while BMW and Mercedes trade on about seven times earnings; Porsche sits in the middle on around 16 times.

What can Porsche do? Although several top executives have been replaced, it's astonishing that after such a fall from grace Porsche still shares CEO Oliver Blume with its largest shareholder Volkswagen. Porsche is reportedly hunting for a successor, but VW should have acted long ago to provide the 911-maker with a full-time driver. Alas, VW often plays by different corporate governance standards, to the detriment of its share price.

Beyond that, Porsche appears resigned to a more modest future. The measures announced on Friday are the "final steps" in the realignment of its product strategy, it stated. In a world of intensifying Chinese competition and higher trade barriers, there may be fundamental limits to Porsche's earnings power. It may also be unwilling to upend the deeper cuts needed to make the brand more exclusive. Or both.

The question is Porsche's luxury credentials are now hanging by a thread.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

US risks losing tech supremacy

Apropos of "American dream re-coded" (FE, September 22), the US order on an unprecedented hike in H-1B visa fees has sent jitters in the information technology (IT) sector. Restricting the entry of talented and skilled workforce theoretically would help local employment, but this alternative arrangement would be time-consuming and impact projects.

A low turnout of foreign students at US campuses will also hit revenues, with a cascading effect on other income-generating areas. For IT firms, relocating or moving projects offshore or to neighbouring countries would also have an impact in the long run. Analysts predict a brain gain for the impacted countries. All of these factors may cause the US to losing its status as the centre of the tech industry in the long run.

—RV Baskaran, Pune


GST 2.0: Festival gift?

In his televised address on Sunday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi framed the goods and services tax (GST) reforms as a "festive double bonanza" that will lead to a consumption boom. But affordable pricing is not a gift—it is a citizen's right. Reducing GST and easing income tax burden are overdue steps toward economic fairness, not favours to be credited to politicians. While the timing aligns

with India's festive season, the deeper goal is to stimulate demand. Lower taxes do increase disposable income, but whether this leads to a true consumption boom depends on job growth, rural spending, and consumer confidence and availability of spare money. The rhetoric may be political, but the impact will be judged by how much it empowers people.

—O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

A thought for today
Fun is like life insurance, the older you get, the more it costs
KIN HUBBARD

Pay It Forward

GST 2.0 can do wonders for the economy if industry passes on its full benefit to consumers as lower prices

From promise to delivery, GST 2.0 ranks among India's quickest reforms. Modi had promised a "Divali gift" on 1-Day, but it's arrived a month early with Navratri. And while he's cast it as 'Bachat Utsav' - savings fest - lower GST rates are really a spending stimulus. They could be transformative because India has never had such low indirect taxes before. Not under the Raj, nor during the dalliance with "socialism", or even three decades of liberalisation. The biggest change is of mindset, though. For the first time, cars, ACs, large refrigerators and TVs are not seen as luxuries or sin goods, but as necessities.

In fact, govt is counting on you to buy many more of these, so that revenue lost per unit is more than made up by increased sales volumes. The finance ministry has estimated a hit of ₹48,000cr in the unlikely scenario of sales remaining stagnant. But for sales to increase, the generous tax cuts must be passed on as lower prices to customers. If ads over the past week are an indication, manufacturers and sellers are keen to oblige. This is understandable because sluggish demand has saddled manufacturers with idle capacity. Reports early this year said 50% of handset manufacturing capacity in India was unutilised. That's an extreme case but the problem is general. In April, Maruti decided to go slow on its new Inn-cars-per-year Gujarat plant due to tepid sales growth.

So, lowering prices to boost demand is in industry's interest. It can kickstart the virtuous cycle that leads to new capital investments, jobs and scale - which is crucial for competing with China in the global market. Already, carmakers have slashed prices substantially. Small cars, which had become unaffordable after post-BSE price hikes, are back at their 2019 price levels. Not every industry is so high-profile, however, and it's hard to keep track of prices of every product. But one sector that's being keenly watched is insurance, where govt has removed GST entirely on health and life products, hoping to increase their penetration. After conflicting signals, and pressure from govt, insurers have promised to pass on the full benefit, but there's also talk of increasing premiums to account for the loss of input tax credit. While that may be necessary, insurers must guard against charging more than what's fair, to not miss the GST 2.0 bus.

Helpless Together
Global critique of Israel is getting sharper. But what does it matter if US keeps backing Netanyahu?

Canada, Australia and Portugal joined UN in recognising Palestinian statehood over the weekend. This came ahead of the UN summit co-hosted by France and Saudi Arabia yesterday that focused on Israel's war in Gaza and the elusive Two State Solution to the Israel-Palestine border conflict. All of this makes clear a growing international momentum against Israel. The Gaza conflict is homing in on two years with Tel Aviv showing no signs of relenting. Meanwhile, Israel is expanding its settlements in West Bank. This will ensure there is no contiguous Palestinian state. Thus, there's increasing realisation that Israel is using the Gaza conflict to erase the possibility of a Palestine state itself.

That means defeating Hamas, the ostensible goal of Israeli military operations in Gaza, is only a pretext. Had it not been so, Tel Aviv would have had no problem in signing up to a plan that would hand over post-war Gaza to Palestinian Authority (PA). But Tel Aviv has been deliberately gutting PA and withholding the latter's taxes, crippling its essential functions. This has even prompted Germany - an Israel ally - to consider sending financial aid to PA.

Of course, Israel gets away with all this because of solid US backing. American Jewish and Evangelical lobbies have huge influence in US politics. Therefore, Trump can politically ill-afford to dump Israel, even though he was reportedly unhappy with Netanyahu for striking Hamas leaders in Qatar. Which means UN can pass all the resolutions it wants in favour of Palestine statehood, but it won't make much of a difference to Israel or the Gaza conflict. There might be a split in the Western camp over Israel, but this isn't enough to rein in Tel Aviv. Even growing economic boycott of Israel may not move the needle. Israel's actions are truly showing the limits of multilateralism. The international community can only profess helplessness.

Homebound best be

Kamala and Trump agree on H-IB-hit Indian men

Anil Abraham
Kamala is always irritated when I step out of the house on a Sunday. "You're constantly chatting with the neighbours, or walking aimlessly around the area like these middle-aged uncles with no clear goal in life. Can't you find something to do at home?"

So I plunked myself on the sofa and began reading the newspaper for the nth time. I had only left the obituary columns untouched. Several people started to look vaguely familiar on that page and so I read out the interesting ones aloud to Kamala just to clarify that we had not missed any deaths among family and friends. "You are the most morbid man in the world - nobody reads the obituaries with as much relish as you!" But like Gen Z checks social media to see what's happening in their friends' lives, Gen X scans these columns for life-changing events. Literally doom scrolling.

The front page had equally depressing news of some US visa fees being hiked yugely. To be or not to be H-IB, Shakespeare might have said if he was around. By the time a clarification was later issued that this was not an annual fee, panic and anxiety had already spread across the Indian diaspora. "It's like raising GST and then lowering it again in an attempt to undo the damage," Kamala said cynically, snacking on her cheaper caramel popcorn. Our neighbour NRI Naresha has cancelled his son's wedding next week because of the onerous travel costs. Our friends are worrying that their kids won't visit them this Diwali or Christmas.

But how about looking at this sunny side up? With Trump's hefty visa fees adding a double whammy to his trade tariffs, Indians abroad now have a fresh chance to demonstrate their patriotism and love for their country - in their country. In fact, like other Indian men on a Sunday, the story of the lives of non-resident Indians abroad trapped in India's official entry for the Oscars this year. It's serendipitously titled, *Homebound*.

H-IB: When One Door Closes...

Trump will be sending more pain India's way • GOI needs to buckle up • Help the talent now stuck here build AI, robotics, chips • Help young Indians hit by Trump's student visa cuts find non-US paths to get serious skills • Learn from the transformative Make in China 2025 programme

Amit Gupta
The decision to slap a \$100,000 fee on American companies who hire a new H-IB visa employee is a victory for the MAGA crowd and also for other American conservatives who do not want to see Indian workers being employed in US.

They think, as the conservative *Washington Times* stated in an editorial, "It makes no sense to import 290,000 noncitizen programmers when plenty of Americans would fill those positions if given the opportunity. Too often, the visa holders' loyalty remains in their homeland, considering the staggering sums they send back to India."

Further, the slapping of the huge fee on companies is most likely the first step in substantially reducing the programme. Both American political groups and India's govt and public need, however, to recognise that the implications are not as clear-cut as the Trump administration thinks they will be.

What Americans need to understand
Firstly, for those who want to Make America White Again, the H-IB restriction will do little to stop the demographic change that is coming in the country. Its census bureau has estimated that by 2045 US would become a country where minorities would account for over 60% of the population.

Minority students were supposed to reach 50% of all children in primary school in 2022 but that happened in 2019 instead. Put simply, everyone who will shape the upbringing of America is already in the country and restricting H-IB visas can do little to reverse this trend.

Secondly, some of the work done by H-IB visa holders will be outsourced to Indian back offices, although the Trump administration will likely take that process. Employment, therefore, will increase in India, which is good for the country, but will not fulfil the aspirations of H-IB seekers, who wish to emigrate.

Thirdly, the \$100,000 fee is expected to make companies hire only at the highest level of the H-IB scale, which is that of experts. With AI now doing much of the entry-level

work, the Trump administration is arguing that American companies should be hiring workers who add substantial value to the company's product and make them world beaters. Low-level hirings do little to further that goal. But hiring someone who can achieve a breakthrough in say battery technology will.

What Indians need to understand
While racial preferences and technological strategy



may be driving the Trump administration's actions, what are the implications for India?

One obvious consequence is that those in India have been controversial from the very beginning, including in its selection of the venue. India didn't shake hands after outlasting Pakistan in the first game. In the post-match presentation, captain Suryakumar Yadav paid a tribute to the victims and the families of the Pahalgam massacre. Before that, Pakistan all-rounder Faheem Ashraf had posted a cringeworthy social media post mimicking Operation Sindoor.

Two clear trends emerge from these games. First, the stadiums may be half-full, but Indo-Pak cricket matches still arouse plenty of emotion. And the emotions are mostly negative. There's little joy in winning, but the vicarious pleasure of having shown an inveterate foe its "true place". Similarly, the despair of losing is multiplied because it was inflicted by the only country you cannot lose to at any cost.

Second, there's a grudging realisation that there's a yennang gap between the two sides. On Sunday, India dropped five catches, including four in the first eight overs. Yet it defeated its opponent with ease. What few Pakistanis admit is that the state of cricket cannot be better than the state of the country.

It was different in 1996 when I spent 10 days as a reporter during the World Cup in Pakistan. Among other games, I also reported on the England-Sri Lanka quarter final played in Faisalabad.

recognising that symbolism and optics mean little to American govt.

Instead of a U-turn or an improvement, what followed was the H-IB decision. And more pain is likely to follow. So what GOI needs to do is recognise that it has a major problem on hand and look for alternatives.

The country does best when it faces a crisis. After the 1962 war serious defence planning took place and in 1991 the country undertook significant economic reforms. New Delhi is not in as bad a predicament today but it should take the opportunity to make major reforms.

One such step would be to use the now available Indian talent domestically to work on AI, robotics, and chip manufacture. Learn from the Chinese whose Make in China 2025 programme has led to sixth-generation fighter jets, robot tanks, cell phones that match the iPhone, laser weapons, and electric vehicles that are considered better and cheaper than Tesla.

Over the years there have been claims of madrigalian computers, cell phones, and an alternative to WhatsApp in India. None have borne fruit. But if India is going to have a skilled labour force that cannot leave the country, it is time to have a technological initiative to gainfully employ the workers.

Finally, how many times does the Trump administration have to take a tough stance against India for the mandarins in New Delhi to realise that the two countries are not going to go back to business as usual?

Apart from the H-IB issue there is the fact that student visas have been cut by 50% and Trump is now talking of bringing in 600,000 Chinese students. New Delhi can respond by negotiating with Moscow and Beijing, as part of a drive to get more Indian students into computer, engineering, and medical courses in Russia and China. Their schools provide a first-rate education in these areas and if this is to train the next generation of Indians then this is an easy way to do so.

Those going abroad will have to understand that now studying abroad or working abroad is no longer going to be an easy first step to citizenship. But they can gain the skills to become world beaters.

The writer is a Senior Fellow of the National Institute for Defence Studies, US. Views are personal

What Farhan's 'Gun' Tells Us About Pakistan

Some Pak players were playing anything but cricket in Sunday's Asia Cup match. Their gestures reflect the deeper toll decades of militarisation and extremism have taken on the Pak psyche

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Culture writer Mike Marqusee, a rare American who loved cricket and penned persuasively on the game, once described the intensity and passion that define Indo-Pak encounters as "Waximus The Shooting." It was the title of his book focused on the 1996 ODI World Cup. But mid-90s, cross-border terrorism had taken deep roots, creating a trust deficit between the two South Asian neighbours. But the last war between the two countries had happened 25 years earlier in 1971. The title was more metaphorical.

On Sunday, however, the word "shooting" took on a more visual dimension in the context of Indo-Pak cricket. Pakistan opener Sahibzada Farhan celebrated his half-century aiming an imaginary gun at the spectators, mostly Indian expatriates.

A little later, Pakistan pacesman Harris Rauf taunted the crowd by mimicking a plane being shot down and following it up with a 60 gesture. It was a not-so-veiled reference to the unverified number of Indian planes allegedly shot down during the four-day military exchange between the two countries in May this year.

Symbolically but clearly something more than just cricket was being played over the Dubai night sky. The Indian cricketers didn't hold themselves back. Abuses were used to convey where the ball had gone, which generated more controversy from the very beginning, including in its selection of the venue. India didn't shake hands after outlasting Pakistan in the first game. In the post-match presentation, captain Suryakumar Yadav paid a tribute to the victims and the families of the Pahalgam massacre. Before that, Pakistan all-rounder Faheem Ashraf had posted a cringeworthy social media post mimicking Operation Sindoor.

Two clear trends emerge from these games. First, the stadiums may be half-full, but Indo-Pak cricket matches still arouse plenty of emotion. And the emotions are mostly negative. There's little joy in winning, but the vicarious pleasure of having shown an inveterate foe its "true place". Similarly, the despair of losing is multiplied because it was inflicted by the only country you cannot lose to at any cost.

Second, there's a grudging realisation that there's a yennang gap between the two sides. On Sunday, India dropped five catches, including four in the first eight overs. Yet it defeated its opponent with ease. What few Pakistanis admit is that the state of cricket cannot be better than the state of the country.

It was different in 1996 when I spent 10 days as a reporter during the World Cup in Pakistan. Among other games, I also reported on the England-Sri Lanka quarter final played in Faisalabad.

Nobody was interested in that match, especially in the second half when the day-night India-Pakistan game started in Bengaluru.

Pakistaners were the stronger side and a favourite to retain the world champions title. Everyone that one spoke to in Pakistan before the game had convinced themselves that they were going to win the match. They might have, until Ajay Jadeja produced a lifetime of lifeline, which gave India hope and edge. But Pakistan bounced back with a galloping opening partnership.

The match seemed to be slipping away from India's hands until an aggressive Aamer Sohail famously gestured to Venkatesh Prasad to fetch the ball. Next delivery, he lost his cool and wicket. It was the beginning of the end for Pakistan in the high-pressure game. Sohail's finger-pointing became the indelible image of that match.

Relatively speaking, the 1990s were far more gentlemanly times than the 2020s. Just as the 1970s were compared to the 1990s, though Mohinder Amarnath recently revealed in his autobiography, *Fearless*, that during the 1978 tour a Cambridge-educated Pakistan player had called an Indian player "kafir", a pejorative term for those who don't adhere to Islam. But those days provocative wasn't travel as fast and furious was today, aggravating deeper feelings.

It could be great if both sides take strict action against players whose gestures are deemed aggressive and provocative by the umpires. Yellow cards and red cards on the lines of football might also help, but rest assured, in these edgy times, such thoughts are more a fantasy.



Sacredspace

The assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of western cruelty and barbarity. Universal compassion is the only gateway to morality.

Arthur Schopenhauer

From Egocentric To Ecocentric: Reverse All Life

Paromita Roy
In the wake of the recent 'stray dogs' controversy that raised vital questions about preserving fragile ecosystems, we must turn to ancient Bharatayana. *Pranapara* (Indic wisdom traditions) for humane, reverential, compassionate, practical win-win solutions to prevent human-animal conflict and re-examine the Protagonist notion that 'man is the measure of all things'. Indic wisdom traditions teach not merely 'compassion' but reverence for all life, born of realisation of interconnectedness of cosmos, unambiguously proven today by modern science through the quantum entanglement phenomenon. This truth, discovered by our ancient rishis in Vedas and Upanishads ages ago, is not just a theoretical concept, but integrated into daily practice through the *pancha mahayajnas*. Five great sacrifices: Deva Yajna, sacrifice for forces of nature,

called gods; Pitru Yajna, for our ancestors' legacy; Rishi Yajna, for rishis and Vedas, sources of wisdom; Nri/Manushya Yajna, for all human beings; Bhuta Yajna, for all living and non-living beings.

Cosmic rhy that described in the *Katha Upanishad* as *ram bhrah* - the great Cosmic Order - informs and envelops all life and existence. Rishabhdeva captured this ideal in his essay *Sadhana* through the Vedic dictum: *prano virat*. 'Life is immense'. This ancient vision aligns with ecocentric, as contrasting with egocentric view of modern times. Aldo Leopold emphasises that every being plays a unique, irreplaceable role in the ecosystem's stability. From time immemorial, India has emphasised interconnectedness of all life, reflected in daily practices like offering food first to

cows, dogs, birds, and guests before a family sit down to their meals.

Indian epics, Mahabharata and Ramayan, offer several instances of the kinship between humans and animals. The Mahabharata's story of a mongoose, full of whose body turned to gold when it rolled on the remnants of the gift of food by a poor family that embraced starvation, and eventual death resonates with heartbeats of Bharat.

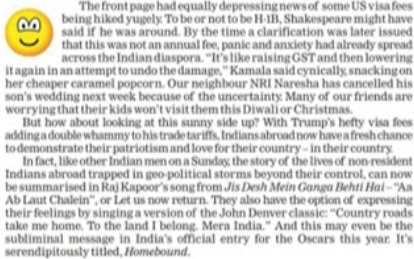
Yudhishtir refused to enter heaven without his loyal dog, who was later revealed to be the veritable embodiment of dharma. Ramayan narrates how Nature grieved and mourned Sita's abduction. Such tales are endless in Hindu lore, and they loudly proclaim humans' profound emotional and spiritual bonding with Nature. When the world is awakening to and revering India's ancient wisdom of 'One Earth, One Family', it is tragic that we allow ourselves to think

and speak in terms of fragmentation and dualism. The World Hindu Organisation's 'One Health' approach - a 'collaborative, multi-sectoral, and transdisciplinary' vision - recognises interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. When one sees life in its immensity, illusion of separateness dissolve in Oneness.

This universal empathy echoes in Jeremy Bentham's timeless question: "The question is not, can they reason? Nor can they talk? But can they suffer?" Ecologists such as Bill Devall and George Sessions assert that all forms of life have intrinsic worth as inextricable parts of an interconnected whole.

Oscar Wilde's "The Selfish Giant" exhorts love and oneness, whereupon life blossoms - birds sing, animals rejoice, children exult and bliss flows endlessly.

The writer is assistant professor, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational & Research Institute, Belur Math





Desperation is the raw material of drastic change. Only those who can leave behind everything they have ever believed in can hope to escape

William Burroughs

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— Ramnath Goenka

BAGRAM DEMAND MAY SHOW LIMITS OF TRUMP'S COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

US President Donald Trump recently revealed that the Bagram airbase in Afghanistan was on his wishlist of strategically significant territories he wanted control over. While Greenland and the Panama Canal were part of his pre-election rhetoric, the desire to retake Bagram was articulated just a few days ago. Trump wanted the Panama Canal for 'economic security', alleging it had been 'ceded' to China. The crisis blew over after Panama decided not to renew its contract with a Hong Kong company that was operating the ports. On the flip side, Greenland refused to budge.

As for Bagram, the Biden administration vacated it along with the rest of the country in a chaotic pullout in 2021, two decades after the American invasion of Afghanistan. The Taliban overran the weak elected government even before the US exit. Trump considers Biden's full troop withdrawal a strategic blunder. But he misses the point that American troops would have been sitting ducks in Bagram had they stayed put during the coup by the Taliban and other fighters. The US is currently negotiating a prisoner and hostage swap deal with the Taliban. If clinched, the deal could potentially set the pace for talks on using the Bagram base for joint counterterrorism efforts. Zalmay Khalilzad, former US special representative for Afghanistan, recently indicated.

