

Pursuing probity in public life

In a polarised political landscape, a consensus on Bills to unseat jailed ministers is difficult

That the Congress, Trinamool Congress, Samajwadi Party, Aam Aadmi Party, and Shiv Sena (UBT) have refused to join the proposed joint parliamentary committee (JPC) to look into three bills seeking the removal of ministers accused of serious crimes who have spent at least 30 days in jail does not come as a surprise. The Opposition opposed the bills when the government introduced them in Parliament in the just concluded monsoon session. Since one of the bills needs a constitutional amendment, the government requires a section of the Opposition in Parliament to support it. The JPC was a step towards building a consensus in favour of the bills.

No one can disagree with the intent to raise ethical standards in public life, but recent political history has stoked the fear that the bills, if turned into law, may end up as tools to destabilise governments led by non-NDA parties. As this newspaper wrote last week, "In an ideal State with robust institutions and apolitical investigation agencies," such a law may be welcome. In the current polarised climate, it is perceived as a move in bad faith.

As per a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms, 12 of the 30 chief ministers, a majority of them belonging to non-NDA outfits, have declared serious criminal cases, including cases related to attempt to murder, kidnapping, bribery, and criminal intimidation, against them. The non-NDA parties allege that investigating agencies are partisan, accusing the latter of foisting cases on them at the behest of the Centre. This is also the justification for their refusal to quit office when arrested by the CBI or the Enforcement Directorate in corruption cases. The government, for its part, has already declared that the bill is driven by a desire to ensure probity in public life, and that the Opposition needs to explain to people why it doesn't want this. In light of such high mistrust prevailing in Opposition parties, a bipartisan JPC is a hard ask. A workable plan will be to ensure early closure in corruption cases involving ministers and sitting legislators. The Supreme Court has for long asked for fast-track courts to settle these cases — some courts are now functional, but many more are needed. Such a mechanism will ensure that the first principle of justice, which is innocent until proven guilty, is respected, and due process is adhered to. Currently, cases drag endlessly, helping nobody. The battle against corruption or to enforce accountability in public life has to go beyond political gamesmanship.

Building weapons for the wars of future

Between the announcement of the government's plans to build a national security shield with defensive and offensive capabilities (Mission Sudarshan Chakra) on August 15 and the first test of some components of the system less than 10 days later, India has signalled its determination to protect vital civilian and military installations from a range of modern threats, especially drones and missiles. The defence ministry has said that an integrated air defence weapon system with three components — a quick reaction surface-to-air missiles, a very short range air defence system, and a laser-based directed energy weapon — has been tested. The new weapon system was successful in engaging and destroying both fixed wing and multi-copter drones. The capability of using laser-based weapons to take out missiles and drones is possessed by a limited number of countries such as the US, the UK, Germany, Russia, Israel and China.

More than anything else, the four days of hostilities with Pakistan in May have shown that drones and missiles will be increasingly used in wars of the future in this region. Drones have emerged as cost-effective weapons for targeting the enemy's civilian and military infrastructure since the conflict in Ukraine began in 2022. In India's neighbourhood, Pakistan has access to a wide array of drones from China and Turkey, thus enhancing the need for a foolproof air defence shield that can not only jam the radars and other systems used to guide UAVs to their targets but also bring down the drones themselves. Over the years, India has either acquired or developed several components needed for an effective air defence shield, such as the S-400 systems and home-grown Akash missile, and the focus should now be on identifying the vital installations and economic facilities that need to be guarded against enemy attacks and integrating all the indigenous and foreign military equipment into a comprehensive nationwide shield. The just-concluded test shows the government is doing just that.

Building the digital bridge for tomorrow

The Northeast is expected to emerge as a digital corridor and innovation hub that seamlessly connects India with its eastern neighbours in the next 10 years

Once viewed as a distant frontier, Northeast India has undergone a remarkable transformation. No longer a peripheral region, it is quickly emerging as India's strategic gateway to the East, forming a crucial bridge between our 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policy pillars.

PM Narendra Modi's personal focus on attention to the Northeast has resulted in an unprecedented shift from a conflict-ridden and infrastructure-deficient region to a zone of development, connectivity, and prosperity. In the last 10 years, budgetary allocations for Northeast India have risen by over 200%, with over ₹5 trillion (approximately \$60 billion) invested in creating new highways, rail links, border trade points and energy corridors, that are reshaping the regional landscape.

This massive infrastructure push is converting Northeast India into a vital land bridge, connecting the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia and beyond. The region's strategic importance cannot be overstated; it represents the physical manifestation of India's broader ambitions in the Indo-Pacific; it is where the subcontinent merges seamlessly with ASEAN.

But Northeast India's emergence as a land bridge extends far beyond physical

infrastructure. The region is rapidly evolving into a digital hub that connects not just territories, but minds and markets across borders. India's commitment to digital connectivity in the Northeast includes building cutting-edge telecommunications and internet infrastructure that positions the region at the forefront of the digital revolution.

The establishment of 5G training labs across all eight northeastern states exemplifies this commitment. These facilities are designed to bridge the digital divide and equip the region's youth with skills essential for the information age. The goal is ambitious yet achievable: transforming Northeast India into India's 'new growth engine' in the digital economy.

Most significantly, India's \$1-billion line-of-credit for digital connectivity with ASEAN promises to create optical-fibre highways linking India with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam through Northeast India. This initiative transforms the region into a digital bridge, enabling neighbouring nations to access enhanced bandwidth while fostering unprecedented regional integration in cyberspace.

AI represents the next frontier in Northeast India's development journey. The potential applications are as diverse as the region itself, spanning governance, disaster management, health care, agriculture, and environmental conservation. In a region prone to natural disasters, AI-driven early warning systems could revolutionise disaster preparedness, providing timely predictions for floods, earth-

quakes, and other calamities. The lives saved and economic damage prevented would justify the investment manifold.

Health care delivery, long a challenge in remote hill villages, can benefit enormously from AI-powered telemedicine. Quality medical consultation and diagnosis could reach the most isolated communities, breaking down geographical barriers that have historically limited access to essential services.

Agriculture, the backbone of the region's economy, can be optimised through AI applications that improve yields while supporting sustainable practices. Similarly, the region's extraordinary biodiversity can be better conserved through intelligent monitoring and management systems.

One of Northeast India's greatest strengths lies in its vibrant cultural tapestry.

The region is home to hundreds of languages, dialects, and traditions that represent an irreplaceable part of human heritage. AI and digital technologies can serve as guardians of this cultural wealth, ensuring that modernisation enhances rather than erodes cultural identity.

Machine-learning algorithms can document endangered tribal languages, while digital platforms can preserve and promote Nagas' folklore, Assamese literature, and countless other cultural treasures. This approach mirrors successful global initiatives, such as AI tools developed for Maori language preservation in New Zealand or AI-driven digital linguistic heritage. Mizoram's

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Northeast India's emergence as a land bridge extends far beyond physical infrastructure.

pioneering work in building multilingual e-governance platforms using AI tools demonstrates how technology can bridge language barriers and deliver government services in local languages. This model of inclusive digital governance could be replicated across the region, ensuring that technological advancement serves all communities.

Realising Northeast India's AI potential requires unprecedented collaboration and synergy between government, academia and industry. The foundation is being laid through initiatives like the National Programme on AI and Digital India, but success depends on sustained partnership across sectors.

India's active participation in the Global Partnership on AI (GPAI) and other international digital cooperation forums reflects our commitment to developing responsible and inclusive AI frameworks. These global engagements inform domestic policies and ensure that our AI development aligns with international best practices.

The synergy between public policy, academic research, and private sector innovation will determine whether AI solutions for Northeast India are truly effective, ethical, and equitable. Universities must collaborate with startups, government agencies must work with civil society organisations, and traditional knowledge systems must inform cutting-edge technological solutions.

Looking ahead, Northeast India is

the next 10 years could be unrecognisable when compared to today — a thriving digital corridor and innovation hub that seamlessly connects India with its eastern neighbours. This transformation is not merely a regional aspiration but a national imperative that strengthens India's entire position in the Indo-Pacific. The convergence of broader foreign policy goals — from Act East to *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* — finds its most tangible expression in Northeast India's development. AI, deployed responsibly and inclusively, can accelerate this convergence while powering economic growth, enhancing human security, and celebrating cultural diversity.

As India champions human-centric AI development in global forums, Northeast India offers the perfect laboratory to demonstrate how technology can uphold humanity's highest values. With sustained vision and collective effort, the region will emerge as a future driver in India's AI-powered future, driving inclusive prosperity at home while fostering connectivity and goodwill across borders.

The journey from periphery to digital bridge is well underway. The destination — a prosperous, connected, and culturally vibrant Northeast India — is within reach.

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What needs to be done to curb prison overcrowding

When jail cells built for one person must hold three or four or even five, everything suffers — from food to beds, medicine to sanitation. And of course the least remembered — human beings. The line for a toilet starts before dawn, sleeping is in shifts, and the scramble for space can erupt into violence. Medical attention becomes a game of chance. Proximity breeds desperation — and exploitation. The strong prey on the weak. Sexual intimacy, wanted or not, is unavoidable. Rent-seeking for food, safety, or a phone call is backed by muscle, creating a subterranean economy of survival.

Recently, too, Maharashtra's home minister acknowledged a national crisis too long ignored — overcrowded prisons. But Maharashtra is not even the worst of it. In state after state capital, central jails tell the story. Delhi's Tihar, built for 5,200, holds over 12,000 prisoners. Built for just about 1,000 inmates, Arthur Road Jail in Mumbai holds more than three times that number. Like Alkhabab's Naini prison, Patna's Beaur Central Jail holds twice the number of inmates than it should.

The India Justice Report records that 55% of India's prisons exceeded capacity, and 176 held up to four times what they should have in 2022. With a staggering 49% overcrowding, Uttar Pradesh's Moradabad district prison shows how extreme situations are easily tolerated. The inhumanity is compounded by a thin, demotivated administration. Security staff are underpaid — not judged as guilty but locked up while the system decides when it will finish investigation or trial, or are simply there because they cannot quit jail. Legally, they remain under the judicial authority yet are allowed to face dangers they would never have had to endure outside.

With two-thirds of the prison population awaiting trial — often for months or years — who can deny that the system punishes before guilt is established? Here lies real tragedy. All duty holders know this — and accept it. This tolerance for the sub-human life lived by others normalises the breach of the rule of law. It mocks the constitutional principle that every citizen's life is more than mere physical existence. Of course, some efforts are underway. New policy directions are emerging through model prison rules and revised manuals. The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) provisions speak of time-bound trials, plea bargaining, bail after a third of sentence served, and community service as alternatives to incarceration. The Supreme Court keeps reminding: Arrest must be a last resort. Bail, not jail, should be the norm. A government fund now supports poor prisoners unable to furnish securities. A room of dedicated judges for bail hearings is in its fledgling stages. Video conferencing is expanding space, though there's nothing to show that it reduces incarceration or improves access to counsel. Some states are exploring open jails; others are refurbishing old facilities or planning new ones. But pipelines are

long. From land acquisition to construction and staffing, it can take four to seven years to build a central jail. Even sub-jails take two to three years. That is under ideal conditions.

Worryingly, there are counter-currents as well. Many archaic and overlapping laws remain on the books. A new *Vaidhi* study found over 5,300 provisions that criminalise everything from dog-walking without a leash to collecting water without permission. The BNSS increases the number of offences, extends remand time, and lengthens some sentences. Harsh, non-negotiable laws like the NDPS Act continue to flood the system. Despite the Supreme Court's caution on arrest, it often remains a first reflex. Bail is still elusive; custody remains the default for over-cautious magistrates. Trial delays remain entrenched.

And so the system groans on. Injustice is routine, suffering predictable. Too many duty holders look away. Oversight has faltered. Legally mandated boards of visitors are largely inactive. There is no transparently functioning roster of visits by the bar, bench, or administrators — let alone human rights commissions. If such visits were regular, meticulously reported and followed up, even a small measure of accountability and accountability might take hold. Yet even this minimum remains largely unattended.

Reducing overcrowding is urgent if broader reforms are to stand on solid ground. As an immediate step, filtering systems of release and relief — like undertaker review committees — must be proactive. Oversight bodies like boards of visitors must be revived and made effective. Coordination with local authorities and regular reporting must become the norm. Civil society and active citizens must be trusted to assist with connecting up agencies, helping to find early representation, and bringing in activities that assist inmates' transition productively back into the outside world.

But any real effort at reform and rehabilitation requires a radical sea change in the prison service, root to branch. The current system — where experienced warders and superintendents remain in lower cadres while police officers are parachuted in as temporary overseers — must change. Security dominating mindsets must give way to those oriented toward rehabilitation. Open prisons must move from concept to reality. Oversight must be active and accountability real. Wrongful arrests must be called out by the magistracy and lead to compensation. And beyond funds on hand, the magistracy must be assisted and incentivised to exercise genuine scrutiny at first appearance.

Wholesale reform still feels like a distant goal. But the recent attention in legislatures and parliament offers a sliver of hope. The fact that so many active citizens, lawyers, and rights advocates continue to press at the fogged glass of State conscience keeps that hope alive. Selfishly, for our own safety, we all stand to gain if the system ensures people emerge from custodial ordeals as citizens, not as people warped by stranger-than-fiction experiences behind bars. Acknowledging the problem is a start. Now to go from recognition to repair.

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SHUBHANSHU SHUKLA | INDIAN ASTRONAUT

We have a great vision and ambition to land on the Moon by 2040. And it would be probably one of you who would be setting foot there

Talking to schoolchildren at his alma mater in Lucknow



New online gambling Act breaches federal boundaries

Parliament, on Thursday, passed the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act, 2025, which seeks to regulate e-sports and online social games, while imposing a complete ban on online money games involving monetary stakes. A reading of the Act shows it is largely modelled on Tamil Nadu's Online Gaming Act of 2022, a landmark legislation which historically regulates online gaming and gambling in Tamil Nadu. The Act is purportedly framed by Parliament in exercise of its legislative power under Entry 31, which deals with "Posts & telegraphs; telephones; wireless; broadcasting and other like forms of communication." Though the object of the Act is indisputably laudable, a closer look at its provisions reveals that it transgresses into legislative fields reserved exclusively for the states and is yet another instance of federal overreach by the Union.

The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution contains three lists — the Union List, the State List and the Concurrent List — demarcating the legislative fields between Parliament and the state legislatures. The Constitution prior to 1956, which was amended to legislate on the subjects in the Union List. Similarly, the Union cannot legislate on subjects in the State List.

The Act, in pith and substance, regulates the activities of betting and gambling and sports and entertainment activities, which are subjects exclusively reserved for the state legislatures under Entries 33 and 34 of the State List. Parliament does not have the legislative competence on these subjects, and the attempt to bring it within its competency by invoking Entry 31 of List I stands on constitutionally thin ice, and will not withstand legal scrutiny. The argument that these online gaming activities can be regulated only by the Union under Entry 31 List I did not find favour with the courts on earlier occasions. The Tamil Nadu Act was challenged by the Union government, and the Supreme Court, in *Union of India v. Madras High Court* (2022) and *All India Gaming Federation (2023)* upheld the competence of the state legislature to regulate online gaming activities under Entries 33 and 34 of List II.

The Act regulates betting and gambling, and sports and entertainment activities, and merely because they are played online would not alter their character as far as legislative competence to regulate the activity is concerned. To hold otherwise would allow Parliament to subvert

most subjects of the State List on the pretext that the activity is now being conducted through digital platforms, thereby unsettling the delicate federal balance envisaged by the Constitution. For instance, State List subjects such as "markets and fairs" now also operate on digital platforms and "public health" is increasingly mediated through online tele-medicine platforms, and it would be unconstitutional to contend that as these activities are being carried out online, it would be Parliament which would have competence to regulate these activities.

By legislating on matters that lie squarely within the competence of state legislatures, Parliament has transgressed the constitutionally allocated powers and violated federal principles. The Act is a colourable legislation given, by means of the present Act, Parliament seeks to do indirectly what it is constitutionally barred from doing directly. The Act of the Union in legislating where only states may tread poses a serious threat to constitutional federalism, and skewers the distribution of powers in favour of the Union government.

dated aberration but as part of a broader and unsettling trend of the Union executive encroaching upon the federal autonomy of the states. Such usurpations destroy the federal fabric of the nation, undermine state autonomy and reduce them to mere implementers of the policies of the Union government.

This is not to say that the harms caused by online money gaming should go unchecked; addition, financial ruin, and suicides are lived tragedies in households across India. The situation demands urgent action, but the response must remain constitutionally grounded, such as empowering and encouraging state legislatures to frame robust legal regimes, or by building consensus for legislation under Article 252 with the consent of the states.


An instructive precedent can be found in Tamil Nadu's Act, which lays down a comprehensive framework and demonstrates how States, acting within their constitutional domain, can respond effectively to the adverse effects of online betting and gambling. Perhaps the Union can do better by not gambling on an unconstitutional regulatory framework.

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Opinion

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SCIENCE FOR SOCIETY

Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan

ITs will be central to achieving India's long-term strategic goals. The next 25 years will determine how these prestigious institutions lead not just in engineering and technology, but in solving societal challenges

Bite the bullet

The govt should walk the PM's talk on unleashing an arsenal of reforms

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's intention to unleash an arsenal of reforms is reassuring and a reiteration of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance's approach to development. As part of the next round of reforms, the government will repeal obsolete laws, simplify rules and processes, digitise procedures and approvals, and decriminalise more offences. The idea, as Modi has articulated, is not merely to bring in marginal changes but to enable the economy to take a big leap. This is the right approach. Indeed, over the past decade, the government has worked to not merely roll out new policies and schemes but also upgrade and fine-tune existing ones. The goods and service tax reforms is the latest manifestation of those efforts.

The scorecard has been impressive—the government has done well to establish economic stability, build the economic infrastructure, radically improve the provision of basic goods and services, and create a unique digital infrastructure. It has unleashed some path-breaking legislation and changes in areas such as taxation, foreign direct investment, digital transfers, stress resolution, and labour. The efforts have paid off. With the economy doubling to \$4 trillion between 2014 and now, the country's poverty ratio has declined to 4.9% in 2023–24 from 9.5% in 2022–23. India's per capita income (in purchasing power parity terms) has risen from \$2,424 in 2004 to \$12,131.8 in 2025 and pushed up the country's global ranking to 149 in 2025 from 181 in 2024.

However, the government can do much better in many other areas. The 1991 reforms were half-done, and the so-called second-generation reforms have been fitful and inadequate. There is a need to remove many obstacles on the ground that delay, and even stall, speedy implementation of projects. India may have moved up in the global ease of doing business rankings but it still has some ground to cover in terms of cutting down on the many rules and regulations that need to be complied with before a unit can get going. Acquiring land, for instance, is still a nightmare. The fact is that the economic momentum of the past decade, during which the GDP has grown at an annual average of 6.8%, has been sustained largely because the government has done much of the heavy-lifting. Despite huge tax benefits, India Inc has not been investing meaningfully. If manufacturing is to get a boost—its share remains at about 17% of GDP—the private sector must play a key role. In this context, schemes like the production-linked incentive, which has generated 1.2 million direct and indirect jobs, need to be revisited to encourage more investments. Importantly, even as it works to frame new policies, the government must ensure there is regulatory certainty. Businesses should not be caught unawares by policy changes after having invested serious sums as has happened recently with the online money gaming industry. Capital must be treated with due respect.

Genuine empowerment of a progressively larger population requires governments to invest in the future—infrastructure, education, and health. These investments, in turn, require expanding the economic pie through growth. For it's through growth that government multiplies its resources for productive public spending. India also needs to bring down import barriers to allow user industries to import their inputs freely. Privatisation is another area. The 2021 Public Sector Enterprise (PSE) Policy, which provides for privatisation of all PSEs except a handful in each of the four sectors identified as strategic, must be implemented.

Why Russia-India-China reboot will not last

THE RUSSIA-INDIA-CHINA alliance, floated in the 1990s as a counterweight to the US, is being revived today as a way for the three countries to ride out the storm of President Donald Trump's trade war. But old suspicions mean the union is unlikely to endure. Despite their shared grievances with Washington, the partnership is more a marriage of convenience.

That reality will be on display this week when the three nuclear powers converge in Tianjin for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit. The Kremlin is pressing for a long-awaited trilateral meeting. If the troika did find new life, it would send a powerful signal that the geopolitical heavyweights are aligning in the face of US pressure. But the inherent tensions between India and China, and economic differences between the three, make that outcome unlikely.

That pressure is most acute for India. Until recently a key American partner, it has borne the brunt of Trump's tariffs. He doubled duties on exports to 50%—due to go into effect on August 27—as punishment for its purchases of Russian oil. Beijing, originally Washington's primary target, is enjoying a temporary reprieve, but is stuck in a long-term strategic competition. And Russia, battered by sanctions and bogged down in Ukraine, is on the hunt for friends to blunt its isolation.

Moscow first dreamed up the idea of RIC, as it was dubbed, in the 1990s. Then Prime Minister Yeghinyak proposed the formation of the group to challenge the US's global influence. The coalition looked formidable on paper—three nations with huge economies and populations. In practice, it's always been undermined by mistrust, above all between Russia and China.

Among the biggest sticking points is their long-running border dispute. They've been at loggerheads over an ill-defined 3,481-km frontier in the Himalayan region. Those hostilities erupted into a war in 1962, and continue to simmer today. In 2020, the two clashed violently in Ladakh's Galwan Valley, leaving soldiers dead on both sides in the bloodiest fighting in decades. Diplomatic ties froze, with New Delhi suspending tourist visas for Chinese nationals, and imposing restrictions on tech imports.

Trump's tariffs are nudging them closer. Last week, they agreed to explore demarcating their disputed border, a key move toward resolving the territorial dispute. Strains around visas have eased and China has expressed solidarity with India on exports.

But the risk of future standoffs can't be discounted. The fundamental contradictions in the dynamic are unlikely to disappear soon. Happiness Jacob, founder and director, Council for Strategic and Defense Research, notes for the *Hindustan Times*. While serious violence may have been averted for now, a lasting rapprochement is unlikely. It's hard for New Delhi to be fully confident of Beijing's intentions, especially in light of its military assertiveness in areas like the South China Sea and Taiwan. Security aside, the economic logic doesn't work in New Delhi's favour. India depends on US technology, capital, and supply chains—which neither Russia nor China can replace. The US is also the most important market for Indian goods, by a wide margin. In 2024, consumers bought \$77.5 billion worth of Indian goods, according to a Bank of Baroda report. In comparison, Chinese and Russian purchases were only a fraction of that.

