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[OUR TAKE]

A court jolt for US's tariffs plans

Expect delay in the roll-out of Donald Trump's 'liberation day' tariff announcements

A US trade court has ruled that Donald Trump's "liberation day" tariff scheme is illegal. To be sure, the judgment seems to rest on a constitutional technicality rather than the economic merits of tariffs. This is because the court has observed that Trump was wrong in invoking emergency powers in issuing the executive order which announced the tariffs.

Whether or not the tariffs have already become infructuous is something we await clarity on. However, it does seem that unless the court ruling is ignored in some way, the Trump administration will have to seek the US Congress's approval to reinstate the tariffs. In principle, the courts have done the right thing in reinstating the authority of the legislature vis-à-vis the executive, which in this case was acting like an entity without any checks and balances.

What does this mean for the Trump administration and Trump personally? The Republican party has narrow majorities in the House of Representatives (220-212) and the Senate (53-45) unlike Trump's larger than life persona playing out in US politics right now. Given that tariffs are likely to have an adverse effect on diverse constituencies in the US, a section of the GOP actually may oppose or stall them when they are debated in the US Congress. The dynamics at play here will not be different from the larger contradiction between Trump and the Republican party: He has repeatedly challenged the latter on various issues and, so far, managed to prevail. It remains to be seen whether the tariff debate sees a similar outcome or not. To be sure, a more important outcome of the latest court ruling could be a large delay in roll-out of Trump's trade policy on things such as tariffs as they now have to be framed as a bill and be subjected to detailed parliamentary procedures.

What does this entail for countries, India included, that are in the process of negotiating trade deals with the US? The most important takeaway is that the constitutional battle over whether or not President Trump alone can decide all things about US policy is still a work in progress. While a sovereign country is perfectly justified in deciding its policies including things such as tariffs, whether or not they are being made by a populist leader or through complicated political negotiations could make a lot of difference to these policies. Waiting and watching, rather than making haste may be the most prudent strategy in dealing with President Trump at the moment.

B'desh politics heats up, Yunus on the back foot

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) rally in Dhaka on Wednesday is a sign of the continuing political ferment in Bangladesh nearly 10 months after the Sheikh Hasina government was deposed and a caretaker administration under Muhammad Yunus took charge. The shake-up was meant to usher in political reforms, democratise the polity, and herald a "new republic" under an amended Constitution. But the picture from Dhaka is of a nation adrift. The political consensus that enabled the appointment of the interim government has frayed with Yunus, the chief advisor and head of the caretaker administration, at odds with the major political parties and the army.

Yunus wants political reforms first, whereas parties such as BNP and the army are restive about the lack of a firm time-frame for the election. Army chief Waker-Uz-Zaman has repeatedly said crucial decisions impinging on national security should be left to an elected government. Both BNP and the army want polls by December and a new government by February next. Besides, Draconian restriction of the freedoms of government employees are hardly the reforms the people called for.

Beneath the political divide, some issues threaten to force a realignment of Dhaka's relations with its neighbours. A plan reportedly mooted by the country's National Security Adviser, Khalidur Rahman, a civilian appointee of Yunus backed by the US and UK, to have a "corridor" to engage with the Rohingya population in the Arakan province of Myanmar has been staunchly opposed by the army; the latter fears that the move will draw the attention of China, which backs the Tatmadaw in Naypyidaw. Yunus's strategy to cover up his administrative failings has been to exacerbate fears of an Indian hegemony. That a stable, democratic Bangladesh is in India's interest is hardly of concern to Yunus. His attempt to pivot Dhaka away from New Delhi and into the orbit of Islamabad and Beijing can only hurt Bangladesh's economic and political stability.

New legal architecture for nuclear power sector

Comprehensive legislative changes can facilitate investment in the sector and create a broader pool of developers and operators and accelerate industrialisation

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's new emphasis on nuclear power is in line with renewed global interest in this clean and stable source of electricity, which also supports India's quest for energy sovereignty, independence and security. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), demand for electricity is growing at twice the rate of other forms of energy — and six times faster in the developing world — due to urbanisation, prosperity, transportation, air conditioning and the exponential growth in demand from data centres. Globally, nuclear power contributes to 9% of power generated, second behind hydro-power as a source of non-fossil fuel.

According to IEA, 63 reactors with a capacity of 70 GW are under construction — 25 are of Chinese design and 23 of Russian design. After decades of standstill, countries like France and the US are resuming capacity addition.