Khalilzad's diplomatic articulation contrasted with Trump's crude declaration that Bagram must be returned to those who built it: he made the same argument on the Panama Canal. Located 50 km north of Kabul, the Bagram airbase is a short distance away from China and holds immense strategic value. Interestingly, Trump's statement came at a time when the Taliban regime approved a draft policy on the export of minerals, including rare earths. Though he cited China, chances are he wants control over Bagram for security cover to import critical minerals from Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. His threat of "bad things" happening to Afghanistan if it failed to yield was yet another marker of his authoritarian streak, which recently included the cancellation of comedy shows back home. Predictably, the Taliban refused to be bullied and China supported Afghanistan's sovereign right to make its own call. The Taliban has better ties with Russia and China than Uncle Sam. Coercive diplomacy clearly has its limits.

ODISHA MUST EXPAND ITS TIGER PAW-PRINT

THE photograph of a melanistic tiger cub from Odisha's Similipal Tiger Reserve triggered a wave of jubilation last week. From top political leaders to forest officers, there was a flood of congratulatory messages. The reason was that the young tiger with a striking dark pelt adorned the cover of an international wildlife magazine—a feature rare for this part of the country. However, pseudomelanistic tigers are not rare, thanks to the mutation of a particular gene. Over 30 years back, L A K Singh, a state research officer, had officially documented what is colloquially called a black tiger. Half a decade ago, a team headed by scientists from Bengaluru's National Centre for Biological Sciences decoded the gene responsible for the anomalous phenotype.

So was the celebration over-the-top? Not exactly, because it shines the spotlight on the state's big fauna on a big stage. However, the big picture must not be missed. The mutation could be caused by the isolated nature of the tiger population in Similipal, one of India's earliest reserves notified way back in 1973. It points to excessive inbreeding and lack of genetic diversity. Much of it was elucidated in the research that called for 'genetic rescue'—the reason the National Tiger Conservation Authority suggested bringing over tigers from other parts to Similipal. Last year, the government enumerated 30 tigers in the state—27 were from Similipal, of which 13 were pseudomelanistic.

A healthy tiger population is not just good news for the forest ecosystem; it also drives tourism. In central, western and northern states, tigers have brought in waves of eco-tourism activities. Odisha for long missed the bus because of its unimpressive count and reluctance to experiment. After being nudged by the authority, the state translocated two females from the Tadoba-Andhari reserve. More such actions must be taken up. At present, Odisha has two notified reserves with Salween devoid of tigers, having suffered a failed reintroduction in 2018. No tiger reserve has been added in the last 18 years. The Sunabeda sanctuary was given in-principle consent by the Centre in 2008, but its fate hangs in balance. Another proposal to develop Debrigarh sanctuary in western Odisha should be fast-tracked. Instead of basking in melanistic glory, the government must go for experiments. Tiger supplementation involves risk, but it's one worth taking.

QUICK TAKE

WATER AS A BRIDGE

A N honour is often an excuse to celebrate good work on a vital issue that otherwise would miss the attention it deserves. Pune-based scientist Himanshu Kulkarni becoming the first South Asian recipient of the University of Oklahoma's biennial International Water Prize is one such occasion. Kulkarni, a hydrogeologist who co-founded the Advanced Centre for Water Resources Development and Management and teaches at IIT Bombay and Shiv Nadar University, has worked for more than three decades on bridging the gap between communities and aquifers to manage groundwater. In a country where Dalits are often beaten for accessing water sources marked for higher castes, engagement of whole communities in managing water resources could be an essential tool for progress.

THE week gone by ended with a bang. President Donald Trump decided to impose a stiff \$1,00,000 fee for H-1B visa applicants. This move, in the wake of the 50 percent tariff that was imposed on Indian exports to the US just recently, seemed to be a double whammy of sorts. The good part: the White House seemed determined to ensure that American jobs were secure. The bad part: the American dream of many a young Indian wanting to make money in the US seemed a bit shaken, if not stirred and decimated altogether.

There was chaos for an entire day. Amid the confusion of understanding the fine print of the presidential order, companies sent out advisories to their employees to return to the US immediately by September 21 to avoid the risk of not being allowed to re-enter. Social media videos of those just about leaving US airports wanting to de-board out of sheer fright made the news. There was panic and uncertainty in the air. The US had dropped the H-bomb—the H-1B visa bomb. The American dream could not be taken for granted. The times were uncertain.

The US administration clarified quite quickly in a day that existing visa holders need not worry. That was calming for those with a visa on hand. Only those who sought new visas and those that came up for the next round of lottery were the ones who would have a big fee to pay. Companies bringing in overseas resources to work in the US were being told to bring in only high-value-added human resources. Folks who were willing to pay a stiff fee to bring in.

President Trump does not want you to replace lower-end American jobs with the Indian or Chinese import. He even went about quoting the case of a company that sacked more than 20,000 American workers to bring in just about that number of overseas employees at a lower cost. Trump seemed fine with "brain-shopping" at the top end, but seemed staunchly against "body shopping", something that has been the very foundation of the Indian IT end-to-end services industry. He wants to put an end to this, and hence the plan.

This action on the H-1B visa seems to be part of this plan. The key idea is the noble intent of protecting American jobs. From the Indian side of the fence, all that was well, but this is a business challenge. One that will make Indian IT exports uncompetitive. This is not to be for the Indian company alone, but for

After stiff tariffs on goods, Trump's H-1B bomb is a levy on Indian service exports. If American firms can't bring over the people they need, they should go where the expertise is

BUSINESS CAN GO TO TALENT WHEN TALENT WON'T COME TO IT

HARISH BIJOOR

Brand guru & founder of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc



some of the biggest American companies as well that bring in Indians to work for them on American soil. The data throws up names of some of the biggest American companies on the list—Amazon, Microsoft, Meta, Apple and Google included.

The double-whammy perception of it is, however, the fact that Indian imports were being taxed, both of the goods and the human kind now. India was certainly at the receiving end of this order, as 71 percent of the approved visas (of the total 85,000 H-1B approvals) went to Indians, with China coming a distant second with 11.7 percent. The pressure was clearly on India and Indians. The world is getting less flat all of a sudden. Nations are getting protective and the MAGA agenda in the US is not a force to be ignored. India and the Indian are under pressure. The

US is no longer the land of milk and honey for us to drink from.

What then is the India response? What must it be? As I ask this question, there is a fair bit of chaos and lack of clear thinking in the industry. The government response is yet to come, as the diplomacy back-channels must be working overtime. The people's response is loud and chaotic though, as it usually is. Our television channels are full of 'quick-gun Murugan' responses. Everyone is aghast and irritated. Everyone is against the US actions.

And then there is a fair bit of criss-romanticism at play here. People who just don't know the business reality at play are suggesting political motives with solutions that talk of things that seem just out of a Mills & Boon business romance series, if there ever was one.

TEMPORAL MINDERS OF GODLY WEALTH

C P SURENDRAN

Port, novelist and screenplay writer whose latest novel is One Love and the Many Lives of Chappell

As of now, a Supreme Court-nominated committee manages the Padmanabhaswamy Temple's affairs, including its finances and security. This is seen as a working compromise reducing the direct control of both the royal family and the state government, the main contestants for managing the funds.

A fraction of temple funds is used for philanthropy. The Tirumala authorities run hospitals and universities. In contrast, the Kerala temple boards' charitable output is perceived to be minimal. For example, nothing ought to prevent them from running good hospitals for the poor, yet there are few such institutions.



Politicians of all stripes vie to control the considerable riches of temples. The case of missing gold from Sabarimala points to the mismanagement of temple affairs. Devotees who offer their hard-earned wealth deserve to know how it is managed

The vast majority of temple wealth disappears into a labyrinthine ecosystem of administrative overheads, opaque fixed deposits, non-transparent tenders for everything from ladies to laddus, and real estate deals. The boards governing these temples are often vicarious centres of political patronage, where appointments are rewards, not responsibilities. The annual audit reports, when they see the light of day, are often corners of compromise.

The Sabarimala case is exceptional be-

cause of its direct nexus with politics. The TDB, which manages over 1,200 temples, is currently headed by a leader of the CPI(M), a party in power for nearly eight consecutive years. One might ask: what has Marxism to do with Manikantan (another name for Ayappa)?

The 90 kgs vs 4 kg debate is not a simple accounting error. It is facetious to claim a considerable quantity of gold simply evaporated. After years of investigation, if the Crime Branch cannot determine the weight of the missing gold, it is a symptom of the disease. The TDB's version of events is a testament to their belief that the faithful would swallow any explanation, no matter how implausible.

They forget the lesson taught by rationalists like the late Pavanan, who happens to be my father. A rationalist all his life, decades ago he exposed the 'divine' Makara Vilakku 'miracle' as a man-made fire, orchestrated by the devaswam board. Makaravilakku is an annual event celebrated at Sabarimala marking the culmination of the pilgrimage season. The festival is famous for the sighting of a special light, the Makarajyothi, on the top of a distant hill. Pavanan and his colleagues discovered that the fire was lit by the temple management. He proved that the machinery of faith is often powered by falsity. Yet, the Makarajyothi spectacle continues.

Those who believe cannot question. Politicians and power brokers know this well. Why would an all-powerful god, who created the stars and Earth, want gold and cash? No politician, no banker or Kerala-specific, would ask that question because power must build bridges with superstition to survive. The devotee does need to know that their sacrifice—the hard-earned cash dropped into the hundi, the gold necklace offered in desperation or gratitude—is treated with a measure of sanctity. Perhaps our billionaire gods cannot be brought to book. But the dealings of the politicians who pretend to be their managers can be made more transparent.

(Views are personal) (cpsurendran@gmail.com)

An entire reverse brain-drain on the US with our Indian doctors and scientists and engineers returning home to work for India in India is one of them.

As the Indian response is shaping up, what can we do? I do believe when a nation is pushed, it pushes back. This push-back has begun. When pushed against the wall, you need to survive and fight back. Indian IT houses need to think this out carefully. The writing has always been on the wall and internal think tanks within companies have always floated on this possibility. Our scenario-planning exercises have always visualised this eventuality. This is nothing new.

Our IT-led and -enabled enterprises have, over the years, hedged their bets across geographies. What started as a US-centric business is today hedged across geographies. India works across the world. Yes, the US is still the biggest market, but it certainly is not the only market. In that manner of speaking, an Amazon will face the bite of this action more than a TCS. The business response will, therefore, come from the biggest of American firms that use and depend on Indian resources.

When the resource cannot come to the company at economic cost, must the company go to the resource then? Therein lays a salivating thought for India. I do believe action on this will come from American companies and not by hands-tied Indian ones. In the beginning, they will test the legality of this presidential action, and if it holds, I do believe business will go where it makes sense to go. The large number of global capability centres (GCCs)—1,900 at the last count—that have made Indian soil their home are examples of how businesses go where it makes sense to go. These GCCs have been set up in India not only because India is hungry for them (that as well). They are here because they are hungry for India and what it offers them. It makes excellent business sense to be in the centre of talent. Either go where the talent is, or like in the old days, bring the talent in. That paradigm will change and there lays the big opportunity for India.

Yes, a lot of our youngsters will lose the opportunity to live in the US and enjoy the American life and lifestyle, but home is where the heart is. My Bengaluru has had traffic, but it's not all that bad. We get the best doctors out here at prices that astound, particularly when you convert the dollar to the rupee. Come to Bengaluru.

(Views are personal) (harishbijoor@hotmail.com)

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Brain gain

Ref: Prioritise innovation, build India's future as deep tech destination (Sep 22). The US president wants to give priority to Americans, just like any other country would. Our previous leaders failed to prevent brain drain and the present employees are paying the penalty. If India wants to bring the best talents back to our country, first we must incentivise skill. **VR Ganeshan, Chennai**

Mohanlal's gift

Ref: Craft meets greatness (Sep 22). Mohanlal's cinematic career has been in congruence with Malayalam cinema, both in creativity and growth. Admirably, he belongs to the actors who "rowing hand against the stream, saw distant gates of Eden gleam, and did not dream it was a dream". **Keleth Gopakumar Menon, Thrissur**

Inspiring read

Ref: Slayer of darkness (Sep 22). The author's writing was both engaging and insightful. The narrative was clear, thoughtful, and left the reader with much to reflect upon. As a reader, I value columns that combine knowledge with readability, offering both information and inspiration. **Prem Anand A, email**

Daring escapes

Ref: On a wheel and a prayer (Sep 22). This story brings back memories of a real-life story I read in the Reader's Digest about a Cuban teenager who fled from Cuba in a similar fashion in 1969. The youth had tied himself to the rear wheel shaft and had miraculously survived. **GSTH Nallagandy, email**

HAR reality

Ref: Shun foreign goods, turn to Indian (Sep 22). The GST reforms, though necessary, should not be celebrated as they were long overdue. Celebrating it as a gift is certainly not appropriate and seems hypocritical when people are taking continuous blows from inflation and wage stagnation. **P Padmanabhan, Bengaluru**

Palestine hypocrisy

Ref: UK, Aus, Canada recognise Palestinian state (Sep 22). Recognition without action epitomises 'too little, too late'. These nations remain complicit in arming Israel, facilitating the massacre. This genocide has revealed the moral hollowities of governments, which have failed to relay their citizens' demands of putting an end to the genocide for almost two years now. **Ananya Podder, Kolkata**

A simplified GST

Revenue collection must be closely tracked

In his address to the nation on Sunday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi underscored how changes in the goods and services tax (GST) structure — which were cleared by the GST Council earlier this month and came into effect on Monday — would make goods and services more affordable for people and simplify operations for businesses. The GST Council, in its 56th meeting, had decided to move mainly to a two-rate structure, 5 per cent and 18 per cent, for most goods and services, with a demerit rate of 40 per cent for a select few goods. The council also did away with the compensation cess except on a few sin goods, which will be collected until the loans raised to compensate states during the pandemic are repaid. This is likely to be over in the coming few months.

A simplified GST structure will help all stakeholders. The government expects that lower GST rates, along with income-tax relief, will boost consumption. As the Prime Minister noted, changes in the income-tax rates and GST would lead to savings of ₹2.2 trillion for the people of India. While the changes should help boost consumption, their extent and sustainability would be worth watching. Further, the other side of lowering taxes is the implication for revenue collection. Since GST is collected by the Union and state governments, both could be affected. The revenue flow to states could be affected more because part of the central government's tax collection also flows to states. Interestingly, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) last week came up with a report on state finances, the first of its kind. Since the report is for 2022-23, the numbers are not particularly new and are broadly known, but its decadal analysis and findings are still worth discussing, especially at a time when tax rates have been reduced.

The report shows that aggregate public debt in states in absolute terms went up 3.39 times between 2013-14 and 2022-23. In terms of percentage of gross state domestic product (GSDP), public debt increased from 16.66 per cent to 22.96 per cent during the same period. Accounting for public-accounts liabilities, the liability of states was at about 28 per cent of GSDP. The data compiled by the Reserve Bank of India in the last report on state finances (December 2024) suggests that the liability went up in the subsequent years. The increase in levels of debt means debt-servicing costs have gone up for states, which leaves fewer resources for other purposes. For about 10 states, interest payment was over 10 per cent of their expenditure. To be fair, some states have managed their finances well, but a potential revenue loss might have a bigger impact on weaker states.

At a broader policy level, the country has moved to a simpler GST system, which must be welcomed. Nevertheless, over the past weeks, several experts have talked about the need for the next set of reforms in the GST system. In terms of revenue, for example, it has been suggested that the 5 per cent rate could have been raised a bit to protect revenue collection. There are suggestions of revisiting the exemption list and also bringing petroleum products within the GST net, which will significantly help businesses. Thus, while the latest set of reforms will help consumers and businesses a great deal, more will need to be done in the future. Revenue implications will also need to be closely tracked.

Tel Aviv's isolation

A two-state solution remains the global consensus

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Keir Starmer, on Sunday announced that his country would confer diplomatic recognition on the state of Palestine. His Commonwealth counterparts — from Australia and Canada — also declared that their nations would take a similar step. This is part of an effort that appears to be coordinated primarily by President Emmanuel Macron of France, who this week will announce at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly that his country too is recognising the Palestinian state; two other European nations, Portugal and Belgium, will do so too. Mr Macron is due to co-host a summit with Saudi Arabia on the subject of Palestinian statehood. This represents a major shift in attitudes in the West, and is a reflection of the increasing isolation on the international stage being endured by Tel Aviv following its continuing war on the population of the Gaza Strip. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to these developments by declaring them "a huge reward for terrorism", and adding that "a Palestinian state will not be established west of the Jordan River".

It is worth noting that the European nations and their Anglosphere allies are not outliers at this point; if anything, Mr Netanyahu's response is revealing of how far the Israeli leadership has drifted from the global consensus on this issue. The first European nation to recognise Palestine was Sweden, in 2014; since then, multiple other Western nations, including Spain, have done so. Three-fourths of UN member states have done so, and most of the others are also committed to a two-state solution. It is Mr Netanyahu who, through his statement, has revealed a difficult truth: the Israeli establishment is now determined that a two-state solution is impossible. This is a shift from the basic assumptions that have guided the global outreach to Israel since the Oslo Accords in the 1990s. Those assumptions are that, first, the Palestinian authority will rise to the level of a putative state; second, that the areas under Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, give or take a little, will serve as the core of that state. To rule out a Palestinian state that occupies even a fraction of those lands — both of which are "west of the Jordan River" — clearly violates those foundational assumptions. The Israeli Knesset also passed a resolution last year against a two-state solution, saying that any Palestinian state would pose "an existential danger to the State of Israel and its citizens, perpetuate the conflict, and destabilise the region".

It is unclear what actual shifts on the ground, particularly in the prosecution of Tel Aviv's brutal war against Gaza, such recognition would deliver. But the Israeli leadership would be wise to understand that this is not an expression of support for Islamism or Hamas; it is a reminder that Israel's leaders have a duty to return to the positions that they occupied in the past, on which their country's current acceptability in the comity of nations is based. They retain, of course, the support of the United States (US). But as any ally of the US now knows, such support cannot be counted upon. India recognised Palestine decades ago, but has a close strategic partnership with Israel. Tel Aviv must understand the latter grew out of the former, not independently of it — and this is the case for most of the world.

AI is at an extreme

The market capitalisation, returns, and capex concentration of top AI firms have surpassed tech-bubble highs

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



At the moment, global markets are dancing entirely to the tune of artificial intelligence (AI). It is everywhere, and either you believe and participate in the bull market, or you sit on the sidelines, doomed to mediocre relative performance while waiting for sanity to return. As of today, the bulls have the upper hand, as markets are convinced that AI is transformational and here to stay. It will determine the future winners and losers, both at the company and sovereign level. At the beginning of an industry platform shift, one should not worry about valuations, just focus on buying the winners, so goes the current thinking.

The believers are convinced that AI will solve the demographic and fiscal challenges of the West. Through a surge in productivity, growth will accelerate, solving the debt trap problem that most Western democracies are on the precipice of. We don't have to inflate our way out of the fiscal challenges. AI led growth will solve the budget arithmetic.

With a need for fewer workers, especially at entry level, the demographic challenges of the West will be less corrosive. AI will also widen the span of corporate outcomes, with the winners seeing a surge in growth and margins and the losers going out of business. America is seen as a winner in the AI race, as is China. The AI trade is in full force, whether you look at the internals of the US market or consider the out-performance of China/Korea and Taiwan. India is seen as an AI loser or laggard.

While one can debate the ultimate outcome, timing, and true benefits of AI, only the passage of time will reveal its real impact. The trade and them-

atic are currently all-pervasive. AI carries extreme weight in the markets, and measures of concentration across market capitalisation, returns, earnings, and capex are at all-time highs.

Today in the US, 65 per cent of all venture capital investment is going into AI- or machine-learning-based startups. OpenAI is poised to raise money at a \$500 billion valuation, despite its own internal projections showing it will lose over \$100 billion over the next five years. Every single large language model (LLM) company is raising billions in new capital, and Oracle has seen a \$240 billion single-day surge in market capitalisation based on a \$300 billion five-year Cloud deal signed with OpenAI (which has estimated current revenues of \$12 billion and no visibility on free cash flows). Oracle's pop in market capitalisation needs the markets to stay buoyant so that OpenAI can raise the cash required to fund the contract. Circular logic at its best!

Today, the Magnificent Seven (Mag-7) holds a 32 per cent weight in the S&P 500. In January 2023, just after ChatGPT was launched, this number was only 18 per cent. Nvidia, with an 8 per cent weight in the S&P 500, now has the largest single stock weight in the history of the index. Its current market capitalisation is equivalent to 15 per cent of US gross domestic product!

The S&P TMT (tech/media/telecom) weight at 45 per cent, is exactly the same as it was in the tech bubble of 2000. The difference of course is that this is all AI now, with telecom and media almost non-existent. If we look at the top 10 companies in the S&P 500 (basically the Mag-7, Broadcom, Berkshire



AKASH PRAKASH

Trump tariffs and India's options

American shoppers may soon feel the pinch of Donald Trump's tariffs. High tariffs on consumer goods imported into the United States (US) will lead to inflation. Over time, this will affect most US citizens, and economic growth may stagnate if demand declines. Also, as the prices of intermediate goods increase, the cost of domestic manufacturing — and ultimately the prices of domestically produced goods — will rise.

Even so, domestic producers in the US are content to give Donald Trump political mileage, as this is largely a consumers' problem. They may benefit from reduced competition.