In contrast, Moscow is much closer to Beijing. Since Western sanctions were imposed in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea, bilateral trade between the two has surged to record highs, surpassing \$200 billion last year. Businesses are increasingly connected to the Chinese financial system through the use of the yuan, and services like Visa and Mastercard. For New Delhi, joining such a bloc would mean being the junior partner—hardly an appealing prospect.

Yet, resurrecting the bloc could pose a challenge to the US if it resulted in more coordinated action. But what binds these nations is necessity, not trust. The gathering in Tianjin will offer the opportunity for the optics of warmer ties, but it will be more symbolism than substance. This is an inherently fragile partnership, one that could unravel if American pressure diminishes.

HYPER-PERSONALISED PRICING

WHEN AI DECODES YOU, NOT MARKET DYNAMICS, TO BRING PRICE ELASTICITY IT'S ENTERING AN AMBIGUOUS TERRAIN

‘Surge-your-worth’ economics

ONCE UPON A not-so-distant time, business was governed by a certain egalitarian clarity. A price tag spoke the same truth to all who beheld it. Whether you were a maid servant or an investment banker, the fare for your journey, the cost of your tea, or the value of your bread bore no reflection of your identity. Pricing stood as an impartial arbiter between value and exchange.

That familiar world is vanishing. Consider this real-life incident: two travellers, seated in economy class on the same flight, departing as scheduled, both with the same benefits on their tickets, booked via the same platform, yet one paid almost twice what the other did. What changed? The divergence lies solely in the traveller's digital footprint—her browsing patterns, hour of purchase, postcode, the number of times she returned to check prices, and whether she booked during a moment of urgency or calm. The algorithm saw her, understood her, assessed her likely ceiling, and charged accordingly.

This is no evolution of value management but a quiet revolution in digital economics, where traditional market dynamics are eclipsed by a more intimate, if not insidious, metric: you. It isn't about preferences but psychology. And not simply your history, but your hesitation.

Witness the rise of hyper-personalised pricing: Asym in which artificial intelligence (AI) doesn't just respond to consumer demand but actively anticipates and shapes it. It watches, it learns, it infers, and then it monetises, not based on cost or value but based on your willingness to yield. You are no longer a participant in the market; you are its measure.

And this is not a dystopian hypothesis; it's already here. The increased fare you paid for an Ola during a thunderstorm, the surge in price for a last-minute hotel booking, and the discount that mysteriously vanished after a cou-



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ple of views—all are shadows cast by algorithmic intent. It is not just the weather or the hour that determines what you pay, but your perceived vulnerability. Are you shopping after a long day? Using a high-end device? Travelling with a child? The system takes note.

The question has subtly shifted from "what is this worth?" to "what is this person worth to us right now?"

This shift demands critical attention, as it breaches the social contract of commerce. Pricing used to be the transparent metric between the buyer and the seller, but now it is a black-box negotiation between your subconscious and an unseen entity. In theory, personalisation is supposed to enhance CX (customer experience)—curated playlists, tailored shopping suggestions, etc. But now it introduces a silent inequity in pricing. What was once a level field has become a minefield of invisible calculations.

This is not the classical price discrimination based on age, volume, or region, but something more refined, more elusive. Something of a psychographic nature, where consumer behaviours, emotions, and digital footprints are monetised. A system that charges more because of how you think. Herein lies the ethical dilemma. When the price you pay is determined by

what an algorithm believes you will accept (not by market forces), when your very patterns of decision-making are used to shape your cost, is there any informed consent?

The ability of AI to unearth perceived willingness to pay and price accordingly is amazing: data crunching at multiple levels, analysing patterns of behaviour, and predicting the outcome. Here, as just can't do this. But all this, by destabilising the autonomy and dignity of consumers, is the core issue.

When AI decodes your fatigue, your urgency, your indulgences, and your habits—and not the market dynamics—to bring price elasticity, it's entering a morally ambiguous terrain. Tailored products to our preferences is one thing, but it is quite another to be charged based on your psychological susceptibility. The boundary between personalisation and exploitation grows perilously thin.

How can consumers become digitally conscious and avoid surrendering to the algorithmic determinism? While the system observes, the vigilant consumer can obfuscate its gaze. Here are some ways:

Browse in private mode or incognito: Algorithms depend on cookies,

search histories, and behavioural trails. Incognito browsing prevents such context access, and so less chance for price manipulation.

Use VPNs or alternative locations: Many platforms adjust prices based on geographic data. A VPN can mimic a lower-cost location and reduce targeted hikes.

Change devices and logins: Using different devices or browsing without logging in disrupts user identification—so, profiling and price targeting will be difficult.

Delay purchase intentions: Algorithms respond to urgency. By stepping away and revisiting after a pause, or employing price monitoring tools, one may avoid paying a premium born of perceived desperation.

Avoid unified digital ecosystems: Single sign-ons, such as using Google or FB account across sites, centralise your data. The more fragmented the digital identity, the less the predictability and exploitation.

Periodically delete cookies and browsing history: This and use of privacy-enhancing extensions will clear the digital footprints and make it difficult to play with pricing.

If AI shapes your spending impulses like a caffeine-high coach, is it truly choice, or just elegantly disguised commercial puppetry? Making profits is fine, but when it feeds on personal prediction rather than need, the market-place mutates into a mirror maze. The sticker price no longer exists, replaced by your digital twin's insecurities, whims, and midnight cravings. Welcome to the age of "surge-your-worth" pricing, where fairness gets debugged. This isn't anti-AI hysteria; it's a plea for algorithmic regulation and ethics.

Until price tags stop moonlighting as psychics, we'll miss their quaint objectivity. When your wallet becomes a mood ring, don't expect fair prices, only emotional surcharges.



ANIL NAIR

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The wellness double helix

INDIA'S HEALTHCARE ROAD map faces formidable hurdles—the largest population on earth, vast and diverse in its spread, and systemic challenges in providing basic healthcare. As opposed to a growing concentration of well-funded urban private hospitals, we have under-resourced public health facilities catering to 65% of the population in "rurban" areas. It's obvious that democratising healthcare in India needs a biotech surge as much as a health-tech boom.

Government healthcare initiatives like eSanjeevani, which has supported 12 crore tele-consultations, and private telemedicine platforms are serving as a digital bridge so that patients don't have to travel several kilometres. It also addresses the shortage of doctors in rural areas.

Considering the expenses that the population still has to bear directly, other government-led initiatives like electronic health records under the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission and Centres of Excellence for artificial intelligence (AI) to promote AI-powered diagnostics and solutions reveal a forward-thinking mindset. Other digitisation initiatives like vaccination records and services under the U-Win portal, e-Hospital to connect patients with hospitals and doctors on one platform, and e-Bloodbank are maturing fast.

Biotech will give healthcare wings. While the healthcare system provides the

digital infrastructure to widen reach, the true potential of the healthcare system and its quality and effectiveness can only be actualised concurrently with a robust biotech ecosystem. It will help India progress beyond primary care involving basic symptom analysis to detection of diseases and genetic and other disorders at scale. It will help us get beyond trial-and-error treatments that increase costs and affect outcomes adversely.

Indigenous biotech research and development can help us create biosimilars, vaccines, and targeted therapies accessible to the masses. The combination of healthcare and biotech can ignite a major shift from reactive to proactive care. A rural health worker using a healthcare app connected to a portable biotech appliance leveraging bioinformatics can reveal patterns that were not apparent earlier. Similarly, information conveyed via wearables processed through AI algorithms can reveal susceptibilities that were latent before. Processing this data at scale could even reveal the potential onset of a crisis, enabling proactive interventions.

That the subject of biotech came up in the Lok Sabha recently is interesting. Jitendra Singh, minister for state for science and technology, informed the

House on July 30 that India has set up 94 biotech incubators across the country, investing about ₹490 crore since 2012. Emerging regional clusters to nurture research and entrepreneurship in biotech include Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Telangana, each with more than 10 incubators. Institutions like the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council are further strengthening the ecosystem to provide support to start-ups in this space.

Biotech finds extensive use in healthcare—gene editing utilises it to correct genetic defects and treat disorders like viral infections and cancers, and genomics uses it to identify mutations that drive growth of tumours and tailor remediation. It is also applied in messenger RNA therapeutics (a class of medicines that instruct cells to produce particular proteins to combat specific diseases) and in biomanufacturing (involving the use of micro-organisms and cell cultures to produce essential medicines like insulin and vaccines at commercial scale).

Gene therapies now address much more complex conditions and deliver genetic material directly into the patient. With AI, every stage of drug discovery is being accelerated, and with the vastly enhanced ability to study enor-

mous data sets, personalised drug regimens can now be created. Virtual clinical trials are already a reality. Micro-engineered chips can mimic human organs and tissue engineering has changed the paradigm in relation to tissue repair or replacement.

Innovations in biotech have also gone beyond healthcare. For instance, biotech finds use in agriculture to develop insect-resistant strains, crops with additional nutrition, and those with reduced vulnerability to salinity or drought conditions. As for industry, research in biotech is helping create microorganisms to tackle pollution and biofuels from plant biomass that reduce fossil fuel dependence, as well as developing biodegradable plastics. And now, bio-convergence is blurring the lines between AI, biology, classical engineering, and computing.

Global collaboration and converging intent are imperatives. Academia, industry, and governments must come together, unfettered, so that populations across the globe can benefit from dramatic advancements in healthcare. Sharing anonymised patient information will accelerate research and new solutions. Regulatory harmonisation will enable specialist consultations across nations.

We must find ways for life-changing biotech innovations to make the greatest global impact, riding on the healthcare highway.



KARISHMA VASWANI

Bloomberg

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rethinking banking

Apropos of "Banking needs to revisit role" (FE, August 25), indeed, disintermediation gains momentum and thus enables direct access to financial services and products, bypassing traditional intermediaries like banks and brokers. It could lead to cost savings as a result, reducing transaction time and eliminating intermediary fees. Fintech and digital payments, peer-to-peer lending, and

online market places augment the financial markets for direct investment in a wide range of assets and reduce the dependence on traditional banking products. The time has come for banks to introspect their role. They must work on attracting more deposits with high interest rates and refine their customer service, failing which disintermediated investments will see an uptick, despite their risks and volatility. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Famine in Gaza

It is patently obvious that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is lying when he says that there is no famine in Gaza. It is inconceivable that thousands and thousands of humans face starvation and scores of them are dying of it on a daily basis. UN secretary general Antonio Guterres calls the widespread starvation in Gaza a "failure of humanity." It is a self-evident truth that Israel has

engineered the extreme famine in Gaza. That Israel uses starvation as a method of warfare becomes evident from its demolition of agricultural land, and its refusal to agree to a ceasefire, open Gaza's borders, and allow the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Expressing token concerns falls far short of empathetic action that is needed to ensure access to food. —G David Milton, Maruthanode

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The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

ISRAEL-MADE TRAGEDY

Confirmation of famine in Gaza by UN-backed body
underscores a grim ground reality

Declaration of famine by a UN agency is a rare event. In the 20-year history of the UN-backed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), there have been only four: Somalia in 2011, South Sudan in 2017 and 2020, and Sudan in 2024. It was already framed by the stark visuals of emaciated children and reports of malnutrition and starvation deaths caused by Israel's war, but Gaza has now made it to the list. "As this famine is entirely man-made, it can be halted and reversed," says the IPC report published on August 22. For months, the IPC had held back from a formal declaration. In July, it warned that a "famine scenario" was unfolding in parts of Gaza, yet the conditions for a declaration had not been satisfied due to difficulties in gathering reliable data. Now that famine has been confirmed in the Gaza Governorate and is projected to spread, the emphasis on it being man-made underscores the horrific ground reality in a place where Israel's bombing campaign has already killed more than 60,000 people.

The IPC declaration adds to the mounting international pressure on PM Benjamin Netanyahu in recent weeks. Yet, consistent with Israel's past dismissal of global criticism, the government has rejected the report's findings, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs calling them "Hamas lies". The IPC report, however, is not an isolated warning. Last month, a letter signed by 100-plus aid groups including Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam, and Amnesty International accused Israel of deliberately obstructing the flow of aid. Health officials in Gaza estimate that more than 200 have died because of hunger since the conflict began, while more than 1,300 Palestinians have reportedly been killed at aid distribution sites. The evidence is overwhelming, and Israel's blanket rejection of every report as "Hamas propaganda" is unlikely to persuade the international community.

But so far, global outrage is hardly acting as a deterrent. Over the weekend, planes and tanks pounded Gaza City as Israel expanded its war — ostensibly to destroy Hamas and rescue the remaining hostages. Even though the world's attention remains fixed on Gaza, Israel announced last week the approval of 3,400 new settler homes in the occupied West Bank, a move condemned by 26 countries and the EU. Hamas has no presence in the West Bank, and Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits an occupying power from transferring its civilian population into occupied territory. Yet such legal obligations appear to do little to restrain the Netanyahu government. Nor have the announcements by France, the UK, Canada, and Australia that they will recognise a state of Palestine in September. The United States is the only power with leverage over Israel. But with Washington remaining silent on the famine declaration and even hinting at support for the settler plans, no end is in sight for this continuing tragedy.

A CHILLING MESSAGE

That's what is sent out when BJP and Congress both
see conspiracies, both weaponise the law

The Supreme Court has done well to stay criminal proceedings against Sanjay Kumar, poll analyst and co-director of Lokniti, a research programme at the capital's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. The FIRs against Kumar were outrageous to begin with. Consider the sequence of events: He posted two tweets on August 17 on alleged discrepancies in voters' lists of specific constituencies in the Maharashtra Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections, and on finding out that they were erroneous, deleted them two days later, also tendering a public apology. And yet, after this, two FIRs were registered by officials reporting to the Election Commission in Nagpur and Nashik, under sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, alleging criminal intent in misleading voters and citizens. This ease of imputation of criminality, and weaponisation of law to unleash a disproportionate response to an inadvertent error that had been almost instantly acknowledged, is disturbing. Sanjay Kumar and the institution he belongs to are central to, and at the same time, incidental in this still-unfolding sobering story.

The CSDS has done pioneering work in studying India's politics as it is and in generating alternative imaginings: in drawing linkages between scholarly research and living social movements; in opening up spaces for a multi-disciplinary academic engagement to connect to everyday practices. Founded in 1963 by Rajni Kothari, who gave a seminal grounding framework for understanding Indian politics, the CSDS has been supported by the Indian Council for Social Science Research since 1969. Today, in a climate of heightened political polarisation, where allegations of "vote chori" — based more in speculation than fact — point to a downward spiral into a nihilistic politics, the fact that Kumar's erroneous post was seized upon by Congress and wielded against the BJP before it was withdrawn, comes in handy, especially to those searching for a pretext to target an autonomous institution and paint spectres of a conspiracy. Incidentally, Kumar has also expressed his scepticism of Congress's "narrative" of the stolen election, and said that there is no evidence for it.

If the ruling establishment errs on the side of suspicion and vengefulness, Congress flatters it by imitation. The crude threat issued by the party against NDTV anchor Shri Anoor for his critique of Congress's campaign — the party spokesperson says that a criminal complaint has been filed for the "malicious attempt to defame" — is a mirror image of the ruling BJP. Be it the targeting of the CSDS for an honest mistake or the threat to a TV anchor by the Opposition party, however, there is a larger, chilling message: When political players draw the lines between "us" and "them" so tightly, free speech and commentary are a casualty — further pushing discourse to either of the margins.

THANK YOU, PUJARA

As a player, he had to wait for acknowledgement. History will be kinder to the man who dragged Indian cricket to a better future

In 2021, 15 years after his first-class debut, even the corporate moneybags in the IPL were moved to applaud Cheteshwar Pujara when he was signed up by Chennai Super Kings at the auction. The moment went viral as a cricketer named sheepishly acknowledged the contributions of the most old-school cricketer of the modern-day game. It's understandable that an orthodox cricketer like him didn't become a popular icon; his batting was classical in a world of heavy metal.

He had to wait for years in the anonymity of domestic cricket before he got the break to play for India. Luckily, for him and Indian cricket, his father, Arvind, had taught him how to wait. And he did. In his batting, in his life, and for the applause to ring out for him. His patience, his craft, his courage to take multiple blows, and his passion to wear down Australia in Australia that led to famous series wins were finally appreciated. His 993 runs in 11 Tests in Australia stitched together over 2,657 deliveries was monumentally important to India's proud record in Australia in the last decade.

But it didn't take long for the knives to come out; his waiting game began to be seen as a lack of intent. Silly whispers about his batting puts pressure on others began to circulate, not just among fans but in the cricketing corridors. If anything, he had allowed the other batsmen to ride his wave. Through his career, 30.4 per cent of India's total runs were accumulated while he was at the crease; such has been the incredible spillover effect. Only Rahul Dravid and Sunil Gavaskar, lucky to have been in eras where that batsmanship was celebrated, did slightly better in that regard. Pujara would tame the bowlers, wear them down, make the ball lose its shine, and present a more conducive atmosphere for the attacking batsmen. Undoubtedly, history will be kinder to the player who dragged Indian cricket towards a better future.



SHREYA PANDEY, PINAKI CHAKRABORTY

THE PRIME MINISTER'S announcement of GST reforms in his August 15 speech signals a welcome step towards meeting the original promise of a goods and services tax — that of a simple, unified indirect tax structure in the country. However, its effectiveness will depend on a consensus (via the GST Council) on the eventual rate structure and the subsequent reclassification of goods and services.

GST 2.0 will replace the existing rate schedule of 5, 12, 18 and 28 per cent with two slabs of 5 and 18 per cent, and the possible provision of a higher rate for "sin" goods at 40 per cent. It will also retain the structure of low rates (0-3 per cent) for items like bullion and jewellery. This remains far from the desired simple model of a single rate GST, as is the practice in federal countries like Canada and Australia. Albeit a step in the right direction, the new structure will still carry the problems of administrative complexity arising from multiple rates.

Multiple rates enable selectivity in rate setting, which increases compliance costs, adding to the complexity. When reclassifying goods and services across the new rates, the Council should try to avoid the pitfall of over-classifying items, which results in court rulings on whether cheese or pizza toppings should be treated separately from nuts. We should not be putting in time and resources deliberating on whether nuts produced locally are taxed differently from imported nuts that are not found locally.

A longstanding criticism of our multi-rate GST system is the inverted duty structure that results in high costs for businesses in the form of liquidity constraints, refund delays, and input tax credit denials. This arises when the final output is taxed at a lower GST rate than the intermediate inputs used in its production, leading to an accumulation of unutilised input tax credits. In narrowing the slabs, it would be important to minimise such distortions rather than ex-

Going back to the original promise of a unified indirect tax structure could be the first step

Reports indicate that most goods/services taxable at the 12 per cent slab will be moved to the 5 per cent category, narrowing the tax base and limiting revenue collection. Instead, the reverse should be done — most goods and services should be taxed at the standard rate. Since the 18 per cent category currently accounts for over two-thirds of the GST revenues, a broadening of this tax base would pave the way for lowering the standard rate with no loss in revenue. Furthermore, this reduction in standard rate will lower the GST burden for consumers and SMEs more than merging the 12 per cent category with the 5 per cent.

acberate them by moving a final good from 12 per cent to 5 per cent while its intermediate input remains at 18 per cent. It also offers the opportunity to correct distorted tax structures in sectors like construction where intermediate inputs were being taxed in the range of 5-28 per cent.

The proposed model of a reduced rate (5 per cent), standard rate (18 per cent), and a sin or luxury rate begs the question of the principles that will underlie such a classification. An ideal GST is a non-distortionary tax which is completely neutral to the nature of the goods/economic activity being taxed. So, for better revenue outcome and for simplicity, most of the goods and services should be taxed at a standard rate. Reports indicate that most goods/services taxable at the 12 per cent slab will be moved to the 5 per cent category, narrowing the tax base and limiting revenue collection. Instead, the reverse should be done — most goods and services should be taxed at the standard rate. Since the 18 per cent category currently accounts for over two-thirds of the GST revenues, a broadening of this tax base would pave the way for lowering the standard rate with no loss in revenue. Furthermore, this reduction in standard rate will lower the GST burden for consumers and SMEs more than merging the 12 per cent category with the 5 per cent.

Any change in the GST structure in India should aspire to move to a regime where the use of reduced rates and exemptions is minimised. [Targeted transfers from tax revenues have been far more effective than reduced rates in achieving redistributive objectives, as has been seen across countries.] Deviation from this principle may require another major rate restructuring in the future. As the GST Council contemplates the number and nature of goods and services that will be moved from the 12 per cent category to 5 per cent, this very basic principle of GST design should

not be compromised.

Another question is on the treatment of sin goods and luxury goods that currently face a GST rate of 28 per cent. Reports indicate that certain items will be pushed to a high slab of 40 per cent. Will this extend to all goods and services with negative externalities? Will it end up including ultra luxury goods? Will this category avoid the irrationalities present in the current 28 per cent slab, which treats tobacco at par with intermediate inputs like cement? To address the negative externality of sin goods and mobilise more revenue from luxury goods, states and the Centre should apply specific excise taxes on pre-determined and well-defined bases, in addition to the standard GST rates.

When we talk about GST 2.0, the critical consideration should be the asymmetric revenue impact of such a restructuring on the states. More than two-thirds of the own tax revenues of the states come from GST. In the case of the Union government, the share of GST in total tax revenue is 27.58 per cent. Thus, it has more headroom to accommodate the revenue fall due to the restructuring of GST. Since the GST compensation has ended, the revenue impact of GST 2.0 on states' revenues needs to be factored in to ensure that their fiscal autonomy is maintained.

Finally, any reform in the GST design will be incomplete without resolving administrative issues in the implementation of GST. This includes addressing the problem of Inter-state Goods and Services Tax (IGST) settlement between Centre and states (which was taken up in the 55th GST Council meeting), and reducing the compliance and regulatory burden (from registration to assessment) on companies, particularly small and medium-sized ones.

Pandey is an independent economist and Chakraborty is former director, NIPFP



SUMANA ROY

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, I've been thinking about *lauki*. Set in Phulera — its name is not an accident, deriving as it does, we have been led to believe, from *phool*, flower — *Panchayat* is about a young engineering graduate who finds a job as the secretary of a village panchayat. We could have indulged ourselves to imagine the fictional town of Phulera as Malgudi, except that people here fight elections with guns and sticks and a tragicomic zeal and violence. The current panchayat pradhan gifts people bottle gourds from his garden. By the fourth season, that bottle gourd, initially a minor comic indulgence, has become his election symbol; the opposition party chooses a pressure cooker, though it is with free gifts of potatoes that they fight the bottle gourd.

