

Editorial



Qualified cheer

Shukla's paid flight to ISS will provide insight on human space flight

At noon on June 25 (IST), India's Shubhash Shukla lifted off with three other astronauts from NASA's Florida Spaceport to the International Space Station (ISS) as part of the Axiom-4 commercial mission. This is the first time an Indian has gone to orbital space since Rakesh Sharma in 1994. If the Dragon crew capsule docks successfully with the ISS on June 26, Mr. Shukla will also become the first Indian onboard the ISS. Over the next two weeks, he and the ISS crew will perform a suite of experiments carried by the Axiom-4 mission, including eight from the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Mr. Shukla is among the leading candidates to fly in India's maiden human space flight mission, Gaganyaan, currently slated for 2027. For now, the Department of Space has not articulated the reasons for spending ₹548 crore to buy Mr. Shukla's seat on Axiom-4. Against the backdrop of the ₹20,200-crore budget for Gaganyaan, Mr. Shukla's paid flight to the ISS, packaged along with advanced training for him and back-up crewmate Prasanth Nair, will give India considerable insight into human space flight and how it is coordinated ahead of mounting its own astronaut expeditions, regardless of the money spent. However, this does not spare the Department of Space and ISRO from communicating the rationale and extent of these benefits, which has yet to happen.

Space flight has changed considerably between Mr. Sharma's and Mr. Shukla's flights: the stakes today are multidimensional and more demanding. Axiom is a private entity contracted with NASA and SpaceX, and which sells seats to commercial missions to the ISS. But uncertainties linger over NASA's future access to the Dragon crew capsules following Elon Musk's spat with U.S. President Donald Trump. The effects of Mr. Trump's tariffs and his willingness to honour predecessor Joe Biden's commitments to India, given the major budget cuts he has proposed for 2026, are also unclear. And the ISS is set to be decommissioned by 2030. In this world, the future of India's own space programme is caught between multiple futures. NASA and private U.S. companies, including Blue Origin, have said they would like to use Gaganyaan technologies in future missions as part of strengthening U.S.-India ties in the space sector. But even as the country balances commercial with public sector needs, it needs to remain a relevant provider of space flight services. The Indian government has signalled that it is willing to take positive steps to bolster the private sector but which, thus far, have been inadequate. Thus, once Mr. Shukla returns, ISRO's to-do list will move to the next big challenge even as public expectations of it, including transparent communication, will soar.

Cause and effect

Governments must uphold human rights in citizenship cases

Concerns surrounding citizenship faced by sections of society in India's border States have come to the fore again with courts stepping in to provide temporary relief to harassed individuals. The issues arising from these cases are far from settled. On June 24, the Supreme Court of India stayed the deportation of Jaynab Bibi who was labelled a "foreigner", first by the Foreigners' Tribunal in Assam, and then by the Gauhati High Court. Despite hailing from a family whose members have lived in Assam for generations, and furnishing all documents, she has had to run from pillar to post to prove that she is an Indian citizen. A Bench of Justices K.V. Viswanathan and N. Kottiswar Singh ordered the Union government not to take any coercive steps against Ms. Bibi, till the next hearing in August. In the case of Rakshanda Rashid, the High Court of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh ordered the Union Home Secretary to repatriate the 63-year-old housewife to India. She was deported to Pakistan following the crackdown against Pakistani nationals after the Pahalgam terror attack in April. Ms. Rashid, a Pakistani national, had been staying in Jammu for the past 38 years with her husband and two children, and had a long-term visa. Her application for citizenship in 1996 is yet to be processed.

In his order, High Court judge Rahul Bharti said human rights are the most sacrosanct component of a human life and that there are times when a court has to respond "SOS like" without going into the merits and demerits of a case, which can be decided on in due course of time. The lawyers for Ms. Bibi referred to *Md. Rahim Ali @ Abdul Rahim vs The State of Assam* in 2024 in which the Supreme Court touched on the manner in which people in Assam were being randomly suspected as foreigners without any cogent evidence. "...[I]t is well settled that suspicion, however high it may be, can under no circumstances, be held to be a substitute for legal evidence," it said, laying down the due process to be followed when an individual is declared a foreigner. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, by offering citizenship to six non-Muslim communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, adopted a narrow and arbitrary view of "religious persecution". The innate violence in the rhetoric of senior Bharatiya Janata Party Chief Ministers such as Yogi Adityanath and Himanta Biswa Sarma against minorities has heightened the anxiety felt by the marginalised, poor, sometimes undocumented, communities. Governments must uphold human rights and dignity of the individual, as provided for under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and not have to be nudged by courts.

A lofty concept, a Governor and unwanted controversy

A picture of 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India) has triggered a confrontation between the Governor of Kerala and the State government. At a recent function, the Governor had placed a painting of Bharat Mata in the form of a female figure clad in a saffron colour sari with a spear in one hand and standing with a lion behind her against a backdrop of the map of India. The painting had been placed in a room where official functions are held at Raj Bhavan. A tall brass lamp was placed before this garlanded picture. Before any official function begins, the Governor bows before it, offers flowers and lights the lamp. The Chief Minister and other Ministers had raised objections on the grounds that this picture of Bharat Mata is not recognised by the Constitution or any law unlike the national anthem of India or the national flag or other national symbols. Therefore, the government seems to have taken a position that it will not participate in any official function organised by the Governor where this picture is displayed.

The slogan, 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai', was the emotional cry of freedom fighters which would electrify the minds of people who were fighting for freedom from colonial rule. And, they used to raise this slogan at the highest pitch when they were subject to lathi blows. Thus, Bharat Mata is one that deeply resonated with the countless millions during India's freedom struggle.

But the question in this issue in Kerala is not whether we should pay obeisance to this image of Bharat Mata. There is no doubt that Indians have a deep and emotional bond with the concept of Bharat Mata. However, in the Kerala episode, the issue is that the Governor has used a picture of what is claimed to be Bharat Mata at the venue where official functions organised by the government are held and offers floral tributes to it as a part of the official function.

The conduct of the Governor

Since no picture of Bharat Mata in any form has been recognised by either the Constitution or any law or adopted like the national anthem, the national flag, the national emblem or even the national symbols, such a picture cannot be a part of any official function organised by the government. It may be noted here that this picture of Bharat Mata is used only by the Rashtratra Swayamsevak Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party in their functions. The Governor,



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There is a deep and emotional bond with the concept of Bharat Mata, but all constitutional authorities are bound by the framework of the Constitution

being the constitutional head of the state, is expected to conduct himself in accordance with the Constitution. The Governor cannot take independent decisions in the performance of his duties and functions but can act only in accordance with the advice of the elected government. So, if the government decides that such pictures should not be placed at the venue of official meetings organised by the government, the Governor is required to go by that decision.

The personification of Bharat Mata as a mother figure was first done by renowned Bengali novelist, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, in his late 19th century work, *Anandamath*. But the mother symbol he created was Banga Mata (Mother of Bengal) – and not Bharat Mata – and it became the powerful symbol of Bengali nationalism.

But it was Abanindranath Tagore, the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore who first did a painting of the Banga Mata in 1905. This depiction, with four arms, in some ways resembled a Hindu goddess. It was sister Nivekita, a prominent disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who popularised this painting as Bharat Mata. Later, 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai' became the most powerful slogan of the national freedom movement but without any visual representation. The national movement never adopted any picture of the Bharat Mata.

A lofty concept

No one has defined the concept of Bharat Mata as brilliantly as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He explains it in his inimitable style in his *Discovery of India*: "...sometimes as I reached a gathering a great roar of welcome would greet me: Bharat Mata ki Jai-Victory to Mother India. I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this Bharat Mata, whose victory they wanted.... The mountains and the rivers of India and the forest and the broad fields which gave us food were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me who were spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people and victory to her meant victory to these people."

It is rather unfortunate that this lofty concept of Bharat Mata has triggered an unseemly controversy involving the Governor of Kerala. Obviously the picture of a female figure in a saffron sari, with a spear in hand and a lion

behind her, cannot be a symbol of Bharat Mata. The display of such a picture is a throwback to 19th century nationalism which has no relevance in modern times. Indian nationalism under Gandhi had a strong secular core and was inclusive. Anthropomorphisation of a country is an outdated idea. The diversities, the divisions of Indian society, multiple religions, races, and different levels of cultural developments can be represented by such a figure.

Governor versus the government

The country has witnessed too many unseemly fights between Governors and State governments. The Supreme Court of India has intervened in some cases and tried to set things right. Nevertheless the Governor-government spat continues to occur. The Constitution and the interpretations thereof by the Supreme Court have clearly laid down the limits of a Governor's powers and functions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had said emphatically in the Constituent Assembly: "The governor under the constitution has no functions which he can discharge by himself or functions at all."

The Raj Bhavan Kerala controversy, delicate or otherwise, was absolutely unnecessary. It sours the relationship between the Governor and the elected government. In official functions, symbols or logos or other visual representations used by private organisations cannot be used. Bhavan does not merely consist of the private chambers of the Governor. There are rooms where government functions are held as a swearing-in ceremony as it is done in Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The Governor is bound by the advice of the government on, for example, the placing of photographs, portraits in such places and a performing various actions in an official function such as the lighting of the lamp as in protocol approved by the government. The Governor, for example, cannot order that the picture of Bharat Mata should be placed in all government offices. It is a decision only the government can take. Constitutional authorities are bound by the disciplines of the Constitution. The Governor has the constitutional right to advise the Governor not to place the picture of Bharat Mata at venues used to conduct official meetings ground that such a picture has not been recognised by the Constitution or statutes.

The 'Axis of Upheaval' in the West Asia conflict

As the war between Israel and Iran has resulted in a ceasefire after being layered with America's bombing of Iran's nuclear sites, the narrative of the world being divided into power blocs like those during the Cold War era stands punctured. With Iran having suffered a political and military decapitation of leadership and capacity alike, its main partners, China and Russia, have maintained a distance. Before the conflict, Iran had been central to the narrative of the global order's perceived fracturing between palatable West-led alliances against a Moscow- and Beijing-knitted axis, dubbed as the 'Axis of Upheaval' by American scholars Richard Fontaine and Andrea Kendall-Taylor.

In Russia's war against Ukraine, Iranian drone technologies have played a critical role, while Moscow and Tehran, despite certain regional differences, once joined hands to stabilise the government of the now ousted Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, as sanctions have gnawed at Iran's economic depth over the years, China has gained much by continuing to buy cheap oil from the country. This has been helpful to Beijing in powering its stagnating growth while giving Tehran much needed cash inflows in a polity and society that is starved of steady financial streams.

No treaties

However, all this balancing has strategic limitations as well. The axes, at best, are a narrative construct. There are no treaties that bind these states into military blocs, where charters can be mobilised to push the others to join a war if a partner country is attacked. The underpinnings of these partnerships nonetheless go deeper, spilling over into a reconstruction of institutions, currencies, multilateralism and how the world operates today. They want de-dollarisation, alternatives to western payments gateways such as SWIFT, and a strengthening of organisations such as BRICS and



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The narrative of the world being divided into power blocs like those during the Cold War era has been punctured

the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as well as fundamental anti-West ecosystems. But there is no military treaty to anchor all these, which marks a critical gap in taking on western influence which is pinned using both treaties and understandings.

Russia and China, nonetheless, have made statements in favour of Iran as a way of support. Moscow has criticised those backing Israel's actions, including the ambiguity of positions taken by the International Atomic Energy Agency and attempts to manipulate international non-proliferation regimes. Russia's President Vladimir Putin in a telephone call offered mediation, which was sidelined by United States President Donald Trump. The noticeable part was this: it was not that Mr. Putin wanted to mediate, but political and diplomatic support may be the only thing Russia may be able to offer Iran at this stage.

Tehran has comprehensive strategic partnerships that it signed with Mr. Putin (2025) and China's President Xi Jinping (2021), which are almost exclusively economic in nature. While aligning with Iran as part of an axis in the long term makes sense if one considers the country's vast energy reserves (many of which remain untapped due to technology-led roadblocks aided by international sanctions), the fact is that neither Russia nor China have the intent or the bandwidth to come to Tehran's aid in a military sense even though the suitability of the current political system under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is critical to their own individual interests.

Where Russia stands

For Moscow, its war against Ukraine has tied down most of its political and military capabilities. The other opaque member of the axis, North Korea, is already providing soldiers to Russia to arrest its depleting military depth. This denies it any capabilities to tactically help

Tehran. Previously, with its bases and assets in Syria, providing some air power assistance to have been possible, at least theoretically. However, with the fall of the Assad regime, it has now been replaced by former al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Al Sharaa – ironically, he is prioritising relations with the West pushed by Arab partners – Moscow has lost the only military footing in West Asia.

China too has come out in support of Iran. While its Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a call with his Israeli counterpart highlighted how Israel's strikes were violating international law, a recent call between Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin interestingly demanded that the U.S. (without referencing it directly) orchestrate a de-escalation. While both Russia and China are worried about the wider implications of this conflict, it benefits their strategic postures in many ways. With the U.S. now having joined Israel in attacking Iran, a decision Mr. Trump took while keeping even his closest advisers in the dark, it would bog the White House down once again in West Asia, potentially relocating critical military assets away from the Indo-Pacific and from Ukraine. This would free up space both Beijing and Moscow's immediate geographies of interest while also potentially sowing self-inflicted discord within the Trump administration. For now, a brittle U.S.-backed ceasefire is holding Tehran and Tel Aviv at bay.

The outlook

For Iran, the news on any of the axes from a good. While Russia and China may prioritise own positions, the proverbial 'Axis of Resistance' made up of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis among others is down for the count as Iran's line of defence and offence in the region. If the future of Iran, irrespective of what kind of political reality prevails, even in a moderate system, may be shaped by the point that no nuclear power can hereon guarantee sovereignty.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Feeble voices

The whole world has been left feeling helpless, unable to put an end to the theatrics of the superpowers that are escalating strife. Absurdity and megalomania are evident in the rhetoric of some world leaders. There seems to be no room at all for values, grace, magnanimity, humility, aridity, credibility, humanity and morality. Some voices should unite to stop war-hungry powers.

Dr Bhushan Goyal,
Ludhiana, Punjab

Midnight knock, lessons

The midnight of June 25, 1975, etched a dark shadow

across Indian democracy as Emergency was declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi – a response to the Allahabad High Court verdict by Justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha that set the dominoes in motion. His unflinching verdict, invalidating Mrs Gandhi's election, was a rare moment of judicial spine. Raj Narain, the maverick challenger, may have lost the poll but he won a nation's conscience. The Emergency that followed, with the press muzzled, civil liberties curtailed, and dissent locked behind bars, was also shaped by the quiet enablers such as R.K. Dhawan and a compliant

bureaucracy. Yet, there shone bright lights such as Justice V.R. Krishna Rao, whose jurisprudence preserved constitutional sanity. While the present political class debates and appropriates this legacy, it is imperative that we treat June 25 as a civic reminder: democracy is never a finished product. It must be guarded each day.

Gopalaswamy J.,
Chennai

Shrinking place for English

I am on the same page with the Kerala Chief Minister and his comment about this great Indian nation with parliamentary democracy and diversity ("CM takes a

dig at Amrit Shah for language comment", June 25). Does Home Minister Shah not understand the vast diversity of citizens who speak different languages including English and follow different customs and beliefs? His comment that English-speaking citizens will feel "ashamed" soon is inappropriate. This 'mindset' seems to have crept into the welfare schemes of the Government of India. As a senior citizen, I personally experienced this when I received a call from the number +91205138033 purportedly in response to my dialling a toll-free number 1800110770, as a

missed call. The caller, who I understand represented the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, was speaking too fast, in a low voice and in Hindi, making it difficult for me to comprehend anything. I requested her to talk to me, preferably in English. After a pause and silence, the line was disconnected. No courtesy was shown to my request nor anything conveyed about the scheme. I felt left disturbed. Has English been banned in the national discourse in the Government of India's schemes? Will citizens who speak English be made to forgo or be deprived of

government health schemes?

Jacob Cherian,
Thiruvananthapuram

'Epochal triumph'
June 25, 1983 is etched in the memory of every cricket fan ("Sport" page June 25). It was an extraordinary win that changed Indian cricket.

When one talks about historic win, it connects with the unforgettable image of a beaming K.D. Dev holding aloft the bat from the balcony of Lord's.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

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Enabling voting rights for migrants

Bihar, a State with one of the largest out-migration populations in India, is going to the polls later this year. This time, again a significant proportion of the State's population will be unable to exercise their franchise.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, voter turnout in Bihar was 56%, significantly lower than the national average of 66%. Since more than half the households in Bihar are exposed to migration in some form, a likely factor to have significantly influenced low voter turnout was the large migrant population, which was unable to return home to vote.

Patterns of migration

In 2021, the overall migration rate in India was 28.9%. A significant portion of migration in India is for marriage, especially among women. Around 10%, however, migrate for work. This number is significantly higher in certain northern and eastern States such as Bihar. With an ever-increasing number of migrants travelling from poorer to richer areas in search of employment, the number of those effectively disenfranchised will only increase, unless mechanisms are put in place to facilitate voting by migrants. In an attempt to solve the issue, public discussions have been held. The Election Commission of India (ECI) put forth a concrete proposal in 2024. But no single mechanism for voting for migrants has been implemented.

Different kinds of policies and mechanisms are needed to enable voting for different kinds of migrants (intra and inter-State migrants). Intra-State migrants (around 85% of migrants) working in the informal sector could be encouraged to travel relatively shorter distances to vote in their original place of residence. However, they would need a measure of support from the government. Stricter enforcement of the statutory holiday on polling



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An approach that combines several options will enable a significant share of inter- and intra-State migrants to exercise their right to vote

day would ensure that these workers are able to travel to vote without loss of wages. Special bus services could also be scheduled on the eve of and on polling day.

Different mechanisms

Inter-State migrants working in the informal sector are a large, growing and vulnerable population and need a different set of voting mechanisms. Three possibilities can be explored for this section. The first is an option designed to cater to the large population of migrants in irregular and low-paying jobs, such as in the construction sector. Workers in these jobs may not have permanent residences with address proofs. In 2023, the ECI showcased a pilot project of remote electronic voting machines (RVMs). Each of these is an EVM modified to cater to up to 72 constituencies. Political parties objected to this project. They said there was ambiguity over its functioning. They also cited issues such as problems in identification of migrants and the Code of Conduct being in place in the constituency where the migrant was residing. The project also appeared to be administratively difficult to implement at scale: when a large State with a large out-migration population goes to the polls, migrants from the State who currently reside across the country would be required to notify the ECI months in advance so that the ECI can make the necessary arrangements on polling day. If the ECI finds that in a given city, there are migrants from all 243 constituencies of Bihar, it would need to set up at least four RVMs across the city. The administrative difficulties would only be compounded during the Lok Sabha elections. As complex and challenging as the RVM proposal seems, it was the first major attempt by the ECI to facilitate voting for migrants. With more consultation and fine-tuning, this system could benefit many.

Another option is postal ballots. This system is already being

implemented by the ECI for members of the armed forces. An extension of this model could help many migrants. Here, too, the ECI would require migrants to register with the body well in advance, so the postal ballots can be issued.

Operationally, this appears to be the easier form of remote voting to implement. However, the ECI would have to organise registration, issue ballot papers, and dispatch these ballots to counting centres after voting – all major administrative efforts.

The last option – switching voting constituencies – is suitable for the longer term for more permanent migrants who can prove their residence in a constituency for at least six months. The argument here is that longer-term migrants of an area would likely be more concerned about the politics and policies of their current place of residence. The ECI should also take extra effort to enrol longer-term migrants of the informal sector in their current place of residence. This will empower them to pressure governments to implement more migrant-friendly policies. While this move may face significant opposition from longer-term residents of the area, it would empower one of the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Separately, as a significant number of migrant populations across the country are women who migrate after marriage, voting drives could also be carried out to enrol these women on the voter lists of their new place of residence.

A mixed approach

Each of these options has its advantages and disadvantages. Enabling voting by migrants is a complex task and is made more complex by the heterogeneity of migrants. Therefore, an approach that uses all these options will enable a significant share of both inter- and intra-State salaried and casual migrants to exercise their right to vote.

Trouble from within

The Congress's own legislators are now alleging corruption in Karnataka

STATE OF PLAY

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During its campaign for the 2023 Assembly elections in Karnataka, the Congress focused on the alleged corruption of the previous Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and on claims that contractors had to shell out a "40% commission" for government works. This catapulted the party to power.

Two years later, ironically, the Siddaramaiah-led Congress regime is facing the same stigma of corruption. The party is struggling to fend off charges not from contractors but its own party legislators, much to the glee of the two Opposition parties – the BJP and Janata Dal (Secular).

An audio clip, allegedly featuring a conversation between B.R. Patil, a senior Congress MLA and State Planning Commission Deputy Chairman, and Sarfaraz Khan, a close associate of the Housing Minister, B.Z. Zameer Ahmed Khan, has put the Congress government on the back foot.

In the clip, Mr. Patil is heard alleging that houses were allotted under the Rajiv Gandhi Housing Corporation Ltd. in exchange for bribes, which had embarrassed the Chief Minister. Mr. Siddaramaiah is himself facing allegations of corruption in connection with the illegal allotment of 14 sites (now surrendered) by the Mysore Urban Development Authority to his wife Parvathi. The Congress had to earlier deal with a scam in the Karnataka Maharshi Valmiki Scheduled Tribes Development Corporation, which led to the resignation of Minister B. Nagesh.

As loyalists of Chief Minister

Siddaramaiah appear to have taken a break from dissident activities, which included the demand that Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar be removed from the multiple posts he holds, it seems to be the turn of senior party legislators to voice discontent over the alleged corruption and administrative inaction.

Even before the Opposition could intensify its call for the resignation of Mr. Zameer Ahmed Khan, who is one of the Chief Minister's key loyalists, Congress MLAs Raju Kage and Belur Gopalakrishna expressed outrage over the alleged corruption in the allotment of houses to eligible beneficiaries, and sought the Minister's resignation. Mr. Kage said that the State administration had collapsed.

The alleged housing scam has provided more fodder to the BJP and JD(S). The Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly, R. Ashok, accused the government of collecting ₹25 crore from each Minister for meeting the party's expenses in the upcoming elections in Bihar. JD(S) leader and Union Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy claimed that whenever a legislator wishes to implement a scheme in their constituency, they have to make a "payment".

Similar complaints had emerged earlier. Yelburga MLA and the Chief Minister's Economic Adviser, Basavaraj Rayareddy, had claimed that

Karnataka is "number one in corruption". Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda had candidly acknowledged helplessness in curbing corruption at the lower levels in his department.

Raids by officials of the Karnataka Lokayukta across the State have added heft to the corruption charges. Recently, Home Minister G. Parameshwara and former MP D.K. Suresh, who is Mr. Shivakumar's brother, came under the scanner of the Enforcement Directorate (ED). While ED sleuths raided institutions linked to Mr. Parameshwara in connection with actor Ranya Rao's gold smuggling case, they questioned Mr. Suresh in a money laundering case against city-based businesswoman Aishwarya Gowda.

Unlike his first term (2013-18), Mr. Siddaramaiah has apparently been denied a free hand to take decisions. Several factors are affecting the quality of governance and feeding the alleged corruption – the inept handling of administrative duties owing to factionalism within the party, the existence of multiple centres of power (Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister, and the party high command), and the compulsions of implementing the Congress's five guarantees.

Already under fire from the Opposition for "halting" developmental work, the government is now facing growing criticism from its ranks for denying funds. Public cynicism that corruption has become "normal" in State politics, irrespective of the party in power, is also growing. If deep-rooted corruption goes unchecked, it will retard the growth of the State and cause more suffering among socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

State- and sex-wise liver disease data hint at underlying factors

The stark difference in liver disease prevalence between the sexes and in the north-east requires examination

DATA POINT

Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Deaths due to liver diseases have been rising steadily in India. While this trend has been evident for some time, three patterns – across sex, age, and States – may offer some clues as to why. Diseases of the digestive system, with liver diseases accounting for a substantial share, was the eighth leading cause of death in 2022. It had not ranked among the leading causes of death in any of the previous five years.

Chart 1 shows the sex-wise number of certified deaths due to 'diseases of digestive system' between 2012 and 2022. (It is important to note that the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death uses the term 'sex'.) The number of men dying from digestive diseases was consistently more than three times higher than that of women. In fact, the number of male deaths rose more sharply. In 2022, the number of men who died from the disease was 3.5 times that of women – the highest ratio since 2016.

A large proportion of deaths from digestive diseases are due to liver-related problems. Chart 2 shows liver disease's share among all digestive diseases. In 2022, 75% of men who died of digestive diseases had liver disease, compared to 57.5% of women. Other causes, which make up only a small share, include pancreatic disorders, peritonitis, and ulcers.

The chart also highlights a clear sex gap. Among women who died from digestive diseases, the proportion attributed to liver problems ranged from 52% to 57% between 2012 and 2022. In contrast, for men, liver diseases accounted for a much higher share of digestive disease deaths, consistently ranging from 70% to 78%.

Chart 3 shows the same information as in Chart 1, but only for deaths due to 'liver diseases'. A stark sex gap is seen here as well.

Chart 4 shows the age-wise distribution of deaths due to digestive diseases across sexes in 2022. Among women, the burden of digestive disease deaths increased significantly with age: over 30% of female deaths occurred in the 65+ age group, suggesting that age-related liver complications could be a key factor. In contrast, among men, the highest share of deaths occurred in the 45-54 age group, followed closely by those aged 35-44. This indicates that men were dying from digestive diseases predominantly in their middle age.

Map 5 shows the proportion of deaths caused by digestive diseases out of all medically certified deaths within each State in 2022. For instance, in Sikkim, nearly 20% of certified deaths were due to digestive diseases, the highest among all the States. Notably, the north-eastern States stand out: in five of them, over 10% of certified deaths were attributed to digestive diseases. No other State recorded a double-digit share.

Research shows that alcohol consumption is strongly linked to a higher risk of liver disease. In India, only about 1% of women consume alcohol, compared to 19% of men. Read together with data from Charts 3 and 4, it may be worth investigating whether alcohol use among middle-aged men is contributing to the higher number of liver-related deaths.

Studies have also shown that excessive meat consumption is associated with a higher risk of liver disease. Data from the National Family Health Survey shows that the combined prevalence of meat consumption and alcohol use is highest in the north-east. This overlap could explain the elevated burden of liver disease in the region.

Given the patterns observed, it is important to further investigate the links between meat and alcohol consumption and liver disease. The data presented here shows correlation, not causation. More research is needed to establish any direct relationships.

Liver disease burden: an analysis

The data for the charts were sourced from the annual Medical Certification of Cause of Death (MCCD) reports produced by the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India (ORGI)



Chart 1: The sex-wise number of certified deaths due to diseases of digestive system between 2012 and 2022

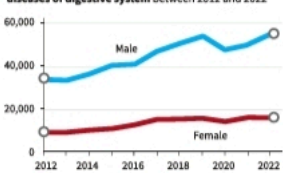


Chart 2: Liver disease's share among all digestive diseases among men and women between 2012 and 2022

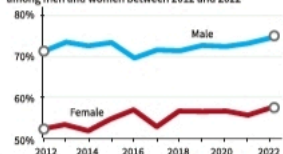


Chart 3: The sex-wise number of certified deaths due to liver diseases between 2012 and 2022

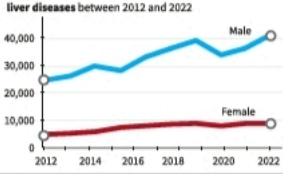
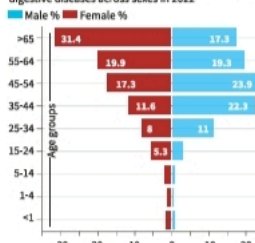
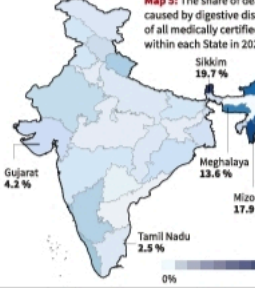


Chart 4: The age-wise distribution of deaths due to digestive diseases across sexes in 2022



Map 5: The share of deaths caused by digestive diseases out of all medically certified deaths within each State in 2022



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 26, 1975

Israel faces UN suspension

United Nations, June 25: Arab delegates have said that Israel would risk suspension from the United Nations in next fall's General Assembly if it refused to withdraw from occupied Arab territories and recognise Palestinian rights as U.N. resolutions demand.