Although higher prices of imported intermediates may incentivise domestic production, it is unclear how long this will last. During the Second World War, Olivetti reconfigured its typewriter plants to produce machine guns for the Italian army in just three months. But that was under wartime patriotic fervour and Mussolini's dictates. Can Mr Trump inspire the same response among US manufacturers?

The additional 25 per cent tariff on all our exports to the US due to its import of Russian crude oil puts a huge burden on India. We import around 600 million barrels of oil per year from Russia. If we stop doing this and other countries don't step in to absorb Russian oil, the demand for other oil suppliers in the international oil markets will increase, and prices of crude oil will shoot up since India is the third-largest oil importer. Shifting imports from Russia to the international market will increase demand in the global market by 4 to 5 per cent. Say it goes up by \$20/barrel.

India's total crude oil imports are around 1,680 million barrels per year. Our annual oil import bill will go up by \$34 billion per year. Currently, the price advantage of Russian crude is \$2/barrel. If we lose that, the additional burden on India could be \$1.2 billion. Apart from not giving in to a bully, there is thus an economic argument for resisting Mr Trump's arm-twisting over importing Russian oil.

How will the US benefit from this? Its net exports of petroleum products in 2023 were 1.64 million barrels per day, or around 600 million barrels per year. With a \$20/barrel increase in price, it would gain an additional \$12 billion in annual revenues. From the US perspective, Mr Trump's tariffs may therefore make some sense.



KIRIT S. PARIKH

Policy choices

India should take steps to protect its exports. For example, the wholesale price of Basmati is around ₹50/kg, while the landed price in the US is about ₹100/kg. With a 50 per cent tariff, the landed price would rise to around ₹150/kg. In comparison, Basmati from Pakistan, facing only a 10 per cent tariff, would cost about ₹120/kg. The current retail price at Walmart in the US is around ₹400/kg.

A subsidy of around ₹20/kg to Indian exporters would make our Basmati competitive against Pakistan in the US market. We are exporting around 235 million kg of rice. A subsidy of ₹20-25 per kg will cost the government around \$50 million. The subsidy can be given in a variety of ways, such as cash transfer to actual export shipment, rolling over debt, and tax rebate against earning from exports to the US. Unfor-

tunately, subsidies once given are often difficult to withdraw. So, it should be in the form that is self-liquidating. One option is to link the subsidy amount to the additional tariff imposed on India for the product, compared with other major exporters to the US.

A similar subsidy could be provided for shrimp exports to protect farmers and fishermen. Such subsidies could be financed using the savings from importing oil from Russia rather than the international market. At the same time, import tariffs should be selectively lowered for large-scale manufacturing sectors. Tariffs and import restrictions were initially introduced to protect infant industries. However, as pointed out, once introduced, they were difficult to remove. As a result, we found ourselves with many semi-infants.

The cost of logistics for industries has been reduced but much still needs to be done. While the government is collecting more taxes, it almost harasses honest taxpayers to the point of discouraging them. I had got a goods and services tax (GST) number when my consulting income exceeded ₹20 lakh. However, I kept receiving reminders about filing GST returns. Fearing harassment, I decided to forego consulting assignments in excess of ₹20 lakh a year, and gave up my GST number.

A report by TeamLease RegTech points out that a standalone solar energy producing plant must comply with 2,735 total annual tasks, with 83 carrying prior sentences. No wonder, many industrialists prefer to invest abroad rather than in India. We should take Trump Tariffs as an opportunity to clean up our act.

The author is chairman, Integrated Research and Action for Development (IRADe)

The author is with Anansa Capital. All data from Apollo Global Chartbook

How Mujib lost the plots



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

As Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, a former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, points out in his foreword, Manash Ghosh's *Mujib's Blunders: The Power and the Plot Behind His Killing*, "covers the troubled years after the freedom struggle, popularly known as the Liberation War, against the genocidal Pakistan Army." Obviously, the focus of any such book has to be Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — commonly referred to as Sheikh Mujib — an inspirational leader who spearheaded Bangladesh's emergence as a nation, but became a

victim of his own hubris.

Mr Ghosh, who describes the proximate circumstances leading to Mujib's assassination along with all members of his immediate family — sons daughters Hasina and Rehana who were abroad — and some members of his extended family, by a group of army officers, also shows that Mujib had by then lost quite a bit of his popularity and had become increasingly isolated within the Awami League. He also shows how Mujib himself was responsible for this. He failed to act to foil Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad's launching of conspiracies to oust him, despite being aware of them. Another was his marginalisation of Tajuddin Ahmed, whom he made to resign his prime ministerial office.

Mujib's grant of amnesty on November 30, 1974 to all who were under trial or had been convicted, of war crimes and collaboration with the Pakistanis gave a huge boost to the Jamaat-e-Islami and its auxiliaries such as the al-Badr, al-Shams

and Razakars; it led to the release of 30,000 supporters who promptly became politically active. Another blunder was the integration into the country's civilian administration and fledgling military, of about 500,000 civilian and military personnel repatriated from West Pakistan at the end of the war, without screening them for their role during the Liberation War. Many of them, loyal to Pakistan, began sabotaging the government's policies and measures, particularly the ones to deal with the floods and famine conditions devastating large parts of Bangladesh in 1974.

Neither Mujib's visit to Pakistan to attend the second summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Lahore from February 22 to 24, 1974, nor Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's three-day visit to Dhaka from June 27 that year, yielded any significant result. The very fact that these were undertaken, however, gave a massive boost to the morale of pro-Pakistan elements gathered round the

Jamaat-e-Islami and its auxiliaries, and enabled several repatriated officers from Pakistan, who had been given important positions in Bangladesh, opportunities to confer with their counterparts from Pakistan about ways to ensure Mujib's ouster.

Mujib was aware of the conspiracies being hatched against him but acted neither against those involved nor against Maulana Bhasani, who spearheaded a vicious campaign against him and India. He also ignored warnings by Indian officials and by Fidel Castro, who said during their conversation at the fourth summit of the non-aligned movement in Algiers in September 1973, that his enemies would get him if he was not tough with them. As Mr Ghosh suggests, Mujib's compassionate nature and belief in the goodness of people, stood in the way of ruthless action, as did his belief that his popularity would never wane in Bangladesh and the question of his



Mujib's Blunders: The Power and the Plot Behind His Killing
By Manash Ghosh
Published by Niyogi Books
476 pages ₹795

ouster or killing could never arise. Nor did he believe that he needed to enhance his security arrangements. His killers, therefore, had little trouble in executing their murderous mission.

The assassination marked the end of one of the tallest leaders of his time, wars notwithstanding. It did not mark the end of Mr Ghosh's narrative, which shifted to the events that followed: The coups and counter-coups; the killing of Tajuddin and three other important Awami League leaders — Syed Nazrul Islam, AFIM Quamruzzaman, and Captain (Retd) Mansur

Ali — in Dhaka Central Jail on November 3, 1975; the murder of Ziaur Rahman, who had made himself Bangladesh's President and sought to consolidate his power through mass executions, and the many vicissitudes that Bangladesh experienced, culminating in the conspiracy, masterminded by foreign powers, that led to Sheikh Hasina's ouster from power

on August 5, 2025. Mr Ghosh has done well to highlight the important role that Tajuddin Ahmed, bureaucrat Nurul Kader and Major-General Khales Hossain played during the Liberation War and thereafter in Bangladesh, and the outstanding contribution by Subimal Dutt, India's first high-commissioner to Bangladesh, in placing the ties between the two countries on a firm footing. These details are not generally known. Also, he has brought to his narrative his deep personal knowledge of Bangladesh's post-Liberation politics and insights gained from his face-to-face interaction with most of the important Bangladeshi personalities. The result is a book that engrosses and informs. There are, however, a couple of avoidable slips. For example, the parliamentary election that Indira Gandhi lost was held in March 1977, and not 1976, as he states (pages 408 and 443). A bigger lacuna is the absence of an index, indispensable in the case of a book like this.

The reviewer is a senior journalist and author of *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan* (Sage, 2005)

The Editorial Page

WORDLY WISE
ACTING IS BEHAVING TRUTHFULLY UNDER
IMAGINARY CIRCUMSTANCES.
— SANFORD MEISNER

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

DISCOUNTING CASTE

UP government order against 'caste-based signs' at rallies collapses voices of marginalised and privileged. It needs to go

THROUGH MUCH OF the freedom struggle and in the decades since Independence, India's politics and democracy have contended with caste — as an axis of historical and ongoing discrimination, an arena for affirmative action, and one of the primary modes of political and social mobilisation. While navigating these complexities is an ongoing task, the Uttar Pradesh government's decision to prohibit "public display of caste-based signs" during political rallies, citing that it might prompt conflict, turns the clock back and undermines the gains made through an evolving politics. The government's directive issued to state officials is welcome insofar as it asks the police not to reveal the caste of an accused — this is inherently discriminatory and could impact investigations. However, the decision not to allow caste markers across public spaces, including vehicles and rallies, presumes a non-discriminatory society. The directive appears blind to the ground realities, especially the various ways in which caste operates today. Assertion of caste by upper-caste individuals or groups might, intentionally or otherwise, intimidate marginalised castes. For the latter, in contrast, public displays of identity — especially in political contexts — are a way to counter historical injustices. The UP government's decision blurs this line and undermines the hard struggle for visibility and equality. It also flies in the face of the Centre's decision to enumerate caste in the upcoming Census for the "holistic interests and values of the nation and society".

The UP government's directive followed the Allahabad High Court's September 16 order, which asked the Home Department and the DGP to frame and implement standard operating procedures to prohibit the disclosure of caste in any police documents except for the cases filed under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Criticising the practice of putting up caste identifiers on cars, homes and slamming the social media reels that "often romanticise caste aggression and dominance, rural masculinity, and regressive honour codes", the court observed: "The socio-psychological, cultural, and legal dimensions of such behaviour reveal how the assertion of caste in public domains undermines constitutional morality and reflects an identity crisis rooted in historical superiority and modern insecurity." The HC order echoes the essence of SC/ST (PoA) Act, which considers intentional insult or intimidation "with intent to humiliate" a member of the SC or ST communities in any place within public view, an offence. In contrast, the government directive is a blunt instrument, ill-suited to the complexities of caste discrimination and assertion.

The directive goes against the spirit of the rights to equality (Articles 14-18), and freedom of expression and speech, and assembly in Articles 19(1)(a) and (b). Historical injustice and lack of representation are recognised by the Constitution, just as free speech is protected by it. Caste mobilisation is a phenomenon across the political spectrum. From the Brahmin Mahapanchayat in Rajasthan to the BJP's allies in UP — NISHAD party, Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party or Apna Dal — caste-based mobilisations are not uncommon. The path to the "annihilation of caste", as B R Ambedkar saw it, was not by ignoring its realities. In fact, he suggested the opposite: Recognition of caste discrimination and targeted affirmative action. The UP government should limit the directive's ambit — it should go by the HC order.

REIMAGINE SWADESHI

A manufacturing ecosystem, operated by Indian or foreign players, is what India needs to weather global uncertainty

HYUNDAI MOTORS HAS raised the proposed investment in its upcoming plant at Talegaon in Maharashtra from Rs 7,000 crore to Rs 11,000 crore. The South Korean auto major's move follows the recent cut in the GST rate on small cars from 28 per cent to 18 per cent. Whether it is Hyundai or Toyota Kirloskar — which is setting up a Rs 20,000 crore greenfield manufacturing facility in Maharashtra's Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar district — the underlying motivation seems to be to leverage India's domestic market as well as export potential. The ability to cater to both segments is something that many foreign firms have implicitly recognised. Maruti Suzuki not only sold over 19 lakh vehicles in India, but also exported 3.3 lakh units from the country during 2024-25. The Japanese carmaker has commenced the production of a Vitara, its first electric vehicle. The bulk of these, from its Hansalpur (Gujarat) facility, will be exported.

The business strategy of both domestic sales and exports from India makes sense, especially when tariff and non-tariff barriers are reappearing. India's domestic market offers a fallback base for firms actively engaged in exports. That flexibility should improve with better infrastructure (the Samruddhi Mahamarg expressway connecting Mumbai and Nagpur makes it possible for Toyota to produce and export from Sambhaji Nagar) and the GST rationalisation exercise. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's interpretation of Swadeshi — no matter from which country the company comes from or even if the product has a foreign name, it should be manufactured in India — sends the right signal.

What India today needs is more success-story investments like those of Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai and, more recently, Apple and Samsung, which have helped turn the country into a global-scale assembler and even exporter of smartphones. The level of domestic value addition in the latter is still low compared to the manufacturing ecosystem that the big auto players have created. But the point about success stories is that have a demonstration effect on other prospective investors, both domestic and foreign, as they start seeing concrete cases of Make in India "for India and for the world". That's why government needs to enable with stable policies and schemes that provide one-time incentives and clear sunset clauses to attract large-scale investment across key sectors where India has potential comparative advantage. Turbulent global times like these can present opportunities waiting to be grabbed.

THE SHAPESHIFTER

Dadasaheb Phalke Award to Mohanlal recognises a career marked by both great artistry and popular acclaim

THE FIRST ROLE for which Mohanlal was recognised at the National Awards was, arguably, also one that would mark him as a future recipient of the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. The 1989 film *Kireedam*, in which Mohanlal played, with heart-rending realism, a young man whose future is destroyed by one act of unintended violence, was a career-defining project for him. It was an extraordinary instance of an actor completely disappearing into a character — it would be counted as just one more role in which Mohanlal displayed an uncanny ability to shapeshift.

An actor's trajectory is often defined by the tension between two attributes — popularity and artistry — often seen as inversely proportional to each other. If an actor is popular, she/he must not be very talented. To see this as the shibboleth that it is, all one needs to do is go through Mohanlal's five-decade-long filmography. Starting in the 1980s, such as film-makers like Sathyan Anthikad, Padmarajan and Priyadarshan and writers like Lohithadas and Sreenivasan were modernising Malayalam cinema, the actor has a body of work, marked as much by popular appeal as critical acclaim. An instinctive, naturally gifted actor, small shifts in posture and microexpressions are all he has ever needed to essay the vast range of human experience, from the drag-addicted doctor of *Amrutham Gamaya* (1987), to the heartbroken Kathakali artist of *Vinayaprastham* (1999), from the disenfranchised actor-turned-politician of *Iruvar* (1997) to the layabout looking for a shortcut to wealth in *Nadodikkattu* (1987).

There are a few duds, inevitable for an actor with over 300 films. Yet, even as Mohanlal's popularity has soared, cementing his iconic status in Malayalam cinema, his sublime performances over four decades have made him richly deserving of Indian cinema's highest honour.

UN-American

The US is withdrawing from multilateralism, China is stepping in. For India, there are risks and opportunities

AS THE UNITED NATIONS General Assembly convenes for its 80th session this week, there is a sinking sense that US President Donald Trump is bent on deconstructing the world's premier multilateral forum. The UN survived his first-term onslaught (2017-21), widely seen then as an aberration in US policy. This time, Trump is more powerful, less constrained, and moving decisively to reduce the UN's salience in the global order.

In his speech today, Trump is expected to pat himself on the back as a peacemaker, boasting of "ending seven wars" in the first eight months of his second term. For Indian audiences weary of that refrain, it is worth recalling that he is speaking, in part, to his populist base. One of the central themes of the America First movement has been opposition to "endless wars" and denunciation of liberals and Democrats as the "war party" squandering American blood and treasure. Trump promised to be a "peace president" in his January inaugural. But these boasts about peace cannot conceal the movement's hostility to the UN. In Trump's telling, he is doing a better job than the UN Security Council (UNSC), the body charged with maintaining international peace and security.

Trump's approach to the UN signals a deeper shift in US foreign policy — a retreat from multilateralism toward unilateralism. His maiden UN speech in 2017 laid out the template. In a definitive repudiation of globalism, he framed national sovereignty as the "fundamental principle" of international relations. International cooperation, he said, was acceptable but never at the cost of national decision-making or prosperity. In Trump's worldview, there is no room for the "supra-nationalism" that enthralled liberals after the Cold War.

Trump's emphasis on sovereignty and his critique of intrusive liberal internationalism resonated with many developing countries, including India. But his 2017 speech also heralded a string of withdrawals and funding threats. In his first term, he left the Paris Climate Agreement, UNESCO, the Human Rights Council and the Iran nuclear deal. He threatened cuts to UN agencies and questioned the value of peacekeeping. The Biden administration reversed this approach. In the second term, Trump has doubled down — turning disruption into comprehensive policy.

The big difference now is an ideological

The real question is whether the US or China will dominate the UN, but whether middle powers like India can help craft a multilateralism fit for an age of rivalry and rapid change. For India, the turbulence brings both risk and opportunity. The old tropes of its multilateralism — Security Council expansion or demands on the North across a wide range of issues — have little chance of advancing in the current circumstances. Delhi must instead focus on a few issues of high priority, such as global governance of AI, and build like-minded coalitions that cut across the North-South divide.

playbook: The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. The conservative manifesto brims with scepticism of internationalism. It calls for slashing UN contributions to agencies seen as undermining sovereignty or promoting "radical social policies" such as gender equality and LGBTQ rights. It goes further than cutting funds, seeking to transform multilateral bodies into instruments of American policy, and even floating the possibility of leaving the UN if it fails to align with administration objectives. UN policies supporting sustainable development or climate mitigation are a no-go for Trump.

Since January 2025, this agenda has been executed at remarkable speed. Washington has again withdrawn from the WHO, UNESCO and the Human Rights Council. Funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees has ceased. US support for the Paris Agreement and the new Climate Loss and Damage Fund has been halted. There has been an unprecedented cut of more than 80 per cent in US contributions to UN operations, including peacekeeping and global health.

As the American retreat creates a vacuum, China is poised to fill it. Beijing brings its own great-power ambition to the UN. It campaigns systematically to place its interests in influential posts, not only in visible leadership but also in technical and administrative roles shaping standards, auditing and membership decisions. It sponsors development initiatives aligned with the Belt and Road and promotes "global development", "global security", "global civilisation" and "global governance" — concepts designed to buttress Chinese strategy for international leadership. Beijing still has some distance to go before supplanting US dominance of the UN and other multilateral institutions, yet its activism has already made it an indispensable actor — an outcome eased by US disengagement.

This new dynamic plays out against a broader fatigue with multilateralism. Around the turn of the millennium, the UN seemed at a high-water mark with the launch of the WTO and the Millennium Development Goals. Since then, populist nationalism, China's rise and transatlantic divisions have eroded consensus. The UNSC is gridlocked by the US-China and US-Russia rivalries; even humanitarian issues are paralysed by competing vetoes. Trump has not caused this decline but has accelerated it. As the UN

turns 80, it faces deep structural and political obstacles. Key agencies are in a financial crisis, voluntary contributions have plummeted, and calls for reform — especially UNSC expansion — remain blocked.

The real question is not simply whether the US or China will dominate the UN, but whether middle powers like India can help craft a multilateralism fit for an age of rivalry and rapid change. For India, the turbulence brings both risk and opportunity. The old tropes of its multilateralism — Security Council expansion or demands on the North across a wide range of issues — have little chance of advancing in the current circumstances. Delhi must instead focus on a few issues of high priority, such as global governance of AI, and build like-minded coalitions that cut across the North-South divide.

Above all, Delhi should put its money where its mouth is by raising its own financial contributions to the UN's regular budget, which now stands at about \$38 million — less than one per cent. In contrast, China contributes about \$680 million (roughly 20 per cent), and the US leads with \$820 million (about 22 per cent). Both powers also make large voluntary contributions to UN activities through specialised agencies. India, too, must raise its voluntary contributions to agencies whose work intersects with its national interests. As it pays more to the UN to match its position as the world's fourth-largest economy, India should also pursue a broader agenda for reform of the UN system as a whole, not just UNSC expansion. Reducing bureaucratic bloat, cutting through multiple inefficiencies and narrowing the organisation's focus could make the UN a more effective instrument for the global majority.

Trump's second-term assault on the UN highlights the fragility of the post-1945 multilateral order. China is yet to convince the world that a future multilateralism led by it would be a better alternative. India, which has long defined itself as a champion of the "Global South", cannot simply lament this erosion. If Delhi wishes to shape the rules of a turbulent world, it must shoulder greater responsibilities in crafting a new multilateralism for an age when neither Washington nor Beijing commands universal legitimacy.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express



TARIQ MANSOOR

EARLIER THIS MONTH, the Supreme Court (SC) pronounced an interim order on the pleas to stay provisions of the Waqf Amendment Act, 2025 (Waqf Act). The crux of the order lies in the Court's navigation of the thin line between the strong presumption of legality of the law passed by Parliament and the need to put certain safeguards in place through rules to be framed by the state governments. While there has been much commentary on the legality of the Waqf Act, little attention has been drawn to the volatile history of reforming Muslim personal law in India, and how it is foundational to controversies in the present waqf reforms.