There is new excitement on the prospects of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). SMRs have many advantages — shorter construction time, lower risk of cost and time overruns, better grid stability, manageable project costs, a payback period of 10-15 years, which is half that of large nuclear reactors, and amenability to project financing and refinancing. The US

and China lead SMR development, with technology expected to mature by early 2030s.

India is an early starter with high competence in all aspects of nuclear energy. However, growth, driven by indigenous technology and public monopoly, is sluggish. Nuclear power accounts for only 3% of electricity generated in India. The target set in 2007 for 63,000 MWe by 2032 has been replaced by the target of 100,000 MWe by 2047. That goal is unattainable in the current institutional and regulatory environment. The NSG exemption in 2008 and bilateral agreements opened access to international uranium sources, but progress on international nuclear technology and reactors to supplement domestic ones have been hampered by regulatory issues, especially the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act (CLNDA) 2010, which has also led domestic suppliers to seek indemnities from the operator, NPCIL.

The government's intention to amend the Atomic Energy Act 1962 (AEA) and the CLNDA are timely and welcome. Comprehensive and unambiguous legislative changes can open up additional sources of investment in a highly capital-intensive sector, create a broader pool of developers and operators and accelerate industrialisation. Foreign participation can go beyond equipment supplies. The distributed market structure and wider ownership associated with SMRs, in particular, require legal and regulatory changes.

India's nuclear liability regime diverges significantly from international norms, particularly the Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage (CSC). The CLNDA, a well-meaning law intended to protect victims, has ended up discouraging supplier engagement. Neither the CLNDA rules, whose provisions on capping liability could be struck down as excessive delegation, nor the clarifications and assurances offered by the government through FAQs, which are not legally binding, have assured foreign or domestic suppliers. A comprehensive amendment, rather than piecemeal fixes, is required.

The amendment could either delete Section 17(b) to remove fault-based supplier liability, in line with CSC, or incorporate the relevant provisions of the CLNDA rules and FAQs to provide statutory caps on liability and claims periods. In addition, Section 46 would have to be amended to clearly bar all civil liability claims outside the CLNDA framework, while preserving the application of criminal liability. Amendments to Sections 5 and 9 would clarify that claims may only be made in accordance with the CLNDA. The clarification in FAQ that the primary reactor vendor or technology provider would be deemed to be the supplier needs to be incorporated.

Complex decisions will be required to determine activities to be opened to the private sector in nuclear power as well as the level of private ownership and foreign shareholding, if any. The simplest proposition is for NPCIL or a government company to build, operate and control plants funded by the private sector; or, outsource the construction of reactors and power plants to the private sector, with status quo



Akshay Jaitly



Jawed Ashraf



At the initial stages at least, the government will have to retain full control of the complete nuclear fuel cycle.

SHUTTERSTOCK

in every other aspect. However, the latter should be permitted to invest in, own and operate nuclear power plants, including reactors and power plants, under a strict licensing regime that addresses national security, proliferation and safety concerns, oversight needs and international obligations. Indian companies could be allowed full ownership and foreign ones up to 49%. For both large and SMR reactors, we would need standardisation, industrialisation and economies of scale.

At the initial stages at least, the government will have to retain full control of the complete nuclear fuel cycle. Globally, too, there are few actors involved in this process. There would, thus, be a separation between ownership and management of nuclear power plants, on the one hand, and of the fuel cycle on the other. Nuclear power generators would be treated on par with other power companies with administrative supervision by the ministry of power, while control of the nuclear fuel cycle would rest with the department of atomic energy.

This framework would entail amending Section 3 of the AEA to redefine atomic energy activities as universally licensable, allowing private companies to participate under central government oversight; amending Section 14 to allow up to 100% private ownership, including by companies with foreign investment, subject to

security clearance; reforming Section 20 to permit intellectual property ownership for civilian nuclear research and development. Indian and other startups developing SMRs, for instance, should be allowed to retain and commercialise their technology; and, reforming Section 22 to place the regulation of electricity tariffs and trading under the Electricity Regulatory Commissions governed by the Electricity Act, 2003. Further, permitting foreign investment would require amendments to FEMA and FDI policy and rules. Private sector entry and large-scale deployment of SMRs would need a more independent and empowered AERB. Assured availability of human resources, finance, and fuel will be essential for growth.