U.S. diplomats have called for the United States to warn that it will withhold its U.N. dues if Israel is suspended and withdraw from the United Nations if Israel is expelled.

Arabs at a luncheon given by the Arab League UN Observer, Ambassador Amin Hilmy II of Egypt, answered newsmen's questions on prospects of a non-aligned move against Israel.

Algerian Ambassador Abdel Latif Babal, chairman of the U.N. non-aligned group, said his group had not yet come to a decision.

(According to UPI a decision on such a move would not be made before an August meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the non-aligned group's steering committee in Havana earlier this year decided to refer the issue to the Lima, Peru meeting.)

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 26, 1925

Disease incidence in India

At the Congress of the Royal Sanitary Institute held at Brighton, London, Sir Leonard Rogers gave a paper on disease incidence and climate in India, which drew deductions from Indian data of great importance in connection with the serious increase in the percentage of unvaccinated children in Great Britain.

Sir Leonard Rogers said, as reported by "The Englishman" correspondent, that the well marked dry cold, dry hot and hot moist, rainy seasons in India, and the great variations in the rainfall in different areas, together with the carefully recorded vital statistics for several decades, furnished an ideal field for studying the influence of climatic conditions on disease incidence. He had shown in previous publications a very close relationship between high rainfall and high leprosy incidence, and vice versa, all over India, and also between humid monsoon winds and high orthosis rates which he illustrated by maps. He also demonstrated in a similar manner the closest relationship between low minimum temperatures, low humidity, and great diurnal variations of temperature during the cold season in the North.

ECONOMIC BUILDING BLOCKS

Union commerce & industry minister Piyush Goyal

History reminds us that great economies are not built in calm waters. Great economies are built in turbulent seas

Being on the right track

Budget funding of Indian Railways infra has to be optimised; more profit centres need to emerge

THE INDIAN RAILWAYS is reportedly planning a modest hike in passenger fares, eyeing an additional annual revenue of around ₹1,500 crore. The first explicit fare increase since 2020 would still exclude ordinary second-class journey up to 500 km, as well as suburban and season tickets. That is hardly a step one could object to, given that the railways has virtually run a revenue deficit for years on end. Low-income travellers will be unaffected by the judicious tariff adjustment. Railway revenues have consistently lagged the growth rate of nominal gross domestic product (GDP) by a wide margin. To be sure, the revenue from the heavily-subsidised passenger segment grew by a little over 100% between FY14 and FY25, and freight receipts, a trifle above 90%, although nominal GDP expanded by 194% during the period. Railway passenger volumes grew an abysmal 27% in the period, and freight loading an unimpressive 40%. This indicates loss of freight traffic volumes, including container cargo, to roads and ports.

In fact, a massive budgetary capital infusion — ₹13 lakh crore in the last decade — is what has kept the railways' operations going, and prevented its infrastructure from crumbling. The government has wisely put a freeze on fresh borrowings to prevent the railways' debt from rising to unmanageable levels. However, the rate of annual increase in budget outlay has lately slowed. A pick-up in public-private partnership in certain areas of non-core operations, and a likely jump in non-fare revenues, including land lease rentals (monetisation), are what the railways is pinning its hope on.

Also, aggressive plans have been drawn up to ramp up premium passenger services, where profitable tariffs are viable. Externally funded dedicated freight corridors, which can transport double-stack containers, and carry goods at a speed four times the traditional network, have become functional of late, and are expected to make operational profits straightaway. Early signs of this is visible — Maruti Suzuki, for example, is planning to increase the dispatches via the railways to 35% by FY31, up from 24% in FY25. To the government's credit, even amid the financial constraints, it managed to raise the stock of electrified track from 44% in 2013-14 to 95% in 2024-25. The railways has been the first mover on use of non-fossil energy for transport, while also expanding its fleet of passenger carriages and wagons at a reasonable pace. However, the target for the railways to acquire a 35% share in the logistics pie in six years appears daunting. Though the railways carries goods at roughly half the cost of roads, the absence of last-mile connectivity is a problem.

The immediate reason for the latest tariff changes is the likelihood of the ₹92,800 crore passenger receipts target for 2025-26 being missed by a large margin. Cross-subsidisation of passengers by freight is uncompetitive, and can't be sustained beyond a point. As such, air-conditioned carriers account for less than a fifth of passenger volumes, but contribute nearly half of the receipts. Steep hikes in high-end and luxury train fares may not be easy either. It is unexceptionable for the government to expend an affordable sum to run, expand, and upgrade the rail infrastructure, which is a public good. The right strategy would be to create multiple profit centres and focus more on market development, while pursuing selective privatisation and optimum use of taxpayer monies. The point is where the lines are drawn and limits imposed.

INDIA STANDS ON the cusp of a transformative opportunity. Recent reports indicate that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is actively strategising to nurture home-grown accounting and consulting firms capable of rivaling global giants. This ambition, deeply aligned with Atmanirbhar Bharat, recognises the untapped potential of Indian professional services to not only compete but lead on the world stage. The aspiration articulated by the Prime Minister and finance minister to birth Indian firms of global stature is both timely and essential.

To grasp the scale of the vision, we must first understand the rise of the "Big Four" — Deloitte, PwC, EY, and KPMG. Their global dominance was no accident. In the post-World War II era, as American and European multinationals expanded across borders, their auditors followed, establishing international offices to meet client demands. What began as audit-focused firms evolved into multi-disciplinary powerhouses. Trust in their audit opinions became a springboard for diversified services — tax, technology, strategy, human capital, and digital transformation. In India today, audits account for less than 20% of their revenue, with the bulk flowing from advisory, government projects, and technology consulting. These firms didn't just ensure compliance; they became strategic architects of business growth.

A missed opportunity, a new horizon

India faced a critical juncture two decades ago. As Indian information technology (IT) and pharmaceutical companies like Infosys and Dr. Reddy's went global, they sought international credibility to access capital markets. Naturally, they turned to the Big Four for audits and certifications, often sidelining Indian firms even for domestic work. This created a paradox: Indian businesses powered global markets, yet Indian professional services remained local. The

● BID FOR EXCELLENCE

VISION TO CREATE CONSULTING POWERHOUSES MUST BE BACKED BY SUPPORTIVE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

India's Big Four bet

DINESH KANABAR

CEO, Dhruva Advisors LLP

question now is whether Indian firms should go global, but how swiftly they can seize this renewed opportunity.

A case study in potential

Consider an Indian tax and regulatory advisory firm that launched just over a decade ago. From its base in India, it expanded to the UAE, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia, now serving some of the largest Indian and global multinationals. Its rapid ascent demonstrates that Indian firms can scale by focusing on niche expertise, unwavering client trust, and strategic international outreach. If Indian professionals lead global institutions — think Satya Nadella at Microsoft, Sundar Pichai at Google, or even partners at the Big Four — then Indian firms can undoubtedly build world-class organisations from their home soil. This success story is a microcosm of what's possible with the right vision and execution.

Lessons from India's IT triumph

India's IT sector offers a proven blueprint. Firms like TCS, Infosys, and Wipro began as cost-effective service providers but transformed into global consulting leaders. Today, consulting and systems integration drive over 40% of TCS's revenue, a feat achieved through relentless investment in capabilities, leadership, and scale. Their success rested on three pillars: **Uncompromising quality.** They benchmarked against global standards, often surpassing them, earning trust from Fortune 500 clients.

Bold scaling: Global delivery centres, strategic acquisitions, and diverse talent pools fuelled their expansion.

Brand power: Through thought leadership, global partnerships, and presence at forums like Davos, they built reputations that resonated with global CXOs.

These principles are directly applicable to India's professional services sector.

What Indian firms must do

To replicate this success, Indian accounting and consulting firms must act decisively on three fronts.

Embrace global standards: Trust is the currency of professional services. Firms must invest heavily in cutting-edge technologies — artificial intelligence-powered audits, predictive tax analytics, environmental, social, and governance frameworks — and rigorous training to match global benchmarks.

Adopting international governance practices will further bolster credibility.

Scale strategically: India's professional services ecosystem is fragmented, with many firms limited by small-scale mindsets, governance challenges, or reluctance to share leadership. Scale is not optional — it brings depth, diversity, and resilience. Consolidation, partnerships, and strategic investments are critical to building firms with global staying power.

Enhance visibility: The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI), which is a guardian of ethics, must modernise outdated restrictions. Bans on advertising or even prominent signage

If we act with urgency, India can transition from being a marketplace for global consulting firms to their birthplace

are relics in a digital economy. Visibility is not vanity — it's a cornerstone of credibility. The ICAI should allow firms to compete globally while safeguarding professional integrity.

The government's pivotal role

The PMO's commitment to this vision is a powerful catalyst, but ambition must be backed by institutional frameworks. In the 1990s, special economic zones, tax incentives, and export benefits propelled India's IT sector to global prominence. A similar push is needed for consulting firms today. A "Global Indian Firm" initiative could include:

Financial and logistical support: Subsidies or grants for overseas expansion, including market entry and infrastructure development costs.

Preferential access: Price or qualification preferences in government projects, where global firms have long held sway, to nurture domestic players.

Regulatory clarity: Simplified pathways for cross-border operations, including streamlined routes for foreign affiliations and easier mobility for Indian professionals to serve global clients.

India already possesses the market size, talent pool, and credibility to birth global consulting giants. An enabling ecosystem is the final piece of the puzzle.

Seizing a historic moment

India stands at a crossroads. The alignment of government resolve, regulatory reform, and enterprise-level ambition creates a rare window of opportunity. If we act with urgency, India can transition from being a marketplace for global consulting firms to their birthplace. The next Big Four can and should be Indian names.

This is not just about economic ambition; it's about global influence. Indian firms can shape international standards, drive innovation, and showcase India's intellectual prowess. With the right policies, investments, and mindset, India can redefine the global professional services landscape. Let us not miss this moment.

Victoria's Secret needs a different kind of Angel

AMONG THE DEMANDS of Barington Capital Group, one of two activist investors seeking to shake up Victoria's Secret & Co., is that the company bring back the "angels" — the glamorous supermodels once synonymous with America's biggest underwear retailer.

But what Victoria's Secret really needs is a different kind of angel: a buyer, ideally one that can offer a decent bid premium to long-suffering shareholders and enable the company to do the hard work needed to adapt to a new lingerie landscape, away from the glare of quarterly earnings. The agitators and the retailer should stop trading barbs, and instead work together to deliver value to all investors.

If Victoria's Secret puts itself up for sale, the activists could facilitate a take-private by joining forces with the bidder or backing its offer.

Both Barington Capital, which holds more than 1% of the retailer, and BBRC International Pte, which has acquired a 12.9% stake, are urging Victoria's Secret to make changes to its board and strategy to address the underperformance of its shares. They have a point. Since the company was spun out of L Brands Inc. four years ago, the stock has lost more than half of its value.

For years, Victoria's Secret led the underwear market. But amid the #MeToo era, the company looked increasingly male-dominated and out of touch. The scandal sparked by the association of former L Brands Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Leslie Wexner with the disgraced late financier Jeffrey Epstein only hurt the brand further. As it prepared for life as a separately listed company, Victoria's Secret replaced the angels with a group of women recognized for their accomplishments and opinions. But the VS Collective, as it was known, failed to turbo-charge sales and was quietly disbanded.

Last fall, under new CEO Hillary Super, the company staged an updated version of its fashion show, an annual marketing extravaganza that was once a cultural force. It was a step in the right direction. But Victoria's Secret is still struggling to find its place in a market populated by nimble rivals, such as Kim Kardashian's Skims and Rihanna's Savage X Fenty, which Super previously led.

There are some encouraging signs. For example, Victoria's Secret has been dressing pop superstar of the moment Sabrina Carpenter. Amid a return to offices and anxiety about the job market, more formal clothing that requires structured undergarments is making a comeback. And the retailer remains the biggest underwear retailer not just in the US but also globally, notes Mary Ross Gilbert, an analyst at *Bloomberg Intelligence*. The core brand — as well as sister line Pink — both have huge recognition, including with Gen-Z consumers, while other mall brands of yesteryear, such as Gap Inc, are proving it's possible to ride a wave of nostalgia to improved sales.

But making the most of this potential — the company should go further in updating its image and stores, and foster closer ties with Carpenter — requires significant investment. With President Donald Trump's tariffs, which will cost the company \$50 million this year, and growing pressure on US consumers, committing to an overhaul spells short-term financial pain. Victoria's Secret has introduced a so-called share holder rights plan, a poison pill designed to stop an investor building a controlling stake without paying a premium. But it does not preclude the company considering an offer. Nor is Victoria's Secret too big a morsel to tempt a buyer. The company's market value has shrunk to about \$1.5 billion. The 30% premium that is the standard in takeover deals would value the company's equity at about \$2 billion. But given how far the shares have sunk, a 50% premium looks more apt. Add in expected net debt excluding lease liabilities of \$600 million at the end of this fiscal year, and the enterprise value would still be under \$3 billion — not out of reach for many private equity groups.

Putting yourself up for sale can be seen as a sign of weakness. But some private equity buyers won't come knocking without the encouragement of an open door. And a deal to go private, which pays shareholders some of the recovery value in a takeover premium, looks like the best outcome. Its time for Victoria's Secret to pivot from selling lingerie to selling a lingerie company.

JAMAL MECKLAI

CEO, Mecklai Financial
www.mecklai.com

IN MATHEMATICS, a Fibonacci sequence is where each number is the sum of the two numbers that precede it. Starting from 0 and 1, the sequence begins 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144...

The Fibonacci numbers were first described in India as early as 200 BC in Pingala's work on enumerating possible patterns of Sanskrit poetry formed from syllables of two lengths. They are named after the Italian mathematician Leonardo Bonacci of Pisa, also known as Fibonacci, who introduced the sequence to the western world. They appear to reflect the natural world as the numbers describe observations of the branching in trees, the arrangement of leaves on a stem, the number of seeds in succeeding rings of a sunflower, the spiral shape of waves, etc. (*Wikipedia plus*)

Since these are recurring patterns in nature and since markets are, in many senses, a reflection of nature, the science of technical analysis has evolved and uses patterns based on Fibonacci numbers to try and forecast markets. I have looked curiously at the discipline, and am very, very, very much an amateur, but I certainly find it curious since it reflects my belief that everything everywhere is connected and, indeed, one.

With my limited knowledge, the only pattern I think I can understand is the head-and-shoulders (and its reverse), which looks exactly like the name suggests. I noticed that the movements of the rupee this year appear to be creating a series of these S-H-S patterns. (Apologies for all the numbers which must make this



piece difficult to read.)

On February 10, the rupee fell to 87.90 from 86.30 (on January 24), before rebounding to 86.50 two days later (February 12), forming what is called a neck-line at 86.40 (halfway between 86.30 and 86.50). After that, it moved around between 86.50 and 87.50 for over a month, before it climbed above the neck-line on March 20. This completed a (reverse) head-and-shoulders with a target of 84.90 (neck-line at 86.40 minus 1.50) [reverse head at 87.90 minus neck-line of 86.40], with a pattern failure if the rupee fell back below the neck-line (86.40). In fact, the rupee strengthened sharply to 84.96 (on April 4), more or less reaching the target and completing the pattern.

The rupee then fell to 86.69 (on April 10) before shooting up again to 85.14 (on

A weaker rupee is certainly a possibility. The caveat is that if the rupee climbs above the neck-line (viz. 85.79) the S-H-S target is aborted



April 22), setting up another neck-line at 85.09 (halfway between the previous peak 84.96 and 85.14). It then stayed below the neck-line, but in about a week it strengthened to cross the neck-line (on April 29), completing another reverse head-and-shoulders, this time with a target of 83.49 (neck-line 85.09 - 1.60 [previous bottom 86.69 - 85.09]). And, sure enough, in a couple of days (by May 2), the rupee shot higher to 83.80 — close to the target but no cigar.

It then fell over the next few weeks, reaching a low of 85.93 on May 23. I noticed that together with its previous low (of 85.65 on April 24), it had formed a neck-line at 85.79 (halfway between 85.65 and 85.93). The rupee bounced higher in a volatile market, and finally weakened, breaking the neck-line on June 4; together with the peak (head) of

83.80, this completed the S-H-S pattern, with a target of 87.78 (85.79 + 1.99 [85.79 - 83.80]).

On June 18, we were at 86.50, possibly on the way to the (approximately) 88 target. I note that there are several events in the near future that could create possible market trauma to drive the rupee lower — the passing of Donald Trump's Big Beautiful Bill expected by July 4, the next tariff deadline of July 9, and of course, the Israel-Iran war which could result in the Strait of Hormuz being mined and closed to shipping at any time. Clearly, a weaker rupee is certainly a possibility. Having said that, the caveat is that if the rupee climbs above the neck-line — viz. 85.79 — the S-H-S target is aborted.

Clearly, technical analysis is a tool for traders and not for risk management. However, there are pointers we can get. For instance, exporters with open positions could stay unhedged today with a stop-loss at 85.79, although being completely unhedged is always a bad option and particularly foolish in such a volatile market. Another important point to learn is that the market appears to always react very sharply after a target is reached — this means that when you see a huge move, you should act immediately rather than waiting for further gains.

Again, the technical signal of further rupee weakness came nearly two weeks ago, when the neck-line was broken on June 4, and the rupee was still (a bit) stronger than 86. Any unhedged short term imports — and I pray there were none — should have been hedged then.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Clean energy challenge

Apologies of "Supporting India's green energy goals" (FE, June 25), India's mission to achieve 500 gigawatt capacity of renewable energy (RE) faces a significant challenge due to the expiry of the Inter-State Transmission System charges' waiver to RE projects. Without the charges waiver, the tariffs may surge and affect

India's decarbonisation mission. It seems that the cost of extending the waiver is very minimal, running to 4 paise per unit of clean energy generated, and the government can extend the waiver of charges. The extension will serve as a stimulating factor in clean energy generation, timely move in extending the waiver will fuel India's RE mission. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Connecting India

Apologies of "Status quo 2.0" (FE, June 25), like many other schemes launched with much fanfare, PM-Vani has not achieved its goals. There is no doubt that the intent — empowering small entrepreneurs — was good, but the execution was poor. High internet line costs and low usage have hindered the success of public data

offices, for whom it is unaffordable to pay high costs to telecom providers. Cheap mobile data plans have further complicated viability. The Universal Service Obligation Fund must be used if the Centre wants to bridge the digital gap between rural and urban India. —Bal Govind, Noida

A ceasefire for now

Row over B-2 bombing of Iranian N-sites

Sridhar Krishnaswami

The ceasefire to the 12-day war in the Middle East announced by US President Donald Trump even before Iran and Israel were on board seems to be holding but in a tense environment.

After the B-2s unleashed 30,000 pounds on Iranian nuclear sites, it was the turn of the American President to drop the "F" bomb to make sure the warring parties stay with the truce.

In language that is now understood by the whole world, a visibly irritated Trump on reports of ceasefire violations said: "We basically have two countries that have been fighting so long and so hard that they don't know what the F*k they are doing".

That "F" bomb seems to have worked as Tel Aviv and Tehran soon announced that they will abide by the truce as long as the other does not violate it, an old standard for warring parties.

LEAKED REPORT But soon Trump and his senior aides had to deal with a leaked classified report of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) that essentially made the point that the B-2 strikes on nuclear sites hardly came anywhere near the "obliteration" that the President had spoke about and his top officials like the Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth repeated.

According to CNN, the American strikes on three nuclear sites of Iran did not destroy the core components of Iran's nuclear program but only set it back by months. The reporting was based on an initial assessment of the DIA and described by seven people who had been briefed. The early findings are at odds with President Donald Trump's repeated claims that the strikes 'completely and totally obliterated' Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities", CNN reported. It went on to point out one source saying that the centrifuges are largely "intact" with another maintaining that the intelligence assessment was that the enriched uranium was moved out prior to the American hits.

The response of the White House has been along expected fiery lines. "This alleged assessment is flat out wrong and was classified as 'top secret' but was still leaked to CNN by an anonymous, low level loser in the intelligence community. The leaking of this alleged assessment is a clear attempt to demean President Trump," White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt



DONALD TRUMP, Middle East correspondent

said in a statement to CNN. And what could raise further questions on the efficacy of American strikes at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan is the statement of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dan Caine that while damage assessment is still going on, it is "way too early" to comment if Iran still retains nuclear capabilities.

In a town where political inferences get ahead of reason at times, the cancellation of classified briefings to committee members of House of Representatives and Senate and a general briefing to all House law makers soon found itself wading into the intelligence findings.

"Trump just cancelled a classified House briefing on the Iran strikes with zero explanation. The real reason? He claims he destroyed 'all' nuclear facilities and capability," his team knows they can't back up his bluster and BS", said Democrat of New York Pat Ryan on X. The classified sessions with law makers had been pushed to Thursday from Tuesday.

For a person who basically distrusts his intelligence community — the latest being in his disagreement with Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard over Iran — it is unlikely that Trump will be bothered by the DIA assessment or of its reporting by CNN which will be brushed off as "fake news".

But it does concern some serious analysts who worry about a ceasefire that has been forced down without ascertaining the whereabouts of hundreds of centrifuges or of the status of some 400 kg of enriched uranium.

That undoubtedly leaves Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to carry on with his strikes now that his prodding of the US to using bunker busters may not have delivered the desired results.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North American and United Nations

RBI as a source of abundant riches

The RBI dividend payout to the Centre zoomed in FY25. But the Centre should not become too reliant on this



HIMADRI BHATTACHARYA

The quantum of dividend payments of the RBI to the Central government during the last few years has followed a rising trend not witnessed before. In 2024-25, the payout at ₹2,10,874 crore took a leap of 141 per cent vis-à-vis the previous year. The amount for the current fiscal, 2025-26, is ₹2,68,590 crore (equivalent to a little over \$31 billion, at the current exchange rate) entailing a yearly growth of 27.3 per cent.

SEIGNIORAGE INCOME In general, the surplus generated by any central bank follows a logic which is unique and different from that of commercial enterprises, including banks. The surplus is derived from what is known as "seigniorage", the historical roots of the meaning of which alludes to the earnings of the issuers of currency notes/coins.

The central bank also enjoys two related privileges not granted to any other entity. One, it can expand and contract its balance sheet at will. Two, its monetary liability has little or no financial cost.

Roughly speaking, the seigniorage is equal to the interest earned on the central bank's assets that are counterpart of its (i) monetary liability (Reserve Money or M1 in the case of RBI), (ii) deposits of Central and State governments, and (iii) equity.

Disregarding the variation in the rate of interest earned on foreign and domestic assets as also in the operating cost from year to year, the growth of net income (before transfers to free reserves to bolster equity) of a central bank should approximately correspond to that of the aggregate of the three items, as above.

In the case of RBI, during the three-year period from 2021-22 to 2024-25, while the assets, as above, grew at an annual compound rate of a little less than 7 per cent, the net income rose at a much higher compound rate of a little over 29 per cent.

The compound annual growth rate of dividend payment to the Central government during this period was much higher at about 107 per cent, thanks to the wide year-on-year variation in the transfer from net income to RBI's contingency fund, the balance of which represents almost the entire net worth of RBI.

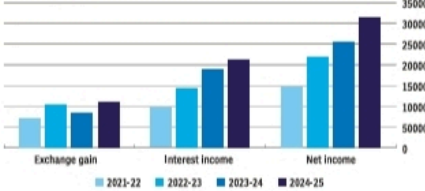
Although the year-to-year divergence between the net income and dividend paid to the Central government has been sought to be explained in terms of RBI's economic capital framework, a closer look at the matter clearly brings out the signature of fiscal considerations in this regard.

Dividend boost

RBI's Dividend as a percentage of the Central Government's Net Tax Revenue



Rising trend



Dollar transactions



Source: www.rbi.org.in; www.fimic.sic.in

Chart 1 highlights the increasing significance of the dividend payout to the Central government in relation to its net tax revenue.

EXCHANGE GAIN'S KEY ROLE

As was the case in the earlier few years, very high exchange gain, both in absolute terms and also in relation to RBI's interest income was a major contributor for the net income and the dividend paid to the Central government, is given in Chart 2.

While the interest income on the assets of RBI constitutes its seigniorage income, it is open to question if very large exchange gains fall under this category. It is not difficult to surmise that the bulk of the exchange gain

Very high exchange gain, both in absolute terms and also in relation to RBI's interest income, was a major contributor for the net income and the dividend paid to the Central government

happened at the 'sale' leg of the US/Rupee buy-sell swaps undertaken by RBI.

Also, at least some of the swaps are for reinstating liquidity in the wake of spot sales of US dollars to support the rupee at times of heightened downward pressure on it. But the rest of the buy-sell swaps are discretionary in nature with no declared policy objective for this purpose.

The volumes of purchase and sale of US dollars on account of outright as well as swap transactions increased significantly in 2024-25 (Chart 3), which explains the spurt in exchange gain by about 33 per cent. The outstanding sale commitment also increased correspondingly, with the net forward position reaching a negative of \$84.3 billion as on March 31, 2025.

The overwhelming presence of RBI in the buy-sell segment of the swap market has had the effect of distorting the forward curve and reducing the incentive for two-way trading in the swap market.

ABUNDANT RICHES

In the early years of the 1991 structural reform in India, the government had

made enquiries about the adequacy of RBI's net income, particularly when high-level discussions for putting an end to the automatic monetisation of fiscal deficits entered a decisive stage in 1994.

However, for a variety of reasons, including a view shared in the political and bureaucratic circles in Delhi, that it wouldn't be appropriate to put any kind of pressure on RBI for more income and transferable surplus, the matter was not pursued any further.

The possibility of converting at least some of the unrealised exchange gain, accruing to RBI on account of the secular depreciation of the rupee vis-à-vis US dollar, to realised income remained a dormant issue for quite some time.

The steadfast position of the leadership of RBI in those days in the matter also perhaps had an impact. The issue was revived in the late 2000s. Various alternatives for this purpose were examined and eventually a change in the accounting rule was adopted and implemented, according to which profit/loss on sale of the US dollar and other currencies would be booked vis-à-vis their average acquisition cost. The impact of this change in rule was felt in a big way in 2019-20, which witnessed a huge jump in exchange gains. There has not been any looking back since then.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong, in principle, to book profit on the sale of the US dollar and other currencies vis-à-vis their acquisition cost. For any commercial entry, this rule cannot be taken advantage of to make unrealistic exchange gain because the volume of purchase to be followed by sales cannot be increased beyond a point because of 'budgetary' constraints.

But for RBI this constraint does not exist, as it can increase the volume of purchase and subsequent sale of US dollars in a purely discretionary manner, as has seemingly been the case.

Moreover, RBI has the incentive to do so because the rupee generally depreciates against the US dollar over time, principally because of higher inflation in India. Unless, of course, RBI puts in place adequate and credible checks and balances that would prevent this.

Converting a large portion of unrealised exchange gain arising out of the depreciation of the rupee (which is notional) into realised gain to be given to the government for budgetary spending is a tricky thing at best. There are significant downside risks to this, including, but not limited to, trimmed monetary independence for the RBI. No wonder, major central banks are not known to do this.

One only hopes that RBI does not become a 'perpetual motion machine of the first kind', which is a hypothetical machine that can do work indefinitely without an external energy source.

The writer is a former central banker and a consultant to the IMF. (Through The Billion Press)

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

June 26, 2005

Govt may infuse capital into Punjab & Sind Bank

The Government may consider recapitalisation support to Punjab & Sind Bank, the Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, said on Saturday. "The extent of capital infusion will depend upon the bank's plan for the current year in terms of deposit mobilisation, expansion of credit and recovery of non-performing assets (NPAs)," Mr Chidambaram told presspersons at the sidelines of the seminar on 'Foreign Contribution Regulation Act 1976', jointly organised by the Union Home Ministry and the ICAI.

'Lodha appointed Birla Corp chairman'

A little less than a year after the demise of Priyambada Birla, Mr Rajendra Singh Lodha has been appointed Chairman of the Rs 1,360-crore Birla Corporation Ltd, the flagship company of the MP Birla Group.