Asilver lining has been that no one, per se, questioned the need for reforms in the waqfs. Rather, the contentions are rooted in the nature and extent of the changes. Even the reforms' most vociferous critics accept that there is a need to correct the flaws in waqf administration and management. In fact, the waqf, as a unit of Muslim personal law, has seen the largest number of changes post-Independence — through acts and amendments in 1954, 1959, 1964, 1969, 1984, 1995 and 2013. Even the Sachar Committee Report (2006) highlighted inefficiencies in waqf management and suggested reforms, including better financial practices, overhaul of dispute settlement mechanisms and increased representation.

Historically, reforming Muslim personal laws has been challenging. The reason is that

THE REFORM CHALLENGE

Difficulty of waqf reform must be seen in broader context of Muslim personal law

the personal laws are a distinct feature of the Indian system where contesting social, legal, cultural and heritage practices negotiate with each other. This often involves compromise between binaries such as "tradition vs modernity", "scriptures vs legislation" and "customs vs laws". Such binaries have been on display in virtually all past reform measures aimed at removing gender-discriminatory laws, such as women's right to maintenance and the abolition of triple talac. Hence, the controversies surrounding the reform of waqfs represent a continuity and not a break from the past. In fact, on the emotive issue, the issue of waqf is perhaps even more sensitive than past issues of Muslim personal law, as it concerns the entire community rather than a sub-group.

Moreover, state-driven legal initiatives to reform personal laws have been rather rare. Wherever such initiatives have borne fruit, the demand emerged from within the community. In fact, litigation in the constitutional courts on the issues of maintenance and triple talac illustrates that the functioning of the in-house dispute settlement mechanisms within the Muslim community has fallen short.

A key reason Indian Muslims have resisted reforms is that reformatory aspects of Muslim law have been underemphasised in socio-cultural practices. The strength of Islamic jurisprudence lies in strong concepts such as *ijtihad* — evolution and reasoning. As an example, for

many kinds of theft, the Islamic punishment is cutting off hands. But few Muslim countries apply such a punishment. Does that mean all these Muslim countries have abandoned the Quran? No, they have used *ijtihad* to evolve better means of deterrence and punishment.

It is in this backdrop of the vexed socio-cultural history of Muslim personal law reforms that the SC should examine the constitutional challenge. The involvement of the state in waqf administration should, in itself, not be a reason for anxiety. In several Muslim nations — such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Bangladesh and Turkey — waqf properties are generally regulated by the institutions set up by the government. The state and administrative authorities need to ensure that reforms are brought into effect in a way that allays the anxieties of ordinary Muslims.

The proposed reforms also contemplate opening the doors for participation to underrepresented Muslim groups, including women and Pasmandas. The waqf reforms will be keenly watched to see whether they foster an internal sociological and gender realignment, and if they can reshape the political interaction of these Muslim groups with the BJP.

The writer is a former vice-chancellor, Aligarh Muslim University, and nominated Member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council



SEPTEMBER 23, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

BLAST IN CAPITAL

THREE PERSONS WERE killed and one injured when a transistor bomb exploded in a narrow lane in New Delhi, near the Old Delhi Railway Station. According to explosive experts, the bombs, encased in transistor shells, were similar to the ones that rocked the capital and neighbouring states in the second week of May, killing about 90 people and injuring over 100 others.

No BJP-AKALI TIE-UP

BJP PRESIDENT ATAL Bihari Vajpayee denied reports that his party had decided to support

the Akali Dal (L) in the Punjab polls. He said in a statement, "The news item is totally baseless. I am convinced the report has been concocted with the intention of harming the interest of the BJP in the forthcoming elections."

ANTI-HINDI STIR

OVER 3,000 DRAVIDA Kazhagam (DK) volunteers were taken into custody at various places in Tamil Nadu when they took out processions to railway stations with the intention of erasing the Hindi lettering on signboards there. Those arrested include DK general secretary K Veeramani. More than 200 DK volunteers were arrested in Ooty

for violating prohibitory orders in force.

FRANCE ADMITS ATTACK

THE FRENCH PREMIER, Laurent Fabius, admitted that France was responsible for sinking the anti-nuclear protest ship, *Rainbow Warrior*, in New Zealand and that French agencies were ordered to carry out the act. Fabius, in a statement to the press at his office, said Bernard Tricot, who carried out the government's initial investigation of the incident, was misled to, and confirmed numerous reports that the bombing was done by the General Directorate for External Security (DGSE), France's main espionage agency.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Why play at all

Asia Cup matches between India and Pakistan have been reduced to revanchism, not rivalry. Why play cricket, if on the field, it's just not cricket



KAUSHIK DAS GUPTA

I USED TO be among those who believed India-Pakistan cricket must go on despite the acrimony in bilateral relations. I saluted the power of sport to create goodwill and become a bridge between nations at odds when athletes of the two Koreas walked hand in hand at the 2018 Winter Olympics. The tennis partnership between Rohan Bopanna and Aisam-ul-Haq Querishi, the "Indo-Pak Express" of tennis, was an example of sport blurring boundaries. The respect that Neeraj Chopra and Arshad Nadeem have for each other is a testament to comradeship in athletics. I am still not on the same page as George Orwell on the "Sporting Spirit" and cannot bring myself to argue that "sport is an unfailing cause of ill will". But after last week's handshake episode in the India-Pakistan Asia Cup match, and the shadow it cast on their Super Four-level contest in the tournament on Sunday, I have become a naysayer on cricketing ties between the two nations. Why play sport, if the players cannot be its best servants?

Of course, the troubled politics between the two nations has almost always cast its shadow on cricket. Historian Ramachandra Guha has written of the Bengaluru crowd booing Javed Miandad in his last match during India's famous win in the 1996 World Cup quarter-finals. Yet the abiding memories of that match were not spectator behaviour, but Ajay Jadeja taking down Waqar Younis, Venkatesh Prasad casting Amr Sohail and the Indian spinners choking the Pakistani top order after a rollicking start by Sohail and Saeed Anwar.

Miandad's last-ball six in Sharjah, Sunil Gavaskar's back-to-the-wall battle, in vain, against the Pakistan spin attack in his last Test match, Sachin Tendulkar's upper cut of Shoaib Akhtar at Centurion in 2003, Sreesanth pouncing a Mishbah-ul-Haq scum to give India victory in the inaugural T20 World Cup, Anil Kumble's 10 wickets in Delhi, Shoaib Shah Afridi bamboozling the Indian batting line-up with his raw pace at the T20 World Cup in 2021 and Virat Kohli's refusal to give up when 28 runs were required in eight balls at Melbourne in 2022, were great advertisements for the game. While jingoism often led to bad blood among viewers, players of both sides showed healthy respect for each other. In recent years, the image of Babar Azam engaged in a discussion with his idol, Kohli, after a hard-fought game kept alive the hope that sport could paper over geopolitical fault lines.

The effect of last week's match was sobering on many like me who believe in that great axiom: Whoever dominates the field of play, the game is always the winner. The match will not be remembered for Abhishek Sharma dancing down the pitch first ball to belt Afridi down the ground, or Kuldeep Yadav's leg breakers and googlies, or Jasprit Bumrah's yorkers. As the Indian captain put



C.R. Sasikumar

it, "I feel a few things, few things in life are ahead of sportsman's spirit also."

Surya Kumar Yadav has, at most times, given the impression of being mild-mannered, both on and off the field. He has said that his team keeps itself insulated from the social-media noise. But cricket is not played in a vacuum. It never was. Today, players are expected to become soldiers with guns on the field. That zeitgeist may still not be antithetical to the game as long as it has a bearing on how players bat, bowl and field, as long as it pushes them out of their comfort zones — perhaps enriching the sport in the process. Yadav has said that his teammates were out to make a statement on the field. The Indian captain's tribute to the soldiers and victims of the ghastly terror attack in Pahalagam, after last week's match, seemed to be in that vein.

But the handshake episode was not just about Indian cricketers wearing nationalism on their sleeves. Greeting an opponent after a match speaks for something inherent to the athlete's credo — respect for the competitor. Sport teaches grace in victory and acceptance in defeat. It encourages opponents to appreciate each other's work. If Yadav and his men were magnificent in showing the Pakistan team its place on the field of play at the group level, they were clinical with their demolition job at the Super Four stage. But the Indian cricketers may not realise this — in

humiliating their opponents after the match, they have been revanchist towards the game itself. And the Pakistani team hasn't done well, either — their demand to sack match referee Andy Pycroft was churlish and showed them as bad losers.

Perhaps there are times — as the Indian captain said last week — when sporting fundamentals must take a backseat. We cannot say what the BCCI wants by insisting on continuing to play Pakistan in multi-team tournaments. We do not know its motives. But if the players' behaviour in the two matches is anything to go by, it's apparent that the world's richest board doesn't care if the game itself is hurt in the ham-handed pursuit of its interests.

Perhaps there are times — as the Indian captain said last week — when sporting fundamentals must take a backseat. We cannot say what the BCCI wants by insisting on continuing to play Pakistan in multi-team tournaments. We do not know its motives. But if the players' behaviour in the two matches is anything to go by, it's apparent that the world's richest board doesn't care if the game itself is hurt in the ham-handed pursuit of its interests.

Cricket deserves better. What has happened at the Asia Cup has forced many of us who love the sport to change our views — in the current circumstances, it would be hurtful for cricket to continue India-Pakistan cricketing ties.

kaushik.dasgupta@expressindia.com

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Promoting a mirage of a Palestinian state without taking meaningful action to halt the annihilation would be cruel, cowardly and self-serving."

— THE GUARDIAN

The GST we warned against

What the BJP now hails, Congress foresaw. A decade later, the government backtracks on missteps Congress opposed in Parliament



MANI SHANKAR AIYAR

P CHIDAMBARAM, in his weekly column in the Sunday Express (September 14), has cited excerpts from his speech in the Rajya Sabha in July 2016 on the Goods and Services Tax Bill to demonstrate that the recent decisions of the GST Council, being hailed by the Prime Minister and his supporters as their achievements, are only corrections of errors in the original Bill that Congress as Opposition had pointed out a decade ago. It was referred for detailed consideration to a Select Committee of the Rajya Sabha. The three Congress members nominated by the party to the Select Committee were Madhusudan Mistry, Bhalchandra Munekar and I. We were mentored, guided and supervised by the Congress financial expert Chidambaram.

Nearly a year before Chidambaram's, we three had submitted a note of dissent attached to the main report of the Select Committee. I believe if readers need to be acquainted (or re-acquainted) with the dissent note to understand how much the country and our business community, especially small businesses and small traders, have suffered in consequence of the BJP government having shut its ears to our sound advice only because they wanted the entire credit for enacting GST, which was, in fact, a bold and revolutionary initiative of the Congress-led UPA II government. Now that good sense has at last dawned, the least the government could do would be to acknowledge that it was wrong in forcing us to resort to a note of dissent instead of incorporating our views in the Select Committee report. But such large-heartedness does not characterise those ruling us at present.

Therefore, to restore credit where credit is due, I reproduce key extracts from the main dissent note (but, for want of space, not its technical annexes). "We are in favour of a Goods and Services Tax that is simple and comprehensive. The Constitution (122nd) Amendment Bill, 2015, is neither. It is pitted with compromises, exclusions and exceptions that make it impossible for us to extend our support to the Bill in the absence of the amendments we have proposed being incorporated in the Bill, as drafted at present."

First, to ensure that GST rates are moderate and reasonable and do not impose an unfair burden on consumers, particularly poor consumers, it is necessary that a ceiling rate be specified in Article 246A so that, in the pursuit of higher revenues, the GST Council desists from crossing the ceiling. We have proposed a ceiling of 18 per cent as a reasonable, moderate, adequately revenue-generating GST rate.

Second, we find the proposal to levy an additional 1 per cent tax to be market distorting, especially in view of the fact that we have proposed 100 per cent compensation for a minimum of five years to states

that might lose revenues. Further, in our view, the compensation should be deposited in a GST Compensation Fund, under the administrative control of the GST Council, as proposed by the Standing Committee on Finance.

Third, the single most crucial word in the Bill is "supply links", which is used in clause 9 and clause 18 without being defined. We have, therefore, sought to amend clause 9 through two provisos to Article 269 (A) to clarify that goods moving from one unit to another unit of a firm in different states under the same ownership, or when two or more firms are collaborating in units located in different states for the manufacture of the same end-product, should be excluded from the term "supply links". This would also apply to the same term used in clause 18. However, representatives of the government have failed to define this term in the Committee on the ground that three governmental committees are engaged in defining the term in preparing Bills for GST, SCST and IGST. We believe that a Select Committee of the Rajya Sabha cannot be subordinated to bureaucratic committees and that it would not be proper for the Select Committee to commend a draft Constitution amendment to Parliament without a proper agreed definition of this key term.

Fourth, given that the fundamental aim of GST is to establish a common market for the whole country, we are unable to support a GST Bill that excludes indefinitely from the purview of the GST tobacco and tobacco products, alcohol for human consumption and electricity supply and consumption. We propose that all three be included in clause 12 of the Constitution Amendment Bill, with the condition that the GST Council take a decision for their inclusion in GST within a period of five years.

Fifth, we cannot support a GST Council that is unduly weighted in favour of the Centre. In the interests of true "cooperative federalism", the share of the states in voting in the GST Council must be enhanced to 75 per cent and the share of the Centre brought down to 25 per cent.

Sixth, we cannot support a Bill that transgresses the elementary principle of law that parties to a dispute must be judges in their own cause. The failure to incorporate a GST Disputes Settlement Authority, as was provided for in the 2011 Bill, is a serious lacuna that must be filled. The GST Council, comprising members who will necessarily be party to any dispute relating to the implementation of GST, must be supplemented and reinforced with a GST Disputes Settlement Authority in toto as provided for in the 2011 Bill.

Seventh, the sources of revenue of the panchayats and municipalities, as provided for in Parts IX and IXA of the Constitution, must be safeguarded and they must be assured of their due share in the revenue buoyancy that is expected to arise from the enactment and implementation of the GST. It is only with such assurance, through the amendments we have suggested in this regard to the Bill, that we might find it possible to support the proposed legislation. (The 15th Finance Commission under N. Singh has since supported this proposal.)

The writer is a former Union minister



ANJU GUPTA

SINCE THE ISRAELI strikes on Doha on September 9, several Arab and Muslim nations have convened multiple multilateral and bilateral meetings to deliberate a new threat perception in the region. On the sidelines of a meeting in Doha, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), met with a few leaders of nations with strong armies, including those of Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Amidst growing concerns about the dependability of American protective cover and talks about a grand military alliance for the region, the first decisive step was taken by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. MBS and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement on September 17 in Riyadh. It was publicly announced that any aggression against either country would be considered an aggression against both. Three key questions need to be examined: To what extent can Pakistan help Saudi Arabia? Was the US consulted prior to the pact? And what could be the potential fallout for South Asia?

It is well known that Pakistani forces are bogged down with serious internal and external security challenges. According to data from a credible Pakistani think tank, more than 550 terrorist incidents have been recorded in 2024, while the total number of incidents in 2025 was 521 and in 2023, it was 306. In 2024, the incidents resulted in over 2,000 casualties, including about 850 fatalities. The security forces suffered more than 1,000 casualties, including over 380 fa-

Overplaying its hand

Pact with Saudi Arabia could draw Pakistan into volatile geopolitics of West Asia

ties. Around 60 per cent of terrorist attacks were targeted at security forces, convoys, and installations. Of the incidents in 2024, over 95 per cent were concentrated in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, which border Afghanistan. For many months, Pakistani forces have been engaged in ground operations in these provinces and continue to face losses of even senior officers. The Pakistani forces are periodically seen mounting aerial attacks in both provinces, incurring significant collateral damage to civilians. In addition, on several occasions, Pakistan has not only mounted aerial attacks on Afghan territory but has engaged in clashes with Taliban forces along the border. Pakistan-Taliban relations have become increasingly tense since the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

Thus, apart from deploying trainers, troops, and hardware in Saudi Arabia, the real vital contribution Pakistan can make was clarified by its Defence Minister, Khawaja Asif. Describing it as an "umbrella" and "defensive" pact, Asif has asserted that all capabilities that Pakistan has, including nuclear deterrence, will "absolutely" be available to Saudi Arabia. He also indicated that "doors were open" for other nations to join the pact.

The "nuclear issue" would certainly have provoked the current US administration, which has often claimed credit for the ceasefire between the nuclear-armed neighbours of South Asia. Was the US consulted prior to the pact? Notwithstanding the White House lunch hosted for Pakistan's

army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, in June and the invite for the US Central Command ceremony in August, the US-Pakistan relationship has inherently been transactional for decades. As always, the Pakistan Army has chosen to play along, drawing mileage out of the US-Pakistan "optics" to boost its own internal standing and external grandstanding. In the current environment, US concerns about the pact are unlikely to have been a factor for either side. In 2023, Saudi Arabia went ahead with Chinese mediation to establish peace with Iran, seen as an "arch-enemy" of Israel.

Adirect potential military role for Pakistan in West Asia and the extension of its nuclear deterrence to Saudi Arabia theoretically brings Pakistan face-to-face with Israel. Pakistan would not have made this bold move without explicit clearance from China, which remains the backbone of its military belt. This may also turn out to be a Chinese foray into the region to offer its military hardware with training by Pakistani officers. As the US is being seen withdrawing from taking care of the "unpaid" security of other nations, including NATO, a Chinese model may well be emerging as an alternative — by design or by default.

The US may have "sensed" the real force behind Pakistan's bold move. This might explain President Donald Trump's sudden decision on September 18 in London that he wants to take back the Bagram base in Afghanistan. He publicly clarified the purpose by suggesting that the base was "an hour away from where China makes its nuclear

weapons". For decades, the US has chosen the Indo-Pacific and not South Asia to challenge Chinese military might. This novel move, though "reactionary" in nature, may raise temperatures in South Asia and result in unintended consequences even for US security concerns. It would not be prudent to view it through a "Pakistan lens" or a "Taliban lens". Pakistan has already built dependable military and political relationships with China and Turkey. The pact with Saudi Arabia would further bring wealth to Pakistan to boost its economy and military might. It is possible that more Arab States may join the pact to enjoy Pakistani "nuclear deterrence". However, by tying its destiny with an increasingly complex and volatile West Asia, Pakistan may have bitten off more than it can chew. In reality, it divides Pakistan's military help between South Asia and West Asia.

Lastly, any US-China military competition in South Asia has serious potential to destabilise the entire region and may affect India in more ways than one. The US has recently revoked the Chabahar Port waiver, identified India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and Myanmar amongst "major drug transit or major illicit drug producing countries" and hiked the H-1B visa fee phenomenally. These may well be attempts to generate new levers of power in South Asia, not just for trade and tariffs, but far beyond them.

The writer is a security analyst and former director general of police

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

H-1B OWN GOAL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial "The visa barrier" (IE, September 22). The Trump administration's decision to impose a steep one-time fee of \$100,000 for new H-1B visa applications is clearly aimed at curbing the influx of skilled foreigners. But the paucity of outstanding local talent in the US in STEM careers cannot be brushed aside. The mobility of skilled talent has spurred innovation as well as economic growth. The hefty fee will prompt companies to expedite offshoring. There will be less local hiring in America, and project costs might go up for US clients.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial "The visa barrier" (IE, September 22). The hike in H-1B fees should be a wake-up call for India. Our IT sector has been overly dependent on exporting talent rather than creating world-class opportunities at home. India can convert this into an opportunity by accelerating investment in cutting-edge technologies, nurturing start-ups, and incentivising global companies to open innovation hubs. Moreover, most major US tech firms are run or significantly influenced by Asian professionals; restricting this talent pipeline will eventually disadvantage America itself by curbing its innovation and competitiveness.

Muskan Kumari, Patiala

ENGAGE PROACTIVELY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "No big deal" (IE, September 22). Israel's strike on Qatar, coupled with the fact that the American defence promise is looking rather shabby, has forced Riyadh to ink a pact with a nuclear-armed nation. For Pakistan, the agreement represents both diplomatic leverage and a military boost at a time of economic distress and regional isolation. As far as New Delhi is concerned, our ties with Riyadh have grown tremendously over the last few years, and India is Saudi Arabia's second largest trade partner. There is no chance the Saudis will jeopardise this relationship for Islamabad's sake. However, proactive diplomacy and a balanced engagement without complacency should be India's approach going forward.

Bal Govind, Noida

GST 2.0 IMPACT

THIS REFERS TO the article "Tax system that cares" (IE, September 22). At a time when the world seems engulfed in the quagmire of economic crisis, the government's initiative to rationalise the GST regime is highly welcome. This will result in the setting up of more industries, enhance the number of jobs available for our youth and pave the way for the country to become self-reliant despite the odds.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

Why Indian oil cos have \$1.4 bn in dividends stuck in Russia

SUKALP SHARMA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 22

INDIAN PUBLIC sector oil companies are facing a \$1.4-billion question: how should their dividend income, which has been piling up in Russia for over three years, be repatriated? The Indian government and the companies have been attempting to find a resolution, but success has so far eluded them.

Dividends from investments in Russian oil and gas projects are being deposited at regular intervals in the companies' accounts in an Indian bank in Moscow, but they have been unable to access them. These cumulative investments are estimated to be over \$6 billion, underlining the strategy's significance in India's overall energy security plan amid its heavy reliance on oil imports.