India's private sector and startup community can meet the stringent requirements of the nuclear power sector through research, innovation, advanced engineering, investments and responsible and safe project management. Comprehensive and clear reforms will unlock foreign capital and participation. Nuclear power will have to be an integral component of an energy strategy needed to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat while ensuring clean energy transition and energy access and equity for all.

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How to ease the migration pressure on India's cities

For some years now, Goa has been reeling under an influx of settlers who found Indian metros unlivable and now work in the gig economy or are retired. While this trend picked up post-2020, the trickle intensified into a flood after the pandemic, leading to a surge in the cost of living for locals including housing costs and other social and economic repercussions that are still being dealt with.

A similar reverse migration to Uttarakhand and, to a smaller extent, Himachal Pradesh was seen in the last decade, with the former seeing a bigger influx as land ownership rules there are more flexible than the latter. While these states are learning to live with this influx, the factors driving people out from cities remain unchanged: Despite the Smart Cities Mission, many of the metros and larger cities are reaching their breaking point.

Given that there are no quick-fix solutions to reducing the load on cities and ensuring that the steady trickle of exodus doesn't turn into a flood, it might be a good idea for the government to actively look at ways to stem the migration of rural youth to cities in search of livelihood and employment.

On my trips to Kumaon, I have come across at least three initiatives on reducing migration from the hills to the cities. Since 2009, B2R, a rural BPO in Uttarakhand started by BHS-Pisani alumni, has led to remarkable changes in the social fabric of the region, with women employees marrying later and even choosing partners in societies that have traditionally frowned upon such progress. Although the journey has been far from smooth, with many ups and downs over the last 16 years, B2R now employs 600 locals at its five centres in the state, most of whom would have been leading wretched lives as migrants and urban poor in India's metros. While their pay packages may be a fraction of what their metro counterparts might earn, their standard of living is higher, with cleaner air and cooler temperatures a natural perk.

Another enterprise, Udhyan (set up in 2007), is helping curb migration by identifying new businesses and providing seed capital, working capital loans, and mentorship to the local youth who then set up the businesses they feel passionate about. Starting with a small cohort of 20-25, the enterprise has touched the lives of over 400 entrepreneurs over the last few years, with more than 200 of them active at any given point. The enterprise was set up to counter a few worrying trends: The number of educated but

unemployed youth in the hills was rising, agriculture if practised was mostly for subsistence, and even as many were returning from the plains disillusioned, there were no industries or companies that could hire them. What then does a young, educated person do? Many were sitting idle and unhappy, leading to increased crime rates in the region.

An exemplary model in the Almora region is that of SOS Organics, a tiny natural cosmetics and health foods enterprise started by two former IITs who followed with its 25 female employees (only four are men), the primary breadwinners with minimal disruption to their traditional roles. Work shifts are six-and-a-half hours a day with an hour for lunch. All employees are paid well above the average wage in the region, with a starting salary of ₹9,000, and workers and their family members are fully medically insured. The space created by the founders is a blend of modern and traditional beauty but also for how little it demands from its surroundings in terms of resources. Rainwater is harvested, solar power generated, keeping the space off the public grid as far as possible. Almost all materials used in the workshop are locally sourced, eliminating even the pollution caused by trucks ferrying inputs.

At a more countrywide and macro-scale, there are at least two big operators — Desi Crew, RuralShores and Merit Inc., all of whom are providing local employment and reducing migration.

While DesiCrew has a total of 1,480 employees and works with native language speakers from 15 states, Merit Inc., with 4,000 employees, is doing cutting edge IT using AI from remote locations for several Silicon Valley firms by employing a primarily female workforce — no mean accomplishment for a country with low female labour force participation rates.

So, the question to ask now is what precisely policymakers can do to support and help scale up such initiatives. Two low-hanging fruits stare policy makers in the face.

One is to outsource some of the poorly run government services to such rural companies, just the way passport issuance services were outsourced to TCS, resulting in a three-way win for the authorities, the citizens and the vendor. Two, provide incentives to encourage Indian corporates to outsource some of their back-end work to such outfits, thereby reducing costs and enhancing efficiency.

Perhaps a task force or committee (the government's expertise) to look more keenly into this sector and come up with a more comprehensive policy to encourage demand. The idea — a National Policy for Rural BPOs — has been put up by past governments but is yet to see the light of day.

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[WANG YI] FOREIGN MINISTER, CHINA

China will undertake 100 infrastructure and environmental projects across the Pacific over the next three years, recognising these nations' vulnerability to climate change

At the Pacific Islands summit in Xiamen



Free speech, democracy & an epidemic of hurt feelings

Muktahimani mukto bhabdha bhabdha-bharmayugi
Khanditeh satyayanyu math sa
(Freedom is the function of feeling free; the bondage of feeling bound.)