Sumitomo to pick up 15% Swaraj Mazda stake from PTL

The Japan based Sumitomo Corporation is said to emerge as the single largest shareholder in light commercial vehicles manufacturer Swaraj Mazda (SML) following a decision by the board of directors of Punjab Tractors Ltd (PTL) to sell 15 per cent in the company's stake in SML to Sumitomo.

Andrea Palasciano

NATO leaders agreed to increase defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP and renewed their "ironclad commitment" to mutual defence in an historic move that comes at the time of an increasingly belligerent Russia.

The decision from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 32 members at their high-stakes summit in The Hague is a major win for Donald Trump who has repeatedly lambasted his European allies for underspending on security. "The US President, who wavered in his commitment in the lead-up to the

summit, on Wednesday called it a "tremendous" gathering and pledged his backing for Article 5, which requires members to defend each other from attack. "I stand with it," Trump told reporters after a 2 1/2-hour working session with NATO leaders. "That's why I'm here."

The declaration endorsed at the two-day summit in the Netherlands states that allies "reaffirm our ironclad commitment to collective defence" and "remain united and steadfast in our resolve to protect our one billion citizens, defend the Alliance, and safeguard our freedom and democracy." The summit has been dominated by



NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte

efforts to ensure that Trump remains engaged with the transatlantic alliance amid growing concerns that the US is looking to pull back weapons and troops from Europe. Ukraine's allies are

also struggling to mount an effective response to Russia's war in the country, which is now well into its fourth year.

"Together allies have laid the foundation for a stronger, fairer, more liberal NATO," Secretary General Mark Rutte said at a news conference after the meeting. The declaration said the new target, which will mark an increase from the current spending goal of 2 per cent, comes in response to "profound security threats and challenges, in particular the long-term threat posed by Russia to Euro-Atlantic security and the persistent threat of terrorism." ^{REUTERS}

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2726



EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Formidable, valiant (11)
- 02. Give a warning (7)
- 03. Fever, malaria (4)
- 11. French currency unit (5)
- 12. To hustle, elbow (6)
- 14. Patches applied to the face (6,5)
- 18. Metal cupboard with key (6)
- 20. Lift (5)
- 22. Auction (4)
- 23. Freeing one of (7)
- 24. Briefly, concisely (2,1,8)

DOWN

- 02. To school (7)
- 03. Bath, Chelsea confections (4)
- 04. Not serious (5)
- 05. Laugh at (5)
- 06. Measuring instrument (5)
- 08. Comprised as a part (8)
- 10. Likened (8)
- 13. Needle thread-hole (3)
- 15. Trifling (7)
- 16. Near (5)
- 17. Road edge (5)
- 19. Large intestine (5)
- 21. Bar on instrument fingerboard (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Being valiant, bade trouble disperse (11)
- 02. Give one a warning as to heedfulness (7)
- 03. Fever that's not clearly defined after five (4)
- 11. Drake is out of foreign currency (5)
- 12. In France I may get round lots if I push with my elbows (6)
- 14. Patches were applied to lovely parts of the countryside (6,5)
- 18. Clerk might hide nothing in cupboard with a key (6)
- 20. More salary required as one re-organises it (5)
- 22. Exchange of something for money in rehearsal, evidently (4)
- 23. Freeing one of engaged sign, did wriggle inside (7)
- 24. To put it briefly, this is where the kernel is (2,1,8)

DOWN

- 02. To give one teaching at university, cede the letters needed (7)
- 03. Teatime confections one will cold-shoulder if put up (4)
- 04. Lamp may have little weight to it (5)
- 05. Deride the way one will gobble one's food (5)
- 06. It takes me almost all of Lent to find a measuring device (5)
- 08. Din may have got mislaid but one didn't leave it out (8)
- 10. Is likened to a map, decor like this (8)
- 13. It may see the sound I make (3)
- 15. Around Rhode Island it may be vital, but unimportant (7)
- 16. Shut up when it's near the cathedral (5)
- 17. Grieve at losing one maybe by the side of the road (5)
- 19. Possession overseas didn't finish with the punctuation mark (5)
- 21. Worry oneself about the ornamental decoration (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2725

ACROSS 1. Grazed 5. Forum 8. Overran 9. Risen 10. Metronome 12. Set 13. Tense 17. Was 19. In between 21. Prose 22. Undergo 24. Steps 25. Hundred

DOWN 1. Grooms 2. Alerted 3. Tar 4. Dingo 5. Forcefeed 6. Risks 7. Minute 11. Outsiders 14. Shearer 15. Swipes 16. Enfold 18. Shove 20. Blush 23. Dun

CPTPP as an option

Trade disorder calls for pacts with EU, Asia

Time is running out on the 90-day "pause" that United States (US) President Donald Trump declared in his trade war against the rest of the world. The countdown will end on July 8, when his retaliatory tariffs are supposed to come back into effect. The US administration had promised that some trade deals would be announced before then, and it has said at various points that up to 90 different negotiations are ongoing. But so far only one, with the United Kingdom (UK), has been announced. There is no sign that other negotiations, including those with India, are going as well. In any case, the "baseline" 10 per cent tariff Mr Trump had initiated will stay — it has stayed as part of the deal with the UK. That tariff has had an emboldening effect for the US administration because it has raised billions in revenue, which helps finance its tax-cutting plans and has also had a very limited impact on inflation so far. While Mr Trump's disruptions to global trade may have for now taken the back seat to the disorder in West Asia, that moment will not last. Very shortly, India and the world will once again have to deal with the prospect of a more fragmented trading system.

India's path forward under these circumstances is obvious: To continue to try to get a deal out of the US that increases its competitive advantage, while also signing up to other deals with more trade-friendly partners. The government's initial scepticism about trade has thankfully given way more recently to a willingness to conclude various deals. In the past years, free-trade agreements, early-harvest orders, or comprehensive economic partnerships have been signed with various other nations, including Australia, the United Arab Emirates, and the UK. But these are frankly not ambitious enough to make up for the disorder that the US will inject into trade. It is essential, first of all, that the ongoing negotiations with the European Union, which has the highest potential among all partners for mutual prosperity, be successfully concluded on the timeline given by Prime Minister Narendra Modi — namely, the end of this year.

But integration into value chains means India must also consider the manufacturing hubs to its east. Recent comments describing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) as China's "B-team" are unhelpful in this context. The fact is that integration with Asean and the rest of Asia ex-China will be essential if India is to upgrade its manufacturing and become globally competitive. From an economic perspective, this means that entering into mega pacts, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), is a sensible way forward. However, given that mainland China is part of the RCEP, it might be considered politically infeasible until relations improve. That objection does not hold, however, for the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP. At the very least, India should submit an application for this trade pact, which would deepen its integration with major investors into the Indian market like Japan and Korea. It would also allow for a clear road map forward for regulatory reform domestically to bring Indian regulations up to global standards and make its exports more competitive. While this process may take a while, it is important, given the state of uncertainty and disorder that prevails in the global trade architecture, to demonstrate India's commitment to a particular direction of travel.

Asian hotspot

Mitigation and adaptation strategies must be accelerated

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has sounded a red alert in its latest "State of the Climate in Asia" report, indicating that the continent is warming twice as fast as the global land and ocean average. According to the report, the "mean anomaly" for 2024 in Asia was 1.04 degrees Celsius above the 1991-2000 average. In 2024, average temperatures ranked as the warmest or second-warmest on record, depending on the dataset used (the WMO uses six datasets in its analysis). From east to west, these findings would not come as a surprise to a range of Asians who suffered extreme weather events last year — North Indians weathering a severe heatwave, Keralites who lost their families in the Wayanad landslide induced by excessive rainfall, Indo-Chinese and Filipinos facing extensive damage from cyclones, Chinese farmers who lost crops to severe drought, Kazakhs and Russians forced to evacuate due to record-breaking rainfall and citizens of the United Arab Emirates who faced extreme precipitation.

The report attributes this faster rate of warming to Asia's massive landmass because, as it explains, temperature increases over land are greater than temperature increases over the ocean. At 44.59 million square kilometres, Asia is the largest of all the continents. But the exceptionally high temperatures on Asia's landmass last year had its knock-on effect on 15 million sq km of ocean area, one-tenth of the earth's ocean surface. Average sea temperatures rose at the rate of 0.24 degree Celsius per decade, double the global mean rate of 0.13 degree Celsius per decade, causing marine heatwaves in the northern Indian Ocean and the seas near Japan and the Yellow and East China Seas. The observable impact of such rapidly elevated temperatures can be seen in alarmingly receding glaciers, rising sea levels and prolonged heat waves.

Given that Asia accounts for more than half the world's population, the obvious takeaway from the WMO's temperature alert is the critical need for countries to accelerate mitigation and adaptation strategies by several orders of magnitude, not least because the actions of some actors can have unpredictable consequences elsewhere. East Asia, especially the area around China, Japan, and South Korea, is the world's most densely industrialised region. China remains the factory to the world, and Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea are centres of hi-tech industries, notably semi-conductors. No less concerning is the fact that Asia — South Asia in particular — is increasingly becoming the alternative location for a range of "dirty" industries that the West is jettisoning. This includes chemicals, metal and plastic manufacture, and oil and mineral refining. Asia, therefore, remains the largest consumer of fossil fuel globally, accounting for a staggering 80 per cent of the world's coal power consumption. China and India, the world's two most populous countries, figure among the world's largest fossil-fuel consumers and emitters of greenhouse gases. Though China has made strides in the transition to renewable energy — accounting for a third of total electricity generation — India remains a laggard. Developing countries in Asia argue that economic growth and concomitant poverty reduction are contingent on continuing fossil-fuel consumption. But the fact is that rising temperatures take a toll on the lives and livelihoods of marginalised and vulnerable communities like small farmers and those in the fishing trade. Hastening the transition to net zero would serve Asia's poorest most effectively.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Keeping WTO relevant

Plurilateral agreements may be key to WTO's future

Earlier this month Ngzi Okonjo-Iweala, director general of the World Trade Organization (WTO), in her lecture at the London School of Economics, emphasised the need to speak up for the multilateral institution, particularly when the dominant funding economy has chosen to suppress its voice and relevance. Her statement augurs well for the WTO, which stands at a crossroads in terms of its fundamental purposes and the objective of promoting freer and fairer trade. While there has been much talk about the United States blocking appointments to the Appellate Body of the Dispute Settlement Mechanism, the decline of the institution, in terms of both long-drawn negotiations and a lack of substantial trade issues, has long preceded this development.

It is well known that the expansion of membership of the WTO, from 23 founding members of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), to 128 in 1994 when GATT transitioned to the WTO, to 166 in 2024, has not been without challenge. Consensus-based resolution of significant issues such as agricultural subsidies, non-agricultural market access, and services liberalisation has been hard to achieve, given the varied interests and sensitivities of developed, developing, and least-developed member countries.

The agreements on trade facilitation and, more recently, on fisheries subsidies were concluded after prolonged and difficult negotiations, each stretching over more than a decade. While a persistent negotiating impasse on major issues has resulted in the WTO's first and only trade liberalisation "round", the Doha Development Agenda, being effectively suspended, most ministerial meetings have ended up with only administrative decisions related to the implementation of earlier agreements. The rules and provisions at the WTO have hence undergone limited, if any, evolution beyond what was achieved in the last round of GATT.

However, the imperatives of evolving global trade, which is increasingly driven by global value chains (GVCs), have led to free trade agreements (FTAs) and issue-based plurilateral agreements (PAs) becoming the alternative routes for rule-making. The FTAs, permitted under GATT Article XXIV and involving liberalisation of "substantially all trade" among two or more member economies, have witnessed remarkable proliferation in the 21st century. From less than 100 in 2000, the number of FTAs notified to the WTO is well over 600 in 2025.

Along with an increase in their number, FTAs have also acquired greater depth, with most now encompassing a substantial number of higher-grade provisions related to intellectual property, investment and services liberalisation, and environment and sustainable governance (ESG). Once criticised for overlapping membership and consequent complexity of rules of origin across multiple FTAs, mega regional trade agreements, particularly those with common and cumulative rules of origin, have contributed to the ease of FTA utilisation for member economies. A large number of developing economies have benefited, through their participation in FTAs, and increased their integration with GVCs and their share of global trade.

The PAs, also under the aegis of the WTO, and initiated by a subset of like-minded member nations on specific issues or sectors, have however progressed at a much slower pace than FTAs. The first PA under the WTO was the Information Technology Agreement signed in 1996, whereby participating nations provided duty-free trade for a set of identified information technology products to all WTO members. In more recent times, though PAs on new-age policy areas such as e-commerce, investment facilitation, and alternative dispute resolution have been initiated, participation of major economies and conclusive



STRAIGHT TALK
AMITA BATRA

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Walking the talk on customer centricity

The phrase "customer centric", once popular, is now being rapidly replaced by the more muscular phrase "customer obsessed", which is dominating the favourite word in boardroom presentations, in fierce competition with moat and pivot. Unfortunately, customer centric and customer obsessed are not exactly the same thing. In fact, they are mirror images of each other. The locus of customer centricity is the world of customers, and the locus of customer obsession is the world of the company.

A really good definition of customer centricity is, to quote Hector Ruiz, the former chief executive officer of semiconductor company AMD: Not doing everything the customer wants, but doing everything on behalf of the customer. And, of course, finding a way to do it in a manner that is profitable for the company.

Customer centricity is about figuring out how to add value to customers (value that customers perceive, not value as marketers think customers should or would perceive). Customer obsession is often all about how to extract value from customers. It is not unusual to see a slide called "We are customer obsessed," which has the customer at the centre and radiating outwards are all the ways in which the company will extract value from the customer (cross-sell, increase ticket size, improve stickiness, offer adjacencies, and the like). Conspicuous by its absence is what the company will do for its customers. That is, the customer-centric mission statements that say, "We will delight customers" or "Be the preferred supplier for customers around the world" — statements that are all about "us" and not a word about what it will do to make customers' lives better.

Obsessively testing products with customers is also not customer centricity — it is product centricity.

Obsessively also asking customers what they want from a product or service (and then becoming the fact that customers don't want) also does not qualify as customer centricity. It qualifies as abdicating decision-making and making the customer the marketing director of the company. It is the customer's job to have a problem, or a pain point, or a value-processing algorithm — that is, an internal process by which they decide what benefits add value to them.

It is not the company's job to come up with solutions to resolve the pain or problem, or to find ways by which companies can deliver more value to them. They do not know what is possible; all they know is what will make them happier. Customer-centric companies work tirelessly to do this. They understand and compromise that customers are making today — like staying in a three-star hotel that doesn't give them status, though affordable, versus a five-star hotel that does give them the status benefit but are unaffordable and over-engineered for their needs. Or being a small-ticket buyer in a remote location and having to pay a premium to access certain products. These companies focus on breaking such compromises and unleashing customer-perceived value. The language of customer centricity is to shift the frame of business decisions and design to: "What can I do for customers?"

Many — though not all — startups in the new economy with digital business models have demonstrated this customer-centricity — like startup companies. They have managed to break compromises customers face and solved the tough challenge posed by the Indian market — of consumers who have high performance thresholds for acceptability and low prices / costs thresholds, and companies that want reasonable unit margins.

Startups have shown more customer centricity in

negotiations have been hard to achieve. In fact, PAs have been controversial, as the interested subset of member economies initiating negotiations on a specific issue is sometimes considered as not fully representative of the entire WTO membership. Consequently, the exclusivity of PAs engenders apprehensions of possible power play in agenda-setting and the according of a first-mover advantage in rule-setting to participant nations. This is viewed, and just as determining the consensus-based approach of negotiations that is integral to the WTO, but also as negating the long struggle of developing countries post-Uruguay Round in establishing development as the avowed objective of the Doha Development Agenda while keeping "non-trade" issues at bay. However, much has since changed in the context of global trade.

Firstly, the underlying mechanism of the 21st Century GVC-led global trade needs to be understood as an inextricable nexus between liberalisation of trade in goods, investment and services. An appropriate set of rules and regulatory framework in each of these domains is therefore necessary to facilitate global trade. Secondly, issues classified as "non-trade" by some economies, including India, and being resisted for negotiations under the PA route are already covered in greater depth in FTAs. For example, while plurilateral negotiations on investment facilitation are being challenged by some WTO members, investment chapters in most FTAs of the 21st century go well beyond investment facilitation to include deeper provisions on investment protection, dispute resolution, intellectual property rights. Similarly, ESG-related provisions, many of which were long considered as non-trade issues, have seen a significant increase in FTAs in the 2010s. Thirdly, where PA negotiations do not take off or are long delayed, interested countries have opted for sector-specific bilateral agreements outside of the WTO. For example, US-Japan and Australia-Singapore signed a bilateral digital trade agreement in 2020. More recently, the EU and South Korea concluded a digital trade agreement in March 2025. Fourthly, we are in an era of growing protectionist unilateralism and trade policy uncertainty. There is, therefore, a greater need for consistency in global trade rules.

Given that the WTO is the only institution more appropriate to expend negotiating capital on defining the rules for participation and negotiation in these plurilateral formulations with "variable geometry," rather than persist with a futile pursuit of elusive consensus-based decision-making processes at the WTO. This would require alternative mechanisms, perhaps in terms of developing a threshold share of global trade for nations initiating a discussion in a plurilateral formation, or in terms of a majority rule to identify issues that can be taken up for negotiation under the aegis of a plurilateral formulation. Simultaneously, an effort should be made to deal with the issues of legality in including PA-negotiated outcomes in the WTO.

In order to prevent the WTO from being consigned to the sidelines, catering only to routine administrative measures on past agreements, and to assist its evolution in consonance with the imperatives of a fast-developing global trade context, a combination of alternative instruments — FTAs and PAs — is required. The latter entails serious cooperative efforts to redefine the decision-making process at the WTO.

The author is professor, School of International Studies, JNU, and author of *India's Trade Policy in the 21st Century*, Routledge, London, 2022. The views are personal.



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

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Startups have shown more customer centricity in

designing solutions to add value or remove pain for people and businesses than the traditional marketing management approach. Perhaps, it should be the funders relentlessly ask the former, "Why will you win?" — pushing them towards unresolved customer problems. And probably because the latter today is more focused on performance marketing than on designing or delivering (or even discovering) customer value. Research & development folk are also more likely to be in the trenches, working with counterparts, perhaps because their DNA is rooted in problem-solving or delivering performance breakthroughs for use cases.

When it comes to the more operational area of designing digital interfaces, there are many shades and grades of customer centricity, despite all the UI UX expertise. For example, bank apps may be technically heroic but tend to cross-sell things before allowing you to finish the job for which you opened the app. It smacks of a hostage customer and a customer-obsessed supplier who believes the bank's work is more important than the customer's urgency to get her job done. Leave techies of the IT department in charge of error messages and other communications. They are the ones who get the most technically heroic but tend to cross-sell things before allowing you to finish the job for which you opened the app. It smacks of a hostage customer and a customer-obsessed supplier who believes the bank's work is more important than the customer's urgency to get her job done. Leave techies of the IT department in charge of error messages and other communications. They are the ones who get the most

"We are pleased to inform you that we are back online now," instead of, "We apologise for the interruption in your internet services and the disruption it has caused. We are now back online".

Customer centricity is not about having bulky, time-guzzling feedback forms and tying up the CEO's minutes to a Net Promoter Score. It is about an orientation that says, "What can I do to make customers' lives better?" — as they see it not as I see it — and, "How do I do it in the smartest possible way that maximises value to them and minimises cost to me?"

The author is a business advisor in the area of customer-based business strategy

An industry's complicity in murder



SNEHA PATHAK

I had heard the term "serial-killer" way before I knew its definition. The US Department of Justice defines it like this: Anyone who has committed two or more murders on separate occasions is deemed a serial killer. Ted Bundy, whose face appears on the cover of *Murderland: Crime and Bloodlust in the Time of Serial Killers*, murdered dozens of women.

Bundy was just one of many such serial killers who roamed the streets of America during the 1970s and 1980s, preying on women. Why were a number of these killers connected with the Pacific Northwest, home to Caroline Fraser, the author of *Murderland*? Why did this phenomenon of the serial killer rise with such intensity during a certain time period and then, just as suddenly, come to an end? These are the questions that Pulitzer Prize winner Fraser asks in her latest book. She also supplies her unexpected and thought-provoking answer — lead poisoning.

Ms Fraser takes her readers to Tacoma and its surroundings in the northwest, an area polluted by the smelting industry for decades. With lead and arsenic among the main components of the deadly emissions released by smelter

smokestacks, and leaded gasoline further increasing atmospheric lead levels, there was little chance for locals in the region to escape the toxic effects of these fumes. The grew, and especially children, grew on a steady diet of lead and arsenic, and Ms Fraser traces a connection between the presence of high levels of such elements in human beings with severe mental development issues, ranging from irritability to "dreams bordering on hallucinations". Studies are beginning to link childhood lead exposure with "aggression, psychopathy and crime," she writes. Fascinatingly, all the serial killers she talks about in *Murderland*, such as Ted Bundy, Warren Leslie Forest, Dennis Rader, Richard Ramirez and Israel Keyes (whose ideal was Ted Bundy) spent years living in and

around places with high lead concentration in the air.

The criminals Ms Fraser investigates here are two-fold. There are the serial killers, of course. But there's also the smelter industry, particularly the American Smelting and Refining Company, whose crimes Ms Fraser sets out to investigate in the book. Ms Fraser doesn't let the serial killers off the hook. But she goes beyond the descriptions of their many gruesome crimes and victims (and the list is long and makes harrowing reading) and brings to light the equally heinous crimes of an industry that knowingly, and sometimes in collusion with those in power, helped create these monsters. No surprise, the industry steadfastly denied harming the environment or the people for as long as it could, before it



MURDERLAND: Crime and Bloodlust in the Time of Serial Killers
by Caroline Fraser
Published by Picet
480 pages ₹2,089

was finally shut. *Murderland* can be read as a true crime book, but it would be a disservice to see it as just that. It blends true crime with reportage and memoir. Intertwoven with the world of killers and corporations is a strand of Ms Fraser's childhood and her years under a strict and conservative scientist father. Ms Fraser moves to-and-fro between these universes, situating the killers and the killings within a framework of other contemporary happenings, things with an impact at either a micro or macro level.

In a single chapter, for instance, in snapshot-like descriptions, she tells us how Frank Herbert based the world of *Dune* on Tacoma; the attack on 20-year-olds Lisa Wick and Lonnie Trumble; the death of the

brother of Ms Fraser's friend in Vietnam war; the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr; the fact that Bundy was working as a handyman on Queen Anne Island in 1968; the launch of Apollo 11, and the suicide of her friend's dad who also blew up his house.

The wry tone Ms Fraser employs underlines the callousness of both kinds of criminals. For instance, she writes of a time when Bundy loved to play crime scenes in panic, disposing of whatever incriminating material he has, and appends it with the sentence, "No worries — he'll be back."

Murderland is not for a casual true-crime reader. Eschewing any pretence of being a linear narrative, the book is research-intensive, as its lengthy "Notes" section testifies. It looks at past events from a different perspective and ends up telling a fascinating story.

The reviewer is a freelance writer and translator

Small banks, big deal

Relaxed priority sector lending norms will help SFBs

In line with its recent credo of easing regulatory curbs on credit, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has proposed a significant relaxation in its rules governing small finance banks (SFBs). Beginning this financial year, SFBs will be required to meet a priority sector lending (PSL) target of only 60 per cent compared to the 75 per cent in place until last year.



As with other classes of banks, small finance banks must continue to extend 40 per cent of their net credit to agriculture, micro enterprises, weaker sections, affordable housing, renewables and other designated priority sectors. Earlier they were required to earmark an additional 35 per cent towards any one of these segments — this has now been reduced to 20 per cent. This relaxation may not materially hurt credit flow to the targeted sectors as SFBs account for less than 5 per cent of outstanding priority sector credit from scheduled commercial banks. SFBs have been exceeding their PSL mandates and can now take up such lending based on commercial logic. The relaxation of PSL norms for SFBs is positive on three counts. For one, with 15 per cent of their available credit now released from PSL obligations, SFBs can now pursue more diversified lending opportunities, reducing loan book concentration. Rising stress in microfinance loans for instance, has been a key concern for SFBs lately. The relaxed PSL quota would allow them to prune microfinance exposure and step up lending to secured segments such as affordable housing loans, loans against property or gold loans.

Two, with 40 per cent (25 per cent earlier) of their credit flow now freed up, SFBs can flexibly switch between their traditional lending segments and newer ones like retail loans to the salaried, and expand their presence in markets where there are deposit-taking opportunities. Three and most important, a diversified loan book will smoothen the transition of established SFBs into mainstream banks. While RBI has allowed SFBs to apply for universal banking licences, very few of them have taken up the option with their concentrated exposures acting as an impediment. Given the snail's pace at which RBI has handed out new universal bank licences in recent years, SFBs converting to universal banks can inject much-needed competition into the banking sector. The 60 per cent PSL mandate also aligns SFB lending mandates with UCBs (urban co-operative banks) reducing the regulatory arbitrage between the two types of banks.

For a while now, RBI has been trying to push the lightly regulated UCBs with high failure rates to apply for SFB licences. So far, the higher PSL norm apart from tighter prudential norms on capital adequacy and accounting have proved a deterrent. In recent years, RBI has had to make one too many tweaks to its PSL quotas and definitions to keep up with evolving credit markets. Micro-management of credit flow impedes loan availability to deserving borrowers, while promoting lazy banking.

POCKET



"Perhaps all investors have a chance of winning a Nobel Peace Prize each if they short defence stocks hard enough?"

ABHIJIT DAS

India's average tariff during the past decade of 8-11 per cent, as against the US 2-3 per cent, has prompted President Trump to initiate retaliatory action. Many economists have decried India's use of high tariffs as being protectionist, raising manufacturing costs, constraining supply chain integration and harming the Indian economy. It should, therefore, not be surprising that these experts have taken the present tumult in international trade to argue that it would be in India's own interest to cut its tariffs unilaterally.

How does the outright condemnation of India's high tariffs square up with India's experience of using tariffs over the last few years? While India's average tariffs are high, the government appears to have used this policy instrument strategically by keeping customs duties on inputs substantially lower than those on final goods, auto sector being a good example. It also varied the duties to respond to both consumer and producer interests, and this was prominently evident in the edible oil sector. These have often been ignored by trade analysts. Further, three specific episodes on tariffs go against the grain of logic of the eminent economists.

First, the automobile sector has emerged as the most important segment of India's manufacturing. According to the Press Information Bureau, almost half of India's total manufacturing value-added arises from this sector. It is no secret that during 1990s and 2000s India succeeded in creating this vibrant sector on the back of 60-125 per cent tariffs on automobiles. If the government had followed the prescription of maintaining low tariffs in this sector, foreign players would have preferred to export automobiles to India rather than investing in creating manufacturing facilities in the country. Further, moderate tariffs on auto parts and components, coupled with local sourcing requirements for components, helped create a robust upstream industry of these inputs.

Second, in the last 2-3 years, the mobile handset sector has emerged as a star performer in manufacturing. With tariffs on smartphones being zero till 2017, most foreign investors showed little interest in establishing manufacturing/assembly facilities in India. However, after imposing a tariff of 10 per cent in 2017, foreign players found it profitable to assemble smartphones in India.

Of course, flanking policies, such as subsidies under the PSL scheme would also have attracted them. No doubt



Needed, a nuanced tariff policy

PROTECTION MATTERS. A mix of high, moderate and low tariffs on different products is required to balance domestic producers' interest and consumer welfare

Nokia had established its manufacturing facility in India during the days when tariff on mobile phones was zero. However, what we are witnessing today, even at 10-20 per cent tariffs, is manufacturing at a significantly larger scale.