The companies include ONGC Videsh (OVL), the overseas investment arm of Oil

and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC). OVL holds a 20 per cent stake in the Russian Sakhalin-1 project and a 26 per cent stake in the Vankor project. OVL's share of the stuck dividends is close to \$400 million.

Then there is the consortium of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Oil India (OI), and Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL) arm Bharat PetroResources (BPRIL), which together hold a 23.9% share in Vankor and a 29.9% share in the Taas-Yuryakh project. The consortium's cumulative share of the stranded dividends is around \$1 billion.

Repatriation challenge

Indian companies have been unable to repatriate their income since the Russia-Ukraine war commenced in February 2022. The fundamental obstacle is the payment channel-related restrictions imposed following the outbreak of war.

The dividend income is currently held in

Moscow in accounts at the Commercial Ind Bank (CIBL), which is an affiliate of the State Bank of India (SBI). The funds are being deposited in rubles.

Soon after the war began, numerous major Russian banks were barred from using the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system. Since SWIFT is essential for processing financial transactions globally, this ban severely compromised Russia's ability to access the global payments system. Russia also restricted the repatriation of US dollars out of the country to curb foreign exchange volatility.

Adding to the challenge are international jurisdiction issues. Some of the vehicles used by Indian companies to make their investments are special purpose vehicles (SPVs) registered outside of India, often based in countries like Singapore.

Despite the issue being regularly discussed between Indian companies and their Russian partners, and featuring in government-to-government discussions, a viable resolution is still pending due to the complications arising from Western sanctions targeting Moscow.

Some industry insiders believe that a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine and easing of the West's sanctions on Moscow might be the only way to access the stuck dividends.

Utilising funds

While repatriation is currently not possible, the Indian companies and the government have explored ways to access and utilise the funds within Russia. However, their options are highly constrained.

One possibility is utilising the funds to make payments within Russia, while another is to use the money to fund operational and capital expenditure requirements for ex-

isting projects or to increase investments in Russia. Neither appears feasible.

The dividend payments are already released after the deduction of operational expenses. Furthermore, most ongoing assets are past their major capital expenditure cycle, meaning that a demand for significant new investment, or cash calls, is highly unlikely in the near-to-medium term.

The one potential exception involves OVL, which needs to pay approximately \$600 million to Russia to secure its re-nomination as a shareholder in the Sakhalin-1 project. OVL has been actively negotiating with Russian authorities to use its dividend income to partially settle this payment. But that, too, is stuck due to complications with dollar payments to Russian entities. Besides this, Indian companies are not seeking investments in other Russian projects.

Oil complications

The obvious alternative, using the

stranded dividends to partially pay for the substantial volumes of Russian oil flowing into India, is also fraught with complexity. For instance, while IOC and BPCL purchase Russian oil, OI and OVL do not.

Also, because the investments were made through SPVs registered in overseas territories, any payment using the dividends would fall under the jurisdiction of those overseas territories as well. Given the various Western sanctions against Russia, using the dividend income for cross-payments related to Russian oil would result in an extremely complex exercise from both taxation and accounting viewpoints.

Indian companies have been seeking guidance from legal and international accounting experts, it is learnt. Ultimately, finding a workable solution will likely require a combination of ingenious commercial negotiations with stakeholders both inside and outside of Russia, alongside deft diplomacy.

EXPLAINED SPACE

EARTH'S FOLLOWERS IN SPACE: MINI-MOONS AND QUASI-MOONS

THE EARTH stands alone in the solar system as a habitable world, as far as we know. But that doesn't mean we don't get visitors, most often as asteroids.

Some even choose to stick around for a while, gaining a moonlike status. The latest of these is an asteroid that astronomers are calling 2025 PN7. Spotted this summer, it has an orbit that's similar to Earth's trajectory around the Sun. It is known as a quasi-moon and could be the smallest of its kind, perhaps no longer than 52 feet.



Artist's illustration of an asteroid, most of which originate from between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. NASA

The source

Some asteroids near Earth come from the main asteroid belt orbiting the Sun between Mars and Jupiter. Others are chunks of the Moon, ejected after a major meteorite impact.

Because scientists have few telescopic observations of 2025 PN7, there are "no real hints about its origins, only speculations," said Carlos de la Fuente Marcos, an astronomer at the Complutense University of Madrid and an author of a study about the quasi-moon's discovery published this month in the journal *Research Notes of the American Astronomical Society*.

But one thing is certain: It is a temporary visitor. 2025 PN7 is part of a sparsely populated fleet of space rocks that briefly flinger around, trail, or lead Earth. Like the rest of its flock, this asteroid will eventually shoot off elsewhere into space — perhaps in about 60 years.

Smaller moons

Earth has several mini-moons and quasi-moons. Mini-moons are objects that orbit our planet, but they make for fickle fans: they tend to swing around Earth only for a few months. One example was 2024 PT5, which joined our planet last fall and then headed its own way at the end of November.

Unlike mini-moons, quasi-moons orbit the Sun, not Earth, spending hundreds or thousands of years in lock step with Earth's orbit. This protracted proximity makes them good targets for planetary science missions. Quasi-moon

Kamo'oalewa is the destination of Tianwen-2, a Chinese mission that aims to collect a geologic sample.

Scientists spotted 2025 PN7 last month with the Pan-STARRS observatory at the University of Hawaii. The asteroid was then found in archival images going back several years, allowing astronomers to determine its precise orbit.

It seems to have shifted into its quasi-moon orbit in 1957 — just in time to witness the launch of Sputnik 1, Earth's first artificial satellite. The astronomers estimate that in August 1980, 2025 PN7 got as close to Earth as 2.5 million miles — about 10 times the distance between Earth and the moon. Simulations show that it will have a 126-year residency in Earth's orbit.

2025 PN7's time of tiniest quasi-moon is ending. Astronomers try to estimate an asteroid's size based on how much sunlight its surface reflects, but the 2025 PN7 has proved difficult to observe so far.

Still, near-Earth asteroids — when they aren't threatening to crash into the planet — fascinate astronomers because they offer clues about the evolution of the inner solar system.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

GST 2.0: What changes

The GST rate rejig will leave more disposable income in the hands of the consumer and, as a result, spur consumption. But a few concerns, especially regarding inverted duty structure on certain items, remain

ANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 22

FROM EXEMPTIONS for Indian breads and health and life insurance for individuals, to sharp tax cuts for beauty and well-being services and aspirational goods like air conditioners and big TV screens, reforms under GST 2.0 touch a wide range of goods and services.

Effective Monday, the rate rejig also seeks to resolve classification disputes by placing similar goods in the same rate slab — this will help avoid confusion arising for differential rates for caramelised and salted popcorn, for instance — and majorly correcting the inverted duty structure (IDS), wherein the tax rate on output is lower than the tax rate on inputs.

This rate rationalisation is meant to leave more disposable income in the hands of people and spur household consumption which, in turn, could incentivise investments. The consumption boost, the government has warned, will help offset the revenue loss arising from the rate cuts.

Streamlining the processes for registration, returns and refunds will be next on the government's agenda. The government will also have to look into representations being made by some sectors where the IDS persists.

The slab tweaks

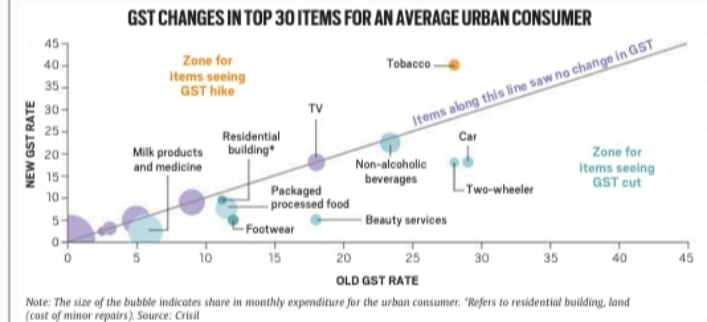
The GST regime, rolled out in July 2017, subsumed 17 indirect taxes and 13 cesses. While it has seen over a dozen rounds of rate tweaks so far, the latest reforms focussed on a major restructuring of the GST slabs.

The multiple slabs — 5%, 12%, 18% and 28% — were replaced with a broad two-slab structure comprising a merit rate of 5% and a standard rate of 18% in addition to a special de-merit rate of 40% to sin and demerit goods.

The GST rates are now:

- 0.25% for rough diamonds and precious and semi-precious stones;
- 1.5% for cut and polished diamonds;
- 3% for precious metals such as gold, silver and pearls;
- 5% for 316 categories of goods, including mostly food items, some medical devices, agricultural machinery, hydrogen vehicles based on fuel cell technology;
- 12% for non-sand-like bricks (the only category of items to have been kept in this slab); and
- 18% for 640 categories of goods, including industrial goods such as machines, boilers, chemicals, paints, automobile parts, small cars and bikes.

The de-merit rate of 40% applies to 13 categories of items such as smoking pipes; aerated waters; non-alcoholic, caffeinated and carbon-



INVERTED DUTY STRUCTURE

In a value-added production chain, the tax on output is typically higher. This can then be set off against tax paid on inputs.

An inverted duty structure arises when the tax paid on inputs is more than the output tax liability. For instance, under the new structure, steel attracts 18% GST but bicycles (made using steel) are

in the 5% slab. This leads to the accumulation of input tax credit, for which refunds (from the government) may come with a lag, restricting working capital for businesses.

ated beverages; yachts, aircraft for personal use; and bigger cars and bikes. Tobacco and tobacco-related products are also going to be in the topmost slab along with a yet-to-be finalised levy over and above the 40% rate.

Services have also seen major cuts. From being taxed at 18% before, welfare services like health and life insurance for individuals have been made exempt from GST.

Hotels with per day tariff rate of below or equal to Rs 7,500 have seen a cut in GST rate from 12% with input tax credit (ITC) to 5% without ITC. Salons and well-being services such as health clubs have also seen a reduction in the GST rate to 5% from 18%.

For consumers' benefit

Household budgets are expected to get a boost from the GST rate cuts, and the ensuing price cuts by companies. While the government does not have a legal provision in force to act against profiteering, the Finance Ministry has asked its officers to compile monthly data reports on price change of commodities pre- and post-GST rate rationalisation in order to ensure that the benefits get passed on to the consumers.

The price change data will be compiled for 54 categories of items, including food items such as butter, cheese, dry fruits, biscuits,

tomato ketchup, and cakes, other common-use items such as toilet soap bars, hair oil, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss, talcum powder, and lotion, and educational items such as math boxes, erasers, pencil sharpeners, pencils, crayons, and notebooks.

Companies had already announced a series of steep discounts, extra grammage, or other deals to entice customers in the run-up to the GST 2.0 rollout. Other companies are expected to follow suit as they bring into effect the changes under the GST 2.0.

Some issues persist

The multiplicity of rates had made the GST structure complex, directly affecting the ease of doing business and trade, and the cost of living of citizens, particularly the poor and the middle class. The IDS had affected cash flow and working capital of businesses, since they had to seek refunds for accumulated ITC. Pacing similar items in the same tax bracket is expected to help ease some pressure points.

That said, some industry associations have already flagged concerns about inversion issues. Some items such as bicycles, tractors, fertilisers and a few types of textiles continue to face an IDS structure, with their raw materials and inputs facing higher tax than output. The big gaps between certain inputs taxed at 18%

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Too loud to ignore: Why Indians should care about noise pollution in cities



SHAHZAD GANI & GIRISH AGRAWAL

IF THERE is one health hazard that has crept up unacknowledged on Indian cities, it is noise.

Legally, it is already recognised as an air pollutant under the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981. Medically, it is among the leading contributors to hypertension, sleep disruption, stress disorders, and cognitive decline — conditions that together shorten lives and push people toward premature death. Yet, despite this dual recognition, India has barely invested in sys-

tematic monitoring or data collection to understand the scale of the damage.

A heavy burden

Most towns and cities in India routinely endure noise levels far above what is safe. The World Health Organization recommends residential daytime exposure not exceed 55 dB(A) — roughly the volume of a normal conversation. India's Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000 set similar limits: 55 dB from 6 am to 10 pm, and 45 dB at night.

But the decibel scale is not linear: a 10 dB increase means a ten-fold rise in intensity. Traffic corridors in Indian cities often exceed 70 dB(A).

And, as with air pollution, the burden of this unchecked exposure falls heaviest on those least able to shield themselves — street vendors, delivery workers, traffic police, and residents of informal settlements. For them, the roar of the city is not an occasional nuisance but an everyday occurrence.

pational hazard that slowly erodes health and well-being.

Three failures

Systemic gaps compound the problem. Noise monitoring is sparse, enforcement weak, and responsibility scattered across multiple authorities. As with air quality, symbolic fixes — occasional honking bans or festive road closures — do little to tackle structural drivers.

The result: a chronic, unaddressed public health crisis.

This neglect stems from three failures.

First, inadequate monitoring leaves policymakers blind. Unlike air pollution, where satellites and low-cost sensors have transformed measurement, noise data in India are sporadic, reactive, and incomplete.

Second, structural and cultural barriers hinder enforcement. Without recognition that noise can be as harmful as smog, many citizens tolerate or even participate in noisy practices.

Third, governance is fragmented: pollution control boards, municipalities, and police all have partial jurisdiction, limited resources, and weak incentives to act.

Path ahead

What must be done?

First, treat noise on par with air and water pollution. Researchers and policymakers should design evidence-based interventions grounded in public-health data.

Monitoring must expand dramatically. Real-time sensors can create integrated maps of sound exposure. Machine-learning tools can distinguish sources — traffic, construction, industry — and guide targeted responses.

Health studies should explicitly track noise exposure, especially near schools, hospitals, and low-income areas.

Urban planning must incorporate noise mitigation. Green buffers such as trees and parks absorb sound, while zoning can shield residential areas from high-intensity noise

corridors. While limited experiments with green belts for noise-reduction are promising, broader efforts must be scientifically assessed and community-informed.

Governance reforms are essential. Noise regulations must be enforceable, backed by transparent data and accountability. Agencies must collaborate across sectors — from pollution boards to transport departments and cycling for urban mobility, a faster transition to electric buses, and enforcing honking restrictions systematically will bring measurable relief.

Community engagement matters too. Because noise is tied to cultural and social practices, solutions must be sensitive but firm. Awareness campaigns and partnerships with religious and community leaders can reshape norms without alienating communities.

Equity is key

Finally, equity must remain central.

Those most exposed to noise often have the least means to protect themselves. Just as air purifiers are a luxury, so too are quiet homes and workplaces.

The right to quiet must not be a privilege — it must be a baseline condition of public health.

India has already learned, painfully, that neglecting air pollution magnifies harm and widens inequality. We cannot repeat the same mistake with noise. The law already names it an air pollutant; what is missing is the political and civic will to act.

By treating noise with the seriousness it deserves — integrating it into clean-air agendas, embedding it in urban planning, and making it a priority for public health — we can save lives, protect communities, and reclaim the basic human right to quiet.

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EDITORIAL

PEACE AT A CROSSROADS

The global stage is once again turning its attention to the long and bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as France and Saudi Arabia advance a new plan for peace at the United Nations General Assembly. This initiative comes amid the catastrophic war in Gaza, where civilian suffering has reached intolerable proportions and displacement has turned an already dire situation into a humanitarian calamity. By linking the urgency of an immediate ceasefire to a broader vision of Palestinian statehood, the French-Saudi effort seeks to reignite a conversation the world has largely abandoned: that a viable two-state solution remains the only durable path to peace. With Britain, Canada, and Australia now joining nearly 150 countries in recognising a Palestinian state, momentum is building for a global consensus that could fundamentally alter the diplomatic calculus. The phased plan—ending the war, withdrawing Israeli troops, restoring governance to a demilitarised Palestinian Authority backed by international support, and ultimately pursuing normalisation between Israel and its Arab neighbours—offers a framework that moves beyond rhetoric to concrete steps. It is designed to reconcile the immediate humanitarian imperative with the long-term political settlement that has eluded generations. Yet as promising as this shift appears, the initiative runs directly into the brick wall of entrenched opposition from Israel and the United States, which continue to prioritise short-term military calculations and domestic politics over the need for a durable solution.

The Israeli government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu and supported by its far-right coalition, views the recognition of Palestinian statehood not as a diplomatic gesture but as a threat to sovereignty. Even before the current war, Israel had expanded its military control over Jerusalem in ways that made the contours of a Palestinian state increasingly implausible. Now, in the wake of Hamas's October 7 attack and the devastating military response that followed, Israeli leaders see every discussion of Palestinian independence as a reward for militancy and an invitation to future attacks. The United States, despite its public commitment to regional stability, has mirrored this stance by blocking Palestinian participation in the General Assembly and quietly aligning with Israel's rejection of unilateral recognition. This dual opposition undermines the very international consensus that France and Saudi Arabia wish to establish, leaving the plan vulnerable to collapse before it can take root. Meanwhile, the Palestinians remain trapped between a discredited Palestinian Authority that lacks legitimacy at home and an embattled Hamas that refuses to relinquish arms, perpetuating internal divisions at the very moment external recognition gathers pace. Without structural reforms, elections, and credible leadership, even a demilitarised state backed by international aid risks becoming a fragile construct unable to command popular trust or provide stability.

The broader danger is that without progress on two-state parameters, the region slips further into a one-state reality defined by permanent occupation, unequal rights, and endless cycles of violence. Already, the occupation of the West Bank has created an environment where over half a million settlers live alongside three million Palestinians under military control, a status quo widely denounced by rights groups as unsustainable and discriminatory. In Gaza, the devastation wrought by months of bombardment has rendered entire neighbourhoods uninhabitable, pushing the population into famine-like conditions and eroding any possibility of rebuilding a viable civil and political infrastructure. In such a context, the French-Saudi proposal may indeed represent one of the last serious international attempts to salvage the two-state vision. If rejected outright, it will not only bury hopes of Palestinian independence but also entrench a permanent conflict that destabilises the broader Middle East, from the Gulf states to the Mediterranean. For India and other rising powers, the stakes are equally high, as instability in West Asia threatens energy security, trade flows, and the global economic recovery. The world cannot afford for this plan to join the long list of failed accords. The responsibility now lies not only with Israel and Palestine but with the international community to summon the political courage to prevent further bloodshed and to keep alive the possibility of a just and lasting peace.

RESILIENT INDIA



ANIRBAN GANGULY

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Since 2014, violent incidents in the Northeast dropped by 71%, with over 10,700 insurgents laying down arms

Secession, Struggle, and Strength

From facing abductions and killings in the Northeast to shaping peace accords today, RSS Pracharaks embody a saga of sacrifice, resilience, and the pursuit of India's unity and self-respect

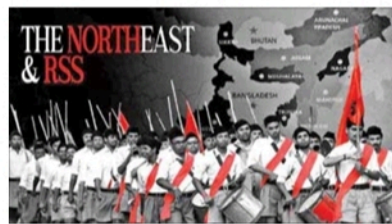
Wherever secessionist forces were active in India, RSS Swamyas and Pracharaks faced the brunt of their hate simply because they stood for India's cultural and geographical unity. They spoke of her civilisational continuity, worked for social cohesion, for the empowerment of the marginalised and resisted their exploitation. In the 1980s and 1990s and for a number of years into the new millennium, India's northeast faced a number of such challenging situations.

The RSS's Akhil Bharatiya Pratidinhi Sabha (ABPS), in its resolution on Assam in 1991, analysed the situation. Concluding the death of *Pracharak* Omprakash Chaturvedi and the abduction and disappearance of *Pracharak* Murali Manohar from Kerala, it pointed at the nexus of separatist forces and terrorist organisations in trying to dismember India. The ABPS resolution observed how, "documents recovered by the army during their raids on the secret hideouts of the ULFA, have clearly revealed its clandestine links with N.S.C.N. of Nagaland - a banned fundamentalist Christian Organisation, the People's Liberation Army of Manipur, leftist secessionists of Burma, L.T.T.E. of Sri Lanka and Khalistanis of Punjab-all of which work in collusion with the international conspiracy to dismember Bharat."

Since they were at the forefront in society of trying to foil this conspiracy of dismembering Bharat, RSS *Pracharaks* and *Swamyas* were faced the onslaught. The communist parties or their cadres did not face such a situation. Their ideology acted as their shield. They did not believe in the fundamental and civilisational unity of India. Such an ideology suited separatist and secessionist forces.

Under the CPIM-led Left Front rule in Tripura, four RSS *Pracharaks* were kidnapped by the terror outfit National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) on August 6, 1999. Senior RSS *Pracharak*, Shaashank Chaudhary, records in his memoirs "My Journey as a *Pracharak*", that unnerving phase, when Shyamal Kanti Sengupta, *khetra karyakari* of Assam and West Bengal, *Pracharak* Sudhakar Dutta, Dinendranath Dutta, and Shubankar Dutta were waylaid and abducted by NLFT terrorists from the densely forested Dhaka district of Tripura.

Attempts to trace them proved futile for over 6-7 months. Around 2001, a self-styled "commander" of the NLFT, Nayanbhai Jamatia, who had deserted the outfit and surrendered, claimed that the RSS



In the villages and forests of the Northeast, RSS Pracharaks worked at the grassroots, countering separatism with service and solidarity

Pracharaks were taken away to Bangladesh and were executed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area, following orders from the NLFT's top leadership.