I've been noticing a gentle vegetal turn in Indian cinema and television. *Lopnotal Ladies* (2023), as I showed in an essay for this newspaper, "Our flowery fantasy" (IE, May 8, 2024) was built around a subterranean structure of plant life, more particularly flowers — the girls are called Phool and Pushpa, the husband is Pankaj; the village is Suryamukhi, sunflower, to which the couple travels by a bus called "Pushpa Travels". There's the troubling awareness of a plant world in the neighbourhood of thought affairs: When Phool fails to remember the name of her husband's village, the people around her offer her possible names, all of which are flowers: "Gulab, Champa, Chameli, Matiya, Kaner, Dhatura... Parijat... Mogra". Another film was released in the same year, one whose re-

COMEDY OF THE BOTANICAL

From 'Panchayat' to 'Kathal', there's a gentle vegetal turn in Indian cinema and TV

lation with plant life is announced in the title itself. *Kathal*, jackfruit. There's a *lauki* in *Kathal* as well — instead of the *lauki*, his garden has exotic *kathal*. When they are stolen, the police are summoned to find the thief urgently. At the end of the film, after many storylines meet and clash with each other, we learn that it wasn't humans but monkeys who were responsible for the disappearing jackfruits.

And many decades before that, so long ago that it's possible to forget the lineage, there was the English professor forced to act as a teacher of Botany in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Chupke Chupke* (1975). He finds himself falling in love with a Botany student who wants him to make the subject easy for her. Comedy is inevitable: When asked about "corolla", he says "karola" — a bitter gourd. The name of the woman he loves is "Vasudha", meaning "earth". The comic is emphasised in other ways, as when the holds — and studies — a marigold flower when speaking to the professor and then, in annoyance, throws it and walks away from him. A little later, he pulls a flower from the vase nearby to give her. Suddenly, grown aware of Vasudha's eavesdropping sister, he begins chanting, "Corolla is the modified stem..." For those who know a little more about plants than the English professor, there's a hidden joke there too: The corolla is not a modified stem but leaves, petals.

A few years after *Chupke Chupke*, Gulzar would name his adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* after that: *Angoor*

(1982), grape, all because the second pair of twins are intent on buying grape orchards.

A lineage of thought runs through these films — it's the comedy of the botanical, deriving from the intersection of human and plant worlds; the other is deceit, comedy's lubricant. Even when a register of fear attaches itself to such a film and it crosses over into a different genre, as it does in *Munjya* (2024), which is presented as a "horror comedy", where life and death, over two time periods, come to be concentrated in a peepal tree, the underlying tone is comic. Moving between Goa in 1952 and Pune in the 21st century, different histories and sets of characters are brought together through the figure of the peepal tree under which someone is buried to become the supernatural *Munjya*; the tree is burnt at the end of the movie. The transportation of the burnt logs, with the suggestion of a ghostly presence, is a new addition to what has primarily been a comic tradition, one that includes flowers "kissing". Disappearing fruits; missing girls as missing flowers; politicians and everyday vegetables, *lauki* and *kathal*; the burnt peepal tree, a trope that goes back to Emperor Ashoka's enchantment with the Bodhi tree and attempts to kill it, has transmogrified into a ghost in our cinema. If these are not an unconscious manifestation of the death of our forests, what is?

Roy, a poet and writer, is associate professor at Ashoka University. Views are personal

AUGUST 26, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

ACTING AKALI CHIEF

THE FORMER UNION minister, Surjit Singh Barnala, was on Sunday elected acting president of the Akali Dal (Longowal) at a crucial meeting which committed the party to "every word" of the Punjab accord. The meeting of the Akali Dal's 18 strict jathedars and seven state unit presidents, however, struck a compromise by accommodating the rival claimant for the post, Aji Singh, as chairman of the party's parliamentary board.

AGAINST APARTHEID

INDIA AND TANZANIA condemned the "atrocities and machinations" of South Africa's racist regime, out to suppress its

struggling Black majority. The statement by President Zail Singh and the visiting Tanzanian President, Julius K Nyerere, came at a state banquet here. Nyerere recalled India's economic and political support for the South African and Namibian independence movements and said that New Delhi's voice had always been "clear and uncompromising" on these issues.

DMK PLANS PROTEST

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi and Union Home Minister S B Chavan will be greeted with black flags whenever they visit Tamil Nadu, the Tamil Eelam Supporters' Organisation has announced. DMK president MK Karunanidhi, chairman of TESO, announcing this at the end of a massive rally in

Madras protesting against the deportation of three Tamil Eelam leaders, said the demonstrations would continue till the three were allowed to return to India.

RADIO SILENCE

ALL INDIA RADIO boycotted the public question and answer session with Karnataka's Minister for Medium and Major Industries, JH Patel, organised by the state department. The boycott is believed to have been in retaliation for state ministers' criticism of Union Deputy Finance Minister Janardhana Pojary's loan melas. AIR is believed to have received instructions not to cover Karnataka ministers' programmes. Normally, the Akshayini crew covers even minor village events.



THE IDEAS PAGE

What the EC's numbers hide

Unless the Election Commission is made to adopt more expansive criteria for eligible documents, more than two crore face removal from Bihar's draft rolls



DESHKAAL
BY KAMAYANI SWAMI,
RAHUL SHASTRI,
YOGENDRA YADAV

THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF India (ECI) made an extraordinary claim this Sunday. Asserting that the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) was proceeding in Bihar as per schedule, it claimed that "documents from 98.2 per cent electors have been received" with eight days left for the deadline to file documents, claims and objections to the draft electoral rolls. Another grand success, just like the collection of enumeration forms. Or so the ECI would like us to believe.

Challo comes to mind: "Ki khushi se mar na jaate agar e'tibar hota (Happily my life I'd give, if I could but believe)". Yet another incredible claim by the ECI, another piece of data designed to dazzle and fool. Yet another claim that flies in the face of all ground reporting, including in this paper. The figure invites you to think that the mission is completed, that nearly everyone in Bihar has the documents asked for by the ECI, and that everyone on the draft rolls has made it to the final voters' list. It hides a critical piece of information: the percentage of those who have submitted the documents required by the ECI and those who may have submitted documents like Aadhaar that the ECI refuses to accept. That is going to determine the final number of deletions or the extent of disenfranchisement.

Till the ECI decides to share the full truth, or is made to do so by the Supreme Court, we have to rely upon some rough estimates. The Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan had carried out a second sample survey from July 31 to August 13, immediately after the conclusion of the first phase of the SIR and before the publication of the draft rolls. (A report of the first survey was carried in *The Indian Express* on July 22.) Our volunteers collected information about 1,439 adults from 494 households in 59 booths of 16 assembly constituencies — all selected randomly from the existing electoral rolls. The survey could not be completed in eight of the 24 constituencies in the original sample. This small sample is fairly representative — 42 per cent women, 24 per cent Scheduled Caste, 62 per cent OBC and 13 per cent General.

Its findings present a sobering picture of what happened on the ground during the SIR. Only 49 per cent of our sample reported submitting a complete enumeration form — filled in, signed, with a photograph and some documents. A majority had either not submitted forms, at least not to their knowledge, or had submitted incomplete ones. In our sample, 81 per cent of all adults had, directly or indirectly, received and returned the enumeration form (everyone who received it reported submission), complete or incomplete. While 3 per cent were simply not sure, the results would be transformative. 7 per cent had no idea about the status of their enumeration forms. As widely reported, the acknowledgement receipt provided for in the SIR order proved to be a fiction — less than 1 per cent of those who submitted forms reported getting a receipt on a



CR Sasikumar

duplicate form, while 10 per cent received an SMS acknowledgement. The remaining 89 per cent have no proof of submission of their enumeration forms. The Supreme Court has now made it mandatory to provide a receipt of submission of documents, but it may be too late.

The remaining 9 per cent were the "missing voters" — those residing in Bihar who should have been on the voters' list but did not figure on either the previous electoral rolls or the recent draft. Within this category, which could translate into nearly 90 lakh people in Bihar, about one-third used to be on the voters' list at some point, about one-sixth have tried unsuccessfully to enrol themselves, but well over half have never been on the rolls and have never attempted to be. This finding confirms our hypotheses (Rahul Shastri and Yogendra Yadav, "The missing voter", *IE*, July 31) that Bihar's voters' list was not inflated but deflated as it excluded a significant proportion of "missing voters" that were bypassed in the SIR process. None of these was provided an enumeration form, though the SIR order allowed for a "blank form" to be provided in such an eventuality. Hence the weird outcome of the SIR: Over 65 lakh deletions and not a single addition.

Before we turn to documents, we must first ask: How many were required to furnish one of the 11 eligibility documents listed by the ECI? Sadly, the ECI has kept shifting its position on this crucial question. The original SIR order exempted only those whose own name figured in the 2003 voters' list. A press release of June 30 extended the exemption to parents who featured in 2003, while insisting that their child would still have to submit his documents. In the Supreme Court, the ECI has expanded it further to say that if any person's parents, or any relation whatsoever, were in the 2003 list, then they don't need to submit any documents. Our survey showed that if we go by the original criterion, only 48 per cent of the electors on the earlier rolls possessed the extract of the 2003 list and would thus qualify for exemption. There is a significant group (16 per cent) who would qualify for this exemption but who say they cannot access the extracts. The number would go up by another 17 per cent if the exemption is extended to anyone whose parents were on the 2003 list.

Finally, let us focus on the real issue of doc-

While the Supreme Court's intervention has checked some of the disenfranchising impulse of the SIR, at least in Bihar, the possibility of any further disenfranchisement depends on the nature of the documents considered admissible. The ECI's dazzling figure of 98.2 per cent cannot conceal the fact that well over one-third of those who have submitted a document may not have submitted and cannot possibly submit one of the 11 listed documents. Our preliminary caste-wise analysis shows that the proportion of those who face exclusion due to a lack of documents is much higher among Dalits and the EBCs.

Two simplifying e-visas, reducing immigration queues and delivering a seamless arrival experience are vital. With India's airlines set to expand their fleet by 1,000 aircraft, improved connectivity can give a decisive boost to tourism. Three, the future lies in content-led promotion, influencer engagement and strategic digital storytelling. Millions of creators already showcase India to the world; the task now is to amplify this through AI-enabled curation and partnerships with global platforms.

Four, it is important to unlock private investment. Expanding the tourism sector's inclusion in the Harmonised Master List of Infrastructure can catalyse investments, including PPP projects like hotels, ropeways, wildlife amenities, and convention centres. Five, the *Dekho Apna Desh* campaign can evolve into a national movement. Domestic tourism, accounting for 86 per cent of sector revenues, fosters cultural exchange, economic redistribution, and national integration. Making interstate travel more affordable and convenient will amplify these benefits.

Tourism has one of the highest economic

uments that the ECI's latest claim glosses over. How many of those who do not enjoy exemption have submitted a document that the ECI considers valid? Our survey showed that in this category (who cannot trace their names to the 2003 list and are required to give documentary proof), 59 per cent had attached some documents with their enumeration form. Of these, only 18 per cent had submitted one of the 11 documents (mostly matriculation, domicile or caste certificates) on the ECI's list. The remaining 41 per cent had submitted documents, mainly Aadhaar and ration cards, which do not figure on the ECI's list.

Of those without a qualifying extract of the 2003 rolls, 43 per cent have none of the other 11 "eligibility" documents. Just one in 12 of these have applied for a caste or Awasthiya certificate. Even accounting for this, 35-40 per cent will have no eligibility document to submit. Yet, 97 per cent of this group have Aadhaar cards and 99.5 have Aadhaar or ration cards.

While the Supreme Court's intervention has checked some of the disenfranchising impulse of the SIR, at least in Bihar, the possibility of any further disenfranchisement depends on the nature of the documents considered admissible. The ECI's dazzling figure of 98.2 per cent cannot conceal the fact that well over one-third of those who have submitted a document may not have submitted and cannot possibly submit one of the 11 listed documents. Our preliminary caste-wise analysis shows that the proportion of those who face exclusion due to a lack of documents is much higher among Dalits and the EBCs.

As we wait for the final picture to emerge, there are only two possibilities. One is that the ECI is made to change the requirements under the SIR order. It could use a sleight of hand to expand the scope of exemption from submission of documents or expand the list of documents to include Aadhaar in the list of 11 valid documents. Otherwise, we are looking at a deletion of over two crore names in the SIR exercise.

swami is state coordinator of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan, Bihar. Shastri and Yadav work with the national team of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Yadav has filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging the SIR. Acknowledgements: Professor Pushpendra, Professor Muneshwar Yadav, Zafreen Neha, JSS youth team, Rishi Anand and field surveyors

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Unfortunately, in the first year of the interim government, there have been no effective steps specifically addressing mob violence."

— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

Once upon a festival

How 19th-century British policies and the politics of the day shaped Ganesh Chaturthi as we know it today



ABHINAV CHANDRACHUD

IN MAY 1894, Bal Gangadhar Tilak's English-language newspaper, *The Mahratta*, informed its readers about a surprising new divide-and-rule directive adopted by the colonial government. In a confidential circular, Governor George Robert Canning Harris, former captain of the England cricket team, instructed his officers that Hindus should be told, as a matter of "courtesy", to stop playing music in religious processions while passing by a mosque. No such rule was applicable, however, when a Muslim procession went past a temple. The stage had been set for a communal conflagration.

Sure enough, it occurred a few months later, in July 1894, when the famous palanquins or *palkhis* of the poet-saints Dnyanoba and Tukaram entered Pooná. At Ganesh Peth, as Tukaram's *palkhi* was passing through an area with a dargah, some miscreants threw stones at the man who was beating a drum in the procession. A large communal scuffle occurred. Hindus saw this as a Muslim attack on their religion. Tilak's Marathi-language newspaper *Kesari*, the most widely read local-language newspaper in the Bombay Presidency, reported that some 50 Muslims had attacked the Tukaram palanquin.

All this happened just a few days before Moharram, the high festival of Muslims in India, which fell on the first 10 days of the first month in the Islamic calendar. For many years past, it was customary for Hindus to participate in the processions that were taken out during Moharram called *tabut* (a word that literally means "coffin"). As the American poet Lucia G. Grievé observed, the *tabut* festival involved musical processions, especially using a large number of drums. On the last day of the festival, the *tabuts* were taken to the seaside or bank of a river and immersed. In Bombay, *tabut* processions were carried out by both Shias and Sunnis.

However, after the *palkhi* episode, popular regional-language newspapers in the Bombay Presidency like *Kalpataru*, *Mumbai Vaibhav*, *Indu Prakash*, *Deendabadi*, and *Sudhodi Patrika*, advised their readers, mostly Hindus, not to make *tabuts* or take part in the Moharram festival that year. Handbills were pasted on temple walls containing this message. The Pooná *Vaibhav* went a step further. It told its readers that if Hindus wished to "have similar rejoicings", they could start their own "procession in honour of one of their own gods on a suitable occasion".

What happened next was interesting. Newspapers began reporting that an old Hindu festival, which was hitherto mostly observed privately, was going to be celebrated in Pooná on a grand scale that year. On July 22, 1894, the *Vysani* reported that preparations were on to celebrate the Ganapati festival with "more than the usual éclat". "Chairs of state for idols are being made and splendidly fitted up in the town like the *tabuts*," wrote the Pooná

Vaibhav the following month, "and bands of persons are seen in the streets melodiously singing songs in glorification of Ganpati and Shankar".

In other words, the Ganesh Chaturthi festival that we now know of today had its origins in 1894 in Pooná, as a Hindu substitute for Moharram. This was not lost on contemporary observers. In October 1894, *The Mahratta* explained the phenomenon that was taking place. The two *sadhu* poets, Tukaram and Dnyandeve, were the "great favourites" of the lower classes, who considered them to be deities more beloved than the puranic Gods. When the Tukaram cultists seemed to have been insulted by Muslims in Pooná, the lower classes decided to abstain from the Moharram festival. "But their love to give themselves up to song and dance and to buffoonery for a certain number of days during every year remained ungratified," said *The Mahratta*. "They therefore started the Ganpati festival. 'The festival was not a new one,' wrote *The Mahratta*, and had been 'observed from time immemorial'.

However, it was "modified... so as to resemble the Moharram". Like the *tabuts*, on September 13, 1894, the Ganpatis were carried for immersion in a public procession. "In the place of the small Ganpatis which we have for years past been accustomed to see in Pooná," wrote *The Times of India* the following day, "the Hindus have on this occasion made large imposing figures of their God of Wisdom," which they "prominently exhibited in the streets," under "mandaps" designed like "the *taboots*".

There are many myths that prevail about the founding of the Ganpati festival. One of these is that it was organised for disseminating anti-colonial messages. This was probably not true. However, what was remarkable about Ganesh Chaturthi is that it united all classes of Hindus under a common banner.

The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, was then a privileged movement of educated elites and aristocrats. 1894, against the backdrop of the Ganpati festival, a new kind of politics was beginning to emerge in India, with leaders like Tilak who appealed to the religious fervour of the masses.

Tilak felt that Ganpati was important for "national regeneration". As *Kesari* explained in September 1895, a nation required three things: A common religion, common laws and a common language. The British had given India laws and a common language. However, Tilak felt that the other element of nationality, a "united religion", had to be supplied by Indians themselves "if we hope to rise one day as a united nation". It would perhaps not be incorrect to say that some of Tilak's ideas of nationalism are now considered conventional wisdom in the corridors of power in New Delhi.

The 1890s resonate in more ways than one in modern-day India. The "Harris Shield" inter-school cricket tournament in Mumbai, best known for the 664-run partnership between Sachin Tendulkar and Vinod Kambli in 1988, is named after Governor Harris, whose divide-and-rule policy on Hindu musical processions unwittingly gave birth to the Ganpati festival in its modern form.

The writer is an advocate at the Bombay High Court

The tariff-proof sector

Tourism generates employment, boosts economy and is insulated from trade shocks

SUMAN BILLA

THE RECENT DECISION by the US to impose higher tariffs on select Indian exports, from steel pipes to chemical products, is a reminder of the vulnerabilities that accompany overdependence on any single set of global trade relationships. India has long pursued economic diversification, and this moment underscores the value of widening our growth base. Among the sectors that can deliver transformative results is tourism, not just as a showcase of our heritage and soft power, but as an economic engine capable of generating growth, employment, and foreign exchange.

Tourism is among the most labour-intensive industries in the world, generating livelihoods across transport, hospitality, food services, handicrafts, wellness and entertainment. Few sectors can create employment on such a scale, spanning highly skilled professionals in urban centres to semi-skilled youth in rural communities.

At present, tourism contributes around 5 per cent to India's GDP, compared to the global average of 10 per cent. Countries like Spain and the UAE, where tourism accounts for 12 per cent of GDP, illustrate the potential when the sector is treated as a national growth priority.

In 2024, tourism generated \$28 billion or Rs 2,45,000 crore in foreign exchange earnings for India. This is only a fraction of our potential. Improving the inbound share of

tourism GDP will not only strengthen our external account but also provide a steady buffer against fluctuations in merchandise trade. At the same time, outbound travel is growing rapidly. In 2024, over 28 million Indians travelled abroad, spending an estimated \$28-\$31 billion. Indian travellers are among the highest spenders globally, with a growing appetite for luxury, leisure, and immersive experiences. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity: Unless we offer comparable or superior experiences within India, much of this spending will continue to flow outward.

If we can raise tourism's GDP contribution from 5 per cent to 10 per cent over the next decade, the results would be transformative — an additional \$16 billion to the economy each year, 40 million new jobs, and foreign exchange earnings rising to \$130-\$140 billion. Achieving this will require addressing capacity constraints. India currently has about 180,000 branded hotel rooms and 15 million unbranded rooms. Industry estimates indicate that we need to triple our capacity in both categories to meet demand, remain price-competitive, and position ourselves to host major global events and conventions.

Unlike goods exports, it is shaped primarily by perception, infrastructure, and facilitation — all of which can be directly enhanced. There are some strategic pathways for this growth. The Union Budget's announcement on

developing 50 destinations in partnership with states is an important step. A world-class destination in each state, blending infrastructure, sustainability, and brand, can shift India's positioning from a "place to see" to a "place to experience".

Two simplifying e-visas, reducing immigration queues and delivering a seamless arrival experience are vital. With India's airlines set to expand their fleet by 1,000 aircraft, improved connectivity can give a decisive boost to tourism. Three, the future lies in content-led promotion, influencer engagement and strategic digital storytelling. Millions of creators already showcase India to the world; the task now is to amplify this through AI-enabled curation and partnerships with global platforms.

Four, it is important to unlock private investment. Expanding the tourism sector's inclusion in the Harmonised Master List of Infrastructure can catalyse investments, including PPP projects like hotels, ropeways, wildlife amenities, and convention centres. Five, the *Dekho Apna Desh* campaign can evolve into a national movement. Domestic tourism, accounting for 86 per cent of sector revenues, fosters cultural exchange, economic redistribution, and national integration. Making interstate travel more affordable and convenient will amplify these benefits.

Tourism has one of the highest economic

multipliers of any sector. Every rupee spent flows through transport, crafts, food services and community enterprises. When developed sustainably, tourism is also a green growth driver, creating livelihoods without large-scale environmental costs.

Moreover, the rise of wellness tourism, spiritual journeys, medical value travel, and immersive cultural experiences aligns perfectly with India's civilisational strengths. We do not need to reinvent ourselves; we simply need to present the India that already exists more effectively, more consistently and with world-class standards.

In today's world, resilience lies not only in securing foreign markets but in building domestic capacity that can withstand shocks. Tourism offers exactly this: Inward-looking in development, outward-facing in benefits. It generates demand that cannot be taxed at foreign borders, creates jobs that cannot be offshored, and builds national pride alongside prosperity.

If adversity is the spur, let us seize this moment to frame a tourism strategy that is bold, ambitious, and executed with purpose. Tariffs may be beyond our control, but the warmth of our welcome is entirely in our hands.

The writer is additional secretary & director general, Ministry of Tourism.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UP THE WRONG TREE

COOMI KAPOOR'S COLUMN ("Dogged Activity", *IE*, August 24) is unfortunately misleading. The MCD's inability to meet the targets of the ABC programme has been a running concern. However, the caregivers in her colony have worked exceptionally hard to sterilise and vaccinate all the community dogs in the locality over the last six years. As a result, the population of dogs has dropped substantially, leading to greater safety and less conflict. An unthinking hatred of these helpless animals, who did not ask to be on the streets, has consequences. In 2013, stray dogs and birds were poisoned in Nizamuddin; shortly after that, Kapoor's erstwhile neighbour, the late editor Vinod Mehta, stepped in with others to restore practical compassion to the community. The animal caregivers in the area have worked miracles. They are out in all weather, working in tandem with the MCD, often drawing on their own funds and attempting to reduce human-animal conflicts. In just a few years, they

have shown us that mass vaccination as well as a steady decrease in the population of community dogs is not a sentimental pipe dream — it can become a reality, across Delhi and India.