It's rightly proclaimed that you are the product of what you think. *Ashvakra Gita*, one of the founding texts of Indian philosophy, underscores the importance of freedom in these lines. Freedom manifests itself only when the subject believes in her ability to be free. Unfortunately, many recent events have negated this foundational idea of human endeavour. Ashoka University professor Al Khan Mahmudabad was arrested for a social media post expressing his thoughts on the duplicitous attitudes surrounding the Operation Sindoor debate. The oral observations of the Supreme Court, while granting him bail, suggested that he indulged in "politics" through this post, which contained some words that "have double meaning". It appears a little incongruent that an author is accused of indulging in politics when governments, past and present, have repeatedly proclaimed that just indulging in politics but even critiquing and questioning the government is a sign of India's healthy democracy.

How has politics suddenly become anathema? Politics, or the relationship between the governing and the governed, is the central point of Indian philosophy — classical to modern. In the realm of metaphysics, it is the negotiation between the nature of truth and those seeking it, of which the *Ashvakra Gita* is an example. Politics exists in spiritual and mystical spaces as a dialogue between beliefs and believers. The *Bhagavad Gita* exemplifies this. In the physical space of the ordinariness of life, there is resplendent interlucation of pragmatism and populism.

Politics permeates every aspect of the living and the dead. Politics is the oxygen of academic life, irrespective of the discipline. It is a fallacy, a dangerous one at that, that the social sciences indulge in politics. From Aryabhata's exposition of the relativity of motion, which deals with perspective and illusion, to Albert Einstein's dilemma about the destructive potential of science, even the purest apolitical sciences are firmly ensconced in the political frame-

work. The process of seeking and disseminating knowledge is dependent on the intersections of similar and contradictory ideas. An academic operates within and creates a space where multivalent thoughts find expression. The Socratic dialogues of Greece and the shastric tradition of classical Indian pedagogy inform us about the necessity of a thought space where ideas are shared, discussed, and accepted or rejected. Therefore, if an academic will not indulge in politics, a stirring of the spirit of enquiry, who else will? But this is not about Mahmudabad or any one individual. The shutting of spaces that hold a carnival of ideas precedes a crisis of knowledge and progress. The smothering of the flame of questioning can only herald dark times ahead. In societies where freedom of thought and expression comes with caveats, intellectual growth stunts.

Those who take pride in our philosophical roots based on *samvaddham, samvaddham* (coming together for a harmonious exchange of views) ought to feel uncomfortable with the rise in coercive action to these spaces. The legal and aspects of the limits to freedom of speech aside, shouldn't there be a paradigm shift in assessing what speech is harmful enough to be gagged? If politics is dangerous per se, whether democracy? The government expects the youth to be part of India's growth story but is wary of exposing them to definitions of politics that differ from its own. What greatness has evolved in echo chambers? We can only raise prejudiced minds there. Insecure, easily hurt minds that has, as yet, posed no real danger to public order or instigated violence is akin to punishing a thought crime in George Orwell's 1984.

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Direct impact

Foreign investment dynamics must be studied carefully

Foreign direct investment (FDI) numbers for 2024-25 have attracted significant public and policy attention. While at gross level India attracted \$81 billion during the year, at net level it translated into only \$0.35 billion, the lowest in the past two decades. The low level of net FDI was driven by significantly higher repatriation and disinvestment by foreign firms, along with increased outbound investment by Indian corporations. Last financial year, foreign firms repatriated over \$51 billion. Meanwhile, outward investment by Indian corporations increased about 75 per cent compared to the previous year to \$29.2 billion. As a consequence, at net level, very little was left.

In the normal course, repatriation by foreign multinationals and overseas investment by Indian corporations should not be cause for concern for a large and open economy like India. Some foreign firms would repatriate profits for company-specific reasons, while growing Indian corporations would seek opportunities abroad. However, what is attracting attention and has raised concern is the scale of the outflow. Even in 2023-24, with gross FDI of over \$71 billion, India was left with only about \$10 billion at net level. And while repatriation by foreign firms is witnessing a rising trend, outbound FDI substantially increased last year. The latest monthly review of the finance ministry has taken note of the development and said: "...Indian overseas direct investment increased by nearly \$12.5 billion during the year FY25, even as uncertainty reigned in the world, warrants attention, especially given their cautious attitude towards domestic investment."