The fault of these *Pracharaks*? They dared to work among people, at a difficult time, posing a challenge to secessionist forces and spoke for the unity of India and of greater integration of India's northeast. The CPIM never condoned their disappearance and death. In their records and annals, these abductions and deaths are of no consequence.

The Congress's approach in the northeast was to keep the pot boiling. A number of conflicts and separatist movements were allowed to fester and seemed never-ending. It was not just a lack of political will; it seemed to be a calculated political policy that was followed by the Congress High Command in Delhi and its party's governments in various states across the northeast.

That India's northeast needed special attention and a greater development focus was seen much later when, under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as Prime Minister, the Ministry for Development of the North-Eastern Region (DONER) was launched in 2001. It was the first time since independence that a ministry dedicated to the growth and progress of India's northeast was formed.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a life-long *Pracharak*, as Prime Minister, took it upon himself not only to expedite the development framework for the northeast but also to solve several festering conflicts. PM Modi's mantra for the northeast, "Act East, Act Fast, Act First", paid dividends on the ground in terms of expediting projects and

launching new initiatives. To be precise, in the last decade, the region has witnessed a 71 per cent reduction in violent incidents and an 86 per cent decrease in civilian deaths, while 10,754 insurgents eschewed violence, gave up arms and joined the mainstream. With PM Modi insisting that members of his cabinet tour the northeast, one saw central ministers spending over 700 nights in the region, with the Prime Minister himself visiting the northeast 65 times in the last decade. It is an unprecedented effort in connecting with the region.

In September 2024, after long decades of uncertainty and conflict, the Modi government, through an agreement between the NLFT and the ATTF (All Tripura Tiger Force), ended the 35-year-long conflict. In the decade that he has been Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has successfully worked out 12 such crucial agreements in the northeast, bringing to an end conflicts and separatist movements which had festered for decades. The NLFT-ATTF accord also saw the sanctioning of a 250-crore package for the development of the region.

It took a *Pracharak*, belonging to the lineage of RSS *Pracharaks* who had made India's northeast their home and strove for a lifetime to integrate it, to preserve its diversities and to celebrate its uniqueness, to solve a number of crises and delays dogging the region for decades. Why communists, who once wielded enormous political clout in Delhi, in the states and in the region, could do none of this, is of course best left to the analysis and verdict of history.

When comrade Brinda and comrade Vijayan refer to "martyrs," it becomes a tad tedious to discern which "martyrs"

they are referring to. Were they referring to those numerous RSS *Swamyas* and BJP activists killed in Punjab, or in Tripura and Kerala, under their party's rule? Do they, for instance, think that Modi, while for the RSS was an insult to that valiant teacher and activist from Kerala, Sadanandan Master, whose legs, comrades Brinda and Vijayan's party cadres had chopped off?

In 1994, Sadanandan was just 30 when CPIM marauders carried out the murderous attack. But the indomitable spirit, inexhaustible dynamism and resolute determination that the RSS instils in its *Swamyas* saw Sadanandan withstand the near-fatal attack and emerge as a societal and intellectual symbol and leader.

BJP leader and RSS *Pracharak*, B.L. Santhosh, spoke for lakhs of *karyakartas* and *Swamyas* when he wrote that "Sadanandan master is a symbol of Nationalist Resistance to inhuman Communist ideology and violence across the globe."

Late MGS Narayanan, eminent historian from Kerala, rightly argues in his preface to E. Balakrishnan's authoritative study "History of the Communist Movement in Kerala", that "scholars and politicians in the capital and other parts of India, who have never had the experience of living under a Communist regime, are usually inclined to take the Communists at their word, and judge them by their lofty pronouncements and vigorous criticism of the establishment."

The communists, MGS argues, "are capable of creating a good image when they are in opposition, as long as they have no chance of wielding power. It has been proved again and again in history that the image of the Communist Party is not invariably better than their opponents, and that some of them like the Communists and Fascists are actually worse." MGS points out that a "romantic and utopian view of Communism" was often seen prevailing among intellectuals and social activists "in areas which have never had the taste of Communist rule with its hidden agenda of destroying national self-respect and communal harmony to impose the party's hegemony."

Naturally, with their hidden agenda of destroying national self-respect and communal harmony, communists take it as an insult if the RSS, its *Pracharaks* and *Swamyas*, one of whom stand for national self-respect and national unity, are commended.

Views expressed are personal

SWADESHI SPIRIT



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India's domestic market of 1.4 billion people offers unmatched scope for Swadeshi-driven industries to scale and innovate globally

Reimagining Self-Reliance

Rising global protectionism and US trade barriers highlight why India must embrace a modern Swadeshi—anchored in innovation, self-reliance, and domestic strength—to secure long-term economic resilience

The word *Swadeshi* recalls India's independence struggle, when leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi urged boycotts of foreign goods and promotion of indigenous industries. More than a slogan, it was an economic philosophy rooted in self-reliance, dignity of labour, and community empowerment. Today, amid global protectionism, tariff wars, and US measures like higher tariffs and H-1B visa fees, *Swadeshi* regains relevance. Its modern form—"Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat"—carries the same essence: reducing dependence on external markets and building a resilient domestic economy to withstand global shocks.

Changing global trade landscape
The US, once a staunch advocate of globalisation, is now increasingly adopting protectionist measures. The recent hike in tariffs on select imports and the steep increase in H-1B visa fees ordered by US President Donald Trump on September 20 represent a clear signal: countries are prioritising domestic interests over global commitments. For India, these developments carry both challenges and opportunities.

Tariff hikes make it more expensive for Indian exporters—particularly in sectors like steel, textiles, and pharmaceuticals—to access the American market. This could directly affect foreign exchange earnings and job creation in India.

H-1B visa fee hikes of over \$100,000 annually put a final burden on Indian IT companies, which rely heavily on sending skilled professionals to the US. With outgoing up, competitiveness comes down, and opportunities for young Indian engineers shrink.

Both steps taken by the US highlight the vulnerability of India's economic dependence on foreign markets and immigration-dependent employment opportunities.

Why Swadeshi matters today
Swadeshi, in the 21st century, is not about isolationism or shutting doors to the world. It is about balanced globalisation—engaging with the world from a position of strength rather than dependence. The renewed call for *Swadeshi* becomes crucial for several reasons:

► **Economic self-reliance**
Heavy reliance on the US and other foreign markets exposes Indian industries to policy uncertainties beyond their control. By nurturing domestic industries, India can create a strong internal demand base that



Today, Swadeshi means strengthening domestic industries, generating youth employment, and ensuring India's future is shaped at home, not abroad

reduces vulnerability to external shocks.

► **Job creation at home**
The H-1B fee hike directly affects Indian IT professionals aspiring for US opportunities. A robust *Swadeshi*-oriented industrial and digital ecosystem can absorb this talent within India, creating high-quality jobs and preventing brain drain.

► **Boost to indigenous innovation**
Swadeshi is not just about consuming what is made in India; it is about creating globally competitive products and services in India. With a large pool of engineers, scientists, and entrepreneurs, India can innovate in technology, pharmaceuticals, renewable energy, and defence manufacturing.

► **Strategic resilience**
The COVID-19 pandemic showed how global supply chains can collapse overnight. Similarly, tariff wars can cripple exports. A strong *Swadeshi* base ensures India's strategic industries remain resilient against geopolitical and economic turbulence.

Swadeshi and India's policy push
Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Atmanirbhar Bharat Initiative is a contemporary expression of the *Swadeshi* ethos. It emphasises:

► **Make in India for global and domestic markets**

Digital India, which empowers local entrepreneurs and startups, PLI (Production Linked Incentive) schemes, encouraging domestic manufacturing in electronics, automobiles, pharmaceuticals, and textiles.

Green initiatives which promote renewable energy and reduce reliance on fossil fuel imports.

Together, these policies seek to ensure India is not merely a consumer in the global economy but a producer and innovator.

► **Swadeshi in the context of US policies**

The US has traditionally been a top destination for Indian exports and professionals. However, the tariff hike and visa restrictions should be seen as wake-up calls. They push India to diversify both its export markets and its employment strategies.

► **Export Diversification**

Instead of overdependence on the US, Indian businesses must explore newer markets in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Regional trade agreements, such as ASEAN, can help reduce reliance on Western economies.

► **Employment shift**

The IT sector, long dependent on the US, must pivot towards high-value innovation, product development, and domestic opportunities. India's fast-growing digital economy provides fertile ground for this shift.

► **Strengthening domestic consumption**

A self-reliant India must rely more on its domestic market of 1.4 billion people. Strengthening purchasing power through inclusive development will create demand for local industries, making them less vulnerable to foreign policy shocks.

Challenges Ahead

While the *Swadeshi* campaign sounds ideal in theory, practical challenges cannot be ignored.

► **Global supply chains:** Many industries in India still rely on imported components, especially from China. Completely cutting dependence is unrealistic in the short term.

► **Quality and competitiveness:** To succeed, Indian products must match global standards in quality and price. *Swadeshi* cannot become an excuse for protectionism or substandard production.

► **Capital and technology:** Indigenous development requires massive investment in research, infrastructure, and human capital. Without adequate policy support and private investment, the *Swadeshi* vision will remain incomplete.

The road ahead

Swadeshi, when interpreted as a call for self-reliance, does not mean isolation from the world. It means strengthening the domestic foundation so that India can engage with the global economy with greater bargaining power.

► **Education and skills:** Investment in skill development is vital to convert India's demographic dividend into a productive force for indigenous industries.

► **Innovation ecosystem:** Encouraging startups and R&D in critical areas such as AI, renewable energy, and biotechnology is necessary for global competitiveness.

► **Public-private partnership:** Government schemes must work in tandem with private sector initiatives to accelerate the *Swadeshi* push.

► **Sustainable growth:** *Swadeshi* must also align with environmental sustainability. Building industries that are eco-friendly will ensure India's future-ready.

Conclusion

The recent US tariff hikes and H-1B visa fee increases highlight rising global protectionism, underscoring the urgency for India to revive the *Swadeshi* campaign—not as nostalgia, but as a forward-looking economic strategy. Today, *Swadeshi* means strengthening domestic industries, generating youth employment, and ensuring India's future is shaped at home, not abroad. By blending *Swadeshi* with innovation and global competitiveness, India can withstand external shocks and emerge as a true 21st-century economic powerhouse.

Views expressed are personal

REGION
LEGION



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OFFICER, ADVISER
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ADVISOR IN
MAURITIUS

With BNP leaning
on Pakistan
ties and JaPa
expanding
ambitiously,
Bangladesh's
2026 election
promises
volatility more
than certainty

Dhaka's Political Heat

Violence, fanaticism, and political manoeuvring cast shadows over Bangladesh's election run-up, exposing vulnerabilities in governance and security

At the head of this upcoming election in Bangladesh, amid the prevailing turbulent times, enough political heat is generated in the political and social fabric of the country, and the ongoing trend doesn't look very promising. In these very columns, very recently, it was highlighted that the string of violent happenings is lashing the country. In the ongoing threat of violence, Bangorbeer Qader @ Tiger Siddiqui's Tangle house was attacked and brutally vandalised recently, and the noted freedom fighter's cars were also torched as an act of mindless assault on a pro-liberation individual who is so revered. Kader Siddiqui is also the founder and President of the Krishak Shramik League. Liberal and secular forces are very upset over the alarmingly rising cases of targeting of forces opposed by the fanatics, clearly indicating that acts of religious intolerance are on the rise. It's also baffling to note that the security agencies are completely muted and helpless, even though there has been a regime change for over one year, and still, there is not an iota of improvement in the law-and-order scene of the country. It's even more frustrating that the army and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) are invested with more powers than before, and yet they are proven ineffective time and again.

In another case of chilling violence in Rajbari, the grave of a Sufi, Nurul Haque alias Nurul Pagla, was inhumanely dug up, the body taken out, hurled with the most abusive insults, and subsequently burned down. It led to violence and injuries to many. Earlier, an organised group of hooligans and zealots proclaiming themselves as part of the 'Tahidul Jama', armed with weapons and lethal objects, marched to the gravesite before desecrating it in a most grotesque manner. This led to wide condemnation by many in foreign countries, too, including in China, as reported by the *South China Morning Post*, a leading newspaper. Now the question is, are the authorities complicit in this act of vandalism? Without



BNP's renewed proximity to Pakistan adds another layer of uncertainty to Bangladesh's already turbulent election times

their tacit support, could this happen? The interim government should answer this and hold someone in the security or political establishment accountable to prevent recurrence. This is not an isolated incident of violence. It is becoming a regular happening, which is highly deplorable.

Meanwhile, October 17 happens to be the death anniversary of the renowned Sufi Saint Lalun Shah, or Lalun Faqir, who is still respected for his Sufi teachings and renditions. His house is perceived to be threatened by religious extremists and fanatics who have the propensity in the present regime to defile it, as they have targeted many other spots. In light of the threat assessment and the rising assaults on liberals' houses and grave sites, Lalun's

house is being protected by a posse of policemen in Kushtia. The essence of these incidents is again a trend of the religiously zealous elements attaining supremacy and a carte blanche mandate to carry out attacks on those with secular or liberal backgrounds.

Apart from activities of religious intolerance, there are vibrant political happenings which are galloping as the February 2026 election schedules draw closer. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is upbeat with the wishful thinking of assuming power in the next elections, is warming up to its all-time ally, Pakistan. Very recently, their leader Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, accompanied by other party leaders overseeing

foreign affairs, met the newly appointed Pakistani High Commissioner in Dhaka, Imran Haidar. Although details of the meeting have not yet been made public, both parties are believed to have discussed regional political developments, Pakistan-Bangladesh bilateral cooperation, and other issues of mutual interest. Such a crucial meeting happening as the election in Bangladesh is around the corner naturally leads to several speculations.

Here, it must be reiterated that BNP and Pakistan have always been close friends, and this relationship was reinforced during the two terms that BNP leader Khaleda Zia led as head of the government. Moreover, her son Tarique Rahman, who is based in England, is

strongly believed to be patronised in all forms by the Pakistani establishment ever since Tarique chose to operate from London. From the latest meeting in Dhaka between the BNP and the Pakistani High Commissioner, it can easily be deduced that their discussions hovered around how Pakistan could extend help to the BNP. Surely, Pakistan would like to invest in every possible manner to ensure BNP's victory in the upcoming elections. Pakistan wants to seize the vacuum caused by Hasina and the Awami League (AL) last year. It also aspires to occupy that political space by using BNP as a proxy, and as it is, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) already exists as a much-pronounced pro-Pakistan party. Pakistan further wants to make sure that after the political decimation of the AL, no party in Bangladesh has any proximity to India. Under these circumstances, the latest BNP meeting with the new Pakistani High Commissioner assumes huge political significance, meriting close watch.

Again, on the political front, the Jatya Party (JaPa), in its Central Committee meeting held at Rangpur recently, disclosed that all AL members with a clean image are welcome to join JaPa and that they will be given tickets to contest the February elections. This was confirmed by the party Co-Chairman, Mostafizur Rahman Mustafa. He also announced that his party will field candidates in all 300 constituencies. This revelation has led to political ripples in Gono Odhakar Parishad (GOP), etc., who have been demanding a ban on JaPa and have also been attacking JaPa offices all over the country through violent means.

Judging by all these happenings, it would appear that the country is in the midst of a very interesting but uncertain phase, throwing up multiple security challenges and making the security environment vulnerable, with possibly a violent run-up to the elections. Hence, the near foreseeable future in Bangladesh is expected to be filled with excitement and unpredictability.

Views expressed are personal

VISION
BHARAT



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Upholding
Dharma and
Rajadharma extols
the ethical duty
to safeguard
harmony, protect
the vulnerable
and ensure
equitable
welfare, as
affirmed by the
Mahabharata
and Manusmriti

Roots of Resilient India

PM Modi's vision of "New India," inspired by ancient texts and values, weaves together dharma, self-reliance, innovation, and global leadership as a path to national renewal

"This is New India," said the Prime Minister on his 75th birthday. On the 15th of August, Prime Minister Modi presented the "Paanch Pran" or five pledges for India's future – the rediscovery of ancient Indian wisdom, rooted in a tradition where human progress was balanced with ecological harmony. PM Modi's articulation of "One Sun, One Earth, One Grid" and "One Earth, One Family, One Future" is an extension of this ethos.

The vast repository of ancient practices is not confined to borders. Our old scriptures like the *Arthashastra*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Vedas* and epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* articulate the core principles of statecraft like *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, while outlining the leader's duty to uphold protection, justice, welfare and prosperity for all subjects through *rajadharma*.

Prime Minister Modi has aptly drawn from this ancient wisdom to reshape governance to new heights – an innovative governance based on selfless leadership focused on national service for the collective good in order to foster a new, strong India. PM Modi has ensured "India First" in every policy formulation and execution. There has been a great leap forward in economic reforms, healthcare, serving the poor, *Nari Shakti*, ease of doing business, catapulting a tech-driven India, infrastructure development, environment and sustainability, and an overall growth in all sectors. His devotion, grit and determination have rejuvenated and resurged India's unity, development and pride of a great new India. India is a resilient economic and cultural power on the global stage. Prime Minister Modi has executed ideas from the *Arthashastra* like efficient resource management, trade promotion, a robust economy, and knowledge-driven governance, where leaders promote innovation and self-reliance through successful initiatives like "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat".

There reflect the *Arthashastra's* emphasis on economic self-sufficiency and domestic production to counter external dependence. GST and the new generation GST 2.0 are based on the PM's principle of *Nagarik Devo Bhava* – welfare and economic prosperity of all. Using the *Arthashastra's* tenet of intelligent power to foster prosperity, over



Under PM Modi, India embodies the fusion of ancient ethos and contemporary governance in the making of New India

1,500 obsolete laws have been streamlined. Removal of retrospective taxation and repeal of the Angel tax, along with slashing of corporate taxes, has made India one of the most competitive economies for global investors. Faceless tax assessments have reduced harassment. The taxpayer base has expanded from 3.8 crores in 2017 to over 14 crores in 2025. Over 1,60,000 start-ups have been created over 17.6 lakh jobs. There has been a surge in innovation, and the number of patents granted has increased from 5,978 in 2014-15 to over 1,03,000 in 2023-24. The government has liberalised FDI norms. The manufacturing sector has seen unprecedented growth, with exports rising from \$300 billion in 2014 to over \$450 billion by 2025. Atmanirbhar Bharat echoes Mahabharata's Shanti Parva teachings on self-reliance and resilience in times of crisis. India's defence exports crossed Rs. 21,000 crore in 2022, demonstrating emphasis on self-sufficiency, modernisation and preparedness. The way India pulverised Pakistan exhibited that we are now an *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, a *Shashakt Bharat*, a *Swabhinnam Bharat*, an *Ekatma Bharat*.

PM Modi's economic vision aligns with the *Bhagavad Gita's* teaching of *Nishkama* (selfless action), where policies place national interest over personal gains. This national effort has resulted in India's GDP growth averaging 7 per cent annually, with India as the fastest-growing economy in the world. In the words of the IMF, India is "the only bright spot in the otherwise dark horizon." The scriptures empha-

size a welfare-oriented economy, and we have the world's largest food security program, where free food grains reach the last mile, where DBT's reach over 80 crore people, and where there are several welfare schemes for the poor, executing the *Mahabharata's* priority of selfless action. PM Awaas Yojana, PM KUSUM, Saurbhagya, Gram Jyoti Yojana and Jan Dhan Yojana are some of the several welfare schemes.

Upholding *Dharma* and *Rajadharma* extols the ethical duty to safeguard harmony, protect the vulnerable and ensure equitable welfare, as affirmed by the *Mahabharata* and *Manusmriti*. The "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Priyas" mantra draws from the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ethos in the *Mahabharata*. Public health initiatives like Ayushman Bharat, providing free insurance cover to over 50 crore citizens and all citizens above 70 years of age, and the schemes mentioned above prove this principle.

Educational campaigns like *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* reflect the Vedic commitment to gender equality and knowledge dissemination, while the criminalisation of Triple Talaq aligns with the scriptural mandate on social reform. The deft and patriotic manner in which the Prime Minister led and navigated the country with unflinching resolve through COVID-19 has been unparalleled. The repeated assertion of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* took shape in the most profound manner in the form of *Vaccine Maitri*, where India supplied vaccines to over 250 countries and was the *Vishwamitra* by supplying medical

equipment and pharma products to several countries. And in India, over 2.2 billion doses were administered.

Chanakya's Mandala theory of alliances and pragmatism, while safeguarding our sovereignty, has been executed with aplomb through the Neighbourhood First and Act East policies, the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands outreach, BIMSTEC and BRICS – all with national interest as the guiding principle. India's role in QUAD counters expansionism, reflecting the *Arthashastra's* strategy of presence to deter threats. The revival with China delves into Chanakya's intelligent diplomacy over conflict.