Niranjan S Roy, New Delhi

SHORT-SIGHTED BAN

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The wrong answer" (*IE*, August 25). While the dangers of addiction, fraud, and financial loss are real, banning both history tells us that bans often push activities into unregulated or offshore domains, making them harder to monitor. The economic fallout is also worrying — this sector was generating jobs, attracting investment, and boosting government revenue. Halting it abruptly sends a troubling signal to businesses and investors alike. Rather than swinging the axe, the government should have crafted smarter, stricter oversight with clear rules, transparency, and accountability.

Babu Krishna, Bengaluru

'Videshi' in one's own country: India's internal diasporas



CHINMAY TUMBE

EVER SINCE the High-Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora published its report in 2001-02, the word 'diaspora' has gained currency in policy circles. The size of India's diaspora, estimated in 2001-02 to be over 20 million, is currently estimated to be over 30 million. There have been over 2,000 studies on various aspects of India's international diaspora. A national border necessary to define a diaspora? Is that even feasible in India, where the words *pravasi* and *videshi* are used not only for international migration but also for long-distance internal migration? Ask any Odia migrant worker in Surat where they have come to work, and they will say 'videshi'. For a diasporic experience, it is important to cross a significant cultural zone which may be

internal or international. And yet, compared to the studies on international diasporas, we know very little about internal diasporas.

For instance, Madurai district in Tamil Nadu counts virtually no 'migrants' from Gujarat in the recent migration censuses, and yet reports more than 60,000 Gujarati speakers in the language censuses — more than the size of India's diaspora in most countries of the world.

Diasporas, after all, are a culmination of recent and past migrations, such as the Indian migration to Mauritius in the 19th century that has led to the creation of an Indian diaspora there today.

In a recent paper published in the journal *Sociological Bulletin*, I estimated the internal and international diasporas based on the major languages of India. For internal diasporas, recent language censuses were used, excluding border districts on state boundaries. For international diasporas, other countries' language censuses and other sources were used to form estimates. The results were striking.

When accounting for internal diasporas, the 'diasporic' experience of Indians is not 30 million but well over 100 million.

Punjabi, Malayalam, and Tamil were the most dispersed language groups relative to

INDIA'S LINGUISTIC DIASPORAS			
Language	Size of diaspora (in millions)*	Ratio of diaspora size & number of speakers (in %)*	Ratio of international & internal diaspora
Punjabi**	4.3	12.4	0.8
Malayalam	4.6	12.2	1.8
Tamil	8.4	11.5	1.2
Telugu	7.9	9.7	0.1
Gujarati	4.9	8.7	0.3
Hindi	39.9	7.5	0.2
Marathi	5.5	6.6	0.1
Kannada	2.0	4.6	0.2
Bengali**	3.6	3.7	0.2

*As on 2010. Refers to Indian international diaspora.
Source: 'The Internal and International Diaspora of India'

their sizes (over 10%), followed by Telugu and Gujarati. Hindi (which includes Bhojpuri and Marwari in the Indian Census) speakers are the largest segment of India's diaspora but are less dispersed relative to overall size. Marathi, Kannada, and Bengali are the least dispersed.

As with the international diaspora, there are 'old' internal diasporas and 'new' internal

diasporas linked with the recency of migration. There is the diaspora formed by old Gujarati migration to Tamil Nadu linked with weavers and traders several centuries ago, and more recent ones in Karnataka and Maharashtra linked with business-related migrations.

There is a significant Telugu diaspora in West Bengal and Maharashtra, in addition to

the better-known Telugu diaspora in the US. In fact, barring Malayalam and Tamil, all major language groups have larger internal diasporas than international diasporas. And a third of the internal diaspora is spread across India's 10 largest cities.

Diasporic identities are often cultivated by associations: think of Bengali associations that host Durga Pujas, Marathi Mandals and the spread of the Ganapati festival, and various Gujarati Samaj bodies around the world. At one point, the Gujarat State Non-Resident Gujaratis Foundation listed 176 Gujarati associations within India and 120 outside.

The preservation of language is an important aspect of diasporic groups, but it may fade over time. Some diasporas have learnt local languages along with retaining their own, whereas in extremely cosmopolitan settings, local languages were never seen as important to learn.

Many of the challenges of integration and conflicts between first and second generation migrants within families (as depicted in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*) in the case of international migration can be observed among the internal diasporas as well.

Despite being thrice in size, internal di-

asporas have been understudied compared to international diasporas. Understanding the two diasporas as an outcome of linguistic dispersion also helps in outlining their intimate interlinkages.

Antwerp's diamond connection with Surat and West Asian oil firms' labour linkages with Kerala were both facilitated by sizable Gujarati and Malayalam diasporas in Mumbai. Internal migration is often the trigger behind international migration and, in some cases, vice versa.

Constraining the concept of the diaspora to national borders is a flawed idea that must be rectified to understand Indian diversity, or for that matter, the diversity of any large nation.

India's diasporic experiences greatly matter in the spread of customs and cuisines, not only around the world but also within India. It is only when we understand the transnational from the subnational that we begin to recognise the full meaning of what it means to be *videshi*, outside or within one's own country.

Chinmay Tumbe is with IIM-A and author of *India Moving: A History of Migration* (2018). His paper 'The Internal and International Diaspora of India' was published in the journal *Sociological Bulletin* on Aug 13

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

COULD WE SOON HAVE SPACE-BASED SOLAR PANELS? NOT REALLY

SOLAR POWER is the fastest-growing renewable energy technology in the world. Between 2024 and 2030, solar capacity added is expected to account for 80% of the growth in renewable power globally, the International Energy Agency's 'Renewables 2024' report stated.

But this power source has several limitations. It can only operate in the day, is sensitive to the vagaries of weather, and requires a lot more space per unit of electricity produced than most other technologies.

A silver bullet to solve these problems: space-based solar power (SBSP). This is not a novel idea. But recent technological advances have given it new wings. A latest study by researchers from King's College, London has estimated that SBSP could supply up to 80% of Europe's renewable energy needs by 2050.

Promise of SBSP

The study, published in the journal *Nature* last week, says satellites in geostationary orbit could harvest continuous sunlight and beam it to Earth as microwaves, "delivering dispatchable, zero-carbon power that sidesteps the intermittency plaguing wind and solar" on the ground.

To make it a reality, researchers carried out multiple simulations of two concepts developed by NASA. One, "a nearly continuous heliostats swarm design and an intermittent planar array design," yielded positive results. This design uses mirror-like reflectors to collect sunlight in orbit, transmit this energy to stations on Earth, which then convert it to electricity. Such a design effectively addresses all major problems with solar power on Earth. "In space, you potentially have the ability to position solar panels to always face the sun, which means power generation can be nearly continuous compared to the daily pattern on Earth," engineer Wei He, one of the authors of the study,

said in a statement.

"And, because it's in space, the solar radiation is higher than on the Earth's surface."

Reasons for scepticism

While SBSP is based on existing technological principles and known physics, making it economically viable remains a challenge — one which the study does not tackle.

The main issue is that such a system would require setting up very large structures on Earth and in space. "A single solar power satellite at geostationary orbit might extend more than a kilometre across, with the receiver station on the ground needing a footprint more than ten times larger," the European Space Agency's website says.

A enormous number of launches — possibly running into the hundreds — would be required to set up a single solar satellite which could produce the equivalent of a conventional nuclear power station, according to ESA's website. For context, the much smaller International Space Station was built with more than 40 assembly flights.

Despite progressively declining launch costs, the sheer scale of space infrastructure required is an impediment to SBSP being viable. According to a report in *The Guardian*, it is unlikely that the "potential cost-effectiveness of SBSP [could] be realised until 2050 because building, launching and maintaining it would be too expensive unless technological growth reduces its costs".

The researcher's modelling also does not take into account space-specific challenges such as "orbital congestion, transmission interruptions or bearing variability, which could influence SBSP reliability and operational performance," *The Guardian* report said.

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EXPLAINED LAW

SC's Salwa Judum judgment

The Home Minister has accused the Opposition's VP candidate Justice B Sudershan Reddy of supporting Naxalism by ending the practice of appointing Special Police Officers to fight Maoists. What was the case?

AMAL SHEKHAR

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 25

UNION HOME Minister Amit Shah last week accused Justice B Sudershan Reddy, the opposition alliance's candidate for Vice President, of "supporting Naxalism".

Justice Reddy, a retired judge of the Supreme Court, headed the Bench that in 2011 delivered the landmark ruling in *Nandini Sundar v State of Chhattisgarh*, which ended Salwa Judum, the practice of using tribal youth as Special Police Officers (SPOs) to counter the Maoist insurgency in Chhattisgarh.

Shah said in Kerala on Friday that had Justice Reddy not ended the Salwa Judum judgment, "the Naxal terrorism would have ended by 2020". The remarks have been criticised by the legal fraternity, who have said that a judicial ruling cannot be equated with the personal views of a judge.

"A judgment is always open for critical analysis, but motives cannot be attached to a judge who has authored the judgment. The judge adjudicates, based on the Constitution and not his personal philosophy or political leaning. To find motive or personal interest of a judge in a given judgment is justifiably scandalous and is not permissible," Justice Govind Mahur, former Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court, told *The Indian Express*.

The election for Vice President is scheduled for September 9. The ruling NDA has nominated Maharashtra Governor C P Radhakrishnan for the post.

What was the Salwa Judum?

In the first decade of the 2000s, more than 200 districts in several states were in the grip of the Maoist insurgency. Chhattisgarh was among the worst affected, and witnessed extreme violence: between 2005 and 2011, as many as 1,019 villagers, 726 security personnel, and 422 Maoists were killed in Bastar alone, according to official figures.

In response to the security challenge posed by the Naxals, the government of Chhattisgarh sponsored a vigilante movement known as Salwa Judum ('peace march' in Gond), and mobilised local villagers into armed groups of SPOs, also known as Koya Commandos.

These groups largely comprised tribal youth of the particular areas in which they were active, some of whom were as young as 18 years old, and often had limited education.



Chhattisgarh state police officials oversee the training of woman SPOs at a Salwa Judum camp in Kanta, Dantewada, 2009. Express

The SPOs were appointed under the Chhattisgarh Police Act, 2007. Unlike the Indian Police Act, 1961, under which the approval of a magistrate is required for the appointment of SPOs, the Chhattisgarh Act gave the superintendent of police wide discretionary powers.

The SPOs were given firearms for self defence, and were deployed to assist as guides, translators, informants, and spotters. They got an honorarium of Rs 3,000 per month.

What was the case before the SC?

In 2007, sociologist Nandini Sundar, historian Kanchanbala Guha, and former IAS officer EAS Samra filed a petition before the SC challenging the practice of Salwa Judum.

The petitioners alleged that it was unconstitutional, violated fundamental rights, and had led to widespread human rights abuses. It blurred the line between civilians and combatants, left poorly trained youth exposed to violent retaliation, and displaced entire communities, they said.

What was the argument of the state?

Both the central government, which was led by the Congress at the time, and the state government led by Raman Singh of the BJP, defended the policy.

The Union argued that "its role [was] limited to the approval of upper limit of the number of SPOs for each state for the purpose of reimbursement of the honorarium under the SRE [security-related expenditure] scheme",

and that the "appointment, training, deployment, role and responsibility" of the SPOs were determined by the state governments concerned. The SC's order recorded.

Chhattisgarh filed detailed affidavits submitting that recruitment was on a voluntary basis. The applicants had to be at least 18 years of age, undergo character verification, and should have preferably studied up to the fifth standard. The state said that preference was given to those who had suffered at the hands of Maoists and wanted to resist them.

The order noted the submission of the state that "[T]he victims of racial violence and youth from naxal affected areas having knowledge of the local terrain, dialects, naxalites and their sympathizers and who voluntarily come forward and expressed their willingness are recruited as SPOs after character verification."

The affidavits stated that SPOs were trained in the use of weapons, as well as in law and human rights. They were equipped with firearms for self defence, and were taught to assist police and security forces by providing intelligence and guidance in unfamiliar terrain.

The state claimed that "SPOs have been able to thwart more than a dozen Maoist attacks on relief camps and have also been instrumental in saving lives of regular troops," according to the judgment. It also argued that the appointment of SPOs provided livelihoods in areas with limited employment opportunities. According to the government,

SPOs were treated as part of the regular force for welfare purposes.

And what did the court rule?

The court examined whether the practice of arming and deploying SPOs was consistent with constitutional provisions under Articles 14 and 21, which guarantee the fundamental right to equality and the right to life with dignity.

It noted that the Chhattisgarh Police Act gave very wide discretion to the executive to appoint SPOs without clear conditions or safeguards. The court found that some of those who had been recruited and armed had not even studied up to Class 5.

"It would be impossible for any reasonable person to accept that tribal youngsters, who may, or may not, have passed the fifth standard, would possess the necessary scholastic abilities to read, appreciate and understand the subjects being taught to them, and gain the appropriate skills to be engaged in counter-insurgency movements against the Maoists," the court said.

On the use of firearms, the court said that the youngsters "would simply not possess the analytical and cognitive skills to read and understand the complex socio-legal dimensions that inform the concept of self-defence".

The court held that expecting poorly trained and underpaid SPOs to perform the same functions as regular police officers was discriminatory and violated Article 14. It also held that exposing them to life-threatening risks without adequate training, protection, or long-term security violated their right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution.

On the argument that SPOs were being provided livelihoods, the court observed: "We simply cannot comprehend how involving ill equipped, barely literate youngsters in counter insurgency activities, wherein their lives are placed in danger could be conceived under the rubric of livelihood," it said.

The SC said that the state was effectively using citizens as expendable instruments in counterinsurgency ops, which was "revolting of disrespect for the lives of the tribal youth, and defiling of their human dignity".

It ordered that the practice of appointing SPOs for counterinsurgency operations should be stopped. Salwa Judum was disbanded, and the court directed that only properly trained police or paramilitary forces should carry out operations against Maoists.

These insecurities came to a boil after the general elections of 1987. A section of indigenous Fijians sought to thwart Indonians from consolidating political power.

Multiple apologies

Over the years, Rabuka has apologised multiple times for the 1987 coup.

He had apologised publicly on the 21st anniversary of the takeover in 2008. "It was a mistake and I admit I was wrong," he said on that occasion, according to a *Reuters* report.

In 2023, months after being elected Prime Minister for the second time, Rabuka apologised again.

"We confess our wrongdoings, and we confess that we have hurt so many of our people in Fiji, particularly those of the Indo-Fijian community of the time and among them sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters of those who were indentured as labourers from India between 1879 and 1916," he said in the country's capital, Suva.

Fiji PM Rabuka's changing relationship with his country's Indian diaspora

ALIND CHAUHAN

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 25

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi met his Fijian counterpart Sitiveni Uagabada Rabuka in New Delhi on Monday. Rabuka is on his first visit to India since becoming PM in December 2022.

Of Fiji's large Indian diaspora, Rabuka said: "They (Fijian-Indians) have contributed to what Fiji is today. They continue to contribute to Fiji's growth, to Fiji's economy, to Fiji's stability."

Rabuka's own rise in Fijian politics had been on the back of a coup in 1987, which removed a Prime Minister backed by ethnic Indians from office. Rabuka has since apologised for his actions at the time.

The Fijian coup of 1987

On the morning of May 14, 1987, Rabuka, then a lieutenant colonel in the army, and 10 masked soldiers stormed Fiji's

parliament and arrested then PM Timoci Bavadra. At a news conference subsequently, Rabuka announced the suspension of the constitution and said he would form a caretaker government until fresh elections are held to "restore civilian rule and go back to democracy". *The Indian Express* had reported at the time.

The coup took place a little over a month after an alliance of the National Federation Party and Labour Party won elections that led to the formation of a cabinet dominated by ethnic Indians for the first time since Fiji's independence from Britain in 1970. Bavadra had been elected with the support of a large section of Fijian-Indians.

A day after his takeover, Rabuka announced he was drafting a new constitution that would guarantee Fiji would never again have an Indian-dominated government ("No Power for Indians: Rabuka", *The Indian Express*, May 16, 1987). He denied discriminating against Indians, and claimed that he was only "looking after the Fijians' interest".

On May 19, anti-Indian riots broke out in the country. "[A] crowd of ethnic Fijians ran through the streets of Suva in an hour-long rampage, attacking Indians and Indian-owned shops," despite Rabuka's appeals for calm. *The Indian Express* reported on May 20. At least 50 Indians were reported injured in violence provoked by a rally that Indians took out in support of the ousted PM.

Rabuka's second coup

Widespread racial violence followed the military takeover, academic Amba Pandey wrote in an article published in the journal *Sociological Analysis* ("Race and Power Struggle in Fiji"). Pandey wrote that an attempt by the governor-general to form an advisory council with both Bavadra and Rabuka failed after the ousted PM refused to participate "on the grounds that the composition of the council was unconstitutional and biased".

Following weeks of negotiations, in July

1987, plans to reform the constitution were approved, and it was decided that Bavadra and Kamise Mara — a former PM popular with indigenous Fijians — would form an interim government.

In response, Rabuka orchestrated a second coup on September 25 of that year. He declared Fiji a republic, and proclaimed himself head of state, replacing the Queen. Countries around the world condemned these actions and refused to recognise his regime. India imposed trade sanctions on Fiji.

Under pressure, Rabuka resigned as head of state on December 6, 1987, and Penaia Ganilau became the first President of the Fiji Republic. A new constitution was promulgated in 1990, and elections were held two years later.

Background of crisis

The 1987 election result was only a trigger for Rabuka's crisis. Since independence,

the South Pacific Ocean archipelago had seen a widening political divide between ethnic Indians and indigenous Fijians.

Indians were brought to Fiji from 1879 onward as *girmitiyas* or indentured labour transported to work in the sugar plantations on the islands. The majority of these Indians stayed back after the indenture system ended and, over time, gained prosperity. The Indian community eventually became the backbone of Fiji's economic system, and they had, by the 1940s, outnumbered ethnic Fijians in the population of the islands.

Another reason for the ethnic Fijians' resentment was the nature of landholdings. Indigenous Fijians owned more than 83% of the land on the islands, but Indian tenant farmers held most of it on 99-year leases, Pandey noted. "Despite the fact that the land was legally made inalienable by the constitution of 1970, the fear of losing it had always been there in the minds of the Fijians," Pandey wrote.

Maverick diplomacy

The US ambassador's appointment is problematic

The appointment of Sergio Gor, White House personnel chief, as United States ambassador to India and special envoy on South and Central Asian affairs, subject to Senate confirmation, has presented New Delhi with a new set of challenges to navigate vis-à-vis its fraught relations with the Donald Trump administration. The appointment is remarkable for several reasons and demands a cautious response from the Indian government. First, Mr Gor, 38, has no diplomatic or overseas experience that would have made him an automatic choice for a posting in a country of the size and complexity as India. His rise to prominence in the Trump White House has been on the back of backroom manoeuvring with several prominent Republican politicians before he chose to align himself closely with the Maga ("Make America Great Again") faction. One of President Donald Trump's earliest backers in his presidential bid, Mr Gor managed a political action committee and published his promotional books. This unwavering loyalty yielded considerable backroom power in the Oval Office, where he was responsible for background checks and security clearances for key federal appointments. As such, he is known to have the ear of the President and senior politicians within the administration treat him with circumspection.

At a time when Mr Trump has imposed punitive tariffs on India, Mr Gor's proximity to the President has been presented by some Indo-US commentators as a potential advantage for the government in securing better terms in its trade negotiations with the White House. This may be an optimistic assessment. Though Mr Gor has not been known to articulate views on trade, he is unlikely to deviate from Mr Trump's position once he shifts into the Roosevelt House. Moreover, the President has also stated that his newly appointed envoy's agenda is to "Make America Great Again", of which one-sided trade deals are an integral element.

Second, given that Foreign Minister S Jaishankar said he had "read" about the appointment and declined to comment on ambassadorial appointments of other countries in public, it is probable that the established diplomatic conventions regarding Mr Gor's appointment have not been observed. Most countries negotiate an approval by a country to receive a diplomat from another state. This exercise is generally considered fundamental to diplomatic relations between countries. In this instance, the omission of this practice is particularly concerning since Mr Gor's brief also covers South Asia and Central Asia, a position that will be problematic for New Delhi. This expanded responsibility not only indicates a new way of hyphenating India and Pakistan, the designation also raises the prospect of US meddling in India's relations with its neighbours, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan.

In 2009, India had rejected a designation for Richard Holbrooke as US special envoy for India and Pakistan under the Obama administration. Subsequently, Mr Holbrooke was redesignated US special representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan and focused on the Af-Pak policies of the US administration, though he did occasionally consult India, given New Delhi's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction at the time. All told, Mr Gor's appointment cannot be viewed with equanimity. Given the manner in which it has been made, the expanded ambit of responsibility, and the maverick background of the candidate himself, it carries no reassurance that Indo-US relations will move back on track soon.

Dangerous provisions

Misuse of sedition and defamation against the media must stop

In May 2022, the Supreme Court took a great step forward for constitutional liberties in India. A Bench headed by Justice N V Ramana, then chief justice, suspended the operation of the sedition provision in the Indian Penal Code — under Section 124A. This followed a recognition of the fact that the code, as written — although it had been read down as early as 1962, in the *Kedarnath Singh* case — was being misused by the political authorities. Unfortunately, politicians have chosen to ignore the court's desire. A particularly shocking example of this was visible recently in the Assam Police's registration of sedition cases against journalists associated with *The Wire*.

In this case, defiance of the law and of the judicial system has taken several forms. First, the Union government itself may have chosen to evade the court's expectation that Section 124A cease operation until it met the *Kedarnath* criteria by introducing a replacement for the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the new *Nyaya Sanhita*. Section 152 of the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita* might be considered to be a simple rewording of the IPC's Section 124A. Then there is the question of why the Assam Police is imposing sedition proceedings on journalists for articles reporting on commentary made by military officials about Operation Sindoor. Forget about the absurdity of reporting being seditious — if the Union government, neither the foreign nor defence ministries, views this as sedition, what is the reason for the Assam government's stance? And finally, it has been reported that immediately after the Supreme Court granted the journalists protection from arrest under one sedition FIR in Assam, they were threatened with arrest under another. If true, surely this would amount to a deliberate failure to understand the court's intent?

While this is an unusually egregious example of the misuse of such provisions, it should be noted that the Assam government is not alone in the political class in using the law to go after members of the media. Recently, for example, the spokesperson for the Congress threatened to file a criminal defamation case against one member of the media for a programme discussing the party's accusations against the Election Commission of India. Whether or not the programme in question was a fair reporting of the facts is not the point. The problem is that even a party that should recognise the dangers of criminal defamation — which, remember, — was used as a method to disqualify the Congress' Rahul Gandhi from the Lok Sabha — remains willing to use this provision.