What happened when India removed tariffs in a particular sector over a span of 5-7 years? This brings us to the third illustration. After joining the Information Technology Agreement at the WTO, during 1997-2005 India eliminated tariffs on about 200 products in the IT hardware sector. This had a devastating impact on domestic hardware producers, whose share in domestic demand plunged from around 70 per cent in early 1990s to 35-40 per cent within a few years after India eliminated tariffs in this sector. This is what the website of the Department of Commerce continues to say till today: "India's experience with the ITA has been most discouraging, which almost wiped out the IT industry from India". Unfortunately, the failure of the Indian domestic industry to face import

It is no secret that during 1990s and 2000s India succeeded in creating a vibrant automobile sector on the back of 60-125 per cent tariffs on automobiles

competition in the IT hardware sector under the zero-duty regime appears to have been almost forgotten.

ALTERNATIVES TO TARIFFS Some economists have suggested two alternatives to tariffs for according protection to India's domestic producers. First, protect producers by depreciating the currency, thereby making imports costlier. From multiple perspectives, this suggestion is problematic. Unlike tariffs, which can be fixed at different levels depending on the sensitivity of the domestic industry, currency depreciation would be a blunt instrument that would impact imports of all products. Further, currency depreciation would impact other economic variables, such as repayment of foreign borrowings. It would also make the country vulnerable to the charge of being a currency manipulator — an issue firmly in Trump's cross-hairs. Clearly, this suggestion appears flawed and of limited utility.

The second suggestion centres around using sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures — standards on food safety and animal and plant health — to restrict imports of agricultural products. From two perspectives this is an impractical and half-baked idea. Based on past experience, there's a big question mark on India's ability to meet the technical requirements of scientific justification or appropriate assessment of risks prior to putting in place a stringent SPS

measure that goes beyond international norms. Further, given the high compliance costs, most domestic producers, especially the smaller ones, are unlikely to be able to meet the stringent SPS norms. Consequently, they would be prevented from even selling in the domestic market. Thus, we would be shooting ourselves in the foot, if we try to use SPS measures to protect imports with the objective of reducing our domestic producers.

Based mainly on theoretical considerations, many economists have used a broad brush to condemn India's high tariffs. However, based on India's experience in the past in specific sectors, a more nuanced approach to this policy instrument is warranted. It is not the case that high tariffs alone will create a vibrant domestic industry. But it is also true that on account of handicaps such as infrastructure deficiencies, logistics costs, high cost of capital, subsidised agricultural imports, etc., without tariff protection many segments of our domestic producers will not be able to face import competition. Till the time these handicaps are addressed, India may have little option than to use a mix of high, moderate and low tariffs strategically on different products not only to protect and promote the interests of its domestic producers but also to balance it with consumer welfare.

The writer is an international trade expert and author of 'Strategies in GATT and WTO Negotiations'. Views expressed are personal.

Defence sector firing on all cylinders

This growth is driven by the industrial base of PSU, private conglomerates, MSMEs, and start-ups

Naman Mishra
Palak Jain

In this volatile arena of geopolitics, conflicts breed not just caution but catalysis. The recent skirmishes and heightened tensions between India and Pakistan have refocused national attention on military preparedness — not merely as a security imperative but as an economic opportunity. With global military expenditure witnessing a record surge, India aims to transition from the world's largest arms importer to a competitive defence exporter and manufacturing hub.

In April 2025, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) soared to a record market cap, attributed to numerous export deals that placed India among the world's top 25 defence exporters (PIB, 2025). From Armenia to Vietnam, New Delhi's fighter jets and missile systems are gaining global traction. This transformation is a consequence of calibrated policy, domestic capacity building, and a strategic realisation that self-reliance in defence is a twin engine of national sovereignty and macroeconomic growth.

Historically, India's defence industry has been import-heavy. According to SIPRI, India accounted for about 11 per cent of global arms imports between 2018 and 2022. However, this

dependency is quickly shifting. According to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, India's defence exports have seen a 34x jump — from ₹686 crore in FY2013-14 to ₹23,622 crore in FY2024-25 (PIB, 2025). Simultaneously, domestic defence production is projected to exceed ₹1.6 lakh crore this fiscal year (Ministry of Defence, 2025).

This growth is driven by the concrete industrial base of public sector undertakings (PSUs), private conglomerates, MSMEs, and start-ups. Policies like the 'Make in India' initiative, liberalised FDI norms (now up to 74 per cent under the automatic route), and the Strategic Partnership Model are nudging private companies like Tata Advanced Systems, L&T, and Bharat Forge to manufacture equipment ranging from Tejas fighter jets to Pinaka MBRLs and BrahMos missiles. India has set a goal of reaching ₹3 lakh crore in annual defence production by FY2029. Even the actualisation of 1 per cent share of the projected \$3 trillion global defence market could translate to an incremental \$30 billion in exports (Ministry of Defence, 2024).

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY India's defence expansion is part of a broader global surge in military spending. According to SIPRI's 2024 report, global military expenditure rose by 9.4 per cent year-on-year, to \$2,718



DEFENCE EXPORTS. Gaining traction

billion. The global average defence spending now stands at 2.5 per cent of GDP, with major powers investing aggressively in technological driven warfare (SIPRI Military Expenditure, 2025). India's trajectory mirrors nations like Israel, South Korea, and Turkey — which have transformed domestic defence capabilities into global export machines. For instance, Turkey's Bayraktar TB3 drones and South Korea's K9 howitzers now feature in NATO arsenals.

Investor interest in India's defence sector has surged. Between January and April 2025, defence-related stocks have outperformed the Nifty 50 by an average of 12-15 per cent. This sentiment is bolstered by substantive government support. The Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020 now mandates minimum indigenous content in capital procurement. The Positive Indigenisation List, currently at 509 items, aims to eliminate dependency on

imported systems. Additionally, the Innovations for Defence Excellence (IDEX) framework is nurturing over 300 start-ups across AI, drones, surveillance, and electronic warfare technologies. Also, the 2025 Union Budget increased the capital outlay for defence modernisation by 13 per cent and introduced the Defence Industrial Corridor Development Fund.

India's defence sector is no longer a cost centre — it is becoming a growth multiplier. Robust defence exports could help stabilise India's current account deficit and secure long-term FDI flows. While momentum is strong, several bottlenecks persist. India's procurement cycles are often marred by delays and bureaucratic red tape. Intellectual property restrictions and limited technology transfer from foreign OEMs continue to pose roadblocks to high-end platform development. Moreover, there's a widening skill gap in defence-specific manufacturing, particularly in emerging areas like cyber warfare and aerospace composites. Unless addressed through institutional reforms and cross-sectoral collaboration, these roadblocks could blunt India's competitive edge just as the global opportunity widens.

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

GST reforms

This refers to 'Rate rationalisation' will improve GST system' (June 25). The Finance Minister promised GST rationalisation in the last Budget and it is high time this was implemented. GST collections have been encouraging, and the GST Council has done well in the last eight years, and time has come for it to move towards a three-rate regime. GST reforms such as bringing ATF and natural gas under GST and removing the levy on medical insurance premium should be implemented positively. Indeed structural reforms like operationalising the GST Appellate Tribunal should be prioritised besides using technology

to counter fake entities and fake billing.
Bal Govind
Noida

Rates must be cut

Even though the GST regime is fulfilling the goal of 'One Nation, One Tax' and also serving the purpose of replacing the multiple tax regime, the elevated rates of taxes are counter-productive to consumption, which is critical for stimulating dynamism in the economy. Given the dependence on fossil fuels, the luxuries are today's essentials, yet taxes remain the same. Despite the measures taken to stop leakages of tax revenues, there are

many instances of under-reporting, tax evasion and misuse of input tax credit. It is imperative to strengthen the preventive vigilance systems to eliminate corruption and ensure correct payment of taxes.
YSK Pillai
Changanassery, Kerala

MSME emissions

This refers to 'MSMEs need to cut emissions' (June 25). MSMEs must be encouraged to use renewable energy sources and reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. The government should provide financial support for creating the required infrastructure for transitioning to clean energy sources. MSMEs, on

their part, should participate in the carbon credit market.
NR Nagarajan
Salem, TN

Safety in the skies

This refers to 'DGCA's air-safety audit finds multiple lapses at airlines, hubs' (June 25). While Air India owes an explanation for such grave lapse, a moot question also arises here: why such a late awakening on the part of the nation's civil aviation regulator? Who knows, precious lives could have been saved had "all concerned" been alive to their onerous responsibilities.

SK Gupta
New Delhi

Rlys' fare hike plan

This refers to the planned hike in fares by the Railways from July 1. The proposed hike of 0.5 to 2 paise/km is reasonable. However, to retain public trust, the railways must ensure visible improvements in services — cleanliness, punctuality, digital amenities, and onboard safety. A transparent fare utilisation report could enhance accountability. Exempting suburban trains shows sensitivity to daily commuters. Such calibrated hikes, if matched with service upgrades, can help balance revenue needs with public convenience.

Vijaykumar HK
Rachur

15.E. EXPLAINED

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

WHY NATO MEMBERS HAVE AGREED TO INCREASE THEIR DEFENCE SPENDING

NORTH ATLANTIC Treaty Organization (NATO) leaders on Wednesday backed the big increase in defence spending that United States President Donald Trump had demanded, and restated their commitment to defend each other from attack.

What is the new defence spending goal?

NATO members have agreed to spend 5% of their economic output, or gross domestic product (GDP), on core defence and broader defence, and security-related investments. This is a hefty increase on the current goal of 2%, which was approved at an alliance summit in Wales in 2014.

NATO members will now spend 3.5% of their GDP on core defence such as troops and weapons — the items currently covered by the old 2% target. They will also spend a further 1.5% of GDP on broader defence and security-related investments such as adapting roads, bridges and ports for use by military vehicles, and on cyber-security and protecting energy pipelines.

Note that the NATO members will meet the new defence spending goal by 2035.

How much more cash NATO members will have to spend now?

This is difficult to say as the amount will depend on the size of their economies for years to come.

Also, NATO does not currently measure spending on the new broader category of defence and security-related investments — so there is no baseline measurement to go by.

But NATO countries spent over \$1.3 trillion on core defence in 2024, up from about a trillion a decade earlier in constant 2021 prices. If NATO states had to spend 3.5% of GDP on defence last year, that would have amounted to some \$1.75 trillion.

So, hitting the new targets could eventually mean spending hundreds of bil-



NATO leaders during a summit in The Hague on Wednesday. AP

ions of dollars more per year, compared with current spending.

Why have NATO countries increased spending now?

Russia's continued war in Ukraine, concerns about a possible future threat from Russia, and US pressure have led many European capitals to boost investment in defence and plan to increase it even further over the coming years. Europe is also preparing for the possibility that the US under President Trump will decide to withdraw some of its troops and capabilities from Europe.

Where will the money come from?

Every NATO country will decide on its own where to find the cash to invest more in defence and how to allocate it.

The European Union has moved to try to make it easier for capitals to spend on defence. The EU is allowing members to raise defence spending by 15% of GDP each year for four years without any disciplinary steps that would normally kick in once a national deficit is above 3% of GDP. EU ministers last month also approved the creation of a 150-billion-euro arms fund using EU borrowing to give loans to European countries for joint defence projects. REUTERS

After the fighting has stopped

Trump has forced a fragile truce on Israel and Iran. Tehran needs space to negotiate and recuperate. Israel has shown it can conduct a stand-off war against the Iranian homeland. What next for Iran and the region?



BASHIR ALI ABBAS

A DAY after President Donald Trump expressed his unhappiness, especially with Israel, for violating the ceasefire he announced on Tuesday morning, a fragile peace seemed to be holding in the Middle East.

On Monday, Iran launched a missile attack at the US military's Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar in retaliation for the American strikes on its nuclear facilities in Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. No damage was done, and Trump later thanked Iran for providing the US with advance notice of its attack.

Trump subsequently rejected the findings of a preliminary assessment that the US bombs had set back Iran's nuclear program by only a few months, insisting that it had, in fact, been "obliterated".

How should the last 24 hours of what Trump has described as the "12-day war" be understood, and what should be expected in the Middle East in the coming days and weeks?

Iran's calibrated response

Both during and after the Al-Udeid strikes, the Iranian Supreme National Security Council underlined that the attack "did not pose any threat to our friendly and brotherly country, Qatar", and that the US base was "far from urban facilities and residential areas".

Almost all Iranian missiles were intercepted, with no American or Qatari casualties reported. Crucially, the Iranian attack was telegraphed to the US "in advance", was calibrated and evidently mindful in nature.

For context on this choreography, the American strikes did not eliminate Iran's enrichment capabilities or destroy its existing stock of enriched uranium.

While the latest estimate by the US Defense Intelligence Agency suggests Iran's potential nuclear weapons program has been set back only "by months", Iran has claimed that its 60% enriched stockpiles were withdrawn from Fordow after the US bombs hit.

Arab media reports had suggested earlier that Washington had supplied advance notice of the June 22 strikes, and had communicated privately to Iran that the attacks would be a one-off.

Through the first 10 days of the Israeli at-

US MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN MIDDLE EAST

American bases or sites with recent military presence

AL-UDEID AIR BASE
Largest US military installation in Middle East



tacks that began on June 13, the Iranians consistently maintained two positions — that they were willing to resume nuclear negotiations if Israel ceased its attacks, and that American bases (including those in Arab states) would be hit if the US joined Israel's aggression.

After the June 22 attacks, Tehran had to find the optimal point between acting to preserve the credibility of its threats and retaining itself enough to retain space for negotiations — and to recuperate. The latter is especially important given Iran's worsening economic crisis.

Consequently then, Iran had enough reason to limit its response. Among all Arab states, Qatar was arguably the one where Iran could risk targeting US assets and try to contain the diplomatic fallout.

Qatar, which has positioned itself as a neutral mediator for the region's many conflicts (including between Israel and Hamas), has long maintained strong ties with Iran. This relationship was among the key reasons why Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain imposed an unprecedented blockade on Qatar between 2017 and 2021. The blockade ended two years before the Arab rapprochement with Iran in 2023.

Advance warning by Iran allowed Qatar to shut its airspace an hour before the attacks. And the US military had spent the previous week removing its aircraft from Al-Udeid.

What did not happen

Despite having issued threats, Tehran refrained from closing the Strait of Hormuz between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, which is vital for both global and Iranian energy needs. Evidently, even a combined US-Israeli attack on Iran did not amount to a direct enough trigger for a blockade.

Iran's proxies in the region, nurtured

for decades by Tehran, played no part in the retaliation.

THE HOUTHIS of Yemen, who had ended their ceasefire with the US in April, did not resume attacks against American shipping. The Houthis continue to show a marked ability to start or halt attacks on their own terms.

HEZBOLLAH, the Lebanon-based proxy, had refrained from going all-out against Israel even before its capabilities were significantly degraded in September 2024.

Throughout Israel's war on Gaza, Hezbollah, facing significant internal challenges, engaged only in calibrated rocket and drone attacks, drawing Israeli retaliation at a level it could absorb. Its eventual war with Israel, in which its leader Hassan Nasrallah was killed, was fought on Israel's terms. And on June 20, Hezbollah's current chief, Naim Qassem, while expressing strong solidarity with Iran amid Israel's attacks, committed only to "act as we see fit" — retaining ambiguity.

HASID AL-SHA'ABI, Iranian retaliation was anticipated in Iraq, where the US has bases, and where Iran has cultivated the Hashd as an umbrella proxy group since 2019. However, Iran did not press this militia into action — a repeat of its strategy of January 2020, when, following the assassination of Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched missiles at US bases at Ain al-Assad and Erbil, but did not involve the Hashd.

The Americans were told of the strikes in advance, they did not suffer any casualties, and chose not to escalate.

Unlike the bases in Iraq, however, Al-Udeid is the US military's crown jewel in the Middle East. The 29-year-old self-sufficient base houses 10,000 troops from multiple countries, and is the nerve centre of US operations in the region.

But like in 2020, the US recognised Iran's need to save face, and refrained from escalating in response.

What now for Middle East

Now that active hostilities have ceased, where does the region stand?

Iran did not fight on its own terms, and it would have liked to avoid the war. This was evidenced by its commitment to resume negotiations, if Israel halted its attacks.

The June 22 strikes were the first ever American military attacks on Iranian soil, but it was Israel which imposed the most substantial costs on Iran by its sustained attacks — decimating the senior leadership of the IRGC and posing an unprecedented threat to the Supreme Leader himself.

However, Iran's leadership and military could reorganise itself enough to sustain retaliatory missile salvos against Israel, including the use of its advanced solid fuelled ballistic missile, Kheibar Shekan.

For Iran, this was both symbolically and substantially important. Its threshold of success is lower, defined simply by its ability to hit Israel, beating both US air defence units in the region, and Israel's multi-layered AD systems.

Any bombing campaign, let alone a "one-off" strike, can only delay, not end, Iran's road to a nuclear weapon — should it seek one. It is this clear inference that has long pushed the US and Europe to seek negotiations with Tehran, despite the severe imbalance in conventional military power.

Unlike the "one-off" operation by the US, Israel's objectives were maximalist — complete Iranian nuclear dismantlement and regime change. It could achieve neither objective. But it has demonstrated that it can conduct a stand-off war against the Iranian homeland and draw in US military action, even if limited. This has always been Iran's worst-case scenario — and the reason it cultivated a regional network of militias as a sub-conventional forward defence strategy.

Iran's abject economic crisis has only increased the imperative for sanctions relief through negotiations. That would restrict its path to the bomb and demand a modernisation of its conventional capabilities, more so because of the weakening of its proxy groups.

But in the larger scheme of things, this war has likely convinced both Iran and its neighbouring Arab states of the value of nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantee of security in the long term.

Bashir Ali Abbas is a Senior Research Associate at the Centre for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi

ALZHEIMER'S-DELAYING GENE VARIANT CURBS BRAIN INFLAMMATION: STUDY

RARE gene variant known to delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease works by suppressing inflammation in the brain's immune cells, according to a new study.

The findings, published in the journal *Immunity*, support the notion that inflammation in the brain is a major driver of neurodegenerative, or ageing-related disorders, researchers said.

In Alzheimer's disease, one's memory, thought processes, and decision-making steadily decline, eventually affecting daily routine activities.

A permanent change in the DNA of a gene, which can occur over time and be passed down generations, results in a gene variant — not all of them produce a harmful effect.

The team found that the gene variant APOE3-R136S rendered protection against Alzheimer's disease by blocking an inflammation process, cGAS-STING, researchers said.

Blocking the brain's inflammation process through drugs was found to produce protective effects due to the gene variant — also called the Christchurch mutation — in a preclinical model (used before proceeding to clinical trials).

"This is an exciting study because it suggests that inhibiting this cGAS-STING pathway could make the brain more resistant to the Alzheimer's process, even in the face of significant tau accumulation," Li Gan, a professor at Weill Cornell Medicine (US) and co-author of the study, said. PTI



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Why investigators cannot summon lawyers

AMAL SHEIKH
NEW DELHI, JUNE 25

THE SUPREME COURT on Wednesday observed that police or prosecuting agencies summoning legal professionals for advising their clients infringed on the rights of advocates and threatened the legal profession's autonomy.

"Counsel who are engaged in their legal practice have certain rights and privileges guaranteed because of the fact that they are legal professionals, and also due to statutory provisions," the apex court said. It made the observations during a hearing involving a Gujarat-based lawyer, who was summoned by police for securing bail for his client in a loan dispute case.

This came days after the Supreme Court Bar Association condemned the summons issued by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to two senior advocates of the top court, Arvind Datar and Pratap Venugopal, on June

12 and June 18 respectively. The lawyers were summoned in connection with the agency's probe into the allotment of Employee Stock Option Plans (ESOPs) by Care Health Insurance Ltd to Rashmi Saluja, former chairperson of Reliance Enterprises.

Is attorney-client communication privileged?

Under the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniam (BSA), 2023, which replaced the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, communications between legal advisers and their clients are privileged, meaning they cannot be disclosed to a third party.

Section 132 of the BSA states that an advocate is not allowed to disclose any communication, even after employment has ceased, except in three circumstances: if the client consents to it; if the communication pertains to illegal purposes; and the advocate observes criminal activity being carried out during the employment.

A lawyer is also exempted from testifying or revealing conversations with their client, whether made in oral, written, or electronic form.

No other professionals, including chartered accountants, company secretaries, and cost accountants, have this privilege.

What have courts said on such summons to lawyers?

Over the years, courts have asserted that police or prosecuting agencies cannot issue summons to lawyers for advising their clients.

In *Av. Pavithran v. CBI* (2024), the Bombay High Court quashed summons issued by the Inspector General (IG) of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in Goa to Advocate A. Pavithran. The summons required Pavithran to appear before the IG as the agency wanted to question him in connection with a case registered under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, involving his client whose bank ac-

counts had been frozen by the CBI.

In its order, the court noted that any legal advice rendered is not subject to disclosure under Section 126 of the Indian Evidence Act (now Section 132 of the BSA).

"The rule is — once privileged, always privileged. Under Section 126, an Advocate is not permitted to state the contents or condition of any document with which he has become acquainted in the course and for the purpose of his professional employment," the court said.

In *Parvati Infrav. State of M.P.*, the Madhya Pradesh High Court, in March 2025, quashed summons issued by Indore's Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) to Advocate Rahul Maheshwari, who represented the petitioner in the case.

In this instance also, the court cited Section 126 of the Indian Evidence Act in its order as the reason for quashing the summons. The High Court said that such summons should not be issued, especially when the advocate is neither an accused nor a witness.

What Shubhanshu Shukla's trip to ISS means for India's space program



AMITABH SINHA

TEN MINUTES into the launch of the Axiom-4 mission on Wednesday, Indian astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla made a short statement. He said the lift-off was not just the start of his journey to the International Space Station (ISS), but also the beginning of India's human spaceflight program.

His remark might not become as memorable as Rakesh Sharma's reply 41 years ago — when asked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi how India looked from space, Sharma had said, "Saare Jahan Se Achha". However, Shukla's statement and voyage to

the ISS are emblematic of India's steady emergence as a major space-faring nation.

New era for ISRO

Shukla's trip marks the start of a new phase in India's space program, where human spaceflight would become as routine as satellite launches. Although the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) missed its ambitious aim of sending a human into space by 2022, the challenge put new energy into the space agency and forced it to work urgently on the Gaganyaan program. The project involves a series of manned missions to space.

Human spaceflight today is not just a matter of adventure. It is a strategic capability that can lead to special advantages for the countries possessing it. Space, including the Moon and potentially Mars, is opening up for scientific and commercial exploitation, and human space travel would be a key capability facilitating this. There is also the apprehension that like nuclear



Shubhanshu Shukla before the launch of Axiom-4 on Wednesday. PTI

technology, space could also become exclusionary, with only a handful of countries controlling and regulating space travel.

ISRO has done well over the last few decades to indigenously develop crucial technologies, and demonstrate capabilities that are at par with the best in the world. With human spaceflight, ISRO would shift into new gears, and build the platform for accomplishing even bigger things in space.

It has already announced plans to set up its own space station, and land humans on the Moon by 2040.

Notably, Shukla is not riding piggyback on the capabilities of others in Axiom-4 mission. ISRO has been an equal partner in this entire exercise, starting from the planning stages. This is also evident from the fact that a large ISRO contingent, including Chairman V Narayanan, has been in the United States to see through the last stages of the mission. This team was actively involved in the troubleshooting exer-

cises that were required in the last month during which the mission faced numerous delays due to technical glitches.

The learnings from the Axiom-4 mission can be useful for the Gaganyaan program, whose first crewed mission is expected to launch by 2027.

Consequential technology

Space is going to be one of the few extremely consequential technologies of the future along with others such as artificial intelligence, quantum, and clean energy. These are likely

to have huge economic and strategic implications. Unlike other areas where India has a lot of catching up to do, space is one technology domain where the country is among the front-runners. However, to retain that position and press its advantage, India would need to keep competing with countries such as the United States and China. Both of these countries have ambitious

plans for space, including a program to send humans to the Moon to build facilities for long-term stays.

Space technologies have also opened up opportunities for the private sector to play an active role. There are attractive business opportunities in harnessing and use of space-based technology. Although the Indian Space Station, where the private sector has created a thriving space ecosystem. Despite being one of the leading space powers, India currently accounts for just about 2 per cent of the global space economy. As a result, there is a lot of opportunity for rapid growth.

Also, nothing fires the imagination of youngsters like the prospect of space travel. Therefore, India's capabilities in human spaceflight can draw a lot of younger talent to the space sector. This, in turn, can spark innovation, create employment, and boost the economy.

While Shukla's trip is a significant achievement, it would have to be utilised to benefit the space program of India.

"Better diplomacy than war, but the US president's inconsistency and Benjamin Netanyahu's political needs increase the dangers in this Middle East crisis."

— THE GUARDIAN

THE IDEAS PAGE

Turning point in Eurasia

As Trump questions NATO's relevance and pushes for disengagement, the Indo-Pacific will have to weigh in on new partnerships and independent security strategies



RAJA-MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

HAVING SHAKEN THE Middle East by bombing Iran's nuclear facilities and facilitating a fragile ceasefire between Tel Aviv and Tehran, US President Donald Trump has turned his disruptive energies to Europe. This week's NATO summit in The Hague is a pivotal moment for the transatlantic alliance and the broader European security order. But the implications of Trump's disruptive interventions are not confined to the Middle East or Europe. They reverberate across the Indo-Pacific, and could herald a wider transformation in Eurasian geopolitics.

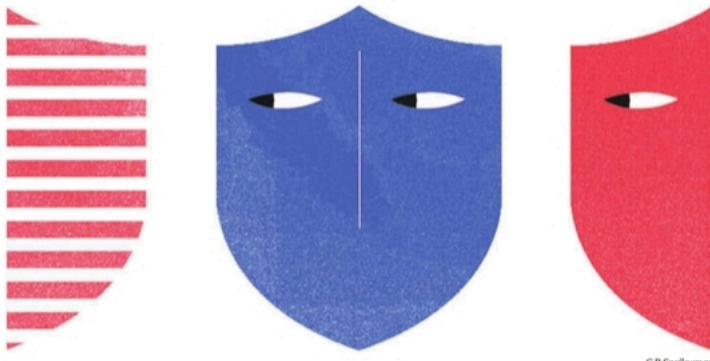
As Washington becomes an agent of profound structural change in both the Middle East and Europe, new centres of gravity are beginning to emerge. Among them is Germany, which is repositioning itself from a "reluctant power" into the strategic anchor in Europe. A German-led Europe could, in turn, become a key player in the future of Eurasia. This year's 32-member NATO summit takes place amid deepening anxieties about the alliance's future. The basic assumptions of NATO look increasingly unsustainable. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, persistent transatlantic tensions, and Trump's repeated questioning of NATO's utility have pushed the alliance into uncharted territory. Trump's insistence that Europe take full ownership of its security is compelling a long-overdue geopolitical reckoning on the old continent.

The search for new strategic leadership within Europe has turned to Germany — its economic dynamo and geopolitical core. When NATO was founded in 1949, its first secretary-general, Lord Ismay, famously declared its goal: "To keep the Americans in the Russians out, and the Germans down." In the post-War order, this formula made sense: A divided Germany had to be contained; the Soviet threat loomed large; and American military and economic might underwrote Western Europe's security.

But the present moment demands a very different configuration. For decades, Germany embraced constitutional pacifism and avoided hard power politics. Even after reunification and its rise as a global economic force, Berlin remained content to rely on American security guarantees. This solidified its image as an "economic giant" and "geopolitical dwarf".

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shattered that wisdom about Germany. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's declaration of a *Zeitenwende* — a historic turning point — marked the end of Germany's strategic reorientation. A €100 billion special fund was set aside to modernise the Bundeswehr, the German armed forces. Berlin placed its NATO's defence spending target of 2 per cent of GDP, and took the unprecedented step of supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine.

That transition is now being consolidated under Chancellor Friedrich Merz, whose firmer stance on defence reflects a broader consensus in Berlin about the need for



C R Sankumar

German leadership in a turbulent Europe. Under Merz, Germany has not only accelerated military modernisation but has also taken on frontline roles — leading NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania and pledging to permanently deploy a combat-ready brigade there.

Germany is emerging as a "security provider" at a time when the Russian threat looms and America is not reliable. The urgency of Europe's strategic recalibration is underscored by Trump's warmth towards Vladimir Putin, his refusal to acknowledge a Russian threat to Europe and repeated calls to reintegrate Russia into the G8, and his pressure on Ukraine to trade territory for peace with Moscow. But the bigger question is this: If Trump does not view Russia as a threat and seeks reconciliation with Moscow, Europe will need more than higher defence spending. It will need to recalibrate its regional relations.