The developments are definitely worth probing. In this regard, policymakers can address the issue differently for foreign and Indian firms. Foreign firms came to India primarily to meet the demand in the Indian economy. Since India remains the fastest-growing large economy in the world, and is reported to have become the fourth-largest economy, why are foreign firms not investing their surplus here in India? It is unlikely that the substantial increase in repatriation is intended only to return the money to shareholders. Some companies are possibly offloading shares in Indian markets because of attractive valuations. But this doesn't explain the entire repatriation and disinvestment story. A deeper probe and analysis are needed. Are they moving out because of the business environment or demand conditions?

The action of Indian corporations is more curious. They are reluctant to invest in India but seem to be finding opportunities abroad at a time when the global environment is fairly uncertain. However, notably, the big jump in outbound FDI could be a one-off. Some companies may have found attractive deals at the same time. Outbound FDI between 2018-19 and 2023-24, for example, moved between \$12 billion and \$18 billion, before increasing to about \$29.2 billion in 2024-25. Nonetheless, the issue needs deeper examination. However, this should not lead the government and regulators to create barriers to foreign or domestic firms transferring funds abroad because it would adversely affect the investment climate. The fact that India needs higher investment for sustained higher growth cannot be overemphasised. FDI in this context plays an important role because multinationals also bring technology and best practices along with capital. It is also the best mode to fill the savings-investment gap in the economy because FDI tends to be the most stable form of foreign capital. It is important to understand the dynamics of such investment and address policy gaps, if any.

Positive outlook

Select sectors have done well

The results of more than 2,000 listed companies in the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2024-25 indicate improvement in revenue and profit growth. Revenues were up 7.6 per cent year-on-year (Y-o-Y) compared to Q4FY24. Reported profit after tax (PAT) was up 12.7 per cent Y-o-Y and 15.7 per cent quarter-on-quarter (Q-o-Q), while PAT adjusted for one-offs was up 9 per cent Y-o-Y and 13 per cent Q-o-Q. Although the growth rate was not high, this pattern — where PAT growth was higher Q-o-Q than Y-o-Y — can signal a change in the business cycle. Once the volatile petroleum and banking & finance, which recorded moderate performances, are excluded, growth in revenues for other sectors aggregated 9.5 per cent Y-o-Y (7.1 per cent Q-o-Q) with operating profits increasing 18 per cent Y-o-Y and reported PAT 21.4 per cent Y-o-Y. After adjustment, PAT was up 15.4 per cent Y-o-Y and up 17.6 per cent Q-o-Q. Taxes paid rose 13.9 per cent Y-o-Y and Q-o-Q.

The oil sector was impacted by lower prices of crude oil and gas, with revenues increasing 0.9 per cent Y-o-Y, while operating profits grew just 1.5 per cent Y-o-Y and PAT was down 2 per cent. However, Q-o-Q PAT grew 19 per cent, which is a sign that refiners profited from better refining margins and a drop in crude oil/gas prices in Q4FY25. Banks saw an 8.8 per cent Y-o-Y rise in income, and after absorbing a whopping 28 per cent increase in taxes, they reported 3.3 per cent PAT growth Y-o-Y. The positive impact of a falling interest-rate regime is not fully apparent yet. Auto ancillaries, capital goods, logistics, and pharmaceuticals crossed the 10 per cent Y-o-Y mark in revenue growth. Infrastructure and cement, which are closely related since the latter's offtake depends on the former's activity, saw a Q-o-Q revenue jump of over 15 per cent, and both recorded respectable high single-digit Y-o-Y growth.

Profit expansion was significant in capital goods (up 11 per cent Y-o-Y after one-offs, and up 22 per cent Q-o-Q) and adjusted PAT was up by a huge 95 per cent Y-o-Y in infrastructure and 32 per cent in logistics. Two core sectors are also worth mentioning along with cement and infrastructure. Power saw 7 per cent growth in revenues and 19.7 per cent growth in adjusted profits. The pharmaceutical and information-technology (IT) sectors are flagships of India's trade. Pharmaceutical revenues were up 13 per cent Y-o-Y with PAT adjusted for one-offs up by 61 per cent. The concerns here are mostly related to the tariff war. IT saw 8.5 per cent revenue gains, and PAT gains of just 4.6 per cent. Margin compression is a big concern because the industry transitions to a future where artificial intelligence, visa concerns, and changing business paradigms loom large.

The fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry saw just 7.7 per cent Y-o-Y revenue growth and 5 per cent growth in adjusted PAT. Again there was margin compression — partly due to intense competition and partly due to high raw material costs. The automobile industry saw marginal profit growth if Tata Motors, which has very volatile results due to JLR, was excluded. Including JLR results would lead to a 24 per cent Y-o-Y fall in PAT. Two-wheelers did much better than four-wheelers. Taking a broad view, the Q-o-Q acceleration could mean the business cycle is shifting into higher gear. Results in areas like FMCG and automobiles indicated that consumption was not very strong. On the global front, obvious concerns remain. Nevertheless there are signs of hope.

Reading between the tax lines

World Bank report suggests India's tax gap is smaller than its peers — but inter-country comparisons can be misleading



Fiscal policy discussions in India have consistently emphasised the need to raise the country's tax-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio. The analysis in this context follows two distinct lines of reasoning. Given the articulated need for an expanded role of the government in a developing country like India, a higher tax-to-GDP ratio is argued to be desirable. Policy prescriptions here focus on identifying new sources of revenue and reducing or eliminating exemptions and concessions. The other line of argument focuses on measuring the "tax gap" — the difference between potential revenues and actual collections. Policy options in this approach include improving tax administration, as the gap could be attributed to evasion and avoidance. In recent studies, potential revenues are estimated using a stochastic frontier approach with cross-country data.

Many of the studies in the latter approach combine data from all types of countries to obtain an estimate of potential revenue. Clearly, this potential revenue is based on a comparison of the performance of different countries. The World Bank recently released a report titled "The South Asia Development Update, April 2025", which adopts a somewhat different approach and arrives at different conclusions. To understand what we can take away from this report, the results are summarised below.

The study focuses on emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs) and examines the performance of four major categories of taxes — corporate and personal income taxes in direct taxes, and consumption and trade taxes in indirect taxes. For each of these categories, India's tax gap is

benchmarked against the average performance of EMDEs. The results of the analysis suggest that in aggregate, the tax gap for India is smaller than the average for EMDEs.

This overall result follows from the following: For personal income tax and consumption taxes, the tax gap for India is considerably lower than the EMDE average, and less than 0.25 per cent of GDP.

On the other hand, the performance on the corporate income tax and trade tax front is not as good. The tax gap for corporate income tax is above the EMDE average and is estimated to be above 1 per cent of GDP. For trade taxes, India's performance in tax gap is similar to the EMDE average, at 0.20 per cent of GDP.

These results are both interesting and challenging. They are interesting for the country because the narrative changes from one of a significantly inefficient tax collection system to a system that is similar to, or even better than, that of other EMDEs in some tax categories.

On the face of it, this is reassuring. To understand why the results are challenging, we consider the results for some of these categories of taxes.

For corporate income tax, the study uses market capitalisation and corporate tax rates. The average price-to-earnings (P/E) ratio for India over the past five years ranges from 21.59 to 23.89. In contrast, the average for EMDEs lies between 12.23 and 15.27 (<https://worldperatio.com>). A higher P/E ratio suggests lower incomes for a given level of market capitalisation. It is, therefore, to be expected that using market capitalisation to assess corporate income tax performance can over-estimate the potential and,

consequently, over-estimate the tax gap. Further, the methodology uses tax rates. For corporate taxes in India, given that we have two regimes in place — one with fewer exemptions and lower rates, and another with more exemptions and higher rates — it is not clear which rate should be used, or what the implications of changing the reference rate would be.

For personal income tax, the base considered is labour income. However, if one analyses the composition of non-corporate incomes reported for purposes of income tax, as reflected in the direct taxes data, wages and salaries only account for 51 per cent of total income in 2023-24. The rest comprises non-corporate business income, income from house property, and income from capital gains.

It is possible that the base for non-corporate income tax is underestimated, and hence the potential too is under-estimated in the context of the personal income tax regime. Another factor to consider is the exemption threshold. It is widely accepted that too few people/entities pay non-corporate income tax, since the regime has high exemption thresholds. It would, therefore, be expected that compared to countries with lower thresholds, India's tax gap should be higher. The results, therefore, appear somewhat counter-intuitive.

Turning to trade taxes, the analysis uses the value of imports and the tax rates. The data for this category is more consistent across countries and hence provides a better benchmark for performance. Clearly, the tax gap in this case can be attributed to a range of exemptions and concessions provided within the Customs duty structures.