The only remedy to this sort of overreach by those who should know better lies through court action and legal reform. First of all, it is to be hoped that the Supreme Court recognises that the actions of the Assam Police must cause it to hasten the examination of the revised sedition provision that it has already said it will conduct. A three-judge Bench led by Chief Justice B R Gavai issued a notice to the Union government on this matter earlier this month. And, second, the question of decriminalisation of defamation must again be studied. While past Law Commissions have advised against it and the Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality in 2016, it is clear that misuse of the provision by the political class shows no sign of stopping.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY

Why are FPIs selling?

The current geopolitical environment may strengthen the bearish case, but it is not the primary cause for zero net inflows

India has now gone five years with zero net foreign inflows into the public equity markets, an incredibly long time. This year too, flows are running at a negative \$13 billion. Foreign ownership of Indian equities is at a 15-year low. India is now a consensus sell, with regional, global, and emerging market (EM) funds all underweight. In the same five years, domestic flows have exceeded \$185 billion. Just as foreign investors have lost interest, domestic investors have never been more bullish.

What has caused this lack of interest among foreign capital? Partly, it is due to the general decline in appetite for the EM asset class. EM equities have been a horrendous place to invest, dramatically underperforming both the United States and global equities. A hundred dollars invested in EM equities 15 years ago is today worth \$180, compared to almost \$500 if it had been invested in global indices. Within this context, India has massively outperformed. Over the past five years, MSCI India delivered dollar returns of almost 15 per cent per annum, compared to just 5 per cent for the broader EM index.

Many investors have lost faith in the EM asset class, cut exposure, and India has been a funding source, given its relative outperformance. The original bulls on India, the US endowments and foundations, have been in the midst of a liquidity crunch. Overexposed to private assets, they have an asset/liability mismatch and have been forced to raise capital by selling public equities. Again, India has been an obvious funding source, given its strong absolute and relative performance over the last five years and current high valuations.

The Indian economy has noticeably slowed over the past 12–18 months. Growth is clearly a challenge; this is not an economy firing on all cylinders. We seem to be struggling to even reach 6 per cent growth. Understandably, corporate earnings have suffered. At best, earnings per share (EPS) growth will be around 10 per cent this year, similar to FY25. For a market

trading at over 20 times forward earnings, earnings disappointments cannot be afforded. You cannot be the second-most expensive market in the world — far above EM valuations — and deliver just 10 per cent EPS growth.

Many investors felt that until very recently, there was a sense of complacency, no real plan to accelerate growth. The third term of the government had seemingly got off to a slow start in terms of economic reforms. Unconvinced about the sustainability of the 7–8 per cent long-term growth trajectory and in need of liquidity, many investors booked profits and reduced their Indian equity exposure. You cannot justify India's valuation premium unless you are fully convinced it will deliver outperformance in both economic growth and earnings. Over the past 24 months, this belief in India's long-term economic outperformance has come under question, as reforms have lagged. Global investors of all stripes have used the high valuations and domestic investor appetite to cash out.

India is also being seen as an artificial intelligence (AI) loser. AI as a theme seems to be entering public territory. Since the launch of ChatGPT, AI stocks have accounted for more than 50 per cent of the S&P 500's returns. Today, eight stocks — all AI plays — represent over 35 per cent of the US market's capitalisation. Single companies are now spending over \$75 billion each on research and capex. We do not have much of a play on large language models (LLMs) or the buildout of AI/data centre infrastructure. Frankly, except for the US and China, no other country is really a player, such is the scale of R&D and capex required.

India also faces the question of the future of its IT services industry. Employing over 5 million people, IT services has been a huge driver of white-collar job creation. A few years ago, the industry was hiring 200,000–250,000 fresh graduates annually; this number is already down to less than 50,000. Some fear the industry may actually shrink in terms of man-



AKASH PRAKASH

Unlocking India's mass market potential

External headwinds inevitably turn our gaze to domestic consumption to see if it can come to the rescue of gross domestic product or GDP growth. All eyes and hopes rest on traditional policy levers of demand stimulation. The earlier cut in income-tax rates that helped a small but relatively high-spending segment of consumer India and the forthcoming cut in goods and services tax rates, slated to reduce prices of a range of consumption items, will give a much-needed one-time step-up in consumer spending.

However, more and more must be done by way of creative and strategic policy measures to develop India's mass markets if we want to fully unlock its consumption potential, preparing for a future where domestic consumption may be an even more important driver of economic growth. Policy measures aimed at large companies and richer consumer segments do not percolate to the mass market — large Indian companies, barring a literal handful do not really engage with these consumers, put off by the small-ticket-size, high-volume-low-margin character of their consumption, and their easily dented incomes and confidence, leaving them to be the preserve of small local companies and wagon loads of imports from China. There is little expectation that large businesses will suddenly change their minds and invest in mega manufacturing capacities, taking a leaf from China, to serve the mass market. As the rich have grown richer, the economic logic of investing steadily in a long-term, money-spinning segment with a painful path to reach it is even less attractive to large companies. They would rather wait for the "ugly duckling" to transform into a richer swan worthy of being served, which will take a long time.

The richest 20 per cent of Indian households have historically been very high earners, spenders, savers (and investors), have shock-resistant incomes, and display "premiunism" consumption behaviour (meaning seeking better performance points and willing to pay more for them), and will continue to be so because of their education-occupation demographics. They will consume without the help of policy nudges, though they are an instant source of quick push-ups in spending. Reduce iPhone or laptop prices, and they will replace faster or buy more gadgets. Reduce stamp duty, and they buy higher-priced homes. They are the darling customers of large companies, who will nurture them with a wider variety of supply.

The next richest 20 per cent of households are a diluted version of the top 20 per cent, with poorer socioeconomic demographics but on the radar of large consumer-facing companies as the next logical source of growth for their existing strategies. Even if their consumption growth is not as stable, their consumption holds even in economically hard times. At worst, they display downgrading behaviour (meaning will settle for less performance at lower prices). This group quickly responds to nudges of more or cheaper credit and price reduction of aspirational products. They are the car and home appliances market. They are the darling customers of large companies, who will nurture them with a wider variety of supply.

However, it is the consumption of the middle 40 per cent of India's households, the relatively homogeneous market spanning urban and rural India that we now need to turn our policy attention to. The long-term perspective should be to transform it into a higher-productivity, higher-efficiency, demand and supply (consumers and producers) ecosystem capable of extracting its maximum potential, best measured in terms of net present value of the future growth it will deliver.

This consumer base is modest income, mostly self-employed agriculturists, informally employed, "own account" workers with varying degrees of skills. It knows what is available, is a keen consumer and a sophisticated value processor, and while it is a sure bet for growth on a long-term trend basis, it demonstrates that the richest 20 per cent.

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power over the coming five years as AI reduces the need for software engineers. Was the TCS layoff just the canary in the coal mine? As industry growth slows and employee pyramids bloat, the sector may also need to shed thousands of high-paying mid-management jobs. What will be the macroeconomic impact of this \$200 billion export engine slowing to sub-five-per-cent growth? India has scale and low-cost skilled manpower, a real competitive advantage. However, as AI reduces the need for this skilled workforce, will it affect India's long-term growth trajectory? A fair question.

It is important to remember that we have received no FPI flows for five years now. Thus, the current geopolitical stress is not the only reason why investors have turned negative. It may strengthen the bearish case, but is not the primary cause for zero flows. Domestic equity flows appear to be more structural in nature. Even today, after 12 months of zero returns, flows continue to accelerate! When the foreign buyer returns, it could have a disproportionate price impact. We have forgotten how markets react when foreigners and locals buy in competition with each other. It has not happened for five years.

With the dollar weakening, down 10 per cent year-to-date, the prospects for non-US equities are improving. This year in dollar terms, global markets have done better. At some stage EM equity as an asset class will get substantial flows. However, for India to get more than its fair share, we have to convince global investors of the sustainability of our 7–8 per cent growth algorithm. With economic growth will come EPS growth. With domestic flows strong, it is unlikely markets will correct significantly in absolute terms. They have already withstood a lot of bad news. Thus, for investors to come back into Indian equities, they will have to probably accept the valuation premiums. The willingness to pay up will come if investors believe we have 20 years of 7 per cent economic growth ahead.

This is where the current geopolitical difficulties should be set 700 to 800 miles in the future and an opportunity to press ahead on long-pending reforms across the economy. The list of needed reforms is well known, now is the time to turn adversity into action. We must treat this as an economic crisis and act accordingly to improve our long-term competitiveness and strengthen the building blocks for delivering multi-decade growth. It also lies in the fact that accounts for 35 per cent of global manufacturing value addition, as much as the next 10 countries combined. We cannot aspire for such scale, but if thought through, there are industries of global significance, where we have the opportunity to dominate. We must work on reaching global scale and also become indispensable to certain supply chains.

The last few weeks have also shown us that only economic leverage matters. We frankly have very little. It does not matter that we may be the fourth-largest economy, what is our leverage? We must strive for dominance in certain industries. Absent this, we will never have enough leverage. China's leverage is not only in manufacturing, it also lies in the fact that it accounts for 35 per cent of global manufacturing value addition, as much as the next 10 countries combined. We cannot aspire for such scale, but if thought through, there are industries of global significance, where we have the opportunity to dominate. We must work on reaching global scale and also become indispensable to certain supply chains.

The author is with Amanasa Capital

Tracking the 'Non-Returning Indian'



SANJEEV AHLUWALIA

The author is a journalist with a difference. He opted for professional roles at key public policy institutions in India and abroad, served as media advisor to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and was chief editor of two business papers, including this one. Possibly, the journalist in him, won when he catchily, albeit narrowly, titled the book around the ongoing flight of the moneyed — unlike the poor or professionals earlier. The bulkier section on the three earlier migratory waves, starting from the colonial period are fascinating. The first wave was driven by the abolition of slavery in 1861, which led

to labour shortages across the British Empire. Surplus Indian labour was exported to fill the gap. Indebted disadvantaged castes became bonded labourers abroad to pay off their loans. Few returned. Many went back because they faced no caste prejudice there with better employment prospects, even after Indian independence in 1947.

The author evokes the fragile environment around Independence, when the loyalty of citizens to the tricolour clashed with their traditional loyalty to the 550-odd princes who ruled one half of India till then. Add to that the pain of 10 million refugees flooding India, from Pakistan — the largest human migration in history. No wonder the Constituent Assembly rejected a proposal for dual passports, demanding that citizens remain loyal only to one country.

The second phase was voluntary migration by workers from the west coast looking for opportunities in the Gulf and West Asia, followed later by labour from north India to feed the construction

boom after the 1970s oil price shock. In the third phase from the mid-1980s, doctors responded to the growing demand of the UK National Health Service and engineers, to the easing of US immigration laws in 1965 and after 1999, the Y2K demand spike in the US. The fourth, ongoing, wave is the wealthy following their globally diversified investments driven by the 1991 liberalisation, loosening exchange controls, and freeing crossborder flow of capital. In 2022, there were 10 million PIOs (persons of Indian origin) — including the children of Gujarati immigrants in East Africa, the UK and the US, as well as second-round immigrants in the UK, British passport holders, offspring of Punjabi and Sindhi emigrants expelled in 1972 from Uganda along with other South Asians. In comparison, there are only 13 million Non-resident Indians (NRIs) — slightly more than one per cent of the adult Indian population. NRIs are Indians with an Indian Passport but live or work

abroad for at least 180 days in a calendar year. In the Gulf, where only long-term work and investment visas are available, generations of NRIs have grown up clutching the navy-blue Indian Passport, but comfortable in their West Asian skins.

A total of 32 million Indian PIOs and NRIs compares favourably with the estimated 20 million Chinese nationals living overseas and another 40 million naturalised abroad. Sadly, no data on migration trends is available for China, unlike India, which is transparent. Despite near similar populations, fewer Indians need to escape abroad compared to China, even though the latter is more than five times richer in per capita terms. People vote with their feet. Our "laid back" governance style and dismal record on public goods, mild cramp business and "ease of living." But the

average Indian is happy migrating within the country for better prospects — less of an option in China. India will be "Visiting Bharat" by 2047. Will a seven-fold growth in nominal gross domestic product or GDP and per capita income levels near high-income economies, change migration patterns? More wealthy people will migrate than workers. One half of the top 5 per cent or 30 million could opt for globalised lifestyles.

Conversely, more employment at home on better terms, could temper the flight of workers and professionals. Inward immigration might increase as the powerful, the aged and global citizens relocate to a culturally attractive, politically stable, cheaper economy. Every departing Indian might be replaced by a returnee from an inflow of 60 million foreigners or 3 per cent of the Indian population — six times the share of foreigners in colonial times. That spells happy times for the services industry. The author shuns futuristic fantasies

and faithfully repeats past laments about the lack of "nationalism" amongst "Non-Returning Indians." But outward emigration has its advantages via inward remittances, which in 2023–24 met 55 per cent of the goods trade deficit of \$21 billion. India's 25 per cent of the surplus from services trade. Inward remittances stabilise India's external account (key in the recent S&P ratings upgrade), without any incentives or support from the government, though recently proactive counsellor support for stranded Indian migrants, was exceptional.

This is a deeply referenced book. It lays out the facts on migration trends and shares the author's insights on the political economy drivers behind these trends in India and the recipient countries. Recommended for all existing and prospective Indian migrants, to know the "tribal" reasons for their bound tourists, who are increasingly likely to have new Indian origin neighbours back home.

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

Why Ukraine war drags on

Russia firm that Ukraine cedes some of its provinces

Sridhar Krishnaswami

At the time of the American Presidential election campaigning, somebody should have impressed upon candidate Donald Trump that ending the ongoing war in the Ukraine cannot be done in one day. The reason: Russia and Ukraine carry so much history and baggage that even a generation will find it difficult to resolve. More than a week after the Alaska summit followed by a meeting of European leaders and President Volodymyr Zelensky in Washington, there are signs that the fight back, only deferred, is clearly exasperated and for good reasons. The much touted meeting between the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine does not seem to be on the horizon.

TRUMP FRUSTRATED

"I'm going to make a decision as to what we do and it's going to be a very important decision, and that's whether or not it's massive sanctions or massive tariffs or both, or we do nothing and say it's your fight," President Trump remarked, which appeared a suggestion to Kyiv to go on the offensive. And President Trump took to his social media platform to hammer President Joe Biden saying he would not let Ukraine "bark at the gates of Russia," which is very hard, if not impossible, to win a war without attacking an invader country. It's like a great team in sports that has a fantastic defence, but is not allowed to play offensive. There is no chance of winning!" Trump said in his Truth Social. Some of the frustration is in a perceived lack of progress in getting together a meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. After this two-way summit, President Trump was mentioning a trilateral meeting involving himself. But Moscow insists that all components of a peace agreement must be in place before a summit with President Zelensky. "Our president has repeatedly said that he is ready to meet, including with Mr Zelensky, on the understanding that all issues requiring consideration at the highest level will be thoroughly worked out and experts and ministers will prepare appropriate recommendations." Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has said. President Trump has said on more than one occasion that land would have to be given up for peace. Europeans are saying that President Putin is playing for time in order to grab as



WAR. No signs of easing up REUTERS

much as he could given the slow progress his troops are making on land. According to one view, President Putin is laying claims to the provinces of Kherson, Donetsk and Zaporizhia. And if Crimea that was annexed in 2014 were to be thrown in that would account for a total of 20 per cent of Ukraine. President Zelensky has consistently maintained that no land can be ceded as this is expressly prohibited by the country's constitution. Perhaps equally vexing in the road to peace are the scope of "security guarantees" to Ukraine; and ones that Moscow would adhere to. President Trump has flatly ruled out American boots on the ground and Moscow would definitely have questions about boots of other nations in Ukraine. Also, Washington may object to Moscow's insistence on being one of security guarantors, but apparently this is what Lavrov has been saying. "The Ukrainian side proposed, and our delegation at that time agreed, to work out security guarantees that would involve all permanent members of the UN Security Council — that is, Russia, the People's Republic of China, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom."

There is something that President Putin has been insistent about since this two-way summit, at the Kremlin: that any expansion of NATO should factor in the security interests of Russia. In 2022 the late Pope Francis maintained that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was "perhaps some provoked" by NATO "barking at the gates of Russia", recalling a conversation he had with an unnamed leader. The analogy of the "backyard" that the Kennedy administration used to reject the Soviet missiles in Cuba cannot be different from today's "frontyard" of President Putin. Deking it out in 1962 was a difficult proposition; it would be a catastrophe in 2025.

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



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

As Indian exporters look beyond the US due to 50 per cent tariffs from August 27, most will cope by finding other markets or relying on domestic demand. The bigger danger is US control of India's digital backbone — leaving us exposed with no backup. From smartphones and office software to defence, power grids, and government systems, US software underpins almost every layer of India's governance, economy and national security. Because American firms are legally bound to share data with Washington — and can cut off services at will — India's position is precarious. A nationwide disruption may seem unlikely today, but the possibility is enough to demand urgent safeguards. The recent shutdown of services by Microsoft at Naryana Energy without even an hour of notice is a warning sign of what could happen.

China has already ring-fenced its digital core, and Europe is moving in the same direction. India cannot afford to wait. Time to launch the Digital Swaraj Mission to cut dependence of US software systems and protect our data which is India's greatest leverage like rare earth minerals are for China.

EXTENT OF DEPENDENCE

India's dependence on US digital systems runs deep, covering nearly every sector of its economy and government. About 25 million government, corporate, and personal laptops are in use in India, with nearly 500 million smartphones use Google's Android, and another 30 million rely on Apple's iOS. If updates or licences were withdrawn, banking, governance, and enterprise IT could be disrupted overnight.

Productivity tools are no different: Microsoft Office, Exchange, and Teams dominate roughly 20 million laptops, while Google Workspace serves another 5-10 million users. If either were blocked access, communications across ministries, banks, and corporations would collapse. India's secure NIC email remains limited to a few departments.

The dependence is equally stark in the cloud. Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud host tens of thousands of Indian workloads spanning fintech, AI, e-commerce, and government services. A US-ordered cut-off could cripple digital payments and online platforms, as India's Meghraj National Cloud cannot replace them.

Information gateways are also US-controlled: Google Chrome holds a 95 per cent share across 500 million devices, with Safari and Microsoft Edge covering most of the rest. Cybersecurity depends on US tools like Microsoft Defender, Active Directory, Cisco, Palo Alto Networks, and CrowdStrike, which secure millions of endpoints. Servers and back-end systems rely on Microsoft Windows Server, Red Hat (IBM), and VMware hypervisors, while many

India must secure its digital backbone

TWO-PRONGED STRATEGY.

Should reduce dependence on US software and protect data sovereignty



GETTY IMAGES

defence platforms — from maritime aircraft to Apache helicopters — run on proprietary US mission software.

Industrial systems, too, depend on US-made SCADA and PLC software, leaving power grids, telecom networks, and factories exposed to remote disablement.

Beyond these systems, control over information flow creates another vulnerability. Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and X dominate India's social media space, where politically motivated messaging and hate speech spread unchecked. Crowdsourced moderation by untrained users often amplifies bias, while American algorithms control what 1.4 billion Indians see online. India is not only digitally dependent — it is digitally vulnerable.

EUROPE IS WAKING UP

After US pressure to dilute its digital laws, Brussels fears an American "kill switch" on critical services. Its response is a push for "technology sovereignty": building sovereign cloud capacity, keeping sensitive data inside Europe, phasing out US software from government systems, and enforcing the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act despite trade pushback from Washington. India faces similar US resistance in its trade talks.

China has further secured every digital layer to achieve independence from US pressure. Since the late 1990s, it has built sovereignty through the Great Firewall and by promoting its platforms. In government and military systems, Windows has been replaced with Kylin OS, while mobile phones form a forked version of Android and Huawei's HarmonyOS.

Data is India's oil and rare earths combined. By insisting on local data storage, taxing digital transactions, and fostering AI development at home, India can turn this resource into bargaining power

DIGITAL SWARAJ MISSION

India has already shown that it can build world-class digital infrastructure at a population scale, through innovations such as UPI, the world's most successful digital payments system, and ONDC, which uses open specifications to democratise digital commerce and curb monopolies.

Building on this success, the time has come to launch Atmanirbhar Digital 2.0 — the Digital Swaraj Mission or Digital India Stack 2.0. A comprehensive national mission must be to develop indigenous alternatives to Microsoft Azure, Google Cloud, and Amazon Web Services and create open-network social media and messaging platforms by 2030.

The goal should be to stay open to global collaboration while ensuring sovereign capability to maintain uninterrupted digital operations, protect citizens from algorithmic manipulation, and safeguard India's trillion-dollar digital economy, information sovereignty, and democratic discourse.

The programme should be anchored in a clear, time-bound plan to secure India's digital backbone.

Government and defence systems must transition from Windows to Linux or local operating systems, while home-grown mobile platforms must reduce reliance on Google's Android and Apple's iOS. Indian-made alternatives to Microsoft Office and Google Workspace should be mandated across ministries and public-sector systems.

At the same time, national cloud capacity must be scaled up through platforms such as Meghraj, backed by strong state funding. Cybersecurity should be rooted in indigenous solutions developed by C-DAC, DRDO, and Indian start-ups, with parallel efforts to build home-grown command-and-control systems, IoT platforms, and industrial controls.

This is not an impossible task. Most core US software — operating systems, office suites, and databases — was created over two decades ago and has only been updated incrementally. Indian engineers played a significant role in developing many of these systems for US firms. With the right policy push and

mobilisation, they can replicate and improve them for India. Achieving this would ensure the country's digital independence and sovereignty in a volatile geopolitical environment.

INDIA'S GREATEST LEVERAGE

India's biggest vulnerability is its reliance on US software, but its biggest strength is its control over vast amounts of data. India has the world's second-largest online user base after China. With China largely inaccessible, US tech giants depend on India as their biggest source of data — essential for training AI, refining algorithms, and sustaining global revenues. This gives India big bargaining power beyond trade figures.

Washington understands leverage — it spared China over Russian oil because Beijing could strike back by cutting rare earth supplies. Now, the US is pressuring India to surrender its data advantage by allowing unrestricted "free flow of data" and blocking digital taxes. Agreeing to this would erase India's greatest and probably only leverage against the US and leave us vulnerable.

India must resist, and use its data strength in trade, tech, and security negotiations. Data is India's oil and rare earths combined. By insisting on local data storage, taxing digital transactions, and fostering AI development at home, India can turn this resource into bargaining power.