Trump's actions in the Middle East mirror this disregard for traditional threat perceptions and a penchant for breaking geopolitical taboos. His first term saw the brokering of the Abraham Accords between Israel and some Arab states. He is now seeking to extend these to include Saudi Arabia. Some in Trump's inner camp are dreaming of "Cyrus Accords" that will promote normalisation of relations between Iran and Israel when Tehran breaks loose from the stranglehold of the present theocracy. The name comes from Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who liberated the Jews from the Babylonian captivity 2,500 years ago. Meanwhile, the weakening of Iran is bound to rejig regional balances in the Middle East.

As Trump rethinks US relations with Russia and China, major powers in Europe and Asia will have to rethink their great power relations and look beyond the US security alliances. The same doubts about US commitments to Eurasia that haunt European capitals now resurface in Tokyo, Seoul, Canberra, and Wellington. The absence of Asian leaders from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea at this year's NATO summit marks a stark shift. In recent years, these nations sought to strengthen Asia-Europe coordination through NATO.

None of America's European or Asian allies can really meet the 5 per cent of GDP defence spending goal being demanded by

Eurasian powers can't simply solve their security problems by throwing money at the military. They will have to find political answers to their security problems. Such solutions will inevitably involve rethinking their current fraught relations with their neighbours. From the war in Ukraine to the bombings to restructure Iran's regime, and from the questioning of NATO to the shadow over America's Asian alliances, there is the unmistakable sense that we are at the birth of a new geopolitical order in Eurasia.

Washington. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, eager to please Trump by signalling a new consensus in favour of spending 5 per cent, glosses over the differences with the US. The US President is, however, not affirming the American commitment to defend the Europeans against Russia. The uncertainty triggered by Trump's approach is bound to compel Europe to eventually seek "strategic autonomy" from Washington. Merz recognises this when he says the higher spending on defence is not just about accommodating Trump but of dealing with the existential threats to European security, especially from Russia.

Eurasian powers can't simply solve their security problems by throwing money at the military. They will have to find political answers to their security problems. Such solutions will inevitably involve rethinking their current fraught relations with their neighbours. From the war in Ukraine to the bombings to restructure Iran's regime, and from the questioning of NATO to the shadow over America's Asian alliances, there is the unmistakable sense that we are at the birth of a new geopolitical order in Eurasia.

For Europe, this means a more assertive Germany at the heart of NATO. For the Middle East, it could mean a gradual shift away from US military guarantees towards regional reconciliation. And in the Indo-Pacific, it implies a growing need for independent strategies and deeper political and military coordination among US allies and partners. The transitions will not be easy, but an America that is turning inwards should help concentrate the minds of Eurasian decision makers.

India, which straddles the three regions, must adapt. Delhi's growing strategic engagement with Europe, its openness to partnerships with all major actors in the Middle East, and its recent effort to stabilise ties with China and strengthen independent engagement with ASEAN, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, while deepening ties with Trump's America, should position it well to navigate this emerging world of diminished certainties.

The writer is a visiting professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, a distinguished fellow at the Council on Strategic and Defence Studies in Delhi and a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

Dictatorship of, by & for Congress

The plot to enforce it had been underway long before the judiciary's action against Indira Gandhi



BHUPENDER YADAV

ON JUNE 25, 1975, India was put under Emergency. People were stripped of their constitutional rights and horrors were inflicted on them. Critics of the government and Opposition leaders were put behind bars. Some of them never tasted freedom again, breathing their last while incarcerated.

Fifty years later, the Emergency remains a dark chapter in India's democratic journey. It must be recalled, remembered and condemned because the real reason for imposing the Emergency was far more sinister than commonly understood. Many believe that Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency because she was rattled by Justice Jagmohan Singh's judgment invalidating her election from Rae Bareilly. By her own admission, Mrs Gandhi did sense an "internal threat" in the country in June.

Evidence, however, suggests the plot to enforce the Emergency had been underway since early January that year. Journalist Cooil Kaur in *The Emergency: A Personal History* mentions a handwritten note (dated January 8, 1975) from then West Bengal Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray requesting Mrs Gandhi for lists of persons proposed to be arrested. The list also mentioned various other steps that needed to be taken. On August 11, Congress mouthpiece *National Herald* stated in an editorial the real reason for the Emergency. It said that the time had come for India to evolve into a single-party democracy.

In *Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India*, historian Srinath Raghavan writes that Mrs Gandhi's closest aides had been pushing for a presidential system. This system was one of limited dictatorship, a committed judiciary and a committed bureaucracy.

In September 1975, BK Nehru, a seasoned diplomat and close aide of Mrs Gandhi, wrote a letter calling the Emergency as a "tour de force of immense courage and power produced by popular support". He wrote to Mrs Gandhi that Parliamentary democracy had "not been able to provide the answer to our needs" and urged her to "make these fundamental changes in the Constitution now when you have two-thirds majority".

One would have dismissed the letter as an act to please the PM had Mrs Gandhi not approved of discussing these ideas with her party leaders.

The ideas met with enthusiastic support from senior Congress leaders like Jagjivan Ram and External Affairs Minister Swaran Singh. As these aides explored the proposals made by BK Nehru on Mrs Gandhi's instructions, what emerged was a document titled 'A fresh look at our Constitution: Some suggestions'. Drafted in 1975, the document proposed a presidential system with a powerful president and a 'Superior Council of Judiciary' to control judicial appointments and legislation, effectively diminishing the Supreme Court's role.

In response to Mrs Gandhi's call to "explore BK Nehru's proposal and party demand for constitutional change", Congress president D K Barooah appointed, on

February 26, 1976, a committee "to study the question of amendment of the Constitution... in the light of experience". The 12-member committee, headed by Swaran Singh, submitted "tentative proposals" to the Congress president in April 1976 and these were then circulated among a select few.

The then Chairman of the Law Commission of India, Justice P B Gajendragadkar, wrote to Mrs Gandhi that while an amendment to the Constitution was necessary, "a do-hocism is undesirable and adoption of extremist doctrinaire positions is irrelevant and inadvisable". He advised the then PM "to appoint a high-powered committee to research and discuss the problem in depth for a dedicated and comprehensive effort". Sadly, no such committee was appointed.

Justice Gajendragadkar later reiterated his view that the amendments to the fundamental law of the land should not have been left to a party committee and that the modality could, advantageously, have been a committee of experts to hear all parties and persons. He said that the committee appointed by Barooah had "worked in a hurry, discussed issues in a casual manner and based its recommendations mainly on political considerations".

The 42nd Amendment, infamously called the "mini-Constitution", brought in sweeping changes. Its primary objective, based on the recommendations of the Swaran Singh Committee, was to enhance the power of the central government and reduce the influence of the judiciary. The 42nd Amendment curtailed the power of the courts to review and invalidate laws passed by Parliament. This was done by amending Articles 32, 131, and 226. It also diluted the power of high courts to issue writ petitions. This is the same power that B R Ambedkar said was the very heart and soul of India's Constitution.

The 42nd Amendment altered the balance of power between the Centre and the states. States found themselves with less control over their own affairs, leading to tensions and conflicts over jurisdiction and governance.

The centralisation of power made it harder for regional parties to advocate for regional issues. The publication of parliamentary proceedings in the media was prohibited under the Emergency. The Statesman warned that "by one sure stroke, the amendment tilts the constitutional balance in favour of the Parliament".

The attempt Congress made to impose dictatorship in the country was thwarted, despite the mass jailing of leaders, the Opposition — which would later form the Janata Party — continued to fight for people's rights and the restoration of democracy. Mrs Gandhi also faced backlash from the global community and was rattled by political developments in the Subcontinent where similar attempts were made to usurp people's rights.

But the basic DNA of Congress stays the same.

Congress leaders walking around with copies of the Constitution are attempting to make people forget the party's gory past. June 25 serves as a reminder that the Indian Constitution was made, and before all else. Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP and the country together will continue to defend it.

The writer is Union Minister for Environment, Forest & Climate Change



HITESH JAIN

WHILE SPEAKING IN Milan last week, Chief Justice B R Gavai stated, "The executive can't become judge, jury and executioner all at once." This statement, while made in the context of putting a stop to "bulldozer justice", is in fact indicative of a larger transformation in India's judiciary. It highlights how courts and judges today, in line with their constitutional mandate, act as unflinching custodians of India's fundamental values. More importantly, it demonstrates that they are at liberty to fulfil this duty unabashedly and without fear.

It was not always so. On June 25, 1975, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in India. The political instability, economic hardships, outright violation of fundamental rights and social unrest that characterised the period from 1975 to 1977 have been thoroughly chronicled. The genesis of the Emergency can be traced back to Raebareilly in Uttar Pradesh, where Raj Narain, a socialist leader of the time, lost in the 1971 national elections. Narain filed a petition before the Allahabad High Court alleging electoral malpractices and accusing Mrs Gandhi, who was already Prime Minister, of using government machinery (including vehicles and personnel) to run her election campaign. Justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha of the High Court of Allahabad found Gandhi to be guilty under several provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Most damagingly, he barred her from contesting elections for a period of six years.

The PM swiftly moved an appeal in the Supreme Court, which granted a partial stay

With fear and favour

Emergency sought to reduce judiciary to a cog in Congress's political machinery

on the High Court order. Pertinently, Narain had also approached the Supreme Court seeking the production of a document called the "Blue Book" that contained security guidelines for the protection of the Prime Minister while travelling. He had asked the Uttar Pradesh government to produce the document in order to show Mrs Gandhi's misuse of public funds, a request that was denied stating that to do so would be against public interest. The Supreme Court sided with the High Court and called for its disclosure, also laying down the foundations for the fundamental right to information.

Soon after, the President of India was compelled to misuse Article 352 of the Constitution and proclaim a state of emergency in the country citing "internal disturbances". What followed was a barrage of ordinances. The Constitution was also amended. The 42nd amendment restricted fundamental rights, expanded the one-time duration of President's Rule from six months to one year, amended the Preamble to include "socialist" and "secular", and redefined India's constitutional structure, amongst other actions. These amendments sought to create avenues to retain power and subjugate all due process. Those who criticised the suspension of civil liberties and mutilation of the Constitution were arrested en masse, with dozens of political leaders (including present-day politicians and ministers) also jailed and stripped of their rights. Naturally, India's values and freedoms, whether of the people, press or judiciary, gradually corroded.

The bleakest example of this institutional

breakdown remains the Supreme Court's decision in *ADM Jabalpur vs Shivkant Shukla* wherein the Court was tasked with deciding whether individuals could seek the judicial remedy of habeas corpus to challenge detentions during the Emergency when Article 21 of the Constitution was suspended. A 4:1 majority of the Court was pressured to abide by the government's narrative, holding that certain fundamental rights, including the right to life and liberty, could not be enforced during the Emergency.

Having brazenly consolidated such unprecedented power, the government continued on its path to obliterate protocol. Justice H R Khanna was denied his rightful ascension to Chief Justice as punishment for his lone dissent in *ADM Jabalpur*. The government installed the plant Justice AN Ray to the senior-most post instead. As it trampled over judicial independence, Congress sought to reduce the country's highest court to a cog in its political machinery. This period saw the starkest example of judicial servility. Consequently, the period of the Emergency continues to serve as an unequalled reminder about how Congress methodically strangled India's institutions.

In stark contrast, PM Narendra Modi's 11-year track record represents a defence of and support for judicial independence. Where Congress, led by Mrs Gandhi, sought to systematically weaken India's courts, PM Modi has allowed room for judicial independence, empowerment and modernisation. This is evidenced from scores of Supreme Court decisions against the government, often on issues

of consequence and contention, such as electoral finance and administrative and legislative scrutiny. Crucially, the present government's response to adverse verdicts is not interference with or dilution of the judicial process or manipulation of the Constitution's identity — it is democratic acceptance. This signals that the government is secure in its legitimacy and mandate, and not compelled to subvert, coerce or retaliate against the judiciary or admonish its officers. Any disagreement has been expressed only within constitutional bounds. While Congress aimed to consolidate and centralise power by undermining judicial authority, the government led by PM Modi has fostered a climate of autonomy, where judges operate without fear of retribution.

PM Modi's leadership has thus set a new yardstick of constitutional temperament, showcasing an innate respect for the judiciary and maintaining constitutional propriety. It is a sustained affirmation of judicial independence. Today, the judiciary stands tall, repudiating, questioning and delivering decisions with freedom. It is no longer an extension of executive will and is an independent steadfast pillar of democracy. It is essential to ensure that we remain vigilant against genuine threats to India's democracy. It is only when history is correctly understood and remembered that we will be able to protect our institutions and uphold their integrity.

The writer is full-time member, Law Commission of India and vice president, Mumbai BJP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAVING DEMOCRACY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Never again' (IE, June 25). The 50-year anniversary of an event which prompted some in the West to boast about their earlier prediction that Indian democracy would not survive for long, is an important juncture to reflect upon. Though the Emergency acted as a rupture and hampered the evolution of India's constitutional democracy, an optimistic outlook of the same suggests that the 1975-77 period acted as an event to renew the resolve of the Indian people towards democracy. Nevertheless, democracy is a continuous project and always in the making. It is always evolving.

Dewang Ganesh Thosar, New Delhi

WEST ASIA TRUCE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A fragile pause' (IE, June 25). It is a win-win situation for all three countries involved, as each has a story to tell to their domestic base. Pragmatically, though, Tehran's theocratic leadership did not have any other option but peace. Khamenei has lost his loyalists, Iran cannot carry forward its attacks for too long. Now is the time for the US to introspect and look for real allies. It would do well to remember

that it is not in the interests of the Gulf states to see a powerful Iran.

Kartik Saha, Jhansi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A fragile pause' (IE, June 25). There is every reason to feel a sense of relief that the ceasefire between Israel and Iran, announced by US President Donald Trump and described by many as "fragile" and "tentative" is holding and "going very well". As POTUS puts it, Leaked intelligence reports (from the Pentagon) debunk the claim that the US strikes destroyed, or to use Trump's term, "obliterated" Iran's nuclear enrichment sites. The general assessment is that the strikes may have at best set back the nuclear programme by several months.

G David Milton, Marathwada

SHOCKING DEFEAT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'England heads at Headingley' (IE, June 25). India lost the inaugural test match of the five-match test series against England by a crushing margin of 5 wickets, in spite of taking a first innings lead of 6 runs. Although it had the upper hand during the first three days of the match, India failed to effectively follow up its bowlers.

Deepanshu Srivastava, Pune

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The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

SECOND VOYAGER

Shubhanshu Shukla's experience will provide critical inputs to the country's space missions, especially Gaganyaan

ON WEDNESDAY, SPACE X's Falcon 9 rocket propelled India's Shubhanshu Shukla and three other astronauts from Hungary, Poland and the US towards the International Space Station (ISS). Shukla, the pilot for the Houston-based Axiom Space-chartered mission, is the second Indian to travel to space after Rakesh Sharma in 1984. But if Sharma's voyage on a Soviet spacecraft had a largely symbolic — and inspirational — significance for a nation taking its early steps in space technology, Shukla's two-week-long stay at the ISS will serve several practical purposes. In the four decades between the two forays, India's premier space research agency, ISRO, has taken large strides. From an institution that initially focused on harnessing space technology for national development — agriculture, communication, water management and disaster response — ISRO is today making its mark in launching complex missions to Mars and the Moon. Forty years ago, India did not have the scientific acumen to do complete justice to the experiences gleaned during Sharma's spaceflight. Now, as its second space traveller makes his way to the ISS, the country is poised to launch its own crewed orbital mission — the Gaganyaan is slated to take off in the first half of 2027.

The task of sending humans into the vast unknown and bringing them back safely is more challenging than the Mars and Moon missions. At the same time, space missions today demand much more than piloting from their crew. They must be adept at performing complex scientific tasks, working well in teams, coordinating with experts on the ground and adjusting quickly to changing conditions. Shukla is one of the four astronauts shortlisted for Gaganyaan. His learnings during the Axiom mission will provide critical inputs to the country's first crewed space mission. The experiments, which the Axiom voyagers will conduct in fields as diverse as health, bioimaging and waste remediation, tie in with ISRO's recent research objectives. Muscle atrophy, for instance. As underlined poignantly by recent images of Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore, spacefarers lose the ability to regenerate muscles during extended stays outside Earth. While this phenomenon has been extensively studied, the precise reasons for cells not repairing well in space are not clear. An ISRO-NASA collaboration during the Axiom mission will use stem cells to examine the muscle repair process. Microgravity mimics, in a much faster way, what ageing and disease do to muscles. That's why the Axiom studies — which Gaganyaan is slated to build on — hold salience beyond the spacefaring community. Shukla is also armed with an elaborate set of instructions from scientists at the Delhi-based International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, which will enable him to study how microgravity affects algae's carbon capture and oxygen production — these could provide the rudiments of building an algae-powered life-support system.

Launched in 1998, the ISS embodies the global community's collective desire for knowledge on space technology. India's second space voyager will have an opportunity to observe its functioning. Given that ISRO has plans for an Indian space station in the next 10 years, Shukla's experience could be critical to this endeavour. His stay in space could be a forerunner to many more feathers in ISRO's cap.

BUILD ON OUTREACH

Centre's efforts towards increasing awareness of schemes in tribal communities are welcome. There are difficult challenges

ON JUNE 15, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs launched an outreach programme, targeting around 1 lakh tribal-dominated villages, to ensure doorstep delivery of two welfare schemes: Pradhan Mantri Janati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PMJANMAN) and Dharti Aaba Janatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DAJGUA). It aims to provide tribals with basic documents like the Aadhaar and Ayushman Bharat cards, title under the Forest Rights Act, pension accounts, as well as Jan Dhan accounts, while helping them to get enrolled in the existing schemes. The campaign's objectives — to make tribal populations aware of the existing schemes while promoting "participatory governance through community mobilisation" — are commendable. But there will be challenges.

In the past couple of years, the Union government has taken measures to bridge the developmental gap between tribal populations and the rest. The PMJANMAN was launched in 2023, targeting the socio-economic development of 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) across 18 states and one UT. Last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched DAJGUA, which aims to fill the infrastructural gaps in 63,843 villages. Large schemes, however, have yet to receive the benefits of the schemes. While difficulties in reaching geographically inaccessible terrain is a major barrier, landlessness remains a concerning issue, especially for the PVTGs. In November 2024, President Droupadi Murmu flagged it, as he asked NTI Aayog to facilitate land provision in tribal areas. Another challenge is getting the required documents for accessing different schemes. Reports published in this newspaper in October 2024 showed how many from the Karkari Adivasi communities in Pune struggled to get the birth and death certificates necessary for accessing welfare benefits under the Tribal Sub Plans (TSP). The reason cited was the non-recognition of their village after displacement due to the construction of the Dambe Dam in 1984.

In the decades after Independence, millions of tribal people have been displaced by dams, mines, wildlife sanctuaries and industries. A sustained effort is required to understand their special predicaments and needs. For that, governance must be prioritised over political symbolism. This outreach campaign can be a starting point.

HOW TO BEAT THE ODDS

Zohran Mamdani's primary win, at a time when the migrant is under siege in US, says some heurtening things

IN AMERICA, THE barriers to entry in politics can seem impossibly high. There are questions of how to raise funding, find political connections and, for minorities and migrants, the challenge of appealing to voters who don't look, talk or worship as they do. Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic nominee for mayor of New York and a state representative, was an underdog when he threw his hat into the primary ring against party stalwarts like former NY Governor Andrew Cuomo. If he wins the election, Mamdani will be the first Muslim and person of Indian descent to become mayor of America's first city. His campaign holds lessons in political communication that liberal politicians might want to heed.

Two of the simplest questions asked of politicians are often the most difficult: What do you stand for? What will you do for me (the voter)? Mamdani, at 33, has been a social democrat through his brief political career. His record is not marked by the compromises that seasoned politicians are forced into. He has made his stand on Israel's aggression in Gaza clear and asserted that anti-Zionism is not anti-semitism. His promises were criticised as idealistic and populist (free bus rides and childcare, for example) by his detractors but were appreciated by many primary voters caught in a cost-of-living crisis. What has stood out most is Mamdani's political communication: On social media, his videos were less slick and seemingly more authentic than his counterparts. He leaned into his Muslim and Indian heritage, speaking in Hindi and Bengali. His show of affection for his mother, filmmaker Mira Nair, in his moment of triumph, struck a warm, human note.

At a time when the migrant is under siege, Mamdani shows there are many ways of being American. The election in November will be a hard-fought one. But the lesson for liberals is that, to beat the odds, it's better to persuade the gallery than play to it.



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

IT HAS NOW become customary for people around the globe to take sides easily in the war between Israel and Iran and respond to the strategic and political needs of this confrontation rather than to answer to their own conscience. Right now, the correct question to ask is why we got here and, of course, the right answer is that the ideological face-to-face between the state of Israel and the Iranian regime during the past 40 years has been all about hegemony in the Middle East. On the one hand, the Iranian Shiite clerics and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards in Iran lived, until very recently, with the illusion that Iran was so powerful that it could fight back Israel and the US at the same time. For nearly five decades, the Iranian regime made the mistake of being immensely loud-mouthed about its rhetoric against the state of Israel and minimising the US power in the Levant. This was intensified after the end of the eight-year war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, with the starring role played by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, especially the Quds Force. The unexpected killing of Qassem Soleimani by the American military in Iraq during Donald Trump's first presidency was a decisive step against the mastermind of Iran's proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Despite the assassination of Soleimani, the Iranian regime continued to push forward its hegemonic perception of international relations in the Middle East and beyond.

In the past five years, the Iranian regime has tried to attack Israeli and American interests in the Middle East through its proxies, like the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis of Yemen. The Iranian people had to pay the price of the presence of this

Iran-Israel war signals a shift in regional power dynamics — and a reckoning for Tehran's allies

Many questions remain after the United States joined Israel in the war against Iran. First, what are the immediate consequences of Trump's 'spectacular military success'? Second, would the Iranian authorities still go for a comprehensive nuclear deal with the US and Europe? Third, will the fragile US-brokered ceasefire between Iran and Israel hold? Last, will the Iranian regime turn its guns once again against its civilians who dare to ask about the moral legitimacy of the country's leadership?

"syndrome of hegemony" by being isolated economically and politically through Trump's maximum pressure campaign, and the EU sanctions against Iran in response to its human rights abuses, nuclear proliferation activities and military support for Russia's war in Ukraine. However, despite this, Iran continued to play a diplomatic game with the Biden administration and the EU, leaving Israel out of the equation each time in talks on the nature of Iranian nuclear sites. It also did not get involved in direct clashes with these two countries. However, on October 1, 2024, Iran fired more than 180 ballistic missiles at Israel, and on October 26, Israel responded with three waves of strikes against Iranian military targets. Unlike the recent war between the two countries, though, Iran and Israel did not aim at each other's citizens, army officers or sensitive installations. Things have been different in the present war between Iran and Israel. First and foremost, Israel could count fully on Trump's political and military support in an attack against Iran's military and its nuclear installations. On the other hand, Ayatollah Khamenei is said to have been asked by advisers not to escalate the war after the bombing of Iran's main nuclear sites — Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan. Third, the Iranian regime kept open the option of firing missiles and drones at Israel, as it did hours after the US suggestion of an unconditional ceasefire, knowing perfectly well that the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran was at stake — as in the case of the 1988 Iran-Iraq war, Iran might run out of missiles and ammunition. Last but not least, though some of the Iranian military commanders

might have suggested a crushing response to the US by closing the Strait of Hormuz — through which more than a quarter of the world's seaborne crude oil passes — even Russia and China, the two key allies of Iran, have not supported such a folly.

The Arab leaders of the Persian Gulf region, notably Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, have tried to calm the tensions between Iran and the US, while not entertaining a Shiite Iran in search of regional hegemony. But they seem to be preoccupied by the sudden isolation of Iran from its weakened proxies and its two political allies, Russia and China, who are deeply embedded in the global economy and have much to lose from the turmoil in the Middle East.

Regime change in Iran is not an easy task. Until now, Israel and the US have been able to set back Iran's nuclear capacities without permanently removing its nuclear and ballistic missile threats. Many questions remain after the United States joined Israel in the war against Iran. First, what are the immediate consequences of Trump's 'spectacular military success'? Second, would the Iranian authorities still go for a comprehensive nuclear deal with the US and Europe? Third, will the fragile US-brokered ceasefire between Iran and Israel hold? Last, will the Iranian regime turn its guns once again against its civilians who dare to ask about the moral legitimacy of the country's leadership?

One way or another, Iran post-June 2025 will lay the groundwork for a new Middle Eastern roadmap.

The writer is director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Nonviolence and Peace Studies, OP Jindal Global University



BRINDA KARAT

FIFTY YEARS AGO, independent India had its first experience of dictatorship. India Gandhi's actions in the declaration of Emergency, suspension of fundamental rights, the ruthless suppression of all dissent and arrests of over 1,00,000 people revealed the fragility of our Constitution and institutions including the judiciary, and the dangerous consequences of the concentration of power. The all-out assault on democracy was done in the name of the "national interest", to guard the nation against "internal and external threats". Fake nationalism is a convenient instrument for dictators.

Emergency was also a concerted assault on the working classes and led to the dismantling of regulations as well as rights, which were seen as fetters on capitalism. India's capitalists had been shaken by working-class struggles and militancy in the early 1970s. The historic railway workers' strike of 1974 was followed by a series of solidarity actions. Emergency eliminated the basic right to unionise, to protest, to strike — dismantling the working classes. In an interview with *The New York Times*, JRD Tata, put it plainly: "You can't imagine what we have gone through here — strikes, boycotts, demonstrations. Why, there were days I couldn't walk out of my office into the streets. The parliamentary system is not suited to our needs." Exactly — dictatorship suits the ruling classes. We should not forget that the Emergency, by and large, was backed by Indian industry.

The day Emergency was declared, I was in Kolkata preparing to shift to Delhi to work full-time in the trade unions. Our party offices in Kolkata had been raided and hundreds of comrades arrested. Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray had already unleashed a reign of terror against Bengal's

FOR THE ELITES

Emergency served interests of capital, saw workers' rights dismantled

communists, subverting the 1971 electoral mandate, which had favoured the CPI(M). It was no coincidence that he was Mrs Gandhi's main advisor in declaring the Emergency. Kolkata had been turned into a virtual police camp.

After a few weeks, I reached Delhi and had my first meeting with the textile workers of Birla Mill. We had to meet in a small office after the evening shift. The door was tightly shut, a single lamp burning so as not to attract attention. The workers identified the Emergency as a time of increased exploitation through a huge increase in their workload. The annual bonus had also been cut.

I worked in a union with members in all five of Delhi's big textile mills. Since there was a police deployment outside every mill, we could meet only secretly in worker's houses. The first strike in Delhi during the Emergency was planned in these meetings. The mill management was introducing the four-loom system with no compensation and with the threat of retrenchment. We wrote out leaflets, used a cyclostyling machine to print them and placed them at bus stops or places where we knew workers would pass. Our members smuggled leaflets into the mill. I would often spend the night at workers' homes, getting to know their families and learning about the importance of organising the women.

The management introduced the new system with an increased workload during the night shift of April 18, 1976 — and the workers went on strike. Harkish Chandra Pant was the first worker who shouted "hartal hartal". There was a huge response — these were the unsung heroes who challenged Emergency's anti-worker face.

It was also in this period that the so-called beautification campaign was

launched. Slums were razed, displacing thousands of poor families living around the mills and factories. I was there on the first day when the workers were forced to move to Nandnagar, a resettlement colony at least 25 kilometres away from their place of work. In the summer, it was like a desert, no water, no sanitation, just thousands of the poor covered in dust. There were other ways to relocate people, but the arrogance of power made it inhuman.

Then there were the sterilisation campaigns. The women would pull me into their small homes and fearfully tell me the sarkari person had come and given a time for their husbands to go to the sterilisation camp. There was terror in many of these places and I heard the harshest words used against Mrs Gandhi and her son Sanjay, seen as the architect of those terrible coercive campaigns.