It should be noted that since many countries are part of free-trade agreements (FTAs) and provide some concessions or exemptions for specific purposes — as well as set-offs against exports — the analysis should be interpreted as indicating the extent to which India differs from other EMDEs. India appears to have more exemptions and concessions than the average EMDE, which in turn implies a higher tax gap than the average EMDE.

What is the primary takeaway from this discussion? Inter-country comparisons of revenue performance should be read and interpreted cautiously. Significant differences in the tax structures, as well as in the structure of the economy, can provide misleading results. For corporate income tax and non-corporate income tax, the underlying incomes are difficult to isolate from broad macro aggregates as discussed earlier. Any proxy used could behave differently across countries.

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Agriculture's road to 2047

At the 10th Governing Council meeting of NTPI Aayog, Prime Minister Narendra Modi re-emphasised the need to make India a developed nation by 2047, coinciding with the centenary of Independence. The agriculture sector holds vast potential to emerge as a driving force in achieving this goal through innovation, economic strength, and environmental sustainability.

In the past, Indian agriculture witnessed a remarkable transformation from a food-insecure to a food-surplus nation, becoming a global success story. There has been a giant leap in food grain production — from a very low level of 50.82 million tonnes in 1947 to an all-time high of 331.96 million tonnes in 2024-25. India used to be a deficit country in most food commodities at the time of independence, but has now emerged as one of the leaders in agricultural exports, reaching 4.08 trillion in 2023-24. Indian agriculture has proved wrong all global projections of famine and starvation, which had predicted massive food shortages to meet the needs of its growing population.

The role of agriculture — especially agricultural research, education, and extension — will be pivotal in achieving our goal of becoming a developed nation. Agriculture, however, faces many challenges, including declining holding size, climate change, resource depletion, changing consumer demands, and growing global competition. At the same time, there are enormous opportunities arising from advancements in biotechnology, precision farming, digital agriculture, and sustainable practices. It is crucial to overcome these challenges and seize the opportunities to become a global leader in agriculture. In this context, the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences, a think-tank of more than 800 agronomists from India and abroad, has published "Indian Agriculture by 2047: A Roadmap for Research, Education and Extension". The suggested focus areas include delivering next-generation solutions, developing

visionary leaders, and ensuring profitable and sustainable farming.

Research for resilience and prosperity: India's agri-research priorities should focus on genomics and biotechnology, climate-resilient agriculture, precision and digital agriculture, and sustainable resource management. Research priorities should also include agricultural diversification to harness the potential of the horticulture, animal, and the fisheries sectors. Need-based farm mechanisation, agro-processing, and reduction of post-harvest losses should be key focus areas. In addition, agri-research must support policy reforms, modernisation of infrastructure, and improved market access.

Scientists should use new tools for research, such as CRISPR (to modify the DNA of living organisms) gene editing, remote sensing and geographic information systems, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, big data analytics, phenotyping platforms, smart sensors & IoT devices, and automated field robots. They will require higher funding, strong interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration, and greater private sector partnership.

Shaping new leaders: Agricultural education should move beyond conventional frameworks to embrace a holistic and futuristic vision. Courses should be updated to include topics such as AI in agriculture, agri-entrepreneurship, climate-smart farming, nature-friendly farming, agribusiness management, and agricultural export strategies. Students should engage in experiential learning, internships with industry, village adoption programmes, hackathons, and startup incubation. Agri-incubators should be developed to nurture student-led startups. Agricultural universities should ensure world-class education through partnerships with global universities and research networks to keep up with the latest trends and technologies. Agricultural education should also focus on enhancing faculty skills to address emerging challenges and opportunities.

Disseminating improved technologies: The agricultural extension system needs drastic strengthening and modernisation. Extension services should harness mobile apps, farmer helplines, online advisory platforms, WhatsApp groups, and YouTube tutorials for effective knowledge and technology delivery. Modernising Krishi Vigyan Kendras is necessary by integrating them with advanced agritech and data-driven advisory services. Strengthening them as hubs for innovation and skill development will enhance agricultural productivity and sustainability. Farmer-producer organisations should be nurtured as marketing collectives and hubs for knowledge dissemination. Public-private partnership models, non-governmental organisation involvement, and collaboration with rural startups can help create a vibrant extension system. Successful models such as e-Choupal, Mahindra Samridhi Centres, and Digital Green have been scaled up through widespread dissemination.