At the heart of the digital Swaraj Mission should lie data sovereignty. The path is clear: reduce reliance on foreign software and protect data sovereignty. This two-pronged strategy is key to securing India's digital future and strengthening national sovereignty. The aim is not isolation but reciprocity: to remain open to cooperation while ensuring India's digital backbone is secure and its bargaining chips are not surrendered.

Digital Swaraj is not just about technology but resilience, and independence in the twenty-first century.

The writer is founder, Global Trade Research Initiative. He thanks Sanjay Thakur, veteran banker and start-up evangelist, for valuable insights

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

August 26, 2005

Telecom firms oppose OneIndia tariff plan

The Government's plan to introduce a uniform telephone call rate across the country has hit a block with telecom service providers opposing the move. Cellular operators and basic operators have written to the Department of Telecom (DoT) expressing reservations against the Government intervening in tariff regulation, stating that such a move could be counter-productive.

Outcome Budget: Govt plans 9 new infrastructure projects

Indicating the Government's commitment to boosting infrastructure, the first-ever Outcome Budget has promised nine new projects under the public-private partnership route, a vast expansion of the country's highway network and dotting of the Indian skies with a new fleet of aircraft for the national carriers, Indian Airlines and Air India.

IA fleet price issue referred to GoM

Indian Airlines (IA) could be a month away from placing order for its ₹10,000-crore 43-Airbus aircraft acquisition proposal. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has decided to refer the matter of the price that IA would pay for the proposal to an empowered Group of Ministers (e-GoM).

Dan Strumpf

India's embassy in Washington has hired a lobbying firm with close ties to the Trump administration and a history of advocating for foreign entities targeted by the US, just before 50 per cent tariffs take effect on exports from the South Asian country. The embassy is paying \$75,000 per month to Mercury Public Affairs LLC to provide government relations, media relations and other services, according to an August 18 filing detailing the agreement.

White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles is a former co-chair of Mercury. Mercury Partner Bryan Lanza, who

previously served as communications director for President Donald Trump's transition team, was listed among those working on the account, according to a separate disclosure. India's Ministry of External Affairs didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. Mercury didn't respond to a request sent after business hours in the US.

FRAYED TIES

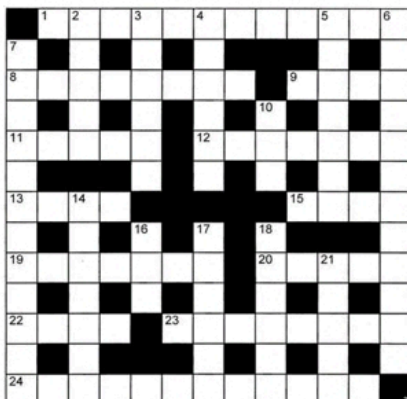
The hiring comes as relations between the US and India have rapidly soured in recent months under Trump. Most recently, ties have frayed over the White House vow to impose 50 per cent tariffs — set to take effect on

Wednesday — on Indian goods as punishment for New Delhi's continued purchases of Russian oil. The White House has argued that the oil purchases fund Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine, but Indian officials say they stabilise oil markets, adding that Washington had previously approved the purchases. The US is India's No. 1 trading partner, and New Delhi worries that the tariffs could devastate exporters. Mercury has a track record of lobbying on behalf of foreign clients who have come into Washington's crosshairs. For example, the firm earlier this year disclosed a contract with the Embassy of Denmark, which has opposed Trump's push to take

control of its self-ruling territory of Greenland. Mercury also previously represented several Chinese companies targeted by Trump. In 2018, Mercury lobbied for the US arm of Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology Co., targeted by the US over its work on surveillance projects in the Chinese region of Xinjiang.

Mercury has also lobbied on behalf of sanctioned Chinese telecom firm ZTE Corp. Separately, Gautam Adani has also been bolstering his Washington lobbying operation since Trump took over the White House. The Indian tycoon is contesting charges of involvement in an alleged bribery scheme. [@BLCAUSG](#)

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2769



EASY

ACROSS

- Act of informing against one (12)
- Informed those in authority (8)
- Tardy (4)
- Feeling of languor, boredom (5)
- Fish related to skate; weapon (7)
- Curved part of foot (4)
- Domestic slave in Old English times (4)
- Former viceroy of Egypt (7)
- Entities (1) (5)
- Male voice (4)
- Voracious reader (8)
- Amusing, playing host (12)

DOWN

- Gone, as food (5)
- Inequitable (6)
- Bring into being (6)
- Disease (7)
- Parliamentary troops as reorganised by Cromwell (3,5,4)
- Not worthy of note (12)
- Forelimb (3)
- Fire-basket of beacon (7)
- Five-dollar bill (3)
- Felt hat with curled brim (6)
- Calculate (6)
- Plant spine (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Formal declaration might induce nation to change (12)
- Made it known if one was in a well-known setting (8)
- Is not quick to make worm a legless lizard (4)
- Boredom shown by nine about to make a forbidden turn (5)
- Marine weapon, or depot that supplies it (7)
- So waggish, it may put one's back up (4)
- Old slave had seen it coming to him (4)
- The king perhaps hid Eve with the viceroy of Egypt (7)
- More than one ens found in tea break (5)
- A singer otherwise pronounced it to be fish (4)
- He likes reading, and has his grub in the library (8)
- Having people home may be diversionary (12)

DOWN

- Having dined, has some coffee at entertainment (5)
- It's not just if a run can be made from it (6)
- Make something react differently with Ecstasy (6)
- Sells, in error, such a malady (7)
- Cromwell's soldiers, and we old men Mary organised (3,5,4)
- It doesn't stand out from a number Laker might have achieved (12)
- Get guns to go in the sleeve (3)
- Secrets told about it holding a signal light (7)
- Almost discover a bit of fish (3)
- A hat made of a red mixture (6)
- Count on being able to make knocker without a top (6)
- Though cut by fifty per cent, the Navy can still be sharp (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2768

ACROSS 1. Madder 8. China 9. Close-up 11. Triptych 12. Swank 15. Lime 16. Mix 17. User 19. Aglow 21. Temerity 24. Earlier 25. Stain 26. Lowing
DOWN 2. Allow 3. Disinter 4. Rout 5. Scope 6. Tiny 7. Bash 10. Predicate 12. Sole 13. Bungalow 14. Craw 18. Crank 20. Ocean 21. Task 22. Moist 23. Yawl

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TUESDAY • AUGUST 26, 2025

Index pulse

Indices linked to derivatives must be broad-based

The Jane Street saga, where the US-based quantitative trading firm was found manipulating index options through positions in the underlying stocks, has revealed several gaps in the domestic stock market. One of them is the risk posed by the narrow composition and the skew in the weights of benchmark and non-benchmark indices, which makes them easy to manipulate. It is just as well that SEBI is now looking closely at this issue and trying to address it in consultation with stakeholders.



Through a consultation paper, the regulator is trying to arrive at the best way to recast non-benchmark indices linked to derivatives, with least disruption to trading activity and to investors. The derivative trading activity in Indian markets is highly concentrated in just a handful of index options. Besides Nifty 50 option contract, the Nifty bank option has been witnessing high trading interest over the last few years. With just 12 constituents and the top three accounting for 64 per cent of the index weight, the Nifty Bank option had been the main target of Jane Street's manipulation. Besides the Nifty Bank, few other non-benchmark indices of the BSE and the NSE are also constituted in similar skewed manner. Jane Street had consistently moved the Bank Nifty through cash positions in the top three constituents of the index. SEBI is trying to check such malpractice by stipulating that all non-benchmark indices on which derivatives are available should have at least 14 constituents, the weight of the largest constituent must be restricted to 20 per cent and the combined weight of the top three constituents must be less than 45 per cent.

While the decision to expand these indices is good, SEBI hasn't gone all the way. It has increased the index components only slightly to 14. Similarly allowing 45 per cent weight to top three constituents can still lead to manipulative practices. The index constituents need to be expanded to at least 20 and the weight of the largest stocks must be reduced considerably. While SEBI is suggesting that the weight of the largest stock be brought down to 20 per cent in four instalments, that can be contrary to the index construction methodology. The regulator can consider making these non-benchmark indices (with derivatives linked to them) equal-weighted. This could ensure that the constituents have similar weights. However, the exchange traded funds and index funds will find it difficult to shift to the recast indices. It may be best to allow the existing and new indices to exist side by side. Funds tracking the indices can be given one to two years to shift investors to the new index.

This may also be the right time to review the narrow composition of the benchmark indices, Sensex and the Nifty 50. With just 30 and 50 constituents respectively, the indices are not representative of the Indian stock market or the economy. With the BSE and NSE among the largest exchanges in terms of listed stocks, expanding them may also be overdue.

POCKET



Empowering the energy efficiency watchdog

Under the proposed rules, the BEE now can conduct audits and enforce penalties for non-compliance



CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHAMISHRA

The Power Ministry has released the draft Energy Conservation (Compliance Enforcement) Rules, 2025, which will facilitate active enforcement under the Energy Conservation Act, 2001. Proposed in the Rules are more powers to the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE).

BEE will have explicit powers to detect, verify, and assess violations, and represent cases before adjudicating officers under State Electricity Regulatory Commissions, according to the proposed Rule.

The regulatory streamlining will nudge industries to integrate energy efficiency into their operations. For energy-intensive sectors, compliance will no longer be optional but a core determinant of cost competitiveness and market reputation.

However, it raises certain questions such as how will the draft Energy Conservation (Compliance Enforcement) Rules, 2025 change the compliance landscape for energy-intensive sectors?

What parameters should companies put in place to ensure real-time monitoring, accurate reporting, and corrective action? Will stricter enforcement accelerate India's progress toward energy efficiency and climate commitments?

The Energy Conservation Act, 2001 was enacted to promote and mandate efficient use of energy and its conservation across all sectors. The Act also provided for the BEE.

ACT OF EMPOWERMENT

According to Rishi Agrawal, CEO and Co Founder of Teamlease Regtech, "The Draft Rules will transform compliance

for energy-intensive sectors such as cement, steel, automotive, and manufacturing. Shifting from voluntary self-reporting, the Rules empower the BEE to enforce standards through audits, inspections, and laboratory testing. The BEE will now detect non-compliance, issue notices, and present cases to adjudicating officers under State Electricity Regulatory Commissions (SERCs), ensuring a streamlined legal framework."

This, he said, points towards greater regulatory focus as the statute provides more teeth to the regulators. It will urge companies to place energy efficiency at the centre of their design and development and move the needle towards sustainable goals.

Applicable to entities under Section 13A (energy-intensive sectors), manufacturers/importers under Section 14, designated consumers under Sections 14(e), 14(n), 14(o), and other entities covered by the Act, the proposed Rules intensify scrutiny of energy use in production and products, such as Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) norms for the automotive sector.

Penalties up to ₹10 lakh will be levied for non-compliance, which will be deposited into the Central Energy Conservation Fund. SERCs will handle cases based on establishment location, clarifying jurisdiction. This demands rigorous rather than reactive compliance, integrating energy efficiency into operations to avoid fines, reputational damage, or restrictions.

"The rules align with India's Net-Zero 2070 and goals of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs),

The BEE will now detect non-compliance, issue notices, and present cases to adjudicating officers under State Electricity Regulatory Commissions

institutionalising energy conservation via the Perform, Achieve, and Trade (PAT) scheme and Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC)," Agrawal said adding that "Companies must adopt effective monitoring and reporting to meet standards, fostering sustainability. This will create a larger eco-system of effective energy utilisation for the economy as a whole."

To comply with the proposed Rules, energy-intensive industries must implement robust frameworks for real-time monitoring, accurate reporting, and corrective action.

"Deployment of IoT-enabled sensors and energy management systems to monitor consumption at the equipment and unit levels can be a good practice. These tools may assist in ensuring real-time visibility into deviations from standards like PAT, CAFE, or ECBC, enabling proactive corrections before violations occur. Next, establish a digitised reporting ecosystem that is tamper-proof and consolidates data across plants and subsidiaries. Automated dashboards should integrate energy performance metrics with BEE compliance requirements, minimising manual errors and streamlining regulatory submissions," he added.

CLIMATE COMMITMENTS

But as always the efficacy of these norms will crucially hinge on their implementation. Stricter enforcement will accelerate India's progress toward energy efficiency and climate commitments, most in the industry opine.

India's energy conservation framework has relied heavily on self-reporting, resulting in uneven compliance and limited impact. The empowerment of BEE with enforcement capabilities will introduce accountability, deterrence and systemic discipline into the compliance eco-system, Agrawal said.

Stricter enforcement will also help close information gaps by generating

more accurate, verified and standardised data on energy use, which policymakers can utilise to design targeted interventions.

These rules aim to move from voluntary conservation to enforced efficiency. Over time, this will not only reduce energy waste but also create a culture of sustainability, placing India firmly on track to achieve its climate commitments.

With proper implementation, these rules will create a regulatory push for industries and designated consumers to shift towards cleaner energy sources, thereby increasing demand for renewable power.

Periodic reporting, third-party audits, and stricter verification protocols, will also enhance market discipline and transparency. Renewable energy producers stand to benefit from a more predictable and compliant buyer eco-system, especially among the obligated entities.

It should seek greater interest from States as the penalties collected from non-compliant entities are routed to the Central Energy Conservation Fund, with 90 per cent allocated to State governments. However, States are wary of money going into a Central fund, as accessing those funds is a tedious process.

But for an energy hungry economy like India's, energy efficiency will be a key ingredient. The proposed Rules, if implemented can reinforce demand for renewable energy, as the rules strengthen enforcement of energy efficiency norms and non-fossil fuel consumption obligations.

From a global perspective, stronger compliance strengthens India's credibility in meeting its Paris Agreement commitments and its stated goal of reaching net-zero emissions by 2070. As enforcement mechanisms mature, the country can align energy efficiency efforts with its renewable energy targets, thereby reducing overall emissions intensity.

Why Indian shrimp sector must invest in Ecuador

The Trump tariffs have had a crippling impact on this major export sector. Investing in Ecuador is a viable way out

M Krishnan
Badri Narayanan Gopalakrishnan

On August 6, the Trump administration announced a new 25 per cent tariff on a variety of Indian imports, raising the total tariff on many products, including seafood, to a crippling 50 per cent.

This action, following an earlier reciprocal tariff, has made Indian seafood exports to the US commercially unviable. India's seafood exports to the US were valued at roughly \$2.5 billion in FY24, with shrimp making up approximately 92 per cent.

This steep tariff is a significant setback for the Marine Products Exports Development Authority (MPEDA), which has targeted seafood export turnover of \$18 billion by 2030. The domestic market is not currently equipped to absorb the large volume of high-value shrimp previously destined for the US, which is the country's largest seafood export market. While foreign direct investment (FDI) was fully opened up in 2016, there has not been a substantial influx of investment from abroad. This lack of inbound investment necessitates a new strategy: offshore FDI.

A viable solution for Indian companies is to invest in or acquire vertically integrated shrimp farming operations in countries with more favourable trade agreements, allowing them to access major global markets, including the US, without being subjected to the new tariffs. Ecuador, a world leader in shrimp production, stands out as the most attractive and logical option.

Ecuador, the ideal partner
Ecuador's shrimp industry has a well established infrastructure and supply chains for everything from feed production and post-larvae (seed) to processing facilities and global distribution networks. This allows Indian investors to leverage existing operations rather than building a new ecosystem, significantly reducing time and investment risk.

Ecuador also offers other key advantages. Both India and Ecuador have some of the lowest production costs in the global shrimp industry, allowing Indian companies to bring their expertise in cost-efficient production to a country with a similar economic structure.

Ecuador's use of the US dollar as its official currency provides a stable and predictable financial environment, eliminating currency risk. While political stability can be a concern, the shrimp industry is a crucial pillar of the Ecuadorian economy with strong



AQUACULTURE. Need to invest abroad.

government backing.

The opportunity for Indian companies to invest in Ecuador is timely and feasible. The Ecuadorian industry is undergoing a period of industrialization and consolidation, creating opportunities for strategic acquisitions. Foreign companies, like the Japanese conglomerate Mitsu & Co., have invested in major players. Indian investors, with their proven expertise in aquaculture, can introduce valuable technological innovations to Ecuador's more semi-intensive system, creating a mutually beneficial partnership.

The Ecuadorian government is also highly receptive to FDI in the aquaculture sector. Its legal and regulatory framework is designed to encourage and protect foreign investors,

including the right to 100 per cent equity ownership and the free transfer and repatriation of profits and capital.

While the opportunity is compelling, Indian companies must conduct thorough due diligence. They need to be aware of the "invisible costs" of doing business, such as security risks and potential social conflicts. The differences in farming models, with India's improved extensive approach versus Ecuador's semi-intensive one, also present both a challenge and an opportunity to foster true collaboration and innovation.

To mitigate the damage of US tariffs and ensure long-term viability, India must pursue a bold new strategy. By strategically investing in Ecuador's vertically integrated shrimp industry, Indian companies can bypass the tariffs, leverage existing infrastructure, and secure a foothold in the global market.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance, Indian Chambers of Commerce and Corporate business houses should seriously consider this as a viable gateway to reset India's export strategy and preserve its relevance in the global shrimp market.

M Krishnan, former Principal Scientist & Head, ICAR - Central Institute of Fisheries Education, Mumbai and Gopalakrishnan is a Visiting Senior Fellow, CSPE, New Delhi

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Controversial Bill

This refers to your Editorial 'Unjust move' (August 25). Given the present government's track record of targeting key opposition figures by foisting stringent charges of money laundering and corruption against them, leading to their long imprisonment without bail, the Constitutional Amendment Bill introduced by Home Minister Amit Shah in Parliament, if passed, can make its task rather easy. In Delhi, we have seen how the then Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his senior ministers were persecuted for years,

which seriously impeded governance in the capital. The haste behind the present move, in utter disregard for established norms, seems largely aimed at diverting people's attention from the opposition's war cry against the Election Commission over alleged electoral malpractices. The claimed objectives of the Bill and the inclusion of even the Prime Minister in its target list are just a ruse to lend it legitimacy. If passed, it will strike a deadly blow to our federal structure and democratic functioning.

Kamal Laddha
Bengaluru

US double standards

This refers to 'Vance defends tariffs on India as leverage' to push Russia on Ukraine war' (August 25). It is intriguing and incomprehensible too to learn that US Vice-President Vance having asserted that Trump administration is making it harder for Moscow to profit from its oil economy through measures that include tariffs on India. Why does Trump want to target Russia by riding on India's shoulders? More importantly, how could he justify US' continued imports from

Russia? Doesn't that smack of double standards? What prevents Trump from the imposing similar secondary tariffs against Chinese import of crude oil from Russia, also remains shrouded in some deep mystery?

SK Gupta
New Delhi

Insurance for plantation crops

With reference 'Excess rain brews trouble for coffee' (August 23). With monsoon commencing earlier than expected and relentless downpour has not only affected the coffee but

also the arecanut crop, which is hit by fruit-rot disease and eventual crop loss.

It is time for an exclusive crop insurance scheme for plantation crops which has a different cropping pattern, unlike crops covered under PMFBY, failing which its economic loss would compound. Unfortunately, this time coffee is hit by a double whammy with hike in US tariff and hopefully the Commerce Ministry will cognisance of this crop's problems.

Rajiv Magal
Halekote Village (Karnataka)

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of journalists killed in Israeli strikes on Gaza hospital

4 The journalists were among at least 15 people killed on Monday when Israeli strikes hit Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, according to Gaza's civil defence agency. According to media watchdogs, around 200 journalists have been killed in nearly two years of war between Israel and Hamas. *AP*

Government's new minimum export price on natural honey

1,400 in \$ per tonne. The government has cut the Minimum Export Price (MEP) on natural honey from \$2,000 per tonne to \$1,400 per tonne till the end of this year, according to a notification. Exports below this MEP are not permitted. *PII*

Number of people whose free ration will stop: Punjab CM

55 In lakh. Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Monday charged the Union government with "hatching a conspiracy" to stop free ration to people. This is the second time within a week that Mr. Mann has accused the Centre of stopping the ration of people under the National Food Security Act. *PII*

Tribal groups which are resisting Ministry interference

150 The groups claimed that interventions by the Tribal Affairs Ministry were "subverting the democratic framework of governance, management and conservation of community forest resources as recognised and established under the Forest Rights Act, 2006". *PII*

Value of Dream11's cancelled sponsorship of Indian cricket

43.6 in \$ million. Dream11, the biggest online gaming platform in the country, is the lead sponsor of the men's and women's national cricket teams. Last week, Parliament passed a Bill criminalising such games. *PII*

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What does the new online gaming Act outline?

What has the World Health Organization said about Real Money Games? How are e-sports and social gaming segments different from online money games? What are the penalties laid out in the Act with respect to engaging with online money games? Has the Supreme Court intervened?

EXPLAINER

Virag Gupta

The story so far:

In August 20, the Lok Sabha passed the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Bill, 2025 after seven minutes of discussion. The Rajya Sabha passed it the next day and the Bill became law after receiving Presidential Assent on August 22. Government data suggests that Indians are losing ~\$15,000 crore every year due to "Real Money Games" (RMGs). The World Health Organization (WHO) has linked RMGs to compulsive behaviour, psychological distress, financial hardship, and an overall disruption of family life. Reflecting these dangers, 32 cases of suicide attributed to online gaming addiction have been reported in Karnataka in the past 31 months. The RMG industry says this ban may threaten more than two lakh jobs across 400+ companies.

What are the three segments of online games?

The Act has proposed three categories for online games – e-sports, social gaming and RMGs. While the Act aims to promote e-sports and social gaming segments, it seeks to ban all forms of RMGs and its advertisements.

The Act defines an online money game as an online game played regardless of whether it is based on skill, chance or both, and is played after a fee-payment or with an expectation of winning money or other stakes (can include credits, coins, tokens, virtual money, etc. which can be converted to money). Under such a definition, variants of popular games like Poker, Rummy, Fantasy Cricket, and Ludo would be classified as RMGs. Several such platforms are represented by celebrities including Ranbir Kapoor and Aamir Khan (Dream11), M.S. Dhoni (WinZO), Hrithik Roshan (RummyCircle) and Sourav Ganguly (My11Circle).

With respect to e-sports, the Act defines them as games which are recognised under the National Sports Governance Act, 2025 and are registered with the proposed regulatory authority. It may include the payment of a registration or participation fee alongside performance-based prize money. Examples include games like Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty.

While there is no legal definition of social gaming, it is included in the broader category of online games defined as games played on an electronic or digital device and operated as a software through the Internet. Under Section 4 of this Bill, the government can facilitate the development and availability of online social games for recreational and educational purposes.

What does it say about regulation?