We could feel the anger building up against the government in the slums and factories of Delhi. And so, another lesson I learnt was about the strength of a people united and determined.

The Emergency lasted just under two years. India recovered. And yet, it seems today that however awful it was at the time, it was just a dress rehearsal for what is happening today — the relentless measures to dilute and weaken our constitutional framework, the concentration of power, the handover of India's resources to the top business houses, the huge inequalities, the targeting of minority communities. Let the 50th anniversary of the Emergency be an occasion to renew our pledge to save India's democracy, India's Constitution.

The writer is a member of the CPI(M) Politburo



JUNE 26 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

AIR INDIA TRAGEDY

THE AIR INDIA jumbo jet "obviously broke up in the air" before crashing into the Atlantic, according to senior Indian officials who began their investigation into the cause of the airline's worst accident, which resulted in the death of all 329 people aboard. After examining the pieces of the wreckage and the bodies of the crash victims, Capt B K Bhan, deputy managing director of Indian Airlines and one of the four senior officials who have flown from India to Ireland to conduct the investigation, said, "It looks quite obvious that the aircraft broke up in the air."

SECURITY BREACH

SECURITY MAY HAVE been breached during baggage inspection at Toronto airport when the ill-fated Air India jumbo jet began its journey. According to Canada's Minister of Transportation, Donald Mazankowski, an X-ray scrutinising machine failed to function after nearly three-fourths of the baggage had passed through.

SIKH YOUTH HELD

A SIKH YOUTH boarding an Indian Airlines flight to Bombay was arrested and a loaded revolver recovered from him by airport se-

curity personnel. Jasbir Singh Bhatia, 32, had come here a few days ago, and was staying with relatives, the police said.

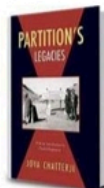
RALLY LATHI-CHARGED

ABIG RALLY of Bhopal gas victims demanding proper relief and rehabilitation, was brutally lathi-charged and beaten by the police in Bhopal when they tried to break a cordon to gherao the state secretariat. Scores of gas victims, including women, were hurt in the lathi-charge. Two women activists, Sadhna and Jyotika, were dragged by their hair and brutally assaulted by lathi-wielding policemen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Displaced lives: East Pakistan refugees from Darva Karanya at Raipura railway station waiting to go to West Bengal in April 1978. THE HINDU ARCHIVES



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"So did you go to Shreya's party?"
"Oh, yes. They had some really good stuff to eat."
"Her what?"
"What does her significant other do?"
"Significant other. This is the term being used in the U.S. These refer to..."
"...the husband or the wife, I suppose."
"Well, not just the husband or wife. It could be the boyfriend or girlfriend."
"So, it's something like 'better half'."
"No. 'Better half' usually refers to the husband or wife, not to boyfriends or girlfriends. So the term 'significant other' is much more general than 'better half'.
"I see. Shreya's significant other, as you put it, is a chemical engineer. His name is Ajay. Does everything that Shreya wants him to."
"He's putty in her hands already! How very interesting."
"He's what?"
"Putty. It's spelt p.u.t.t.y and it rhymes with the word 'nutty'. And..."
"...with the word 'nutty'? So, the p.u.t.t.y in the word 'putty' is pronounced like the words 'hut', 'but' and 'shut'?"
"Yes, that's right."
"I see. But tell me, what is putty?"
"Good question. Putty is a paste. It's the what carpenters use to fix the glass panes onto the window frames."
"Oh, I've seen that before. They also use this putty to fill any cracks or holes in wooden furniture."
"Right again. When you say that someone is putty in your hands, it means they will do what you want them to do. That they are easily influenced by whatever you say."
"In our films, the police are putty in the politician's hands. Can I say that?"
"That's a very good example. My boss is putty in his wife's hands. He always does what she tells him to do."
"Does he really? Or are you just being mean?"
"Just being mean. I guess."
"Oh my gosh! Look at the time. It's nearly 3:30! I'm supposed to meet Ram in the railway station at 4:00."
"Is he going somewhere?"
"Both of us are taking the bus to the stadium to see the football game. So, I asked him to wait for me at the bus stop outside the station."
"Well, in that case, you're not meeting him in the station, but at the station."
"Is there a difference in meaning?"
"Yes, there is. When you say you are meeting someone 'in' the station, it means you are meeting them inside the station."
"But doesn't 'at the station' mean the same thing?"
"If you say you are meeting someone 'at the station', it could mean different things. It could mean you are meeting this person inside the station. It could also mean that you are meeting the person just outside the station."
"So 'at' can have two meanings. It can mean 'inside' or 'outside' the station."
"It doesn't always have to be just outside the station. It could also mean somewhere near the station. Which meaning the word has will depend on the context."

Published in The Hindu on January 7, 1997.

Voices from the margins: Dalit, women refugee accounts of the Bengal Partition

Though the writings on Partition are rightly about loss, writers are also looking at other areas. While a Dalit writer has written his experience of untouchability, another new book underscores that women refugees of Bengal played an important role in shaping the women's movement

Sudipta Datta

At the launch of *The Last Bench* (Ekada/Westland Books) in Kolkata last week, Adhir Biswas said his experience of untouchability as a child was painful, but also a treasure. With no one willing to play with him, and the village too boycotting his family of barbers, he had all the time to forage in the forests and discover a world of other beings, like mongooses and mynahs and a dog called Bhombol, invisible to most like he was. However, that is small compensation for the acute caste oppression forced on him, first in an East Bengal (then East Pakistan) village (Magura), and then when his family moved to West Bengal in 1967. Bengal prides itself on being largely caste agnostic, but Biswas's Dalit and refugee memoir flies in the face of it. Biswas did something about the societal slight – he got himself an education against all odds, began writing in magazines from the 1970s, and then launched a publishing house, Gangachil, in 2005 so that stories like his own could be told. "It's enshrined in my memory – how it feels when you have no place in society – and I wanted to write about it," he said. His heart-rending account – written as three separate slim books in Bengali – has been translated by V. Ramaswamy into English, giving it a wider readership. His life of hardship will be unimaginable to many, and the session to launch the book at Max Mueller Bhavan

was aptly titled, 'Growing up Invisible in an Unjust World.' Just how invisible he felt is described in his classroom travails, when he was asked to sit at the back, far away from everyone; when he wrote every word being taught on his cracked slate, but never had the privilege of being asked a question; when the teacher on day one decided he should be called a 'Paramanik' (because he hailed from a family of barbers) and not Biswas, which was their surname. Caste violence and poverty Read together with Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* (Sage), Biswas's voice from the margins is an important addition to studies and understanding of Dalit and refugee life. Byapari has written about his migration to West Bengal, caste violence and poverty, and his itinerant life in his fiction as well, particularly in the 'Chandal Jibon' trilogy, comprising *The Runaway Boy*, *The Nemesis* and *The Interloper* (Westland Books), all translated by Ramaswamy. Scholars are now paying closer attention to the migration that happened from East Bengal/East Pakistan into West Bengal and looking at the afterlife of Partition. In the Foreword to Gargi Chakravarty's new book, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (Tulika Books), Tanika Sarkar writes that partition in Bengal was a very long-term process, violence was sporadic, and migration happened in a long, persistent trickle rather than in a single torrential

movement. "It is, in fact, difficult to put a definite closure on the process, which, Joya Chatterji argues [in her books on Bengal Partition] began and did not end with 1947." Research has shown, notes Joya Chatterji in her book *Partition's Legacies* (Permanent Black), that in a myriad ways refugees drove change. "In West Bengal, where landed elites resisted reforms, refugees threw themselves behind communist agitations, propelling the communists to power in 1969. They seized and then squatted on vacant land, demanded full rehabilitation as a matter of right, pushing and stretching the vocabulary of 'rights' in India's emergent democracy," she points out. Radical social reorientation Chakravarty's family hailed from East Bengal, and several members had stayed back there. "Listening to those who longed for the lost homeland and to those who remained there, she came to acquire a deep sense of identification with the land that she had not seen," says Sarkar. Her mother, the novelist Sabitri Ray, has portrayed her life in a refugee settlement in West Bengal in her novels and short stories. Too often, writes Chakravarty in the Preface, women's experience of Partition becomes a story of loss and victimhood, of violence and oppression. "While the focus is valid and deeply relevant, it does somewhat marginalise other areas of experience that are no less relevant." Chakravarty points

out that the women refugees of Bengal have not only played an important role in shaping the women's movement, but they have also been responsible for a radical reorientation of the social lives of Bengali women. Chakravarty traces the story of migration – how and why Hindus abandoned their ancestral homes and left East Bengal; and also about the lifelong yearning for the "land of rivers" they had left behind. In West Bengal, refugees faced enormous problems. In that backdrop, Chakravarty reviews the transition in the lives of the refugee women who came out on the streets and plunged into political activism for survival, seeking shelter, food and employment. In due course, there were immense sociological changes in the lives of refugees living in the colonies, which Chakravarty documents. In her Introduction to *Partition's Legacies*, David Washbrook writes that Chatterji's Bengal is no less fractured and brutalised by colonialism, Partition, and the post-colonial state. "However, it does not only stand as a field of negation and lament. [In several essays], she shows how even little people mattered, re-built their lives, challenged and re-made policies of the state, and acculturated themselves to new environments." Chakravarty's book on the lives of refugee women and Biswas's on his own crushing childhood are an invaluable addition to books on Partition in the east.

THE DAILY QUIZ

French astronomer Charles Messier was born on June 26, 1730. Messier published the Catalogue of Nebulae and Star Clusters. A quiz on his astronomical objects

Prathmesh Kher

- QUESTION 1**
How many objects are there in the Messier catalogue?
- QUESTION 2**
Messier objects are classified as what?
- QUESTION 3**
M45 is an asterism seen in the constellation Taurus. What is its more common name?
- QUESTION 4**
Which constellation contains the most Messier objects?
- QUESTION 5**
How many nebulas did Charles Messier discover?



Visual question: Identify the craters in the picture.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Orwell was born here. **Ans: India**
2. Orwell is best known for these two books. **Ans: Animal Farm, 1984**
3. This is a memoir of Orwell. **Ans: Homage to Catalonia**
4. The context in which 'Orwellian' is used. **Ans: It is used to describe totalitarian and authoritarian social practices**
5. Orwell's birth name and the reason why he chose the name 'George Orwell'. **Ans: Eric Arthur Blair; the name George, was inspired by the patron saint of England and Orwell after the River Orwell in Suffolk, which was one of Orwell's favourite locations**
6. Orwell wrote about the importance of precise and clear language in this essay. **Ans: 'Politics and the English Language'**
Visual: Name this writer and the book for which he won the Prometheus Award. **Ans: Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451**
Early Birds: C. Saravanan| Arun Kumar Singh| Sonali Das| Dodo Jayaditya| Vartika Pandey

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

Word of the day

Retrench:
tighten one's belt; use resources carefully; make a reduction, as in one's workforce

Synonyms: conserve, economise, bring down, cut, reduce

Usage: The company had to retrench.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/retrenchpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: ʁɪˈtʃɛnʃ

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

Long Live Cash! Even As Cashless is In

Address behavioural motives for holding cash

Even if no more the king it once was, demand for cash remains strong, despite the strides taken in digital payments. The inherent contradiction should not be difficult to resolve, given the rate of economic growth that fuels demand for both cash and cashless transactions. Inflation has an impact on demand for cash by affecting the opportunity cost of holding it. Demographics, too, plays a role. Older people prefer to deal in cash over tech-enabled payment mechanisms. Degree of formalisation of the economy also has a bearing, with financial exclusion acting as a constraint to cashless transactions.

Concentration of demand for cash among populous Indian states can be traced back to reverse migration during the pandemic, and the consequent surge of currency in circulation. The event has had a long tail, with rural incomes taking much longer to recover to pre-pandemic levels. This

affects cash-holding behaviour, as does spending patterns that spike with festivals. Consolidation among state-owned banks has contributed to the need for bigger cash holdings by regulating the numbers of ATMs in remote locations. India also experiences a rise in currency demand during elections. Since these are spread out over the year, this acts as a prop for cash.

Economic factors for currency demand are persistent forces, with behavioural effects being less significant. By this yardstick, cash transactions will eventually decrease as a share of the nominal GDP. There may, however, be scope for policy to address the behavioural motives for holding cash. A young population with access to technology should influence the cultural preference for dealing in cash, as will progressive urbanisation. India is part of a global phenomenon of rising demand for cash, including in advanced economies with almost universal access to banking services. Further integration into the global economy will create demand for Indian currency outside the country, even as current domestic factors lose some of their significance.

In Republic of NYC, Another America

In Republic of NYC, Democrats have chosen Zohran Mamdani as their party's candidate for the city's mayoral election in November. If he wins, the 33-year-old Ugandan-Indian will not only be the first person of South Asian origin, and first Muslim, but also the Big Apple's first millennial mayor. That gives you an idea of New York as Planet B to Trumpland America in its utter chutzpah for inclusiveness and throwaway pride in diversity. For us in India, xenophobically obsessing about 'place of origin' of people in public office, a city that was the epicentre of 9/11 — when Mamdani was 10 — having an 'outsider' as a future mayor can be mind-boggling.

The former rap music producer stole a march on born-to-the-mayor former New York governor Andrew Cuomo. Effectively, NYC's Democrats have plumped for the exact opposite image of the city's other son, Donald Trump. Mamdani now enters the mayoral race as front runner. His candidature is also a pushback to Trump's vision of the US. It's not just Mamdani's very vocal views on Israel-Palestine — he has denounced Israel's actions in Gaza, calling them 'acts of genocide' — but also his position on immigration that makes him chalk to Trump's cheese. Uganda, where he was born, is on the Trump regime's travel ban to the US list. Mamdani, a member of the New York state assembly since 2021, has a message for the Democrat machinery: too his victory in the primary is of the outsider over the ultimate insider, Cuomo, who was backed by Wall St and Big Money. His populist rests on his focus on cost-of-living issues — housing, transport, childcare, food prices. Whether he becomes NYC's 11th mayor or not, by his candidature, we are reminded that the 'other America' is still very much there.

JUST IN JEST

One expected mainstream media to have settled the fuck down by now

Terrifying F-Word That's Not 'F*dge'

We hope you're not one of those dainty souls who choked on their tea upon hearing Don Don say 'fuck' on Tuesday. After Israel and Iran breached Tuesday's ceasefire announcement, the thoroughly un-Shashi Tharoor said, 'We basically have two countries that have been fighting so long and so hard, that they don't know what the fuck they're doing.' Usually covered by the pointless fig leaf of an asterisk, in circa 2025, the 'F-bomb' no longer detonates moral outrage, but registers as a firecracker. It's now the linguistic equivalent of an angry sigh: versatile, direct, and often more honest than a thousand euphemisms.

What we call 'polite' language was engineered in the drawing rooms of Victorian England, where repression was an art form and fainting couches were essential furniture. Swearing was seen as uncouth, something for the labouring classes, and words like 'fudge' covered their 'horrid cousin'. Today, if a teacher drops the F-word, it's not a scandal, it's solidarity with students. It doesn't signal moral decay, but shows that the utterer is not a self-righteous coy boy (or girl). The emotional frankness of 'fuck' is still taboo in certain quarters because mainstream media swoons and blanches whenever they see her, it quickly covers it up with the usual cover-up see '*, %, @, and BBC-invented bleeps. Fucking trite, if you ask us.

As Shubhanshu Shukla enters International Space Station today, India takes a leap in capabilities

ISRO GETS AX-EFFECT

Start Up for Our Star Trek

Somak Raychaudhury

Finally after several hitches it pushed the original lift-off schedule of June 11 back by a couple of weeks. Aditya Mission (Aditya-L1) is a journey to the International Space Station (ISS). This marks a pivotal moment in the annals of space exploration. Aditya-1 represents a monumental stride for India, as group captain Shubhanshu Shukla pilots SpaceX Dragon. Shukla is the first Indian astronaut to visit ISS, and only the second Indian to ever reach orbit, following captain Rakesh Sharma's groundbreaking 1997 voyage aboard Soyuz spacecraft. This mission signifies India's re-entry into human spaceflight after a 41-year hiatus, underscoring a renewed national commitment and capability in this demanding domain, paving the way for its planned indigenous human spaceflight programme, Gaganyaan, in 2027, and establishment of an Indian space station by 2035.

But Aditya's significance extends far beyond national pride. For India, it represents a crucial opportunity to gain invaluable hands-on experience in human spaceflight operations, crucial for the success of future missions. It isn't alone in this renewed engagement with human spaceflight. Poland and Hungary — with Sleszew, Uznanski, Wisniewski and Tiber Kapu respectively — part of the crew, along with commander Peggy Whitson from the US — are collaborators. This shared trajectory among multiple nations illustrates a broader global trend of international collaboration in space exploration.

Shukla's role underscores India's growing technical prowess. His year-long rigorous training, and selection as Aditya-1 pilot, serving as second-in-command to veteran Nasa astronaut Whitson, is a testament to his rigorous training and exceptional capabilities. The scientific experiments Shukla will perform aboard ISS are equally interesting. They are not only crucial for future missions but also for general applications in India.

Aditya has lined up a set of 7 microgravity research experiments, with Shukla also participating in 5 joint studies planned by Nasa for its human research programme. ► **Muscle-flexing** A good example is 'Myogenesis-Iso' investigation. It is well known that astronauts lose muscle mass due to long-term spaceflight. Scientists suspect that microgravity interferes with metabolism in mitochondria, tiny structures within cells that produce energy. The experiment tests the muscle repair process in low gravity. The results would help people on Earth with low-activated muscle loss, and assist athletes recovering from surgery. ► **Dual moment** 'Sprouts' experiment, led by an Israeli astronaut, will germinate seeds of green mung (green gram) and mung (green gram), which form the basis of common nutritious plant-based foods from the basis of common nutritious plant-based foods with therapeutic properties. Growing them in microgravity conditions will inform us on seed growth and use of seeds in long-term space missions. ► **Find the algae rhythm** Algae grow everywhere, and we will find them in space stations and in human bases on planets and their moons. They are also

packed with nutrients. 'Space Microalgae-Iso' programme, to study how microgravity affects microalgae growth, can also assess whether growing them in space can produce a nutritional food source, and also regulate CO₂ levels in closed systems. ► **Super tardiness** The 'Voyager Tardigrade-Iso' experiment involves tardigrades, tiny aquatic organisms that can tolerate the most extreme conditions on Earth. How will they fare in space, where cosmic radiation and ultra-low temperatures can kill most life forms? This investigation can help identify causes of their extreme resilience on Earth, and help in a wide range of research on humans, including that in ageing and disease resistance. ► **Cosmo gizmo** Finally, how do elec-



The right kind of rocket

tronic gadgets and communication work in space? Humans interact with touch-screen devices differently in weightless conditions. Pointing and eye-tracking studies are being conducted. Results could support improved design not only of control devices for future space missions, but also of regular aircraft flights and other more common situations on Earth. Knowledge gained from these experiments will be instrumental in fostering a robust microgravity research ecosystem in India. Aditya is more than just a satellite launch — it's a statement of intent. It highlights India's commitment to becoming a leading player in global space exploration. It moves beyond traditional bilateral government-to-government agreements, to a more complex, multi-stakeholder model involving commercial entities and multiple national space agencies. It will also inspire a new generation of young Indians pursuing STEAM careers, with these exciting applications. As India plans to establish its own space station by 2035, and achieve manned human landing by 2040, missions like Aditya will provide invaluable experience and insights into critical technologies and demonstrate its position as a major player in the global space arena. This mission is not just about reaching ISS. It's also about charting a new course for human spaceflight, built on innovation, collaboration, and a shared vision for the future of humanity among the stars.

The writer is vice-chancellor and professor of physics, Ashoka University, Sonapat, Haryana

Creating Our Own Space

S Somanath

Aditya Mission (Aditya-L1) is all set to dock at ISS today. The international crew, including India's Shubhanshu Shukla, will conduct over 60 experiments in microgravity biology, health sciences, AI and materials research. Shukla's experience will bolster India's Gaganyaan mission, slated for 2025-27, and enhance its preparedness for future human spaceflight.

As Shukla begins his mission, India's scientific contributions are also making their presence felt in space. ► **Research Ax-4** carries with it 7 cutting-edge experiments focusing on space biology and bioengineering. ► **Microalgae growth** under space research by International Centre for Genetic Engineering & Biotechnol-

ogy programme, which will validate critical technologies and strengthen mission readiness. By the end of the decade, development of BAS is expected to begin, with its initial module likely to launch around 2028. Together, Gaganyaan and BAS will become twin pillars of India's human spaceflight efforts, both as platforms for advanced research and hubs for international collaboration.

The global space landscape is evolving rapidly. Several commercial and national space stations are either planned or under construction. These include the European Space Station, Blue Origin's Orbital Reef, StarLink (a US-Japan Orbital Reef), Russia's proposed ROS, Nasa's Lunar Gateway, and China's Tiangong Station. These ventures reflect a shift from purely government-led missions to multi-stakeholder platforms supporting research, industry and space tourism.

To remain an active and influential participant in this new era, India must deepen its international engagements, forging partnerships with global agencies and private space firms. This will not only expand opportunities for Indian astronauts to fly aboard missions beyond Gaganyaan, but also reinforce India's position as a vital contributor to humanity's shared journey into space.

As it highlights the increasing importance of science diplomacy and technological exchange in a rapidly evolving, multipolar space ecosystem. India, it rekindles the space-faring legacy first ignited in 1964 with cosmonaut Rakesh Sharma, and now, as India's space journey enters the next era of space exploration, it stands as a testament to India's independent and globally integrated role in human spaceflight.

Aditya is not merely a journey to ISS but also a bold leap into the future, unlocking new pathways of scientific discovery, international cooperation and the vast potential of human presence beyond Earth.

It stands as a powerful symbol of how India is poised to leapfrog into the next era of space exploration, not as a follower but as a frontrunner in shaping the future of human spaceflight.

A defining trait of India's space journey has been Isro's philosophy of learning before leading. India has strategically partnered global agencies to absorb knowledge, develop expertise and build indigenous capabilities. From early collaborations with the Soviet Union and Nasa to mastering satellite tech, launch vehicles, interplanetary navigation and human spaceflight, Isro has consistently transformed each international engagement into a foundation for self-reliant progress. As another such milestone, an opportunity to learn from the best, and then translate those insights into India's own systems, missions and ambitions, Isro reinforces a model that has long defined Isro's brand: quiet resilience, scientific excellence and pursuit of sovereign strength in space.

The writer is former chairman, Isro



THE SPEAKING TREE

Being So Judgemental?

THICH NHAT HANH

When we look at a human being, we look deeply enough to see that an individual is made of many elements: society, education, parents, ancestors, culture and so on. If we don't see all these elements, we don't fully see the person. If he has the tendency to behave in a negative manner, it doesn't mean that he likes to behave that way, but that he may be a victim of transmission. The negative seeds in him may have been transmitted to him by his society, his parents, his ancestors or his culture.

When you realise this, it will be easier to have compassion for him. This way of looking at yourself and others will be motivated by the desire to do something to change the environment, the culture, so that the next generation will not be a victim of transmission.

When you look deeply at yourself and you notice one of your strengths, you know you have inherited it from your parents, your grandparents, your culture and so on. Likewise, you see the negative things in yourself, such as fear, anger and discrimination that may have been transmitted to you by your parents and ancestors.

Your parents and ancestors were not able to transform themselves, that is why they have passed these things to you. But you have an opportunity to transform so that you will not transmit these negative things to your children. This way of looking at yourself and others will give you understanding, compassion and a desire to act in order to transform.

STEP UP TO THE PLATE

Onjium Seoul

Onjium — literally 'creating completely' — is a cultural archive served on a plate. Tucked beside Gyeongbuk Palace in Seoul's Jongno district, this culinary studio is part of an institute that has studied Korean heritage since 2003. Here, food is the result of deep research: chef Cho Eun-hee and Park Sang-bee craft seasonal dishes inspired by centuries-old Korean recipes, reinterpreted with finesse for modern palates.

To visit the market every week, such as Noryangjin fish market or Gyeongdong market, to find the ingredients.

Park, adding, 'Our ancestors were clever to notice how a radish tastes sweeter in winter, compared to its taste in summer. Bamboo shoots are salted during spring and stored away to be eaten during autumn when they have fermented.'

Expect offerings like mumsok-juk (seasoned octopus salad), dalgma (deep-fried glutinous rice dessert dusted with pine nut powder), and an octopus pairing of pork belly and abalone (marine snail). Each dish is elegant, earthy and rooted in memory.

Onjium's serene interiors overlook palace grounds, while other floors house exhibitions of hanbok (traditional clothing) and miniature houses (traditional homes). History and gastronomy — what else can one ask for?

Chat Room

Catastrophes And Cautisyls

Agroporn 'Of Cats and Caught Tongues' by T.K. Arum, June 23, India has managed a tightrope walk through 3 major and ongoing armed conflicts, despite the insinuating nations align with its economic and political interests. In the last 7 decades, we've come to be a major actor in international politics. Much of this must be attributed to the strategic foreign policy crafted under Nehru soon after Independence. In 1944, he wrote in 'Discovery of India' that 'India will develop as the centre of economic and cultural importance to play a great part in security problems of Asia, Indian Ocean, and West and South-east Asia'. Prophetically, the ethos remains as practical and relevant. In a world destined to become more multipolar, India's foreign policy, founded on unflinching active non-alignment, could well serve as a fulcrum to global equity and progress. R Narayanan Neei Mumbai

Why Israel Seized the Ceasefire



Athagatha Bhattacharya

Now that there's a ceasefire between Iran and Israel after a 12-day aerial and missile war, it's important to understand why the conflict happened, and why it ended.

Benjamin Netanyahu has been on a sticky domestic wreck for a long time. Corruption cases against him and his wife are reportedly iron-clad. The only thing that stopped a near-civil war situation in Israel in Hamas' attacks on Oct 7, 2023. That banded Israelis together as the country embarked on a mission to flatten Gaza. Israel's senseless act of targeting civilians, accompanied by its political leadership's support for means like forced starvation, cutting off of electricity and water, all point to a bleak economic and political future.

It is in that background that IAEA's statement on Tehran not being transparent with its nuclear research programme, that instantly became a fodder for a wider war, one if waged, would not just draw out the popular resentment against Netanyahu, but also carried the promise of drawing the US into the fire.

political and military top brass, and that the Iranian people will rise up and topple the regime. It had invested in nurturing resentment within Iran for years, building Humint assets who proved pretty effective in the first 3 days of the war. Israel banked on a short war like the 1967 Six Day War. That was a cardinal error. As Iran's nuclear programme and drones started hitting critical military and industrial facilities in Israel many times a day, it became evident that this was the tip of the iceberg, and that Iran could go on for weeks, even months. Israeli anti-missile systems were running woefully short of expensive missiles, which take time to build. Israel is a small country of about 22,000 sq km. In a long war it would have suffered immeasurably more than a country about 70x its size and with

10x its population. Israel couldn't have won a war of attrition with Iran, some think its military leadership started to realise. Also, Iranian society coalesced around its political leadership, with even the regime's critics standing behind the government against Israeli belligerence. When was Netanyahu sent an SOS message to Donald Trump. By then, the US, too, had started smelling the proverbial oil.

USAF bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities was strange in the way it was conducted. Satellite images dating back to June 19 showed frequent activity of heavy duty trucks at Fordow nuclear centre in Qom. It looked like the facility was being evacuated by air and exit gates covered by massive mountain of earth. The post-strike satellite image of Fordow showed 3 hits on the top of the granite mountain, and 3 more down by 80 m on the side. Now, Fordow's contour mapping reveals that the centrifuges and storage chambers are all located beneath the mountain, reportedly at a depth of about 80 m from the base. The mountain itself is over a km tall. Now, assuming 12,000-ton GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrators (MOPs), a.k.a. 'bunker busters', were sent into the US, 2 per hole, penetration would have been impossible beyond 100 m, considering the structure is a solid granite mountain. This still falls nearly 100 m 1 km short of where the facility is.