PM Modi's Gyan Bharat Mission digitises over one crore manuscripts using AI, blending tradition with technology to revive heritage. Yoga's global promotion has been integrated into governance via Chintan Shibir – depicting selfless service in the *Gita*. This resurrection has made India a beacon of ancient wisdom in the modern world. Regarding health and well-being, Swachh Bharat upholds Dharma's cleanliness ethos of improving public health and collective responsibility by building 12 crore toilets. The scriptures advocate adaptation to changing times – that is, innovation – executed through Digital India, which has connected over 2.5 lakh villages with broadband. UPI handles 40 per cent of global digital transactions. Infrastructural development has enhanced connectivity, employment, and economic prosperity, as per the ancient texts. The road space being constructed has increased from 14 km per day in 2014 to 34 km per day today. 136 Vande Bharat services have been operationalised, with plans for 400 more. Since 2014, 86 new airports have been operationalised. Metro Rail has expanded to 23 cities. Since 2014, 3.8 lakh km of rural roads have been built, ensuring 99 per cent rural road connectivity.

By integrating the ancient timeless principles of *Dharma*, *Artha* and diplomatic wisdom, PM Modi has achieved economic development, cultural revival, social justice, innovation and global influence. The PM has transformed every crisis into an opportunity for renewal, growth, development and advancement. The vision of Viksit Bharat encapsulates this blend, aiming to create a resilient, strong, developed and stable India on the global stage.

Views expressed are personal



WHO SAID WHAT

Amit Shah
@AmitShah

Today, our security forces have achieved another major victory against the Naxalites. In the Abujmahad region of Narayanpur along the Maharashtra-Chhattisgarh border, our forces eliminated two Central Committee Member Naxal leaders – Katta Ramachandra Reddy and Kadri Satyanarayan Reddy. Our security forces are systematically dismantling the top leadership of the Naxals, breaking the backbone of red terror.

Abhishek Banerjee
@abhishekkaitc

As we step into the sacred days of Navratri, I extend my warmest greetings to everyone across the country. This festival is a celebration of Shakti, the eternal power of the Divine Feminine and a reminder that truth, courage and righteousness always triumph over darkness. May the divine grace of Maa Durga dispel all shadows, strengthen our collective resolve and illuminate our path towards peace, prosperity and justice for all.

THE ASIAN AGE

23 SEPTEMBER 2025

Next-Gen GST rollout a watershed moment

The rollout of the restructured two-tier Goods and Services Tax (GST) on September 22 marks yet another watershed moment in the history of India's tax administration. From multiple tax administrations and a plethora of indirect taxes, the country transitioned in 2017 to a unified tax administration under the GST Council — excluding a few products, such as petrol and liquor — with a four-rate system. The current restructured tax regime simplifies this further by introducing just two principal rates: Five per cent and 18 per cent. Ultra-luxury items will attract a 40 per cent levy, while tobacco and related products will remain under the 28 per cent plus cess category.

Addressing the nation on September 21, on the eve of India's month-long festive season, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the initiative as the 'GST Bachat Utsav' or 'GST Savings Festival', highlighting its potential to ease the burden on households.

The new rates are expected to lower tax incidence on popular commodities, enabling people to save five to 10 per cent of their monthly expenditure on groceries and household items. The reforms are projected to give a major boost to job-creating sectors such as FMCG, consumer durables, automobiles, and construction. Estimates suggest that people could collectively save up to ₹2.5 lakh crore from the twin decisions.

Nevertheless, the caveat is that Indians should buy local goods, which will set off a virtuous cycle in the economy encompassing consumption, investment, production, and job creation. In an attempt to channel the savings generated by lower GST and income tax rates to support industrial growth in the country, the Prime Minister urged Indians to embrace Swadeshi, or local products.

Despite the availability of Indian substitutes, imports remain high. In the last financial year, India purchased over \$500 million worth of toys and games, \$900 million worth of fruits, about \$600 million worth of apparel and footwear, and more than \$600 million in miscellaneous manufactured goods.

Many of these items are well within the capability of domestic producers. Yet, demand for foreign brands continues to rise among affluent consumers. In this context, Modi's appeal was an endorsement of local industry. However, he also urged Indian manufacturers to restore glory to made-in-India products. As most people cite product quality as one of the reasons for buying imported goods, enhancing the quality of India-made products is of utmost importance.

Reflecting on India's pre-colonial dominance in world trade, Modi exhorted entrepreneurs to work towards regaining it. In earlier times, however, one must note that Indian manufacturers demonstrated exceptional entrepreneurial flair and risk-taking ability, supported by robust family and community networks that acted as informal safety nets. Today's entrepreneurs, however, face liabilities alone, risking both financial security and social standing. If India is to reclaim its past glory, the government must help recreate support systems that mitigate risk and encourage enterprise.

Will clamour for Palestine work?

The international call for a Palestinian state has grown to an impressive list of 147 countries (of 193 in the UN fold) as the UK, Australia, Canada and Portugal recognised it just ahead of the United Nations General Assembly which begins today. The outrage over the continuing war in Gaza that has brought about death and destruction, besides imposing hunger and starvation on a couple of million people, is the immediate trigger for so many allies of the USA committed to not recognise a home for the Palestinians whose cause for a homeland has been a historically just one.

The political messaging is strong in this right now but the UN Security Council, which must ratify such a move, is unlikely to be ever allowed to recognise Palestine statehood so long as Israel, with the help of Jewish power controlling the US veto, is able to block it. And the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is dead against the proposal, is committed to doing everything he can to make statehood an impossible proposition, escalating the war as he has already with desertification of the land in and around Gaza City.

The Palestinians' cause is justified considering how they were promised nearly half the territory when Israel was created in 1947, and they came close enough to recognition after the Oslo Accord in 1993. But subsequent wars and the Gaza strip's recent history with Hamas, as a known instrument of terror, gaining a role in administration by winning the Gaza polls, has led to the cause of the long-suffering people not being recognised.

'Palestine' satisfies the longstanding recognition criteria of a permanent population, defined territorial boundaries even if they have lost 30 percent of their land since 1967, a government in place and the ability to conduct international affairs. The rest of the world wants the conferment of statehood in their pursuit of a long sought after two-state solution that should, in theory, lead to a more peaceful coexistence of Jews and Arabs.

If this symbolic call for recognition at least leads to the renewal of the peace process and a cessation of hostilities by Israel and release of remaining hostages by Hamas, it would have achieved something. It is, however, a burden of Palestinian history that it should suffer one of the most hawkish Israeli regimes in Tel Aviv with a leader who will continue to refuse to yield so long as the USA backs him.

THE ASIAN AGE

KASHMIR EDITOR

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Aakar Patel

Why, in the RSS' view, the nation must be governed by 'Hindu thought'

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is celebrating its centenary and its epic successes in the cultural, cultural and, especially, political field. Readers familiar with the organisation, the font of Hindutva ideology, but unclear about what it specifically stands for might benefit from this column. The RSS' longest-serving chief (83 years, 1940-1979) was M.S. Golwalkar. Two books are attributed to him, of which one is disowned. The other one, *Bunch of Thoughts*, is the subject here and we will examine what it says. It's not a book in the sense that it's a written work, but a compilation of Golwalkar's speeches, interviews and excerpts thereof. This gives it a jumpstart and sporadic feel, but it's worth going through nonetheless. What follows is your columnist's representation of Golwalkar's views, in as unbiased a fashion as is possible.

Golwalkar says the RSS called itself the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and not the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. This was because 'Rashtriya' naturally means Hindu, and the word 'Hindu' need not be used. The first RSS head, Keshav Hedgewar, had said: 'If we use the word Hindu it will mean we consider ourselves only as one of the innumerable

people communities in this land, and that we don't realise our natural status as the nationals of this country.'

Sarkar's Hindu Mahasabha was wrong in one having passed a resolution that the Congress shouldn't give up its national position by holding talks with the Muslim League, but instead ask the Hindu Mahasabha to do so. This called equal position to the Muslims as was a perversion of the reality that India was wholly and only a Hindu Rashtra. Federalism was a problem and the only way out was to be courageous enough to declare a unitary type of government by amending the Constitution. The country was one, the people were one, and therefore India ought to have only a single government and a single legislature. Executive authority could be distributed, but legislative authority should be one and devolved to the states. One central legislature for the whole of the country should satisfy the demands of democracy.

India was special in the world as it offered something nobody else could, and that was 'Hindu thought'. The excellence of Hindu thought was that it alone knew something about the nature of the soul. This could be proved because it was only in India that from ancient

times individuals rose to unravel the mystery of human nature, the 'science of spirit'. Golwalkar says Jesus saw Satan and the Prophet Gabriel. It was only in India that 'sages actually saw God'. Westerners, no matter how much they understood the science of matter, were ignorant of the science of spirit. This unique offering was under threat as Hindus were abandoning their ancient wisdoms. It was the RSS which must revive them within India and organise Hindu society. It would do this by reversing things that were damaging Hindus. Progressive societies were permissive. They led to licentious behaviour with respect to sex, food, drinks, family life and free social intercourse. These things did not produce real happiness. The individual must subsume himself into the larger nation, else the social fabric would be destroyed. This was what Hindu philosophy promoted and that was what would make Hindu happy.

And Hindus did not have this special Hindu knowledge; only some did. Ordinary people needed to be properly educated and enlightened. Making them merely literate would not serve the purpose because this special knowledge would still be absent. People were

unequal in other ways also. Democracy was flawed because it excluded experts and preferred politicians. Panchayats worked best when run on caste lines, to represent the interests of society as a whole. Elections should not be competitive but unanimous. (Again, if this sounds disjointed and rambling, it's because that's how *Bunch of Thoughts* was put together.)

India was a nation from the oceans to the Himalayas. Not just the edge of the mountains but beyond them, on which the ancients had placed places of pilgrimage (Kailash Mansarovar) on the north side, making these regions 'our live boundary'. Tibet was the abode of the gods and the Hindu epic also gave Hindus possession of Afghanistan, Burma, Iran and Lanka. Bharat Mata, for thousands of years, had dipped her arms in the two seas, from India to Singapore, with Sri Lanka as a lotus petal offered at her sacred feet. 'Bhooni pojan' was done as the entire earth was sacred, but Bharat Mata was the most sacred. She needed total devotion, and not engagement through the intellect.

Partition was unacceptable as it was not a division of property between brothers; one doesn't cut up one's mother

as settlement. The concept of Hindu Rashtra was not a mere bundle of political and economic rights. It was essentially cultural, and not political or legal. It revealed itself through the urge for realisation of God: a 'Living' God and not an idol or immaterial form. 'Our People Are Our God' is what the ancients had said. But they had no means to realise God. Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda said: 'Serve man'. But man in the sense of humanity was too wide and cannot be grasped. It should be an Almighty with certain limitations. 'Man' here meant only the Hindu people. The ancients did not use the word 'Hindu' but they did say in the Rig Veda that the sun and moon are his eyes, the stars and skies created from his navel and Brahmin is the head. King the hands, Vaishya the thighs and Shudra the feet. The people who had this four-fold arrangement were God. Service to and worship of this caste-defined society was then service to God.

There is more, and we will take it up another day.

The writer is the chair of Amnemy International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

Subhani



Was Yasin Malik used and betrayed by Indian State?



Bharat Bhushan

Kashmiri leader Mohamad Yasin Malik, once the toast of India's political elite to turn a parish into a double life sentence for his alleged 'terrorist' activities.

The National Investigative Agency (NIA) has appeared in the Delhi high court to convert Malik's life sentence to the death penalty. Malik argued his own cases for a while in the trial court after his first lawyer died during the Covid-19 pandemic, but later refused to participate in the trial.

Embracing the inevitability of certain death, he has written his last testament — a signed and verified affidavit that has been submitted to the Delhi high court. Malik is not contesting the NIA's appeal. He has resigned himself to death, having offered, he points out in his affidavit, his 'istikhara prayer' seeking guidance from God for his decision and accepting his fate in humility.

Malik's journey, from a militant to an interlocutor for peace, and subsequently to a 'terrorist', reflects India's strategic policy shifts, from engagement to securitisation in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Malik, according to his affidavit, was used as an instrument by the Indian State and then cast aside as a liability.

After he denounced armed struggle for good as the chief of J&K Liberation Front by declaring a unilateral ceasefire in 1994, successive Indian governments used Malik as a bridge with the Kashmiri separatists.

He was granted bail in several military related cases (more revived after 35 years), issued an Indian passport and sent as an emissary to start a dialogue both with the sepa-

ratists and Pakistan. Prima facie, Malik's 82-page affidavit shows that he has been sentenced to not stand in scrutiny. They relate to the NIA cases against him — the over three-decade-old TADA cases against him in the J&B court in Jammu are separate and ongoing. The main charges by the NIA include funding stone-pelting after the death of Burhan Wani and receiving money from Hafiz Saeed of Lashkar-e-

Talibat. Malik points out that he was arrested barely half an hour after Burhan Wani's killing by the security forces. His name also does not figure in any of the 10-odd FIRs in the main and supplementary stone-pelting chargesheets. The charge was made against him after a gap of over two years, when he was arrested on April 7, 2015, from a source now named by Malik.

The ledger shows that Saeed allegedly sent the money to Watali on May 3, 2015. However, in the same ledger, Rs 15 lakhs were delivered to Malik a month earlier on April 7, 2015, from a source now named by Malik. Despite these anomalies in the evidence, they were not taken into account by the court. Instead, the prosecution emphasised Malik's meeting with Hafiz Saeed, as Hindus were abandoning their ancient wisdoms. It was the RSS which must revive them within India and organise Hindu society. It would do this by reversing things that were damaging Hindus. Progressive societies were permissive. They led to licentious behaviour with respect to sex, food, drinks, family life and free social intercourse. These things did not produce real happiness. The individual must subsume himself into the larger nation, else the social fabric would be destroyed. This was what Hindu philosophy promoted and that was what would make Hindu happy.

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By emphasising both his role as a peacemaker and his voluntary embrace of an impending death sentence, he will claim a unique position distinct from other figures of resistance before him, like Moulana Iqbal, Afzal Guru and Burhan Wani, as he had genuinely become a Gandhian, choosing the path of peace.

His affidavit is a message to three constituencies — the Kashmiri people, India and the international community. To the Kashmiris, his affidavit presents him as a martyr for the Kashmiri cause, a peacemaker betrayed by India and someone who occupies the high moral ground by embracing death rather than seeking mercy.

To other Indians, he demonstrates the contradictions of their government, and upends the narrative of the NIA to prove that if he is guilty then so are the politicians, intelligence officers and the security establishment that used him as an interlocutor.

By embracing death, he underlines the injustice of the Indian State in sending a peace-seeker to the gallows.

His message to the international community will poke holes in India's narrative on Kashmir, highlighting India's double standards (negotiating peace with the Naga insurgents but denying the same process to the Kashmiris) and questioning the human rights optics as the victim of a duplicitous India.

Malik's is a classic case of a moderate militant leader being brought into the peace process tactically and then sidelined once the State becomes confident and stronger. His affidavit is a brilliant political script — if he lives, he will forever be the symbol of India's betrayal, deterring the leadership of other insurgencies from joining any state-sponsored peace process, and if he dies, he will live as a martyr in Kashmir's history.

The writer is a senior journalist based in New Delhi

LETTERS

RECURRING TRAGEDY

Floods have become a recurring tragedy in many parts of our country, bringing large-scale destruction of lives, property, crops and infrastructure. While floods are natural disasters, their intensity is worsened by deforestation, poor drainage systems, encroachment on riverbanks and inadequate flood management policies. Protecting our nation from such disasters is achievable by constructing strong embankments, promoting afforestation, improving urban drainage systems, and strictly controlling encroachments near waterways. Additionally, establishing robust early warning systems, can significantly minimise damage.

Altaz Hussain
Mumbai

TRIPLE WHAMMY

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's latest foreign policy moves spell a triple whammy for India. First, by lifting US sanctions on Iran, he boosts Tehran's leverage even as New Delhi banks on Chabahar port for Central Asian access. Second, he wants to reclaim Afghanistan's Bagram airbase from the Taliban — signalling a fresh American footprint on India's vulnerable western flank, while resetting military ties with Pakistan. Third, his administration has imposed a \$100,000 fee on new H-1B visa applications. While Mr Trump frames these steps as curbing China and keeping tabs on Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, the fallout narrows India's strategic room to manoeuvre, complicates its regional diplomacy and strikes at its highly skilled talent.

R.S. Narula
Patna

ASTRONOMICAL LOSS

THE RECENT partial solar eclipse, though invisible in India, has once again highlighted our society's neglect of scientific awareness. While the world marvels at such celestial events, in our country they are often greeted with superstition and misinformation. Schools and universities should have seized this moment to organise lectures or live-streams, but instead prevailed in a naive dream of becoming a knowledge superpower, can we afford to let eclipses remain a matter of fear rather than fascination? Until our institutions treat astronomy as a tool of wonder and education, we shall forever be eclipsed, not by the moon, but by ignorance.

Ms Humaira
Mumfargur



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

It's time to reckon with the seven ugly sins of artificial intelligence

Each of them poses a clear and present threat but the rise of AI shouldn't make us gloomy if the world manages to regulate it



NILESH JASANI
is a Singapore-based innovation investor for Genlinnov Pte Ltd

Markets are roaring. So much so that beyond the cheers of bulls, all one hears are the roars of hedge callers. Globally, capital spending in technology is at record levels, thanks to the rise of AI. We are believers in innovation and think the long-term outcome will be positive. But faith cannot be blindness. This is not a crisis of faith; it is a demand for sight. At today's valuations, ignoring risks would be the greater sin. To help track those risks, here are the 'seven deadly sins' of AI. Each is real, present and must be reckoned with.

Pride—Hubris of the machine age. We have given the machine a voice. It speaks our language, and some believe it is beginning to form thoughts. The true sin is not this private belief, but the public performance of absolute certainty that leadership now seems to require. CEOs who once urged caution now preach revolution. As budgets for roads and hospitals are trimmed and non-AI private spending is pruned, much is being sacrificed at the altar of AI. Pride is the armour a leader must wear to justify all this. The danger is not failure itself, but the spectacle of it. Everyone knows innovation projects can fail. Autonomous driving will not be perfect for years. Chatbots will cause harm. Each mistake will be broadcast, litigated and used as a weapon by rivals. But the market does not reward nuance; it demands conviction. Those putting in billions must project a faith with no room for doubt. So every stumble will be called a fall and the leaders of this age will walk with a target pinned to their backs.

Greed—A mania that follows the money. AI is now the largest capital magnet in technology, and greed seems to have given a new name: innovation. Startups are no longer born of vision, but built for acquisition. Their goal is not to create the next Facebook, but to be snapped up for big money, even as insider rounds inflate valuations for the same investors to mark up their own assets on paper. The giants make rushed acquisitions and sign poorly vetted data deals, spending billions in shareholder money to stay 'in the race'. Governance is blindered; boards approve moonshots with no maps to profit. But the bigger sin is the new accounting. A tech giant invests billions in a partner, which then pays those billions back for cloud services. Investment is booked as revenue, a closed loop of capital, like a serpent eating its own tail. The 2008 crisis reborn in the cloud? Could be. Countless can sense it. If fortunes turn, the sages of doom will be those who happen to speak the loudest tale before recess begins.

Lust—Extremism of the crowded stage. To be heard now requires a shout. So the lust is no longer for participation, but for relevance. And in a crowded theatre, the currency of relevance is extremism. Among optimists, executives propose



moonshots not from vision, but from vanity. Their goal is often to grab headlines rather than innovate. But the more dangerous lust lives among pessimists. Here, nuance is a weakness. Every AI failure is magnified, every flaw portrayed as fatal. Rhetoric replaces logic. This lust creates new doomsayers, each competing to paint the darkest future.

Envy—Resentment of the excluded. The new AI order has AI teams on top, some of which act like overlords receiving disproportionate budgets while legacy businesses are starved. This sows internal seeds of envy, while outside, entire professions watch their status evaporate. The deepest envy is for data. The modern world hosts a new inequality: the data-rich versus the data-poor. A handful of corporations hold proprietary data-sets on a planetary scale, with startups, researchers and developing nations left out. This envy is now a geopolitical force behind an arms race measured in parameters and petabytes. Then, there is the envy of those in the market who missed the AI wave—like value investors and non-AI businesses.

Gluttony—The unconstrained fear. AI is not just software; it needs a factory. Data centres are its steel mills, but their hunger is for electricity and water. This physical feast is straining the power grids of entire nations. It's like taking out an environmental mortgage to pay for better auto-complete. Another feast is of data, an endless hunger that scrapes copyrighted works and private records. A hidden appetite is for human labour. Behind the curtain of automation is an army of warm bodies, millions of low-wage contractors labelling data and filtering toxic content. The

machine's intelligence needs invisible human toil. If data centres are overbuilt, job losses may follow.

Wrath—The blade that turns back. Influential advocates of AI have held forth on perpetual job creation as a benefit, but based on a few carefully selected data-points from history. This is a dream of a world that may no longer exist. Technology can be a sword that does not unite, but divide. The impact of AI on jobs could cause social instability. It is a double-edged sword, creating some jobs while disrupting potentially many more.