Offering online money games or engaging in transaction or authorisation of funds for the same will be punishable with imprisonment of up to three years, a fine of up to ₹1 crore, or both. Unlawful advertisement will be punishable with imprisonment of up to two years, a fine of up to ₹50 lakh, or both. Under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, offences shall be cognisable and non-bailable. The central government stated that the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN) will be tasked with blocking or disabling apps that continue to provide banned money gaming services in India, and if needed, it may rope in Interpol to bring in offshore



GETTY IMAGES

operators of money gaming platforms. IT Minister Ashwani Vaishnav clarified in a statement that no penal action for players has been codified.

The Act empowers the Central government to notify and constitute a regulatory authority to recognise, categorise, and register online games. In 2023, the IT Ministry amended the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2021, treating online gaming firms like intermediaries. The amended rules envisaged a system of self-regulated bodies with government oversight. Online gaming firms were required to comply with KYC norms, and uphold measures to safeguard children through measures for parental access control alongside age rating mechanisms based on the nature and type of content.

The new Act makes no provisions to constraint minors from playing online social games or e-sports. It also provides for a budget allocation from the Consolidated Fund of India to promote online social gaming in the country.

Why has the government brought in the Act?

Mr. Vaishnav said the Act was a response to complaints from users who had lost thousands of crores on online money games, and that it was not a knee-jerk reaction. He said that there is irrefutable proof that the algorithms of online gaming firms do not allow for any user to emerge as a net winner in the long run. A Parliamentary Panel Report (2023) stated that gaming portals have become agents for funding terror activities. A 2022 Financial Intelligence Report reported that online gaming firms had evaded tax of ₹2,000 crore. Further, the Defence

Ministry's think tank found that the Chinese App, FIEWIN, has defrauded Indian users of ₹400 crore, with an ED investigation finding evidence of use of mule accounts and cryptocurrency wallets. In yet another report, the government said that gaming companies were involved in GST tax evasion of ₹30,000 crore.

The current Act says that the unchecked expansion of RMGs is linked to financial fraud, money laundering, tax evasion and many other unlawful activities. It also states that gaming firms rely on opaque algorithms designed to manipulate user engagement, and that games can also be operated by bots or undisclosed agents undermining fairness and transparency. Additionally, the Act says that gaming firms operate from offshore jurisdictions bypassing domestic laws, undermining state level regulations and presenting significant enforcement challenges in terms of extra-territorial jurisdiction and interstate inconsistencies. However, while the Act proposes to establish a robust legal framework, the same is not reflected in the contents of the Act. Gaming companies may still bypass restrictions through VPNs, information cash play, or other mechanisms.

What have courts said?

Entries 34 and 62 of the State List in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution places the regulation and taxation of betting and gambling within the jurisdiction of State governments. And various State governments have taken regulatory actions before. In 2017, Telangana became the first State to ban all forms of online gaming including skill-based games. In 2020, Andhra

Pradesh banned online gambling, and in 2022, Tamil Nadu banned games such as Rummy and Poker.

In 2023, the Indian government reclassified GST brackets for online gaming along with casinos and horse racing, putting them in the same bracket as lotteries and betting. In October 2023, it imposed a uniform 28% GST on the entire entry fee/deposit, instead of platform commission. Gaming firms opposed this move, claiming that their platforms were skill based, and termed retrospective taxes as unfair and damaging. The Supreme Court (SC) this year granted a stay on notices issued to online gaming companies. The top court's decisions on whether fantasy sports, poker and rummy should be treated as games of skills or gambling, and on retrospective tax for RMG firms, are awaited. The Central government has requested the SC for one more week to file submissions in the GST dispute on online gaming, with industry players arguing that games of skill cannot be equated with gambling.

The SC had earlier said that games like Rummy and Fantasy Sports involved a substantial degree of skill and cannot be equated with gambling. This Act does not distinguish between games of skills and games of chance, leading critics of the Act to say that it erases the intelligible difference and is violative of Article 19 (1) (g) of the Constitution, giving a guaranteed Right to Trade and Occupation. If the matter is challenged, then the SC can step in to shield the gaming industry with interim relief or issue a notice to the government to explain the rationale behind such a law.

Virag Gupta is an advocate at the Supreme Court.

THE GIST

▼ The Act has proposed three categories for online games – e-sports, social gaming and Real Money Games (RMGs). While the Act aims to promote e-sports and social gaming segments, it seeks to ban all forms of RMGs and its advertisements.

▼ Offering online money games or engaging in transaction or authorisation of funds for the same will be punishable with imprisonment of up to three years, a fine of up to ₹1 crore, or both.

▼ Entries 34 and 62 of the State List in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution places the regulation and taxation of betting and gambling within the jurisdiction of State governments.

Before legislation becomes litigation

The framers of the Indian Constitution faced the formidable challenge of defining constitutional democracy. Absolute parliamentary sovereignty, where Parliament is free to do what it wishes, as in the case of the British model, found no credence with the Constituent Assembly. The intent and mandate of the Assembly was clear: Parliament has the power to make laws, but no law can be a derogation from the Constitution.

The power to strike down laws was meant to be sparing – an exception to the right of Parliament to legislate in a democracy. Trouble starts brewing when exceptional power becomes the norm. Our constitutional courts, by practice, have been elevated to the status of a parallel legislator. The reason, though not exhaustive, includes a systematic abdication of the parliamentarian to exercise functions of lawmaking with constitutional precision. In May, the Supreme Court heard challenges to the constitutionality of the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025. What made this particularly egregious? The challenge was made within days of Parliament having enacted the law. And the challengers were MPs themselves.

Over the past decade, the courtroom has become a frequent site of reckoning for Parliament's legislative output. The Union Law Minister said in a written reply in Rajya Sabha in 2022 that 35 cases challenging central legislation and Constitution (Amendment) Acts were pending before the Supreme Court since 2016.

The problem with execution Legal challenges to legislation generally fall under three categories: constitutional scrutiny, political theatre, and flawed drafting. These challenges are neither partisan nor institutional. The failing seems to lie in the execution: vague definitions, incoherent clauses, cross-references that go nowhere, laws made without harmonising



Samrat Pasriccha
Delhi-based lawyer



Rohini Narayanan
Delhi-based lawyer

their effect with existing legislation, and provisions that contradict the Constitution. The victims are economic prosperity, social harmony, and democratic love between the legislature and the judiciary.

On paper, the system is robust. Chapter 9 of the Manual of Parliamentary Procedure outlines clear processes to be followed for the introduction of legislation. A policy proposal must be made by the relevant Ministry, which shall be conducted with proper stakeholder consultation. It then requires approval by the Law Ministry, followed by consideration by the Cabinet. Once the Bill is in Parliament, the legislation is introduced by way of a first reading, followed by a second reading where it may be sent to a Parliamentary Committee for further consideration. In a third reading, it goes through a clause-by-clause consideration by Parliament.

In practice, the system often breaks down. Bills are introduced without adequate notice, committees are bypassed, and clause-by-clause debates are rushed through with minimal scrutiny, resulting in avoidable legislative mistakes. Take Section 18(d) of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. It prescribes a maximum punishment of two years imprisonment and a fine for sexual abuse of a transgender person. Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, similar abuse of a woman can attract up to seven years or life imprisonment. This is a case awaiting a constitutional challenge. This begs the question: were our legislators equipped with the necessary legal guidance to contextualise this law? Are they able to engage with the jurisprudence emerging from the judgments of our constitutional courts? Is the proposed legislation wrapped in dense legal prose capable of being independently examined by legislators?

When law-making becomes incomprehensible, it ceases to be

democratic. A functioning constitutional democracy relies on the informed participation of its constituents. When legislation is drafted in legalese and pushed through under time pressure, MPs are left to vote on texts they are unable to fully interrogate. Within Parliament, the impact is serious. Law-making cannot be confined to the lawyers in the House. Legislators are elected to represent the complexity of Indian social life. It seems counter-intuitive that the very same legislators who emerge from all walks of life are expected to expertly engage in high constitutional analyses. The result is that legislators toe the party line and their involvement is reduced to quips, whips, and rote rhetoric.

The case for a retainer-AG

Our Parliament needs a constitutional functionary who can guide the process of law-making; who is empowered and qualified to intervene before legislation becomes litigation. To put it succinctly, we need a constitutional review at the Parliament stage itself. As per Article 88 of the Constitution, the Attorney-General for India (AG) is given the right to participate in the proceedings of the Houses of Parliament. Though rarely invoked, the powers granted therein proffer a transformative solution to the malady of constitutionally flawed and linguistically complex legislation that clog Indian courts.

The benefit of Parliament seeking the counsel of the AG during its deliberations would be two-fold: first, the AG can expertly flag and seek amendment of legal inconsistencies and constitutional infirmities during parliamentary debate; second, lawmakers would have the benefit of relying on the counsel of a non-partisan constitutional functionary while casting their vote.

A well-drafted statute will shield Parliament from having its intent substituted and enable the courts to interpret rather than invalidate.

A promise that is hard to keep

Tariff cuts by the Naidu government may be good politics but bad economics

STATE OF PLAY

V. Raghavendra
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Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, who spearheaded reforms in the power sector 25 years ago, has been repeatedly invoking this legacy since his dramatic comeback in the 2024 Assembly elections. Mr. Naidu claims he has asked power utilities not to raise tariffs to avoid burdening consumers. However, the Left parties have disputed this claim, insisting that the tariffs have in fact risen steeply in recent times.

Amid this debate, some industrialists in the State have expressed concern that power is relatively expensive at up to ₹12 a unit. One industrialist said that the Chief Minister had assured them that power tariffs would not be increased and that he would instead try to bring them down by at least ₹0.50 per unit over each one of the next four years.

However, given the current circumstances, this appears doubtful; a promise made only to keep the entrepreneurs in good spirits. Reducing the tariffs may not be possible because even a slight fall in revenue will worsen the financial distress of distribution utilities, or DISCOMs. Already burdened with massive debt, DISCOMs are unable to recover the gap between the cost of supplying subsidised electricity to consumers and the limited reimbursements provided by the government. Utilities in many other States suffer the same plight. The Chief Minister has said that he intends to revive the power sector by increasing efficiencies and not by increasing tariffs.

As per its mandate, the



Energy Department is focused on supplying quality and uninterrupted power and has largely succeeded in its mission. However, power supply involves intensive capital expenditure and comes at a cost, which leaves little room for tariff cuts.

Mr. Naidu has often accused the previous YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government of hiking tariffs nine times. He has disowned responsibility for the slight increase in tariffs after the Telugu Desam Party-Jana Sena Party-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance assumed power. Instead, he has attributed the rise to filings made before the Andhra Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission during 2019-24.

The YSRCP government's review of long-term social power purchase agreements, despite stiff opposition from the TDP and warnings by the Ministry of Power, ended with adverse court verdicts. These forced the State to pay nearly ₹9,000 crore in penalties to independent power producers.

Further, the rise in electricity duty from ₹6 paise to ₹1 per unit early this year has proved to be costly for industries. Industries unsuccessfully challenged this in courts. Energy-intensive industries are especially hit hard by the rise in electricity duty.

Critics of the power sector reforms blame Mr. Naidu for

introducing true-up charges, which allow DISCOMs to recover additional costs retrospectively. Some argue that with political will, the government could marginally reduce tariffs by absorbing part of DISCOMs' expenses, but complete reimbursement of revenue losses is unavoidable. Questions have also been raised about the State's agreement to buy power from the Solar Energy Corporation of India, which some allege was signed under dubious circumstances.

It is widely perceived that since power generation and purchase costs will continue to go up incrementally every year, no government will have the luxury of saying no to the DISCOMs' proposal to recover costs from the consumers. In other words, the government will be left with little choice but to approve tariff revisions.

The Andhra Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission also cannot afford to overlook the financial implications of a rate reduction for DISCOMs. It has to greenlight their demands for revenue at some point as power supply is not charity.

Irrespective of which category a consumer of electricity falls under, whether industrial, commercial, or domestic, she will be hurt by increasing tariffs. The pain will be particularly hard for industries to bear, as they have other costs and large electricity needs. Nevertheless, no one can live under the illusion that bills will become less expensive; they are only bound to increase commensurate with the rising costs.

If the Naidu government delivers on its election promise, it may be good politics but it is not good economics. There can be no profit for the DISCOMs without cost.

About 30% of MPs and MLAs face serious criminal cases

In the Lok Sabha, the share of MPs facing serious criminal charges has more than doubled since 2009

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

An analysis of MPs and MLAs across India shows that 31% of MPs and 29% of MLAs have declared serious criminal charges against them. As the analysis was conducted immediately after the most recent parliamentary elections, and Assembly elections in each State, it does not reflect some of the current set of MPs and MLAs.

A serious criminal charge includes offences where the maximum punishment is five years or more, or those that are non-bailable.

In the Lok Sabha, the share of MPs facing serious criminal cases has more than doubled, from 14% in 2009 to 31% in 2024 (Chart 1). In the Assemblies, the share was 29% in 2024, which accounts for more than 1,200 MLAs. Telangana had the highest share of MPs with serious criminal cases (71%), followed by Bihar (48%). Uttar Pradesh recorded the highest absolute number at 34, as seen in Chart 2.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had the highest absolute number of MPs facing serious cases (63 members or 26% of its total). The Congress followed with 32 MPs (32%). Among smaller parties, the proportions were higher: all four MPs of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) had serious cases against them (Chart 3).

Andhra Pradesh had the highest share of MLAs with serious criminal cases at 56%, followed by Telangana (50%). U.P. recorded the highest absolute number (154 MLAs or 38% of its total) (Chart 4).

While 61% of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP)'s MLAs faced serious cases, 62% of the RJD's did. The BJP, which has the largest presence in Assemblies, accounted for 436 MLAs (26%) with serious cases, followed by the Congress (194 MLAs; 30%) (Chart 5).

Cases against lawmakers

Data for the charts were sourced from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)



Chart 2: State-wise MPs with serious criminal cases. The farther to the right, the higher the % share of such MPs; the bigger the circle, the higher the number of such MPs

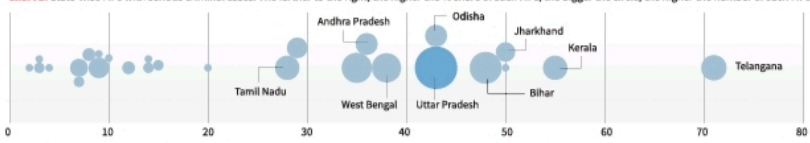


Chart 3: Party-wise MPs with serious criminal cases. The farther to the right, the higher the % share of such MPs; the bigger the circle, the higher the number of such MPs

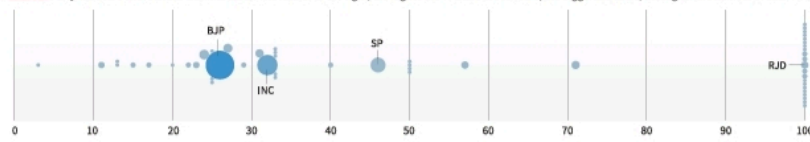


Chart 4: State-wise MLAs with serious criminal cases. The farther to the right, the higher the % share of such MLAs; the bigger the circle, the higher the number of MLAs

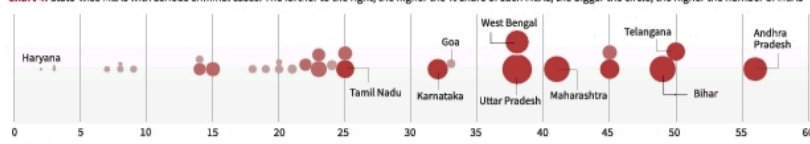
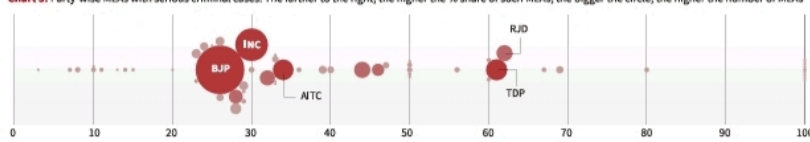


Chart 5: Party-wise MLAs with serious criminal cases. The farther to the right, the higher the % share of such MLAs; the bigger the circle, the higher the number of MLAs



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 26, 1975

Private sector under overall social planning urged

Kanpur, Aug. 25: The Union Labour Minister, Mr. K.V. Raghunatha Reddy yesterday, said the private sector would have to be brought under "overall social planning" to create a truly socialistic order in the country.

Addressing the 11th annual meeting of the Kanpur Productivity Council, he said the private sector laid too much emphasis on profits, which often blurred its functioning.

On the other hand, the public sector, despite its certain weaknesses, was socially and economically far more relevant.

"But for the contribution made in the last few years by the public sector undertakings, the country would have been in an economic mess to-day, as are a large number of countries in the world. It is these units which have helped the country to ward off, nay tackle a serious economic crisis."

Mr. Reddy said the public sector was often accused of inefficiency but during the last year it had achieved a growth rate of 12.5 per cent.

The biggest drawback in the present industrial set-up was that relevance and efficiency of a particular industrial unit, mainly in the private sector, was judged by the amount of profits earned. This led to a disequilibrium in which certain essential units were not set up at all or some had to be closed down because they were less profitable.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 26, 1925

Round the world on bicycles

Calcutta, Aug. 25: Signor Iginio Gibelli and Herr Antony Kundinger, who are touring the world on bicycles, came to Calcutta and called on Mr. Gandhi on Monday. They tried to get Mr. Gandhi to give a message from India to the world in their autograph book. As Monday is observed by Mr. Gandhi as a day of silence he wrote as follows: "If you will please come some other time when I am speaking, I shall talk to you and then decide whether to give something in your book or not."

Being asked if he did not think it wise to write a message from India to the world, Mr. Gandhi wrote: "I want the whole world to know all about my country. You are most welcome."



Beyond debate

Dysfunction of legislatures is due to concentration of power in the executive

Addressing the two-day All India Speakers' Conference in New Delhi on August 24, Union Home Minister Shah called attention to the frequent disruptions that have paralysed deliberations in Assemblies and Parliament. His point that "debate must take place in a democracy" is beyond any debate. But when one goes beyond the truism, a picture of India's representative democracy in distress emerges. Bitterness between the government and the Opposition has erased the scope for any common ground, and Parliament has been reduced to a theatre of mutual diatribe. His remarks followed soon after the Opposition's protests, demanding a debate on the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Bihar, that led to repeated adjournments. Most of the legislative business was carried out with little or no debate. In a session with 21 sittings spread out over 32 days, 15 Bills were passed. According to PRS Legislative Research's analysis, the Lok Sabha functioned for 29% of its scheduled time, and the Rajya Sabha for 34% — the lowest functioning seen during the 18th Lok Sabha. Two-thirds of the planned time was lost to repeated adjournments. In the Lower House, only 8% of starred questions received an oral reply, while it was 5% in the Upper House. On 12 days in the Rajya Sabha and on seven in the Lok Sabha, no questions were answered orally over the 21 days. Question Hour, an instrument of executive accountability, has been rendered ineffective.

The dysfunction of legislatures is linked to concentration of power in the chief executive, the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers. According to the Annual Review of State Laws 2024 by PRS Legislative Research, State Assemblies met for an average of just 20 days in 2024, down from 28 in 2017. Larger States such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh recorded only 16 sitting days, while Odisha and Kerala led with 42 and 38 days, respectively. More than half the Bills were passed on the same day, with little debate. Eight Assemblies do not have a Deputy Speaker; the Lok Sabha has not had a Deputy Speaker since June 2019. Parliamentary committees that used to be a platform for more deliberative and less acrimonious debates have also become vulnerable to partisanship. It is propitious that Mr. Shah thinks that there should be more debate in legislatures, but it will be meaningful only when the government translates that view into action by engaging with the Opposition. A starting point can be a consensus election of an Opposition leader as the Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha.

Friends and foes

Pakistan is filling the void created by the alienation of India from Bangladesh

In the first such visit in 13 years, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar travelled to Dhaka over the weekend to meet with members of the Bangladeshi interim government, headed by Muhammad Yunus, and hold talks with his counterpart, Touhid Hossain. Ties had been tense since 2009, when Sheikh Hasina came to power, and under strain over the prosecution of those who colluded with Pakistan during the 1971 liberation war — and the assassination of her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of her family in 1975. In 2015, Bangladesh demanded the expulsion of a Pakistani diplomat over links to a terror group and recalled its High Commissioner to Islamabad after Pakistan protested the hanging in Bangladesh of those found guilty of collusion in 1971. Although the two nations subsequently restored envoys, they began to repair ties after Ms. Hasina's ouster last August. The process was also nudged by China, which convened a tri-lateral mechanism with Bangladesh and Pakistani officials in Kunming. In Dhaka, there was agreement to restore visa facilitation for diplomats, have direct flights, grant scholarships for Bangladeshi students and ways to enhance trade from current flows of less than a billion dollars. However, the Yunus government has refused to mine old grudges. Bangladesh demands reparations from Pakistan. These include a formal apology for the genocide in 1971 perpetrated by Pakistani forces, financial compensations and the repatriation of thousands of "Stranded Pakistanis" or Urdu-speaking Muhajirs who had migrated there after Partition and still held allegiance to West Pakistan. While meeting Mr. Dar, Mr. Yunus also called for strengthening regional cooperation, including a revival of the SAARC process. India has eyed the thaw in Islamabad-Dhaka ties with some suspicion, given reports that Pakistani diplomats supported Jamaat-e-Islami student activists during the anti-Hasina protests last year. Of greater concern has been military and intelligence contacts.

While there is no question that New Delhi has caused to feel cut out and bruised by the new-found bonhomie between an erstwhile ally and a long-time foe, it is time that South India adopts a more realistic prism. Pakistan is stepping into the breach caused by the strain in India-Bangladesh ties. Although Mr. Modi met Mr. Yunus in April and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met Mr. Hossain on the side-lines of other international events, neither has contemplated a visit, nor has Mr. Yunus been invited. With the announcement of elections in Bangladesh, in February, New Delhi must also broaden its political engagement with political parties there, even as it nudges the Yunus government to a more inclusive process. In the absence of a stronger regional South Asian grouping, New Delhi has a difficult task in holding sway over bilateral ties between any of its neighbours, especially Bangladesh and Pakistan.

"horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee!" Yes, a Shakespearean tragedy is now playing out, though in an intangible form. We are witnessing the murder of press freedom, a right recognised by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court, in 1950, in the case of *Romesh Thappar*. Ironically, his relative, Karan Thapar, is one of the most recent victims. Journalist Siddharth Varadarajan is another such victim. They stand accused of a conspiracy, of "provoking unrest, undermining national security, and spreading narratives aligned with hostile interests". That is quite a mouthful.