The nuclear facility, which was non-operational for quite some time, had two MOPs dropped into its underground facilities. But Isfahan, which

is operational, was only targeted by Tomahawks, none of which can penetrate underground bunkers. While Trump went around boasting how B-2 bombers 'completely and totally obliterated' Iran's nuclear facilities, JD Vance dropped a bombshell, saying almost 400 kg of enriched uranium — enough for at least 10 atom bombs — was uncovered. Iran's nuclear concerns, also echoed by Israeli authorities, who said equipment had been removed from Natanz and Isfahan. Remember, Tehran had already said they were in the process of commissioning a fourth enrichment facility, but did not divulge its location.

By then, both Israel and the US came to certain realisations. ► Iran's nuclear programme could have been set back by a few months, not destroyed.

► Attempt at regime change had failed. ► Iran's nuclear programme was not achieved from air and sea. Israel doesn't have forces or resources for a land invasion. The US and Nato militaries are under-prepared for that purpose.

► A long series of attrition will destroy Israel, bleed the US economy, and possibly even event a battered Iran's position as the most influential power in the region. Both sides had a significant part of their defensive war capabilities severely impaired, while retaining offensive capabilities. That would have hurt Israel with its small geography and economy. Hence, the US stepping in and getting both sides to agree to a ceasefire.

The writer is an independent journalist

Intact after contact: Isfahan nuclear enrichment facility two days after US bombing

THE ASIAN AGE

26 JUNE 2025

Ceasefire the best option: A win for US, Israel & Iran

For the first time in the history of horse racing, a triple dead heat was recorded in 1944, at the Aqueduct racetrack in Queens, New York. Iran, Israel and the US President Donald Trump claiming victory in the 12-day war that has just had the pause button hit on it may be the first such incident of a triple dead heat in the world of international relations, diplomacy and dialogue.

Israel believes it knocked out most of Iran's air defence and missile launching capabilities besides striking at its nuclear fuel processing facilities and eliminating key members of its defence, science and engineering corps. More significantly, the perpetrator of the air battles, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, convinced the United States into joining a war in the Middle East, a first in 22 years.

In showing that Israel's famed Iron Dome defence can be breached at will when hit with multi-directional missile launches, Iran can claim victory. Besides, it also ran a choreographed attack on the US air base in Qatar, with pre-warnings to ensure no damage was inflicted and could still claim to have attacked the US even if it did so ominously on the soil of close ally Qatar.

Joining the two claimants to victory was the US President Trump who has stopped so many wars as to promote his candidature for a honorary Nobel for lifetime achievement in the style of Hollywood's Oscars, but who may have rendered himself ineligible for the Nobel Peace Prize because he dropped 15 of the mother of all bombs — 13,600-kg bunker-busters — on two of Iran's nuclear fuel enrichment sites while hitting a third with Tomahawks. At the end of it all, assuming of course that the tenuous ceasefire which Trump trumpets holds, who has won and who lost is a matter of deep conjecture. Doubts over claims that Iran's nuclear bomb ambition has been wiped out have been raised, including one from inside the Pentagon. And Trump has been shooting down the messenger lest his bombast fails to deliver its intended message of an all-powerful US military.

Iran may be only months away from processing the 60 per cent enriched fuel it may have safeguarded, which means the very purpose of this Israeli scheme to take down an existential threat may have been defeated, though it had to endure civilian suffering and deaths in the Iran offensive. The deaths of Iranians, about 600 to Israel's 40, and the loss of some key personnel are a measure of what damage the war wrought.

The Israel-Iran war of June 2025 illustrates the need for learning the classic lesson of there being only losers in a war. America's military might has not been fully endorsed, Iran's relative weaknesses not wholly exploited even as its supreme leader hid in a bunker and Israel's military operations against Iran and its proxies in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon and Yemen have not brought it all the assurance and security it seeks in a volatile neighbourhood.

There came a point in the war when ceasefire seemed the best way out for all nations involved. Iran could not possibly wage a two-front war involving the US without risking further the nuclear fuel assets it may still possess. Israel has taken enough hits to its economy and its physical infrastructure despite all the success of seriously impeding opponents' abilities to keep striking it.

Under a whimsical President who acts on the instincts of a bargaining businessman, the US could not stay tuned to a "forever war" in faraway land, which was also one that Trump ordered without Congressional approval. It is best then that the triple dead heat be declared the result.

Act swiftly on aviation lapses

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation's surprise checks on the operations of key players in the aviation sector such as airlines, airports and aircraft maintenance companies have exposed serious systemic slackness within India's aviation ecosystem. Its findings paint a profoundly unsettling picture, which include repeated maintenance lapses, unserviceable ground equipment and outdated safety infrastructure, such as worn tyres and unsecured life vests.

In the aviation sector, every operational aspect could directly affect the safety of passengers, and this level of negligence is criminal and indefensible. As shown in Air India's Boeing Dreamliner crash, even a momentary oversight by airport authorities could cost several hundreds of lives. However, if the slackness in the aviation sector is so pervasive, the safety of air travellers would be at a grave risk.

While the DGCA's decision to conduct surprise audits is commendable, the practice should not be sporadic and must be institutionalised. It must form the backbone of a continuously evolving safety culture. It should learn from best practices adopted globally. It should introduce real-time digital tracking of maintenance issues through a centralised logbook system that ensures no defect is overlooked. Ground safety, which has long been neglected, must be prioritised. Infrastructure audits should be conducted through drone surveys and GIS mapping.

India needs a truly independent and empowered air safety body, which is free of government or airline influence. Instead of recruiting only process-followers, bureaucrats, the regulator body should hire people who are technologically updated and who do not treat fliers as mere numbers. Thanks to an aspiring population and the world's largest middle class, India's aviation sector has a great growth potential. However, the growth cannot come at the cost of passenger safety. The skies must be kept safe — by choice and not by chance.

THE ASIAN AGE

Subhani



Refugees & asylum: How UK, India positions vary



Sunanda K. Datta-Ray
Reflections

If Britain really had been "broken" and "broken", as the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, put it, his government would not have dared to sanction two far-right Israeli politicians over the "repeated incidents of violence against Palestinian communities" in the occupied West Bank, thereby earning the wrath of both US President Donald Trump and his protégé, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right. Britain, one of the most tolerant countries in the world, has always tried to do its duty although the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, condemned the UK's agreement with Rwanda to outsource refugees as "incompatible with the letter and spirit of the 1961 Convention" which sets out refugees' rights and the obligations of states to protect them. The UK is a signatory of the convention, which not only allows people to seek asylum in any country they choose but also forbids penalisation on account of irregular entry, meaning that the way a person travels to the destination should not affect the asylum claim.

Yet, despite the Rwanda agreement, Britain has never evaded or avoided its global commitment, which must be contrasted with India's position on the UN Refugee Convention. Home Minister Amit Shah told Parliament that India was not a

"dharma-shala" for the world's homeless and would not sign it. Tolerant, generous and hospitable beyond the BJP's conception, the British government seeks to control the human flow through a rigorous application of due processes before granting refugee status. Sending asylum seekers from the UK anywhere else to have their claims processed is thought to undermine international law.

Hence, the Migration and Economic Development Partnership that Boris Johnson announced as Prime Minister, saying that "anyone entering the UK illegally — as well as those who have arrived illegally since January 1, 2022 — may now be relocated to Rwanda". Mr Johnson followed up by announcing on April 14, 2022 that Britain would end asylum seekers to the Republic of Rwanda, which would decide their asylum claims. If successful, they would be granted asylum in Rwanda, not the UK.

His aim was "to deter people from making dangerous journeys to the UK to seek asylum, which are facilitated by criminal smugglers, when they have already travelled through safe third countries". The plan's other stated purpose was to prevent men, women and children crossing the English Channel in small and dangerous boats that often capsized, drowning all on board.

Perhaps condemnation might not have been so widespread if the Johnson government had not evoked memories of extensive human rights violations and crimes against humanity (as listed by a 2010 United Nations report) during the protracted civil war between Rwanda's ethnic Hutus and Tutsis. But something being better than nothing, even this plan was preferable to India's blunt rejection of the principle of "Atithi Devo Bhava". Given the

As of July 2024, Britain spent at least £318 million on the Rwanda scheme. It was then cancelled. But India's refusal to consider refuge for the few like the Muslim Rohingyas, who have no other choice, remains.

sad reality that 43.4 million people worldwide are refugees, a civilised nation like Britain could not just refuse hospitality or indicate (as our Citizenship Amendment Act does) that human concerns are only for people of one religion. The guilty Israelis, national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, were both banned from entering Britain, where their assets were frozen as part of the measures announced by British foreign secretary (minister) David Lammy. Mr Lammy accuses them of "inciting extremist violence and serious abuses of Palestinian human rights". Australia, Norway, Canada and New Zealand look simultaneous concerted action.

Britain can afford to risk reprisal by defying powerful opinion at home and abroad because its growth since the 18th century, when it was the first nation to industrialise, has been sustained not just by economic one-upmanship but also a sense of morality. If it hadn't been for this back-around Britain, with a population of about 69 million, would not have recorded a net migration of 90,000 — the highest-ever in the year ending June 2023. This net figure measured the difference between an inflow of around 1.3 million long-term immigrants and an outflow of 414,000 emigrating abroad.

The British scheme, full of holes and open to abuse has also been abolished. But India's adamant refusal to consider refuge for the few like the Muslim Rohingyas, who apply to India because they have no other choice, remains.

vessels in 2024 represented a 25 per cent increase over the previous year. On November 15, 2023, the UK's Supreme Court declared the policy unlawful because Rwanda was not a safe country to which asylum seekers could be removed.

Responding to the Supreme Court's judgment, the government published a new treaty with Rwanda providing additional safeguards and introducing new legislation, which declared that Rwanda was safe for asylum seekers. On April 25, 2024, the UK's treaty with Rwanda was ratified, and the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 became law and became operational.

Since winning the 2024 general election and forming a new government, Britain's new ruling Labour Party has cancelled the Rwanda scheme and announced that it will redress money intended for the scheme to fund a new border agency. This applies to all who have claimed asylum, regardless of whether or not they are refugees. Anyone relocated to Rwanda would have had their claims assessed there, those who were recognised as refugees would not have been eligible to return to the UK.

Publicly available information suggests that, as of July 2024, Britain had spent at least £318 million on the Rwanda scheme. It was compulsory, whereas Israel's "voluntary departure" scheme presented the flight to Rwanda as a choice. Unlike the UK, which publicly announced its plans, Israel never had any official agreement with Rwanda although some 4,000 Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers based in Israel were sent to Rwanda and Uganda between 2013 and 2018, before the secretive arrangement was abandoned. The British scheme, full of holes and open to abuse has also been abolished. But India's adamant refusal to consider refuge for the few like the Muslim Rohingyas, who apply to India because they have no other choice, remains.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS
LIBERTY PARAMOUNT

The editorial, "Look back at Emergency, it shouldn't happen again" (June 25, 2025), is a stark and timely reminder of the dangers posed by authoritarian overreach during the Emergency. It effectively recounts how a democratic mandate was twisted into autocratic rule, with devastating consequences for civil liberties. As a large section of today's population has no living memory of those 21 months, this historical reflection is essential. The call to preserve institutional checks and freedoms remains as urgent now as it was then.

K. Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

NO REAL PEACE

THE WORLD watched with cautious relief as Donald Trump suddenly shifted from boasting about "obliterating" Iran's nuclear programme to announcing a ceasefire in 12-day Israel-Iran war — an abrupt turn that felt oddly familiar by now. All sides — America, Israel, and Iran — claimed some form of victory, and for a moment, there was hope that the worst had passed. But that hope was quickly tested when fresh strikes broke out just hours into the ceasefire. Trump, clearly irritated, publicly scolded Israel, pushing Netanyahu to promise restraint, while Iran signalled its readiness to step back too. Though the fighting paused, the deeper problems still simmer — unresolved nuclear questions, Iran's possible exit from the NPT, and the ongoing Gaza crisis. So while the world clings to this fragile ceasefire, it knows real peace is still far off.

Amarjeet Kumar
Hazratnagar

PFI THRIVING IN KERALA

THE BANNED Popular Front of India (PFI) has a hit list of around 972 people, including a former district judge of Kerala, according to documents submitted in court by the National Investigation Agency. PFI has three wings, Reporters Wing, Physical and Arms Training Wing/PF and Service Wing/Hit teams. The government had in September 2022 banned PFI and associated groups for five years accusing them of having links with global terror groups like ISIS. But recently, PFI activists tortured a male woman for simply speaking to a male business acquaintance and humiliated her father, a local CPI(M) worker, leading to her suicide.

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu

P.K. Mishra and Shaktikanta Das
new power couple
of South Block

Since February, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has been operating for the first time with two full principal secretaries, P.K. Mishra and Shaktikanta Das. The arrangement reflects the scale of ambition in Modi 3.0 — fast-track delivery, tighter coordination, and a laser focus on 2030 goals. Mr Mishra oversees economic ministries, infrastructure, and appointments; Mr Das oversees key service ministries like health, agriculture, and education. The division is logical, and the intention is unmistakable — cut through bottlenecks and compress decision cycles. But, observers note, with more power now flowing into two unelected officials, what becomes of the ministers? When every major call is either cleared or nudged from the top, ministerial leadership risks being reduced to a relay function. They are waiting for signals, rather than setting direction. And this isn't just about turf, it's also about institutional resilience. Concentrating so much decision-making within the PMO creates a single point of failure. Both Mr Mishra and Mr Das are immensely capable, but no governance model should depend on individual caprice alone. The real tension here is between speed and depth. A centralised structure may get more

done, faster. But it also limits scrutiny and the open debate that democratic systems rely on. Under Mr Modi, India's ambitions are large and long-term. A double-engine PMO may well accelerate project execution, but only if ministries remain more than just delivery arms. Otherwise, what looks like efficiency may, over time, expose its own fragility. The South Block can steer, but the engine of governance needs all its parts running, not just the ones closest to the PM.

FOREIGN OFFICE'S EXIT LEAVES
A VOID AND MANY QUESTIONS

There's a rustling in the forests of Uttarakhand. It's the collective disbelief over the sudden, near-mysterious departure of Dr Dhyananjoy Mohan, the state's head of forest force (HoFF). A top-notch forest officer, a Dehradun native, an IIT Kanpur gold medalist, and a bird expert of global repute, Dr Mohan wasn't exactly a babe yet to expect to vanish from service in 24 hours flat. And yet, he did. His Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) application, submitted on June 20, 2025, comes before superannuation, was accepted with the kind of speed usually reserved for emergency transfers or political exits. He had even applied for leave to visit Bengaluru from

June 25 to July 2. What changed is the big question. Officially, there's no explanation. Unofficially, there are too many. Sources have told DKB that some believe that Dr Mohan's hallmark integrity may have been his undoing. Another view holds that he was too methodical for a system that wants instant decisions. Then there's the speculation about a political scandal around sapling procurement under the Miyawaki project that may have created enough unease for someone to want a quick reshuffle. It's ironic and also troubling that a man who lived for forests might have been nudged out by the very ecosystem he sought to protect. If that's the case, it's not just a babe we've lost; it is a warning bell for honest public service. CBOT'S TOP DECK SHUFFLE: FRESH BLOOD OR MORE OF THE SAME? Another mouth, another round of top-level musical chairs. This time, it's the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) gearing up for a shuffle. Or, possibly, just a slow remix. Chairman Ravi Agrawal's extended innings ends on June 30, and with him, two other senior members — Prabodh Seth (administration) and R.N. Parbat (legislation) — are also on their way

out. Or are they? If the whispers in North Block are to be believed, Mr Agrawal may just get another run, this time on a contractual basis. Now, while some observers argue continuity is key in tax administration, there's a growing section in the revenue service that is itching for fresh blood. And for good reason. A new CBDT line-up could trigger long-overdue changes down the chain — DGs, PCITs, and other key field positions — several of which are already vacant or about to be. There's also the optics question. Post-election, this is one of the first major senior-level bureaucratic reshuffles in the making. Will the Centre play it safe and stick with familiar hands, or signal a bold reform? The income tax department, like much of India's bureaucracy, often functions in a delicate balance between experience and inertia. The hope is that this transition isn't just about who sits in the big chair, but whether the system around gets sharper, swifter and with a little less status quo. Low me, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com

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

— Ramnath Goenka

PLUG LEAKAGE IN JOB SCHEME, BUT DON'T STOP PAYING SEEKERS

A recent order by the Calcutta High Court has far-reaching implications not only for the biggest job scheme in the world, but also for cooperative federalism in the world's largest democracy. A division bench of the court comprising Chief Justice T S Sivagnanam and Justice Chaitral Chatterjee Das has directed the Union government to resume payments under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in West Bengal, whose clearances were stopped more than three years ago. By the Centre's own submission in the Rajya Sabha in February 2024, its wage liabilities owed to the eastern state were ₹2,765 crore—the highest by far among all states and more than the combined dues owed to Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.

The Centre withheld funds to West Bengal after alleging irregularities such as public money siphoned off through fake job cards. However, the court stated, "Only because of certain irregularities, the allotment of funds of a particular scheme cannot be sent to cold storage for years... As some samples were found rotten, the other applies cannot be deprived of their legitimate claims." The court also allowed the Union government to transfer the funds directly to the beneficiaries' accounts. Following multiple complaints of malpractice lodged with the Union rural development ministry, the Centre sent over 20 teams to investigate the anomalies in the state, which revealed irregularities in multiple districts. Subsequently, the Centre ordered the state to recover the siphoned funds and initiate police action against those involved.

Although the court order clarified that the ruling applies only to Bengal, at a time jobs—especially for those at the bottom of the pyramid—are increasingly hard to come by, it reflects on the kindness of the governing class. Funds have been blocked when the total allocation for MGNREGA has gone down from an actual spend of ₹88,751 crore in 2023-24 to an estimate of ₹85,428 crore for 2025-26. Even for other welfare schemes such as food distribution, the government has been advised not to stop handouts because of technical glitches or corruption. Direct benefit transfers, that were expanded to reduce the latter malaise, have contributed to the former. Large schemes such as MGNREGA are a lifeline for crores of Indians. While the fight against corruption must continue, essential support cannot be cut off to punish administrative lapses.

FIX KABINI DAM SOON TO AVERT DISASTER

THE 51-year-old Kabini dam in Karnataka's Mysuru district has raised serious concerns after an inspection. Underwater robots and cameras deployed by the Irrigation department recently detected a crack of up to half a metre and a cavity through which water is leaking. The dam is on Kapila river, a tributary of the Cauvery, and is crucial to provide water for irrigation, drinking and power generation in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, between whom water-sharing is a very sensitive issue. Kapila as a feeder to Cauvery benefits the Karnataka districts of Mandya, Hassan, Tumakuru, Ramanagara, Mysuru, and the state capital Bengaluru, besides the Tamil Nadu districts of Thanjavur, Tiruvallur, Nagapattinam, Mayiladuthurai, Pudukkottai, Cuddalore and Ramanathapuram.

The Kabini reservoir is almost up to the brim, recording 2,278.4 feet against the maximum storage height of 2,284 feet, due to persistent heavy rains in its catchment area over the past few days. Any weakening of the structure leading to more water leakage could pose severe problems for the downstream Krishnaraja Sagara dam, which is already filled up to 120.9 feet against a maximum height of 124.8 feet. Unusual flows from these dams would not just adversely affect agricultural activities in the delta regions of the two states, but a worse-case scenario like a structural collapse can be catastrophic with flooding of parts of Mysuru and Kodagu.

Although experts have ruled out an immediate threat to the Kabini dam structure, they have insisted that any neglect or delay in filling the cavity and crack can have disastrous consequences. Irrigation department officials are preparing a report for the ₹85-crore strengthening work to present to the Union government and are expecting to invite project bids in November. High turbidity of the water is claimed to be an obstacle for professional divers to do the filling up right away, raising the question why maintenance works were not taken up when the reservoir's levels were not as high. Dam Safety Act, 2002 mandates both the state and central institutional frameworks to undertake regular maintenance. The Karnataka and Union governments must work together on a war-footing despite their political differences to avert any catastrophe arising from delayed maintenance work at these crucial sites.

QUICK TAKE

BIG WAVE IN BIG APPLE

A 33-year-old politician of Indian origin has upset the Big Apple. Zohran Kwanze Mamdani—son of scholar Mahmood Mamdani and filmmaker Mira Nair—has stunned the world by clinching the Democratic nomination to be New York's mayor against severe odds. Given voters' orientation in America's largest city, Zohran is expected to win in November against the Republican nominee. The socialist's success follows those of other Indian-origin politicians from the other side of the political divide, on the other side of the Atlantic. Like the Mamdanis, the families of Rishi Sunak, Priti Patel and Sushma Swarney have also driven out from East Africa. It remains to be seen how far a brown man with a Muslim-African name goes in a US governed by Donald Trump, who made a career out of railing against a black man with a Muslim-African name.

On this day 50 years ago, we published in this space a prescient column by one of the most prominent journalists of the time. Penned before the midnight declaration of Emergency on June 25, 1975, it exhorted Indira Gandhi to accept the Supreme Court order against her election and walk away from the Prime Minister's seat. We reprint it in full here

THE LAST CAUTION BEFORE EMERGENCY

KULDIP NAYAR

Journalist, parliamentarian and diplomat who passed away in 2010



A new element. It concerns the party strength in the Lok Sabha. True, the loss of Mrs Gandhi's vote does not make any difference and it does not matter whether the party has 350 or 349 members in the Lok Sabha. But the matter transcends numbers. It relates to the stature and moral authority of the Prime Minister who cannot vote in the Lok Sabha, but will continue to be its leader. This is an anomalous situation which will get murkier as the days go by. The effect will be felt all along in the administration. At the same time, the cleavage in the country will grow.

But somehow most Congress leaders seem to be convinced that the blot of conditional stay will be washed away by orchestrated demonstrations in Mrs Gandhi's support. They have plans to refurbish her image by going back to the

1960-brand slogans and by indulging in the same old populism. They, however, forget that the mood of the country is now different. Mrs Gandhi's own credibility is low. Many people believe that radicalism is the creed which she espouses when she is in a difficulty.

They ask for her achievements since 1966 when she became Prime Minister. The Bangladesh liberation, however commendable, has not improved the common man's lot. People know too well that the value of the rupee has gone down by 34 percent in the last two years alone and the poverty line has dipped still lower to cover 10 percent more of the population. This means the very poor are now 50 percent against 40 percent a year ago.

The Congress chief ministers, who assembled in Delhi to ensure that the

party's MPs in their states vote for Mrs Gandhi, have agreed to "radical land reforms", the "cancellation" of rural indebtedness and so on. But, by now, they as well as the people know that all that is promised is not meant to be implemented.

People have experienced again and again the fact that a party which depends on the landed aristocracy to "catch" votes and collect funds for elections only talks of progressive steps. The World Bank, in its latest report, has once again pointed out that land reforms have remained mainly on paper. And it is an open secret that every economic policy or decision has a price tag.

Therefore, the "progressive" stance will neither help Mrs Gandhi and other Congress leaders to divert the attention of people nor water down the odium of the conditional stay. In fact, the populist demonstrations may lead to violent clashes, particularly when the opposition prepares a countryside agitation.

It is quite possible that a harassed and irritated government may adopt more authoritarian measures to suppress the opposition point of view. The opposition is not all that restrained or pure. The danger is that a battle which should be fought within the precincts of the law courts may go to the streets. In that atmosphere, how would it be possible for the Supreme Court, or any court, to decide things coolly and dispassionately and give the verdict when it meets on July 14 and later?

If Mrs Gandhi could only step down till the Supreme Court gave its judgement, which might be available by the end of August. At present, it appears that there are great risks in her doing so because an interim successor can take steps to perpetuate himself. But Mrs Gandhi's advantage is that her equation with the masses is still larger than that of any other Congress leader. In this election year, Congressmen will need her all the more.

By stepping down now, she will give a lie to the propaganda that she wants to stay in power at any cost. She will also save the nation from an endless controversy. And when she comes back after an interregnum, she will be the entire country's leader, not of the Congress alone. (From our archives)

SOLVING INDIA'S POVERTY PUZZLE

K N NINAN

Professor of economics, IISc, Bengaluru and Lead Author, CEO, UNEP-Naard

As corporate profits have surged. Oxford's inequality report for India shows the richest 1 percent controlled more than 40 percent of the country's total wealth, whereas the bottom 50 percent owned a mere 3 percent. About 73 percent of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the top 1 percent, whereas the bottom half reported a mere 1 percent increase in their wealth.

Then what explains this steep decline in poverty? There is no doubt that the safety nets provided by the government such as the provision of free foodgrains to over 60 percent of the population and subsidised LPG to poor households largely explain it.



While a World Bank report claims India's poverty rates have fallen sharply, other studies show that falling deprivation remains a deeply challenging endeavour. While the government's safety nets have helped, India must fix its unemployment problem and grow at a much faster rate if it is to eradicate poverty in the near future

However, if less than a twentieth are extremely poor in India, one may question the justification for providing free foodgrains to three-fifths of the population overlooking its adverse fiscal implications and impact on agricultural prices.

Unlike the monetary-based poverty line used by the World Bank, the UNDP's multidimensional poverty index

(MPI) measures the extent of deprivation based on 10 health, education and standard of living indicators. Based on it, India reported 234 million people as multidimensionally poor in 2024. The poverty rate in terms of this broader definition of deprivation was 16.4 percent. India along with Pakistan, Ethiopia, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo accounted for nearly half the global multidimensionally poor population of 1.1 billion people.

According to the National Family Health Survey conducted in 2019-21, despite the government's initiatives to address malnutrition such as POSHAN and Integrated Child Development Services, about 35.5 percent of children aged under 5 years are stunted, 19.3 percent 'wasted', and 32.1 percent underweight. Further, 7.7 percent of children are 'severely wasted', or are facing acute malnutrition.

Unemployment among youth, women and rural people continues to be high alongside wage stagnation among workers. As per the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey data released by the Union ministry of statistics, the unemployment rate among youth in the age group 15-29 years in rural areas rose to 13.7 percent in May 2024 and 17.9 percent in urban areas. Unemployment rates for women also rose to 8.8 percent. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy states that India's youth unemployment rate during the past decade has hovered around 22 percent. Critics therefore refer to the past decade as one characterised by jobless growth.

India still has a long way to go before poverty can be totally eradicated. For this to happen, India's annual GDP growth rate needs to be accelerated to 10 percent or more. While it is laudable that India has outstripped Japan in total economic output, the GDP per capita in India—at \$2,711 in 2024—is still a tenth of that in Japan, where it is at \$33,950.

(Views are personal) (ninankn@yahoo.co.in)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Persian partnership

Ref: India forgets 'smart power' lesson of Rao (Jun 25). India should adopt independent stances like the columnist's admirable mention of the anecdote when Iran voted against an OIC resolution at a UN forum in Geneva 30 years ago. Similar bold stances can tackle the renewed disruption of global peace. H Syed Othman, Trinovelli

Fragile peace

Ref: Glimmer of peace, but crucial issues deeper to fester (Jun 25). The ceasefire hides deeper tensions as China engages quietly, Gulf states remain cautious and cyber warfare intensifies. The rising refugee crisis and disrupted oil market make the conflict global. The pause seems temporary and hints at a dangerous future. Abhinav Barathi, Chennai

Road risks

Ref: Country of potholes (Jun 25). Blame games and sarcasm continue while citizens are forced to endure tortuous daily with huge risks. Accountability is sadly missing in our system. It surely would be historic if the relevant agencies to actually arrive at a solution. Rajarao Kumar, email

Kashmiri ethos

Ref: Hearing the call of the valley (Jun 25). The attempt to disrupt peace failed miserably with widespread condemnation. People's spirit of electoral participation and voter turnout carried a powerful message. Kashmir is progressing towards economic development by barring outside intervention. SKanthimathinath, email

Mailable dissent

Ref: Emergency dissenters (Mailbag, Jun 25). Jagjivan Ram and H N Bahuguna were silent dissenters. They did not resign from the Congress till elections were declared by Indira Gandhi. They did not go to prison, which was not a common luxury for her actual dissenters. Shreeam Paranjape, Bengaluru

Yorkshire yorker

Ref: England take Leeds & India hopes (Jun 25). India's defeat is a sobering reminder that early advantage means little without sustained discipline. The second innings' batting collapse and uninspired fielding nullified the hard-fought lead on the first day. Test cricket rewards consistency and composure, and less than that will be drawn quickly. K Chidambaram, email



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Love looks through a telescope; envy, through a microscope
Josh Billings

778 power outages daily in 2024: Can Goa see light finally?