Slloth—The atrophy of governance. The final sin is the quietest. It begins with the individual: say, the engineer who lets Copilot write code he cannot debug, or the doctor who trusts an AI readout instead of his own diagnosis. This is disliking, not efficiency. This individual sloth creates fragile systems, but the worst sloth may be institutional: seen in a great abdication of governance. Lawmakers, overwhelmed by the pace of change, accept the AI industry's self-pledges as a substitute for law. This atrophy of oversight lets other sins flourish.

The AI wheel is in motion. These sins could lead one into the AI opposition camp, praying for the industry's fall. But that mistakes the possibility of a long winter for the end of all seasons. While AI may not get an entirely free run, a big wheel is in motion. AI is a battlefield of geopolitical rivalry. So a global regulatory clampdown could slow it down, but will not stop it. At the end, the machine age will likely redeem itself, even as it is held accountable for its sins. In a world being remade, those who only chronicle the sins of its creation cannot expect to have a hand in writing the laws of its future.

Trump's H-1B visa fee hike has dealt a blow to young Indians

The world's biggest youth cohort can't afford fewer opportunities



ANDY MUKHERJEE
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering industrial companies and financial services in Asia.

It's hard to say what US President Donald Trump's extraordinary attack on immigration will mean for the future of US tech dominance. What's clearer, however, is the immediate challenge he has created for India, says after he wished his friend Narendra Modi a happy 75th birthday. Indians account for more than 70% of all H-1B visas. A steep \$100,000 entry fee, paid by employers, for every foreign worker entering the US under the programme will effectively gut it, forcing large outsourcing companies such as Infosys to rethink their business strategy.

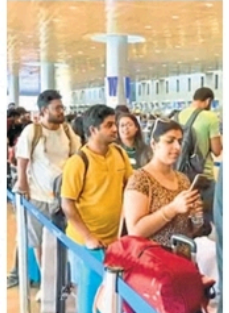
What should worry the Indian government more is how the new rule is being implemented. Introduced on 21 September as a travel restriction, it had the appearance of an economic sanction, an escalation of the 'punishment' that Trump has meted out to a staunch ally in recent months.

First came a 50% duty on merchandise exports. Washington told New Delhi that its 25% reciprocal tariff was being doubled because its purchases of Russian oil were helping to finance Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. Having effectively lost access to its biggest overseas market for textiles, gems and jewellery, shrimp-farming and other labour-intensive industries, India was hoping to soften the blow with a tax cut for domestic consumers, lined up to coincide with this week's start of the annual Hindu festive season. Washington's curbs on white-collar talent seem to have poured cold water on that mitigation strategy too.

Trump's move left many middle-class Indian families in extreme anxiety over the weekend. H-1B visa holders who were overseas on work or holiday were told by their employers to make it back before 12.01am Eastern time on 21 September. Those who failed to beat the deadline could get stranded indefinitely. Or their spouses and children might.

By the time White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt clarified that the entry fee is a one-time payment, which would only apply to the next H-1B lottery and not to current visa holders, the damage was already done. To immigrant families, an already arduous pathway to permanent US residency will look like an impossible dream now. Even many employees currently in the US would ask companies to move them elsewhere. But where?

The US tech and finance industries have at least a couple of options besides mass relocation of foreign-born talent. They could challenge the legality of the entry fee. They could also seek carve-outs. Silicon Valley and Wall Street could, for



It's a tricky time for America to repel India from its geopolitical orbit.

instance, lobby to exempt foreigners with US college STEM degrees. Hospitals that rely on H-1B to ease a shortage of doctors may also make a strong case to retain cost-effective access to foreign-born residents.

Other strategies also seem possible. Recent research shows that when faced with shocks to the H-1B programme in the past, employers substituted talent with transactions. They stepped up acquisitions, particularly of small local targets in places with a high concentration of skilled workers. If visa restrictions prevent a company from hiring the kind of manpower it needs, it can always find similar talent—foreign-born or local—at another business, which it can then acquire.

For India, the problem is much bigger. By adding services to a trade war that New Delhi didn't see coming, Trump may have done more than shave off a few percentage points from outsourcing firms' margins. A quarter-century of closer political alignment with the US had a solid economic foundation. Just as the likes of Apple helped turn China into the world's factory, large US firms propelled India's rise in software services exports. That business model is already facing an existential threat from artificial intelligence (AI). Generative AI may be making top programmers more productive, but it's also hacking away at entry-level jobs. At the same time, US lawmakers are considering legislation that would impose a 25% tax on American companies for payments made to foreign workers for services consumed in the US.

What makes the latest targeted punishment by the Trump administration doubly dangerous is that it's taking place against a backdrop of high youth unemployment and unrest in neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and now Nepal.

It's a tricky time for Washington to repel India from its geopolitical orbit, and to take away opportunities from the world's biggest cohort of youth—one by one.

In a televised address on Sunday, Modi struck an optimistic note. The reduction in the GST from Monday "will accelerate India's growth story," he said. However, with wages under threat from both blue- and white-collar workers in India, Indian consumers might be wary of making big-ticket purchases. Trump's actions may have made sure of that.

THEIR VIEW

Private corporate investment must flicker back to form

SHAURYA DOVAL & SAKSHI ABROL



are, respectively, director and visiting fellow at Pahle India Foundation.

For a country slated to contribute about 20% to global growth (IMF), one would expect India to be abuzz with private enterprises placing bold bets on the future. Instead, the numbers speak otherwise: public capital expenditure does the heavy lifting while private investments remain muted. Over the past decade, India's investment mix has seen ups and downs. Public investment, especially in infrastructure, transport and energy, has risen to a quarter of gross fixed capital formation (GFCF); private investment accounts for the rest of this total, but the share of private corporate investment has been in decline. It has fallen from a peak of 41% in 2015-16 to a current 33%. Household investments are important too. Numbers alone hardly tell the full story. For every stalled factory floor, there's a startup in Bengaluru rewriting the rules of global technology. For every corporate balance sheet weighed down by old debt, there's a renewable energy project securing world-class financing. The story of private

investment, then, is not just one of gaps, but of potential waiting to be unlocked. Which is why the conversation must move beyond asking, 'Why isn't capital flowing in?' Instead, we should ask, 'Where should capital flow for maximum gain?'

To answer this, we must sketch a sectoral picture—where investments have gone and where they must go next. Real estate and professional services dominate India's capital formation, consistently accounting for about 22% of total investment. Trade, transport and services have been rising too, reflecting India's consumption-driven growth and expanding logistics. But the flip side is equally telling. Manufacturing, while still 16-17% of capital formation, has seen its share decline. Utilities—electricity, gas and water—have fallen from 9.5% to under 6% in the last decade, despite rising demand. India's growth is service-heavy, but investments in industrial capacity and infrastructure remain constrained.

India's comparative advantage lies in innovation-led areas: climate finance, digital public goods, health-tech and global supply chain diversification. The world's largest companies are recalibrating supply chains and India can benefit from these shifts. The apparent contradiction between India's cap-

ital-attracting potential and its declining share of private investment shows that the real challenge is not capital availability, but allocation.

So, how can capital find its best use? Investors are no longer swayed by government incentives alone. They seek certainty, speed and scale. A transparent regulatory environment, rapid dispute resolution and streamlined project clearances can boost private sector confidence.

Global benchmarks of private investment are instructive. South Korea's 84% of its investment through private markets, while Australia, Japan and the US maintain 80% plus. China, despite its state-led model, has a much higher GFCF at 41% of GDP, compared to India's 31%, translating to \$390 billion more investment each year.

India's 75% private share of GFCF is proof that market mechanisms work. S&P Global's upgrade of India's sovereign rating to 'BBB' reinforces the point: a large domestic economy with cushions for shocks, healthier cor-

porate balance sheets, rising capacity utilisation and resilient demand. Together, these should facilitate a revival in private investment, aided by a supportive policy environment that features GST and other reforms. While the private sector has been investing in sectors like oil and gas, power and automobiles, lifting

India's total investment from 31% to 35% of GDP—as in other fast-growing Asian economies—will require ensuring capital flows to sectors with the highest multiplier effects.

To accelerate private investment, we can adopt proven frameworks. South Korea's two-tier fund regime tripled venture capital deployment in a decade by calibrating incentives for

both mega-funds and small enterprise vehicles. Unlike India's broad fund-of-funds model, Korea's approach offers targeted regulatory and tax advantages. Singapore's co-investment approach—where its state-run Temasek takes early minority stakes in sunrise sectors—works less as a subsidy scheme and more as a signalling device.

For India, combining Korea's efficiency with Singapore's risk-sharing could drive investment in green tech, quantum tech, health-tech and advanced manufacturing. Government funds can offer patient capital and validation, while nudging private investors to scale up. But capital alone is not enough. We need a sharper R&D thrust, initiated by the government but propelled by private enterprise. At 0.65% of GDP, India's R&D spend lags China's (2.68%) and South Korea's (5.21%). Through better tax incentives, streamlined patents and stronger university-industry linkages, India can steer private research towards strategic areas. Only then will investment translate to cutting-edge capability and value chain upgrade to position India as a global innovation hub, not just a manufacturing base.

Why does this matter when public capex is so high? Because public investment cannot substitute private dynamism. Every rupee spent on highways or power lines creates conditions for multiple rupees of private investment—factories along corridors, startups leveraging digital infrastructure and exporters tapping new markets. Without private participation, the multiplier effect weakens. The sooner it flickers back to form, the louder India's growth engine will roar.

India's growth engine is likely to start roaring once private dynamism steps up its role in the economy

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Stay alert to turbulence on India's external front

An H-1B visa barrier that squeezes talent supply to the US could join other forces to put our balance-of-payments at some extra risk. Capital controls may need to tighten temporarily

Here is a number that Indian planners, economic administrators and central bankers would do well to remember: \$124 billion. It should perhaps be imprinted on all policy documents henceforth. As the global economy enters a new era of volatility and unpredictability that includes a comprehensive reset of commercial relations and networks, an unprecedented bout of flux has begun to convulse all individual economies. Multiple wars—both conventional and unconventional—have added another layer of complexity that shows no sign of an early resolution. India, as a key member of the global polity, has also been struck by this tsunami. It threatens to worsen our existing problems of endemic unemployment, slow household income growth and stagnation across significant parts of the economy. The latest US salvo on H-1B visas, on top of the irrational tariffs imposed earlier, is likely to squeeze the flow of Indian talent to the US, though the severity of its impact is yet to be ascertained. But it is here that the sum of \$124 billion assumes primacy. As our net inward personal transfers during 2024-25, including worker remittances, this amount played a big role in keeping our current account deficit down to a comfortable 0.6% of GDP last fiscal year.

India tops the global league tables of remittance earnings. As our domestic economy grows, so will its interface with foreign economies. This has a direct impact on our external account; closer engagement with the global economy amplifies the risk of an off-kilter balance of payments (BoP)—comprising both current and capital accounts—as trade, investment and other flows can vary widely. There is a

degree of inevitability around India's BoP vulnerability. For example, we have little flexibility on certain imports—oil, capital goods, active pharma ingredients and bullion; this tends to widen our trade deficit whenever export growth slumps. In parallel, though, our diaspora has powered a boom in remittance inflows: from \$107 billion in 2023-24 to \$124 billion in 2024-25. These come from various countries, but the US is our largest source and its new visa barrier will get in the way of that growth.

India's external account, thus, is exposed to more risk even if all other variables that impact the BoP stay the same—which is unlikely. Apart from imports, we have some other inelastic items that make BoP management tricky. Indian companies on a growth path will want loans from overseas to keep their interest bills low, for instance, or use supplier credit lines for capital expenditure to expand their capacity. Foreign portfolio investors, meanwhile, have been losing their appetite for Indian assets. Even foreign direct investment has been drying up, with our net inflows last year dipping below the \$1-billion mark. All this presents the central bank with a sort of a *fait accompli*: the need to tighten capital controls. If action is taken, it must not inhibit routine fund transfers, like dividends sent to overseas shareholders or foreign investors repatriating the sale proceeds of local assets. Its ambit should be confined to Indian citizens and companies that send money abroad under liberalized outward remittance schemes. India Inc, which has shown a rising propensity to invest overseas despite being lavished with multiple fiscal incentives, low taxes and interest rates, may rediscover opportunities back home. But it should be made amply clear that these curbs are only temporary.

IBC reform: Let us also consider preventive insolvency processes

The idea of creditor-led resolution is well meaning but we need newer options for value protection



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The introduction of a creditor-led insolvency resolution process (CLRP) in India's Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) Amendment bill, 2025, is well meaning, but its focus on creditor-only initiations, default as the operative trigger and the court's role in key stages may make value protection a challenge.

Unlike the IBC's usual corporate insolvency resolution process (CIRP), the CLRP is a proposed option under which the corporate debtor keeps management control while creditors work towards a time-bound resolution (50 days extendable by 45 days) under limited court oversight, which is helpful given today's adjudicatory level delays. The bill also aligns with the World Bank's 'E-ready' insolvency model that encourages countries to have an out-of-court mechanism, although the CLRP is a hybrid. A CLRP may be initiated with the approval of 51% of creditors (by debt value), with the corporate debtor given time to respond. Then, an insolvency professional (IP) is appointed. The board stays in place, but the IP can attend meetings and veto resolutions. For a moratorium, an application must be made to the adjudicating authority, which approves the final resolution plan. A CLRP can be converted to a CIRP under certain circumstances.

It is also important to understand what the CLRP is not. It is not strictly

out-of-court; it is a hybrid mechanism that combines out-of-court and formal reorganization methods (for legal sanctity). The CLRP is not 'pre-packaged insolvency' either. It is also not an early-stage preventive device that applies formal resolution processes (with a limited court role) to an enterprise that is not yet technically insolvent. Notably, it kicks in only in case of a default and cannot be self-applied by a corporate debtor on the verge of insolvency.

This reform, while aiming for quicker resolution, raises some concerns over how much value recovery it will enable. First, a CLRP can only be initiated by creditors (and not corporate debtors themselves), who will require the implicit cooperation of the debtor, which could prove challenging in many cases, especially as the initiation of this process means the debtor risks it being converted into a regular CIRP (through a vote among creditors or court order). So, while the corporate debtor gets a breather, a CLRP may boom. This route may end up delaying an inevitable CIRP, causing further value loss.

Next, the CLRP's initiation criterion is a default by the corporate debtor (also the CIRP's insolvency test). However, from a value recovery perspective, it is often quite late by then. The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) prudential guidelines for lenders acknowledge that "default is a lagging indicator." While defaults determine reclassifications of loan quality, the regulator encourages banks to manage accounts proactively.

Lastly, on account of the court's role, limited though it is, the new process would be just as vulnerable to delays as the CIRP, which tends to erode value, as the longer resolution takes, the less can be expected out of it. The court has a role in some important phases (if a CD objects to initiation, for example, and resolution plan approval). While the bill prescribes an adjudication timeline and criteria, the process may face prolonged appeals. Similar concerns exist for other adjudicating-authority approvals.

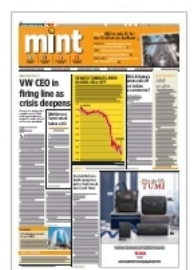
Extant mechanisms do not provide corporate debtors many avenues to initiate pre-default solutions without losing control of operations for risking it. Value erosion typically begins well before technical insolvency, and information asymmetry implies that debtors may be best placed to assess their solvency status. However, since formal processes entail a high risk of losing control (and of an associated stigma), companies often do not seek timely resolution. Extant mechanisms have not seen much success either. The IBC does let corporate debtors initiate a CIRP (upon default), but it has been invoked only in 522 cases so far. The pre-pack device for MSMEs is under-used. Among non-IBC solutions, the 'scheme of arrangement' (under the Companies Act) is considered too complex for debt restructuring. The RBI framework, also default-based, has seen moderate success. Although it recommends early action on warning signals, it is meant for the banking sector and excludes non-financial creditors.

While the CLRP introduces an alternative rescue device, India should also consider preventive insolvency mechanisms for enhanced value protection. Specifically, it will help if we let debtors initiate hybrid processes (without the fear of immediate control loss) as soon as they foresee insolvency. It will encourage debtors to try resolving debts well before technical insolvency. Many countries in the Global South have put in place such mechanisms (for instance, Ethiopia, Morocco, Tunisia). India could consider them too. The Supreme Court has also recently voiced a need for preventive restructuring mechanisms (*Manu Brar Fernandes vs Shaba Sharma*). While we do not need to reopen a discussion on the default test, greater flexibility can be explored for hybrid mechanisms.

An over-emphasis on creditor-led and default-triggered processes may work against value preservation.

These are the author's personal views.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is—it's what consumers tell each other it is

SCOTT COOK

THEIR VIEW

Marketing in the age of AI: First, woo those algorithms

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When I used to wear the hat of a marketer, I had a simple if a marketing mandate: understand our customers. Real, unpredictable, messy humans with their peculiarities, their irrational loyalty to competitors and their occasional acts of rebellion against adjectives that got stuck in their heads. I had sent armies of market researchers to stalk potential customers in malls and *kirana* stores, organized focus groups with freebies for participation and wired consumers to eye-tracking machines. I called this measuring sentiment.

Fast-forward to today, the AI era, and the marketing cosmos looks like it has been hijacked by a mischievous sorcerer. Consumers are still human, yes. They still binge-watch series, pretend to read nutrition labels and quarrel over Android versus the iPhone. But now, looming between the brand and the buyer, sits a new gatekeeper: the large language model (LLM).

Suddenly, it's not enough for humans to like your brand. You need AI algorithms to

like it first. If ChatGPT, Claude or Perplexity decide your brand has the charm of a damp sponge, your sales funnel collapses before a single human even gets a whiff of your product page. AI has become the invisible *maitre d'* of consumer choice, whispering recommendations, warnings and sometimes outright nonsense about your brand to millions of curious searchers. Welcome to the new era, where marketers must woo customers via LLMs and manage their sentiment.

Before the rise of AI, we had our toolbox of sentiment detectors: Surveys with questions designed to look casual but worded to avoid bias; focus groups where a few strangers debated brand colours under the gaze of a one-way mirror; social media listening tools that scraped posts for emojis, hashtags and the occasional meltdown; brand trackers that measured awareness, recall and preference in painstaking quarterly charts.

It wasn't perfect; humans lie, forget, or say one thing while meaning another. But the object of analysis was clear: the human psyche. Marketers were playing psychoanalysts of the masses, trying to decipher intent from a storm of contradictory signals.

If someone said your burger was "fine," was that good? Bad? A prelude to defection? One learnt to read between the lines, to

decode the shrug emoji and obsess over Net Promoter Scores as if they were stock prices.

Today, the game is stranger. LLMs don't buy toothpaste, but they tell humans which one to buy. They don't need smartphones, but they can crown one as the undisputed king while relegating another to footnote status. This shift means marketers must ask not only "What do consumers think?" but also "What does the algorithm think?"

The marketer's playbook now includes a bizarre new chapter titled 'AI Sentiment Optimisation', and it reads like something out of a *Black Mirror* episode. Anyhow, here's what must be done:

Track sentiment across all major AI platforms: If ChatGPT gushes about your eco-friendly sneakers but Claude mutters about "overpriced gimmicks," you've got a split personality problem to solve; so set up automated sentiment alerts. Because nothing ruins a Friday faster than finding out an AI agent just called your product "outdated."

Benchmark against competitors: It's not enough to know your score. You must know if Bard thinks your rival's battery life is "stellar" while describing yours as "adequate." Adequate is death.

Analyse context: AI doesn't merely say "good" or "bad." It offers essays. A paragraph of praise for packaging might be followed by a damning line about customer service. One must understand the why behind that sentiment.

Take corrective action: This could mean gymnastics over search engine optimization (SEO), content partnerships or simply fixing the actual problem.

The irony is that all this effort is still in service of influencing the same old human shopper. The woman standing in the toothpaste aisle has no idea that before she arrived, an invisible algorithmic jury had pre-filtered her options. She trusts the AI guidance without knowing how much lobbying, nudging and algorithm-courtship went into making sure Brand X appeared on her radar instead of

Brand Y. We marketers used to say "perception is reality." Now we must add, "And AI's perception precedes reality."

The implications are as dizzying as they are comical: Brands are now fighting to become the teacher's pet of algorithms. Imagine a toothpaste brand sending flowers to ChatGPT on Valentine's Day. Public relations crises can now start when an LLM "misremembers" your history. Competitive intelligence includes asking how Claude describes us versus them, as if one must eavesdrop on a cocktail party. SEO is no longer just about Google's spiders, but about training the very personality of AI platforms to recall one's brand fondly. It's as if the brand's audience aren't people anymore, but omniscient, occasionally cranky librarians who control the flow of all knowledge. Convince them, and you convince the world.

I live in a great marketing paradox: people still want shinier, cheaper things, but I now woo the machines that woo them. One day I'm conjuring TikTok magic for Gen-Z, the next I'm working to fix why ChatGPT called my product "clunky." We have little choice but to let algorithms chuckle at our efforts and brands. It's to AI that we now first pitch our wares. Best to cozy up with them. Welcome to algorithmic schmoozing.