The accusation against them lies in a First Information Report (FIR) lodged with the Crime Branch in Guwahati, Assam, on May 9, 2025. The FIR is based on allegedly offensive video interviews and articles published by *The Wire*. It is not necessary to delve into the details of the FIR except to say that the complainant is educated and writes quite well but strains really hard to make out a case of national security being undermined.

In fact, he writes so well that it took the Crime Branch three months to understand the complaint, take cognisance and summon the accused on August 12, 2025. Maybe the police did not quite comprehend what he intended to say and perhaps took the assistance of an SIT and a dictionary, but still came to a wrong conclusion. And, this in a matter concerning national security. What is going on?

The FIR does not make out a case of any offence under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and deserves to be quashed. It is nothing but an expression of the complainant's opinion. Unfortunately, based on that opinion, the police in Assam have summoned the two journalists for questioning (everybody knows what that means) on charges of undermining national security. The Supreme Court of India has directed that no coercive action be taken against them. For the time being that is good enough, but I would like the readers of this daily to consider the long-term collateral damage.

Back in sheep's clothing

We have been told, and quite rightly so, that the draconian offence of sedition has been removed from the penal law of India. The BNS does not recognise sedition as a penal offence. However, Section 152 of the BNS creates an offence of endangering the sovereignty, the unity and the integrity of India.

That is sedition in sheep's clothing and is obviously a very serious offence. The law provides that it comes into play when someone "excites or attempts to excite, secession or armed rebellion or subversive activities, or encourages feelings of separatist activities or endangers sovereignty or unity and integrity of India; or indulges in or commits any such act..." The sovereignty and integrity of India are expressions used in Article 19 of the Constitution and have a definite meaning relating to the subservience or break-up of the country, nothing less. In the



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normal course, the expression of views, however radical they may be, cannot be construed as endangering the sovereignty and the integrity of India. Something much more is required, in the nature of secession or armed rebellion or subversive or separatist activity. It is for this reason that the punishment for an offence under Section 152 of the BNS provides also for life imprisonment.

Summons, the consequences

So does all this make Section 152 of the BNS unconstitutional? I do not know — a Constitution Bench of the Court will decide this. And, frankly, I do not want to hazard a guess on the outcome. But, in the meanwhile, what are the consequences of the police summons?

First, a freezing effect. We had earlier acknowledged a chilling effect under the sedition law. Now it has gone well beyond that. Try and imagine any journalist or anybody in a panel discussion on television or otherwise having the courage to be critical of anything to do with any policy of the Government of India. Somebody can misinterpret it and bring national security into play, and the police can take cognisance and summon the alleged offender. Freedom of speech can be bulldozed and demolished because one individual out of a billion people, anywhere in the country, believes (without evidence) that national security is in danger, or that the armed forces are demoralised or that dissent is "strategic subversion" undermining the sovereignty and the integrity of India.

Second, consider the financial inconvenience to a journalist or a common citizen. It is expensive when approaching the Court against a frivolous complaint. The litigant has to pay the lawyer's fee, the printing of paper books and sundry expenses. If the litigant is not a resident in Delhi, one has to add travel expenses, boarding and lodging. How many people can afford that? And why should they just because one or two persons in some part of India misinterpret what is written or said? Consider the expense that Mr. Thapar and Mr. Varadarajan will have to undergo in travel to Guwahati and back (unless they are arrested) and their overnight stay. Will the investigating officer be available on the scheduled date? He might fall sick or have a more pressing case to investigate. In other words, he can make their journey futile.

Then, is there a guarantee that the questioning will be over in one day? Maybe the investigating officer may require their presence again, and again. Today, no police officer is accountable, which is why innocents in Mumbai spent 18 years in jail. Accountability jurisprudence is sorely missing in the country.

In my view, a police officer investigating a crime should travel to the city or the town where the accused is ordinarily resident. The officer is acting for and on behalf of the state. Therefore, the state should bear the expenses rather than a citizen who is presumed to be innocent.

Have the police in Assam explored the possibility of questioning these journalists using video conferencing? Why do they have to be

physically present, at great expense and inconvenience, when they can answer questions over a video call? There is another advantage in questioning by electronic mode. The questions and the answers can be recorded to enable those concerned to know what was asked. Sometimes the questions are inane. This avoids a common allegation made by the investigating agency that the accused "did not cooperate".

A few days ago, the Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi (L-G) passed an order enabling the cross-examination of police officers in a criminal trial through video conferencing. Lawyers in Delhi have objected to this procedure but the L-G has stuck to his guns. If police officers can be cross-examined over a video call in a criminal trial, there is no reason why journalists cannot be questioned the same way in respect of an accusation.

Harass and punish

The attitude of the Assam police is quite obvious — harass the journalists and make the process a punishment for a non-existent offence. That there is a clear intention to go after journalists is obvious from a summons issued recently to Abhisar Sharma for an offence under Section 152 of the BNS. He is accused of endangering the unity and integrity of India by portraying the state as corrupt, communal and illegitimate. Really? While sedition has been deleted from the statute books, it has been replaced by a law that is much worse and is being weaponised with impunity.

Third, does the state have any respect for the Court and its judgments? I am not too sure. The law requires the accused be given a copy of the FIR, as held by the Court in *Youth Bar Association of India* (2016). Both the accused tried unsuccessfully for a week to get a copy of the FIR. This view was followed by the Karnataka High Court in *Sri Tanavaji Rajasheshkar Shiva Prasad* (2024). The police have acted in defiance of the mandate of the Supreme Court with impunity. A copy of the FIR is required to be filed with the jurisdictional Magistrate. So, Mr. Thapar and Mr. Varadarajan approached the Magistrate for a copy of the FIR that had been lodged in May 2025 but were informed that it was not there. Is this impunity? Arrogance? Negligence? Even otherwise, common sense dictates that if an accused is asked to answer allegations against him, he should know what the allegations are.

Finally, in theory, the investigation can gradually rope in other persons involved in the video interviews and articles. The galaxy of accused persons will then include the former Chief of the Research and Analysis Wing, senior journalists, and defence analysts. Watch out. Something is happening here, but you do not know what it is.

Finally, there are three questions that need to be asked. Should Section 152 of the BNS remain on the statute book? Regardless of whether it is constitutional or not, should not the mandate of the law be followed by the police? And, should not the state be made accountable in appropriate cases?

India-Japan ties — old partners, new priorities

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan and China, that begins from August 29, comes at a time of flux in global geopolitics. While there is a tentative easing of tensions between India and China after years of strain, there is also growing uncertainty about New Delhi's ties with Washington as the Trump administration seems to be doing everything in its power to push India away. Thus, Mr. Modi's engagement in Tokyo carries weight well beyond the bilateral.

Japan's major investment plan

At the heart of the visit lies Japan's announcement of a ¥10 trillion (about \$68 billion) investment plan in India to be spread over the next decade. This pledge, among the most ambitious Tokyo has ever made to New Delhi, is designed to boost the infrastructure, manufacturing, clean energy, and technology partnership. It signals Japan's long-term stake in India's growth story at a time when many global investors remain cautious about China. The fact that Japan is also investing in the next-generation EIO series Shinkansen for the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridor reflects economic collaboration alongside Tokyo's willingness to transfer cutting-edge technology to India.

On the strategic front, the two countries are expected to revise the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, reorienting their security and defence partnership in accordance with contemporary realities. The proposed Economic Security Initiative — it covers semiconductors, critical minerals, pharmaceuticals, and clean energy — anchors Japan more firmly within India's quest for diversified supply chains. Also significant is the upgrade of their digital partnership, which is now expected to cover artificial intelligence and startup ecosystems. These initiatives place India-Japan ties at the forefront of technological and security



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The Prime Minister's Japan visit highlights India's steady strategic intent, with signals to China and the U.S.

cooperation in Asia, reinforcing their shared commitment to a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

The U.S. factor, a case of strategic balancing

The timing of the visit is important. After the Tokyo meeting, Mr. Modi is scheduled to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Tianjin, China. Bilateral ties, though scarred by the 2020 Galwan clash, are demonstrating tentative signs of stabilisation with the resumption of direct flights, visa relaxations, and trade facilitation efforts. The visit, from Tokyo to Beijing in a single week, reflects a strategic balancing in many ways. First, it underscores India's ability to engage with a trusted strategic partner and a neighbouring competitor without allowing one relationship to dictate the other. Second, it signals that India can compartmentalise. With Tokyo, the focus is on advancing economic security, defence cooperation, and Indo-Pacific stability. With Beijing, the emphasis will likely be on managing tensions, exploring limited confidence-building measures, and keeping communication lines open.

The balancing becomes even more consequential against the backdrop of Mr. Trump's unpredictability, which has cast a shadow on the reliability of the United States as a steady partner. Mr. Trump stands to unravel years of careful effort invested in building the New Delhi-Washington partnership. Successive administrations on both sides, from George W. Bush to Joe Biden, worked to transform a once-fractious relationship into a cornerstone of Indo-Pacific strategy, anchored in defence cooperation, technology sharing, and growing people-to-people ties. So far, Trump 2.0 risks eroding this progress. The Quad (India, Australia, Japan, the U.S.) too, remains essential to India's Indo-Pacific vision, but its trajectory appears rocky as U.S. engagement turns episodic. The

grouping was conceived as a platform to pool capacities among like-minded democracies, yet its momentum has always depended on Washington's willingness to commit consistently. Under Mr. Trump's second term, signals of disengagement and a narrower view of alliances risk diluting the Quad's strategic coherence. For India, Japan and Australia, this raises pressing questions about sustaining the initiative's credibility and operational depth.

Beyond economics and defence, there is a broader political signal embedded in the visit. By stepping up its engagement with India, Japan is not just diversifying its economic footprint but is also reinforcing the idea that dedicated long-term cooperation can deliver tangible outcomes.

The message

The Tokyo visit is thus less about short-term diplomatic outcomes and more about signalling steady strategic intent — that India is willing to keep channels with Beijing open, prepared to navigate U.S. unpredictability, and determined to deepen enduring partnerships with like-minded powers in the region. Japan's commitments also reinforce India as one of its most reliable partners in navigating the challenges of the Indo-Pacific, from economic resilience to maritime security.

The visit will highlight one of the most enduring features of Indian diplomacy in recent years: flexibility without losing strategic clarity. In a phase of protracted geopolitical uncertainty, it is Japan that emerges as India's anchor partner. Washington's commitment is wavering under Trump's short-sightedness, while Beijing remains a competitor whose gestures of normalisation cannot yet ease underlying mistrust. Tokyo offers consistency, resources and a shared strategic outlook rooted in democratic values and a free and open Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the visit to Japan is not just about consolidating an old partnership. It is about recognising where India's most dependable ballast lies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A new Bill
The 130th Constitutional Amendment Bill directly challenges the rule of law and is arbitrary while undermining the basic structure of the

Constitution. In a country where judicial processes take years to settle, losing public office in a period of 30 days on mere accusations and placing even the highest office of

Prime Minister at the mercy of the executive is aimed at creating a police state. In an environment where ethical standards have reached their nadir and where it is commonplace to

observe candidates getting absolved of various charges as soon as they switch political allegiance to the party in control, investigating agencies become potent weapons to

further political agendas. The best approach would be to introduce a Bill which could end the usual template — where a party is obstructed from absorbing such candidates and

limiting the abuse of power.
Madhuree Guha,
Kolkata
Letters emailed to
letters@thehindu.co.in
must carry the postal address
and the full name.

Like other relics, India's fossils are at high risk of being sold abroad

Fossils once bound for labs are now advertised in storefronts and auction houses; ammonites, extinct sea creatures, once crowded ancient oceans; today, their fossilised remains are sold on the streets of Paris; larger, rarer specimens fetch staggering sums from private collectors at auctions

Anupama Chandrasekaran

In Western India, some of the country's richest fossil beds lie inside open coal mines. It is gruelling work for palaeontologists with long days under a haze of dust, the deafening hammering of tools, and nights in small-town hotels with basic comforts. In 2024, palaeontologist Sunil Bajpai reported that at one such dig, he and his team uncovered the fossilised vertebrae of *Vasuki indicus*. This ancient giant snake may have stretched as long as a tour bus. But without a national repository or a secure, catalogued fossil locker like those abroad, the story remains of this 47-million-year-old serpent face an uncertain future.

"I worry about what will happen to these fossils after I retire in two years," said 63-year-old Mr. Bajpai, chair professor of vertebrate palaeontology at IIT-Roorkee. "Will they be preserved or fall victim to theft or vandalism?"

Around the world, fossils once bound for labs are now advertised in storefronts and auction houses. Ammonites, extinct sea creatures with coiled shells, once crowded ancient oceans. Today, their fossilised remains are sold on the streets of Paris. Larger, rarer specimens fetch staggering sums at auctions from private collectors.

In July 2024, Sotheby's auction house in New York sold a near-complete stegosaurus, a plant-eating dinosaur with spikes, for \$44.6 million. It was the most expensive fossil ever auctioned. In California, luxury homes trumpet dinosaur skeletons as living-room showpieces.

Thomas Carr is a palaeontologist at the Carthage Institute of Palaeontology in Wisconsin in the U.S. He studies fossils of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, one of the largest meat-eating dinosaurs in history. In a study published this April titled "Tyrannosaurus rex: An Endangered Species", Mr. Carr reported that 71 scientifically important *T. rex* specimens are in private hands. Just 61 of these finds are held by public institutions.

"Commercial collectors have gathered more *T. rex* material than scientists have since the first specimen was discovered," Mr. Carr said over a phone call. "The rate of collection by commercial interests was the most surprising and the most alarming."

Heritage at risk
Over decades, India's cultural treasures have often vanished into private hands. In 1898, a British landowner unearthed hundreds of gems from a Buddhist shrine in Uttar Pradesh. The relics stayed in his family for generations before part of the collection was slated for auction at Sotheby's in Hong Kong in 2025. The Indian government blocked the sale. Scientists caution that fossils could be the next heritage lost to the auction block.

The palaeontological record of India, especially the Mesozoic age, is incredibly important to our understanding of the evolution of dinosaurs and other organisms," Mr. Carr said, referring to the 'age of reptiles' when dinosaurs ruled the earth. "We can't afford to lose it."

India's fossil record includes some of the earliest plant life, dinosaurs and even a skull of ancient humans. That wealth of



A panoramic view of the Panandhro lignite mine in Kutch, Gujarat, showing the fossiliferous level (red arrow) where fossils of the 15-metre-long snake *Vasuki indicus* were found. S. BAJPAI AND P. VERMA

fossils is due to the subcontinent's prolonged isolation after splitting from the southern supercontinent Gondwanaland around 150 million years ago. After India collided with Asia 50 to 60 million years ago, ancestral horses and whales emerged along its coasts.

"As of now there are no laws governing fossils and there are huge concerns about vandalism and local sales taking place," Mr. Bajpai said. "If we don't move fast, we're going to lose a part of earth's history that you can never get back. Once a fossil is gone, it's gone forever."

Unsung custodians
Fossils can vanish without trace: misplaced in storerooms, crumbling from heat and rain or hidden away in private collections. One large cache of Indian fossils today lies with the Ranga Rao-Obergefell Trust. It is a collection built by the late Indian palaeontologist M.S. Ranga Rao and his late wife, the German palaeontologist Friedlind Obergefell.

The couple unearthed truckloads of fossils, including bones of a small, hoofed, land-dwelling herbivore called *Indohyus*. Dutch-American palaeontologist Hans Thewissen examined the specimen in 2005 and spotted features that signaled that *Indohyus* was one of the earliest



A fossil of the Perambalur Ammonites Centre, RIE PHOTO

known whale ancestors. The private collection is now kept in a Dehradun home. Some fossils even lie exposed in the garden, according to Mr. Bajpai. The collection, built over decades, remains largely unsorted and unstudied.

With no formal safeguards, some enthusiasts have turned custodians of India's deep history. Vishal Verma, a schoolteacher in Madhya Pradesh, spends weekends rescuing dinosaur bones and shells from riverbeds. The limestone and basalt hills in his neighbourhood, formed 146-65 million years ago, cradle fossilised dinosaur nests and eggs. Ammonites coiled like snakes, slabs of fossil wood and shards of reptile teeth fill every corner of Mr. Verma's home.

"We have to recognise the importance of these finds — they tell the story of our past, the story of earth," said Mr. Verma, speaking in Hindi. "There must be strict measures against misuse and vandalism. Fossils should be accessible to people, but they must also be protected."

In 2006, Mr. Verma stumbled upon hundreds of dinosaur eggs. He borrowed money to rent a truck and move some to a government museum in Mandav. But that wasn't enough to protect them. In 2013, some of the eggs were stolen and the rest were locked away from public view.

"One day they were on the shelf and the other day they weren't," said Ashok Sahni, a veteran Indian palaeontologist of

the theft. "Well, when money comes into the picture, it's very difficult in a country like ours to safeguard anything because you can put guards and you can put wire and you can do everything. They did that at the Mandav museum and still, they lost some of the dinosaur eggs kept there and nobody knows how."

Fossils for sale
Fossils aren't just prey for vandals or roadside sellers anymore. A simple Google search can lead you to sites openly selling fossilised dinosaur eggs. They've also become trophies for the rich.

The stegosaurus fossil that sold for a record \$44.6 million at Sotheby's last year went to hedge fund trader Kenneth Griffin. The fossil frenzy has even drawn Hollywood celebrities like Nicolas Cage and Leonardo DiCaprio, who once had a bidding war over a dinosaur skull. Sotheby's has further stoked the appetite, carving out a new department in 2021 selling fossils alongside space and cinema memorabilia.

A few years ago, a draft plan for a national fossil repository in India raised hopes. But that plan has barely progressed. Experts warn that in its absence, India's prehistoric treasures remain vulnerable to auctions abroad.

"With no law to prohibit their extraction or sale, it's entirely possible that dinosaur eggs from India have found their way into overseas markets," Mr. Bajpai said.

For now, the 27 fossilised vertebrae Mr. Bajpai found of the *Vasuki indicus* rest in a box at IIT-Roorkee. At an estimated 49 feet, the giant python-like snake would have been longer than the *T. rex* that palaeontologist Mr. Carr found to be drifting into private hands. Only time will tell if this fossil will be safeguarded as a national treasure, safe from any auction block.

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Prof. Supreet Saini's research group at IIT-Bombay uses microbes to understand what makes evolution unpredictable and deterministic at the same time. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

IIT researchers use microbes to unlock nature's hidden rules

Purnima Sah

In a breakthrough that sheds new light on one of biology's most puzzling questions, researchers at IIT-Bombay have shown that subtle differences in how nutrients are presented can push microbes along entirely different evolutionary paths. The findings were published in two papers in *npj Systems Biology and Applications* and *BMC Ecology and Evolution*.

The experiments, led by Supreet Saini, focused on the microbes *Escherichia coli*, a common gut bacterium, and *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, a type of yeast widely used in baking. The researchers designed the study to test whether microbes care about what they eat as well as how it is served. They used the chemically related sugars glucose and galactose but packaged them differently. One group of microbes received a simple mix of the two while others were fed lactose or melibiose, complex sugars made of the same components but bonded differently.

"We picked sugars that are chemically related. Our goal was to see if microbes care about how the meal is served," Prof. Saini said.

Over 300 generations, the microbes evolved along strikingly different paths. In *E. coli*, one group grew faster while another produced more biomass. Yeast populations were similarly divergent. Genetic studies revealed that several mutations contributed to these adaptations.

"We didn't expect these subtle differences to create completely distinct adaptive paths," Neetika Ahlawat, a postdoctoral scholar and author of both studies, said. "The findings suggest that the way a cell responds to a nutrient can influence which mutations are beneficial and what paths evolution can take."

The study also suggests a strategy to fight antibiotic resistance by restricting the evolutionary pathways available to pathogens

When researchers transferred these evolved populations of both *E. coli* and yeast into new sugar environments, their growth followed a pattern. This phenomenon, called a pleiotropic response, refers to the side effects of adaptation in one environment influencing behaviour in another.

"It's a nice reminder that evolution is both flexible and constrained," said Pavithra Venkataraman, a former PhD student at IIT-Bombay and an author of the *E. coli* study. "In identical environments, the outcome was unpredictable, demonstrating a possible flexibility in evolution. However, the pleiotropic side effects of that evolution in new environments were surprisingly consistent. How well an evolved population performed elsewhere could be predicted based on how its ancestor had behaved."

The implications stretch far beyond academic interest. By carefully tweaking nutrient combinations, researchers may be able to direct microbial evolution to create strains that grow faster or are more efficient, opening the doors for applications in food and beverages, pharmaceuticals, and biofuels. The study also suggests a strategy to fight antibiotic resistance by restricting the evolutionary pathways available to pathogens.

"We could imagine using resources to limit the evolutionary paths available to pathogens, making it harder for antibiotic resistance to emerge," Prof. Saini said. "It's still early days, but the prospect is exciting."

The IIT-Bombay studies revealed that while the journey may be unpredictable, understanding the hidden rules behind adaptation could allow us to anticipate where evolution may ultimately lead.

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THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Physics of staying airborne

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1
The faster the air flows over the curved upper surface of the wing, the lower the pressure there. This is called X's principle: aeroplanes use it to generate lift and stay airborne. Name X.

QUESTION 2
For an aeroplane, the angle between the wing's chord line and the oncoming airflow is called the angle of _____. It is used to control lift and to keep the plane from stalling. At its critical value, the plane's lift coefficient is at its highest. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 3

The propulsion systems onboard a conventional aeroplane accelerate air (or exhaust gases from the engines) backward, thus producing thrust in the forward direction. Name the quantity whose conservation allows this mechanism.

QUESTION 4
The movable parts of an aeroplane's wings and tail that let pilots steer and stabilise the aircraft are called its _____. They're like the muscles of the plane and are used to change how air flows over different sections, creating forces that lift, push or drop the vehicle. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 5
The _____ is the thin skin of air that hugs an aeroplane's wings,

fuselage, tail, etc. Even though it is typically only a few millimeters to centimeters thick, it has an outsized influence on flight characteristics. Fill in the blanks.

Answers to August 21 quiz:

1. Unit of radiation dose due to eating fruits — **Ans: Banana-equivalent dose**
2. Time unit to track nuclear chain reactions — **Ans: Shakes (of a lamb's tail)**
3. Unit used as a stand-in for large numbers — **Ans: Sagan**

4. Speed unit equal to 0.17 mm per second — **Ans: Furlong per fortnight**
5. Unit of risk of death equal to 1 in a million — **Ans: Micromort**
Visual: **August Beer**
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Anmol Agrawal | Tamal Biswas | Harilakshmi M.



When the engines of this aeroplane were removed, heavy winds were able to tilt it backwards. This is because the centre of gravity in its body shifted to the rear.

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