Despite huge investments in the power sector in the past two years, Goa's common man was let down by massive outages and infrastructure failures in 2024-25. The government's claim of spending over Rs 5,000 crore in the past two years to improve the power supply seems hollow when compared to the grim reality shown in complaint data and the State's long-standing power issues. This disconnect raises important questions about how effective these financial efforts have been and the actual state of Goa's power infrastructure.

Firstly, the quantum of complaints, i.e. an average of 778 per day in 2024-25 paints a sorry picture. Over 2.84 lakh complaints about power failures, along with another 50,000 related to billing errors and faulty meters, reveal deep-rooted problems that successive upgrades have failed to fix.

On the contrary, data showed that power failures have increased during peak seasons. The first quarter alone saw over 79,000 complaints, and there were 91,949 during the monsoon months when weather-related damage worsens existing weaknesses.

The main causes of outages—fuse blowouts (67%), snapped service lines, faults in distribution lines, and failures in underground cables—are basic problems rooted in old, fragile infrastructure. The fact that 77% of outages come from simple fuse blowouts or snapped service lines highlights a weak distribution network that cannot handle routine stresses.

Distribution failures, transformer breakdowns, and grid faults further point to ageing infrastructure that has not been sufficiently modernized, despite the large spending. Moreover, the planned shutdowns—5,678 in a year—serve as a clear reminder that these outages, often seen as necessary for maintenance, still cause inconvenience. This raises the question: Are these scheduled outages a sign of proactive upgrades to infrastructure, or do they show that the system is old and overburdened?

Data suggests that our infrastructure is unable to stand against the challenges of electricity supply. The government's plan for a Rs 6,650 crore upgrade over the next five years, including updating transformers and substations, seems ambitious. However, could there be light at the end of the tunnel, and how much investment would be needed to bring respite to citizens who have been grappling with inconsistent supply?

Goa's power demand—currently around 540 MW, peaking at 750 MW—greatly exceeds the capacity of its ageing infrastructure, making the system inherently weak. The gap between demand and supply, along with unreliable infrastructure, leads to a cycle of outages and consumer dissatisfaction. If investments are not resulting in real improvements, where are we heading?

This situation also raises broader questions about governance and responsibility. Why has the power sector, despite large investments, not been able to provide reliable electricity? Is there a gap between budget allocations and actual implementation? Are maintenance and modernization efforts being held back by bureaucratic delays, corruption, or a lack of technical expertise? These are urgent questions that require immediate attention.

Goa's situation shows that large investments, while necessary, are not enough on their own. We hear about smart meters, but nobody speaks of uninterrupted quality power. Without strategic planning, effective implementation, and a clear focus on strategically upgrading old infrastructure, the power sector will keep disappointing its consumers. The government must face these challenges and prioritize not just spending but also accountability and modernization to make the promise of reliable power a reality for all Goans.

OPEN SPACE >>

Need to replace old ferries with Ro-Ro ferries on all routes

A ferry boat stationed at the Chorao Island ramp partially submerged early Monday morning. Whether it is an operational fault or maintenance issue, the lives of the commuters cannot be put at risk. It is pertinent to note that after much delay the first Roll-on/Roll-off (Ro-Ro) ferry recently did a trial run on the Chorao-Ribandara route. These ferries are larger than traditional ones and can carry vehicles, including cars and two-wheelers, along with passengers. The Ro-Ro ferries are equipped with features like dual passages for entry and exit on both sides. It will benefit daily commuters, office-goers and students. The outdated ferries on all the routes in the state also need to be replaced by Ro-Ro ferries. The Ro-Ro ferry will be a game-changer for river commuting. The government needs to promote the State's diverse river routes as alternate means of transportation to reduce the growing traffic on roads.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

High command's hand

Recent political and cultural shifts witnessed in Goa point towards a quiet recalibration of the State's regional identity



ADV MOSES PINTO

The writer is a Doctoral Researcher working under the Alliance of European Universities and has presented his research works at various Academic Conferences

Introduction: An Uneasy Convergence

The recent political and cultural shifts witnessed in Goa point towards a quiet recalibration of the State's regional identity. With the dismissal of Minister Govind Gaude, the former Minister for Arts and Culture, after he publicly criticised alleged irregularities in the tribal welfare portfolio held by the Chief Minister himself has caused unease among observers. Gaude's dismissal, coinciding with Shah's speech, suggests a pattern of ideological discipline enforced through political control. Seen through the lens of political theory, this reflects what Antonio Gramsci described as "passive revolution", where transformation is achieved not through overt coercion but by neutralising dissent and reshaping cultural norms (Gramsci, 1971/1992). Gaude, a tribal representative and an independent voice within the ruling party, became inconvenient not because of inefficiency, but because of deviation from the expected ideological silence.

Goa's Historical Quest for Special Status

Goa's long-standing demand for special status anchored in cultural preservation, demographic balance, and legal distinctiveness has historically found resonance across ideological divides. The aspiration draws on the State's unique colonial legacy under Portuguese rule, its adoption of the Uniform Civil Code, and its pluralistic population that blends Catholic and Hindu traditions. The movement for special status has always been rooted in a federalist imagination, seeking space for differentiated governance rather than disengagement from national unity (Rodrigues, 2016). Any nationalising ideological push that seeks to flatten this plurality risks destabilising that carefully constructed compact.

Cultural Politics of Language

The statement made by Amit Shah in June 2025 that English speakers in India "will soon feel ashamed" forms part of a recurring political motif. Language here is not merely a medium of communication, but a symbol of allegiance. While English is viewed in Goa as a bridge language with economic utility and historical continuity, Hindi is increasingly promoted at the central level as the true marker of national identity. Such linguistic prioritisation undermines Konkani, a language that itself underwent considerable struggle to be recognised as official in 1987. From the perspective of Goans, this cultural imposition risks reviving anxieties reminiscent of earlier anti-Marathi agitations, whereby the fear of cultural erasure fuelled public mobilisation. Unlike many other states, Goa's language politics are not merely about pedagogy or administration; they are deeply intertwined with identity, faith, and the memory of resistance.

Goa's Chief Minister, Dr Pramod Sawant, has increasingly come to be viewed not as an autonomous regional leader, but as an effective channel for implementing central directives



Removal of a Minister: A Warning to Dissent

The unceremonious removal of Govind Gaude, the former Minister for Arts and Culture, after he publicly criticised alleged irregularities in the tribal welfare portfolio held by the Chief Minister himself has caused unease among observers. Gaude's dismissal, coinciding with Shah's speech, suggests a pattern of ideological discipline enforced through political control. Seen through the lens of political theory, this reflects what Antonio Gramsci described as "passive revolution", where transformation is achieved not through overt coercion but by neutralising dissent and reshaping cultural norms (Gramsci, 1971/1992). Gaude, a tribal representative and an independent voice within the ruling party, became inconvenient not because of inefficiency, but because of deviation from the expected ideological silence.

Pressure to Align with Staunch Nationalism

Goa's Chief Minister, Dr. Pramod Sawant, has increasingly come to be viewed not as an autonomous regional leader, but as an effective channel for implementing central directives. Unlike former Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar who often skillfully negotiated Goa's uniqueness within the national framework Sawant's leadership appears more compliant, favouring a top-down national integration strategy. This transformation reflects a broader trend across BJP-ruled states, where centralised ideological conformity now takes precedence over regional variance. In Goa, this results in a subtle yet pervasive erosion of federal commitments, as local languages, religious syncretism, and institutional peculiarities make way for "Bharatiyata", a centralised idea of Indian-ness.

Cascade Effect: From Cultural Flattening to Federal Erosion

The convergence of events linguistic sidelining, ministerial removal, and ideological consolidation has triggered a cascading effect that impacts multiple spheres: Educational institutions now face pressure to adopt Hindi or Sanskrit content over English-medium instruction, despite Goa's strong record in English-language higher ed-

ucation. Religious minorities perceive increased marginalisation, especially when public funds are increasingly channelled into Hindu temple restoration with little parallel support for other faith-based heritage (Fernandes, 2020). Civil society spaces, especially those involved in art and literature, feel a growing sense of constraint, with government patronage increasingly linked to ideological conformity. These outcomes align with what political sociologist Christophe Jaffrelot terms "ethno-democracy", a structure in which democratic form persists, but substantive pluralism is replaced by majoritarian normativity (Jaffrelot, 2007).

Federalism & Constitutional Integrity in Question

The Indian Constitution's federal structure is not just a functional arrangement of power; it is a guarantor of diversity. Goa's status as a unique jurisdiction with its distinct legal code, linguistic heritage, and composite population is part of that federal promise. However, when uniformity is exalted over unity, and when dissent within party structures is silenced in favour of obedience, the federal balance is compromised. In such a system, demands for special status no longer find fertile ground not because they are invalid, but because they are made ideologically obsolete.

Conclusion: Quiet Retreat of Goan Autonomy

Goa's identity has always been defined by its capacity to be both Indian and distinct. Its laws, language, and religious fabric are neither anomalies nor relics; they are examples of how constitutional pluralism can thrive in practice. But when the Chief Minister must operate within the strict limits of centralised ideological mandates, and when regional assertion becomes politically risky, the foundational logic of Goa's special status begins to erode. In the end, the real danger lies not in the visible replacement of ministers or the controversial rhetoric of Union leaders, but in the silent normalisation of sameness, where the idea of being different ceases to be valued and where Goan-ness is no longer protected, but absorbed.

THE INBOX >>

Unhealthy trends

Bus conductors need to be sensitised to their duties. Apart from issuing tickets, they should ensure that reserved seats for senior citizens, PwD, and lady passengers are respected. Yesterday, while travelling from Sanknelim, I was shocked to see cargo placed on a senior citizen's seat on a Kadamba bus from Bicholim to Titian-Verna. I wonder if any charges were collected for it. A few months ago, on an evening bus from Panaji to Valpoi, I saw two women occupying a seat reserved for a PwD passenger. When a man with a disability asked them to vacate it, they refused, citing their monthly passes. The conductor also refused to intervene, saying they were pass holders. Thankfully, a kind passenger gave up his seat. What was upsetting was the women shouting and accusing the man of harassment, saying men were taking advantage just because they were female. Sadly, it's become common to falsely claim abuse on the basis of gender or caste when at fault. Another issue is that some women don't occupy reserved seats early in the journey, but object when men sit there. If seats are reserved for them, they should use them and allow fair space to others.

PRAXY FERNANDES, Sanknelim

Why bash English when your own kids study abroad?

Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently said at a book launch that "those who speak English in the country would soon feel ashamed." That sounds quite unreasonable. If Mr Shah truly believes this, then why do most Indian politicians—even those who are not very educated—send their children abroad or enrol them in top English medium schools in

Hold MLAs accountable for funnel zone violations

The recent crash of flight AI 171 in Gujarat has once again drawn attention to the sensitive funnel zone around Dabolim Airport. It looks like the judiciary may act on petitions filed by concerned citizens. I want to highlight that a long-serving local MLA has reportedly been involved in several constructions in this zone. On multiple occasions, he has even criticised the Indian Navy for raising objections that interfered with his and his associates' controversial real estate projects. I hope the judiciary and the petitioners name this MLA in their submissions. His actions have put the safety of air travel at risk, and if the courts find him guilty, he must be punished as per the law.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

India? Isn't it because they understand the value and importance of English in today's global world? Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi, though not very fluent, is often seen speaking in English during official foreign visits or while meeting global leaders. Why is that? And what about our External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar? He also uses English while discussing important bilateral matters with leaders from other countries. It seems Mr Shah's comment may reflect his own frustration or discomfort with the language. Despite holding such a senior position and having access to modern technology, he has not mastered basic spoken English. Unfortunately, such careless remarks by politicians only show their narrow thinking.

JERRY FERNANDES, Salgao

US sounded an alarm on travel to India

The US has issued a travel advisory, cautioning citizens about increasing rapes and

crimes. Citizens have been advised to take extra caution in areas of central and eastern India. This is a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. India must retaliate in a fit-for-matter by issuing an advisory for Indian travellers to exercise utmost caution while travelling in the US. Unprovoked gun violence is on the rise, and mindless mass killings, fuelled by the gun culture, are increasing. Moreover, Indians are being seen as job takers and are being despised by locals, especially young citizens.

ROBERT CASTELLINO, Calangute

Incompetent CEO should be sacked

The Tatas should sack their incompetent CEO, Mr Campbell Wilson, for the spate of problems that Air India is facing, many of which are not legacy issues. As per media reports, Air India has curtailed 38 international flights per week and totally suspended services on three overseas routes. Imagine the plight of passengers inconvenienced by this sudden move, who have bought tickets in advance. The recent Ahmedabad crash and DGA's action against senior officials of Air India confirm that the airline was extremely poorly managed, and the buck stops with the CEO. Why, even the condolence statement read out by Wilson was a plagiarised, copy-pasted version of an earlier speech by the American Airlines CEO, Robert Ison. The DGA has gone so far as to threaten suspension of the airline's licence to operate if things are not set right. We blame ministers for not owning vicarious liability, and here the airline CEO, who is directly responsible for safe, smooth flight operations and statutory compliances, is not being held to account.

VINAY DWIVEDI, Beralim



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

Trump and Netanyahu are victors in the war against Iran, Islamic terror

US President Donald Trump and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have emerged as victors in the war in the Middle East, notwithstanding the mainstream media's claims to the contrary. Both have neutralised—at least for a long time—the nuclear threat from Tehran. The latter's resolute leadership has resulted in the serious degradation of terror outfits like Hamas and Hezbollah, the ouster of the Assad regime in Syria, and a considerable weakening of Iran, the head of the octopus of terror in the region. On his part, Trump has achieved the goal of bringing peace to the Middle East without entering into war.

the strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities a few days ago helped end the hostilities rather than make the US belligerent. This was in keeping with his promise to his MAGA (Make America Great Again) base, which is against Washington's involvement in global wars. MAGA's isolationist proclivity being against America's direct involvement in global affairs, Trump also made it clear that his administration's goal in the region was limited to stopping Iran from going nuclear; his goal was not to oust the present government.

"I'd like to see everything calm down as quickly as possible. Regime change is chaotic and ideally,

we don't want to see so much chaos," he has clarified. After orchestrating a major strike on Iran and successfully persuading the US to target key Iranian nuclear facilities, Netanyahu finds himself in a significantly stronger position. With the immediate threat from Tehran weakened, Netanyahu can now turn his full attention to the conflict with Hamas in Gaza. His tough stance against Iran has generated a wave of popular support across Israel, bolstering his political standing. In fact, Netanyahu's approval ratings are now among the highest they have been since the war in Gaza erupted after the barbaric attack on the Jewish state by Hamas

on October 7, 2023. The shift in public sentiment has changed the political landscape. If his government were to collapse today, Netanyahu would stand a reasonable chance of securing re-election—a prospect that had seemed far less likely even a few months back. This surge in popularity has also fueled cautious optimism among some Israelis and political observers. They hope that Netanyahu, now less dependent on the headline factions of his coalition for political survival, might be more inclined to show flexibility regarding the Gaza war and go in for diplomatic avenues to end the prolonged fighting. The strengthened position could

give him space to override the concerns of his coalition partners, who have previously resisted compromises of any sort. However, Netanyahu himself has shown no public indication of a shift in policy. For months, he has maintained an uncompromising position: the war in Gaza will not end until Hamas agrees to disarm, surrenders its authority in Gaza, and its leadership leaves the territory—terms Hamas has consistently rejected. When asked to clarify Israel's stance, his office reiterated this headline position. In a brief statement, his office said, "Hamas is the only obstacle to ending the war. It must release all the hostages, surrender, give up control of Gaza, and get out. The choice is theirs." Netanyahu's determination against the jihadist outfit will go a long way in the war against Islamic terror all over the world. This will undoubtedly help India.

MEDLEY



LETTERS

Bar and bench should foster mutual respect

THIS is with reference to the article "Justice's haven: Courtroom of dignity and cooperation spirit" (THI, June 25). In a democratic country like India, courts play a crucial role in the protection of human rights and safeguarding fundamental rights. Bar-bench refers to the cordial relationship between judges and advocates. Judges are expected to treat advocates with courtesy, respect and fairness recognizing their crucial role in the administration of justice. At the same time the primary role of advocates is to represent clients in legal proceedings, while also upholding the law. If judges and advocates start respecting each other and act as per their conscience, courts will certainly become haven to all who approach.

P Victor Selvaraj, Tirunelveli-627002

No need for complainants to visit govt offices

I wonder why people with myriad representations and complaints are asked to come to the Secretariat or government office, in the first place. Administration can get a boost by putting all people-related issues and services online, so that they need not run around offices for resolving their genuine issues. With millions of illiterates around, such online centres can function on a regular basis near colonies and community halls with technical experts manning them. This can help people save precious time and money and also ensure that their woes are redressed by the concerned departments. That is the hallmark of good governance.

G Murali Mohan Rao, Secunderabad-11

Naidu govt must prioritise welfare schemes

THE NDA government in Andhra Pradesh, led by Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu, has completed an eventful one year in office. Despite challenges, the government has made significant strides in development, attracting investments worth Rs 9.34 lakh crore and generating 8.5 lakh jobs. Construction of Amaravati capital is also on track. However, the government needs to focus on welfare schemes, such as free bus travel to women and financial assistance to farmers. By plugging leakages and targeting benefits to those in need, the government can reduce the financial burden of welfare schemes.

Sridevi Tejaswani K, Hyderabad

Why leave alone Justice Varma?

WHAT is surprising even after finding huge unaccounted currency in the residence of Justice Yashwant Varma is the absence of action against him despite the damning evidence. In the light of Article 50 which nowhere states judges are above law and 124 (4) clearly laying down the procedure for impeachment of a judge, Justice Varma has clearly committed a criminal breach of trust by hoarding ill-gotten cash in his home. Since judiciary is meant to be the final recourse for justice and the Parliament having powers to impeach a judge under Article 124(4), it is time criminal prosecution of Justice Varma is taken up on an urgent basis as provided by the Constitution.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad-3

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Owning properties and the sentiments that go with it



DR MOHAN KANDA

THE Supreme Court of India recently delivered a significant judgment to the effect that simply registering a property does not automatically grant ownership, a verdict expected to have wide-ranging impact nationwide on property owners, legal professionals, and the real estate industry.

It is also expected to lead to a review of current property laws in India. The recently enacted Wakf Amendment Act is a major step in this regard.

I recollect an interesting experience I had while dealing with the subject of land. I was working as the Special Officer Urban Land Ceiling (ULC) and Competent Authority, Hyderabad, under the newly enacted ULC act. People owning land in excess of 500 square metres, in what was called the Hyderabad Urban Agglomeration, were required to file declarations in a prescribed form, with particulars of the lands and buildings owned by them. Under that statute, holdings in excess of that extent, which

was the ceiling for the Agglomeration, were liable to be declared as surplus and taken over by the government.

My father and some friends owned land in the Gachibowli area of the city and, naturally, had also to file the declarations. Embarrassed about dealing with my father's case, I asked one of my immediate subordinate officers to deal with that case, together with others in that group. That officer, after due examination, submitted a note stating that the lands in question were, in fact, not private lands at all, and belonged to the government. I made a mention in the file, saying that the declarants concerned be informed accordingly.

Someone rushed to my father with the news and expressed amazement that his son could have taken a decision such as that in his father's case.

My father, apparently, said, with a smile, "If that is the law and he has followed it, what can be our objection?" In the process, the little hope the declarants had, of cashing in on that property, vanished into thin air. Fortunately, most of the others were well to do, and my father had a house of his own, and enough pension, to get by comfortably. The word 'land' often occurs in the names of cities and countries, such as New Zealand, Newfoundland, Switzerland and, ironically, Land's End, the place



LAND FOR SALE

It is one thing to possess and enjoy a piece of property. But acquiring an absolute right over that can often pose many challenges, especially in metropolitan cities like Hyderabad.

Outdated land records, legal disputes, and difficulty in verifying ownership on account of incomplete documentation, rapid urbanisation and infrastructure development add complexity to the situation.

in England that is furthest to the west, on the coast of Cornwall.

It is one thing to possess and enjoy a piece of property. But acquiring an absolute right over that can often pose many challenges, especially in metropolitan cities like Hyderabad.

Outdated land records, legal disputes, and difficulty in verifying ownership on account of incomplete documentation, rapid ur-

banisation and infrastructure development add complexity to the situation. It was to address such issues that the government of Telangana state introduced the Integrated Land Records Management portal or 'Dharani'.

Although the service offered a decent salary and attractive perquisites, I somehow managed to find myself always in need of extra support to make both

ends meet. I often had to resort to the arrangement of an overdraft with the local branch of the State Bank of India (the institution where I first began my career, as a Probationary Officer), for that purpose. Over time, as Usha and I found it more and more possible to manage our finances soundly, I was able to construct a house, partly with a loan provided by the state government, together with some assistance from my parents and close friends. When, years later, I found it hard to service my debts, I was constrained to sell it off. That, strangely enough, happened to me repeatedly. Finally after returning to Hyderabad following the end of my stint in the National Disaster Management Authority, I bought a house in Banjara Hills. I was on the verge of registering the house when my Gurnu, Ganapathi Sastry, warned me against doing it in my name. "Do it in your wife's name," he laughingly told me, "lest your previous habits return to haunt you!" That attachment to land

or, for that matter, any earthly possession, has little meaning when the inevitable end comes, was poignantly illustrated by the legendary Leo Tolstoy, in 1886, in his short story 'How Much Land Does a Man Require?'.

A man who, in his lust for land, forfeits everything, finally realises that all that is required is a hole in the ground, in which his body can fit in, after he has passed away. Any land more than that is only an illusory source of comfort or security. Somewhat similar, to the poignant sentiment expressed by the deposed Moghul Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, when he was imprisoned by the British in Rangoon, capital of Burma, (now Yangon capital of Myanmar), for suspected involvement in the 1857 rebellion.

While talking about ownership of properties, one cannot help recalling the case of Kunwar Mahender Dhawal Prasad Singh, who, claiming to be a descendant of the Royal families that ruled Delhi earlier, staked a claim of ownership of, of all things, the Qutub Minar! The Archaeological Survey of India, quite rightly, contested the claim, citing the monument's status as a protected site. Fortunately, the Delhi High Court finally dismissed the plea.

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

Book turns spotlight on Yashodara, Buddha's forgotten wife

Sunita Pant Bansal's 'The Illusion of Illusions: The Story of Yashodara, Buddha's Wife' throws new light

MANIK GUPTA

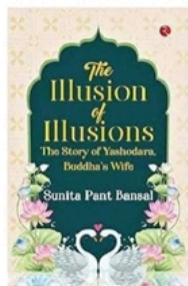
SIDDHARTHA Gautama walked away from royalty and family in search of truth -- and became the Buddha. His story is etched in history and the spiritual annals of millions. But what about Yashodara, the wife and mother of a newborn son, he left behind?

That's where "The Illusion of Illusions: The Story of Yashodara, Buddha's Wife" (Rs 295, Rupa) by Sunita Pant Bansal comes in.

The new book tells the story of the courage and silent resilience of the woman remembered only as 'the wife Siddhartha left behind'. But her story is far more complex and layered, said the author who sets out to give voice to an untold story.

Yashodara's story also falls into the long and painful pattern of historical overshadowing, where the women closest to iconic men are erased, simplified, or remembered only in relation to the men they were attached to... Bansal said. "History tends to spotlight the ones who left, who acted, who preached, who conquered, and rarely the ones who stayed, endured, reflected, or transformed quietly. In spiritual narratives too, the focus has largely been on renunciation as the ultimate act of courage," says Bansal, whose bestselling books include "Everyday Gita", "On the footsteps of Buddha", and "Krishna: The Management Guru".

She describes Yashodara as a



Sunita Pant Bansal

mother, a seeker, and eventually a spiritual adept in her own right who was cast into the margins. The idea behind "The Illusion of Illusions" is to "pull Yashodara out of the shadows, not as a footnote to the Buddha's story, but as a luminous presence in her own right".

The result is a 211-page story in Yashodara's own voice, beginning with her encounter with an enlightened Buddha and ending with her attaining nirvana before him. The book explores the gamut -- ranging from a fairytale wedding to her witnessing her husband's transformation from a reserved prince to a man with a mission, along with the many "red flags" she overlooked during their 13 years of marriage. It traces her overwhelming grief when Siddhartha leaves on the

"Her quiet refusal to reduce herself to victimhood was central to how I envisioned her. Yes, she grieves. Yes, she questions. But she does not let those emotions harden into resentment. I saw her as someone who, over time, begins to understand that Siddhartha's path, however painful for her, was not about abandoning her, but about seeking something larger than both of them"

very day their son Rahul is born, her sorrow as her seven-year-old son leaves to join his father in the Sangha (community of Buddhist practitioners), and ultimately her quiet yet courageous journey towards acceptance and forging her own path.

According to Bansal, Yashodara's account could have been easily told through "betrayer, bitterness, or fury". However, she chose to highlight Yashodara's strength, her rebellion and finally her resilience. "Her quiet refusal to reduce herself to victimhood was central to how I envisioned her. Yes, she grieves. Yes, she questions. But she does not let those emotions harden into resentment. I saw her as someone who, over time, begins to understand that Siddhartha's path, however painful for her, was not about abandoning her, but about seeking something larger than both of them," the author explained. Telling the story of someone who has largely been confined to footnotes

or fragments in Buddhist texts and folklore is no easy task. Bansal, who undertook the painstaking work of drawing from early Pali sources, Buddhist commentaries and regional retellings, acknowledged the challenges in writing what she described as not a biography or a scripture but a "blend of history, imagination and emotional truth".

"The biggest challenge was the silence itself, the absence of detail, of voice, of first-hand insight into Yashodara's mind. That silence gave me space, but it also came with responsibility. I had to inhabit that silence with care. Fiction, in such a context, becomes a form of respectful restoration. I used creative license to give emotional flesh to the truth... to imagine what it might have felt like to be Yashodara, the wife, the mother, the abandoned and the awakened," she explained.

Besides Yashodara, the book offers a deeper look into the lives of other lesser-known women fig-

ures who played significant roles in the couple's story. These include Buddha's aunt and foster mother Mahaprajapati Gautami as well as Yashodara's mother Pamiya, who is also a distant cousin of Siddhartha's father King Shuddhodana.

However, Yashodara stays firmly at the centre, never eclipsed.

"When you write about the lesser-known partner in a legendary relationship... it's easy for the gravitational pull of his legacy to take over the story. But I was clear that this was her journey, not an echo of his. Ultimately, the challenge was not to dim Siddhartha's light, but to reveal that Yashodara had a light of her own, one that did not compete, but completed the story. And I think that's what makes her journey all the more profound," she added. Bansal's dream of seeing it adapted for the screen. In fact, a few informal conversations about adapting the book for film or television are already underway.

"What gives me hope is that we are now in a moment where audiences are ready, even hungry, for layered female narratives... If told with care, I believe her story will not only resonate, but also heal, by offering a new lens on history as well as the human heart," pointed out Bansal, who has also authored numerous children's books on scriptures and folk literature.

The book is endorsed by celebrated filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt and bestselling author Anand Neelakantan.

BENGALURU ONLINE



Special career growth seminar on June 28

On the occasion of the Silver Jubilee Year of the Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning (SCDL), a special Career growth seminar is being organized in Bengaluru featuring renowned entrepreneur, investor, and youth mentor Dr. Arjun Vaidya as the keynote speaker. This seminar is free and open to all, early and mid-career working professionals, but registration is mandatory.

Dr. Vaidya will guide the audience on the theme "Reinventing Yourself for India's Evolving Job Market". The session will be held on Saturday, 28th June 2025 at 10:30 AM at Pride Hotel, 93, Richmond Road, Bengaluru. In this session, Dr. Vaidya will shed light on the following key topics such as How to future-proof your career in a rapidly changing professional landscape, embracing an entrepreneurial mindset while being in a job, importance of upskilling and cross-skilling, transitioning from employee to brand builder and understanding when and how to pivot your career.

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