Investment in agricultural R&D: India can unlock its vast agricultural potential by strategically investing in agricultural research & development (R&D). Currently, agricultural R&D in India is under-invested, with spending significantly lower than international benchmarks. India spends roughly 0.65 per cent of its gross domestic product on research and extension. At least 1 per cent of India's gross domestic product should be allocated to agricultural R&D to make agriculture technology-intensive, globally competitive, and environmentally sustainable.

A developed India will be one where every farmer has access to the best of science and technology, rural youth aspire to become agri-entrepreneurs, innovation flourishes in village clusters, and agriculture becomes a proud, profitable, and prestigious profession. Through collective will, visionary leadership, and strategic action, agriculture has the potential to make India a developed nation by 2047.

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Decoding Xi Jinping Thought



GUNJAN SINGH

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) there have been efforts by every leader to leave an indelible mark on the history of the party, Chinese politics and society. Since Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, no one has come close to achieving this feat — but Xi Jinping is definitely serious about being the next one to do so.

The primary goal of Xi Jinping Thought is to make China great again and is driven by the agenda that the

ultimate goal is "...to create 'one state, one people, one ideology, one party, and one leader'". The book argues that "Xi Jinping's 'Thought' to guide the Party in steering the country". Thus, for anyone wishing to understand China, a deeper and nuanced study of the Xi Jinping Thought is essential.

Xi introduced the "Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era" at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, which was added to the CCP's Constitution. With the abolition of the term limit on the presidency and no successor in sight, Xi is poised to rule for life with no major challenges to his "idea of China".

With Xi Thought, the president is attempting to mould Chinese society and politics. The agenda, however, is clear to him and him only. And because this agenda has strong global implications there is an urgent need to decode his thinking. This is the task

Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung attempt in *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*. The authors contextualise Xi Jinping Thought, its shortcomings and strengths and where it may be directed. Given the unprecedented changes underway in China, the book could not have been written at a more opportune time.

What Xi has achieved primarily is "pushed through structural and ideological changes to strengthen the Party's leadership over the state" and move towards a more Leninist party structure. In China, however, the Party was always more powerful than the state; Xi is merely intensifying this power paradigm. The sanctity of ideology is critical for him as he reiterates that "the Party is a communist party not only in name but also in reality", marking a clear shift from Deng Xiaoping's justifications for economic reform and liberalisation.

There is also an attempt to sanctify

and rebuild the historical narrative. Xi has consistently underscored his love of Chinese history. Thus, the push to make China great again is a nostalgic and nationalistic notion rooted in Xi's "Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation". He has strategically weaponised the idea of history by introducing the concept of "historical nihilism", which makes it almost blasphemy for anyone to contradict and challenge the idea of history promoted by the Party.

Xi Thought also focuses on the Chinese people and their role is defined under the concept of "arming the brain". This basically implies that, "loving the Party and the nation are the same thing, and something that any hot-blooded Chinese patriot must do". He also asserts

that scientists need to be patriots first and scientists second. To push the Party narrative and suppress dissent, there has been an intensification of high-tech mass surveillance of the Chinese people. Under Xi, the Party demands from its citizens an active defence of the regime's security and an acceptance of more intrusive party control over their lives. He is also grooming the education system to strengthen the "bond between the students and the party-state". The authors argue that Xi has modified the social contract and it applies to when the Chinese citizens have been educated to become "patriotic Chinese". Thus, loyalty to the party is non-negotiable.

That is why he sees economic growth as crucial because "he cannot afford to let the economy perform too poorly lest the people turn against the Party". Even

the long-lasting anti-corruption drive was rooted in mitigating anti-party sentiments seeping into society and the party. Xi deeply believes the party and he are almost intertwined, one cannot respect one and ignore the other. The authors conclude that "for all intents and purposes [Xi Jinping Thought] is already being treated as a proto-ideology and gives a broad-brush but clear outline of where Xi aims to take China until 2050 or at least while he stays in power".

The authors have successfully painted a picture of what China looks like under Xi and how it is different from earlier regimes. A nuanced reading also helps one understand the insecurities and challenges that Xi faces and how these weaknesses may impact him. But one cannot ignore the idea that Xi Thought is situated in Xi himself and he is the core of this narrative. Under Xi Thought, China can follow only one way: "the Xi way".

The reviewer is associate professor, OP Jindal Global University

Editor's
TAKE

Int'l student's American dream on the hold

The Trump administration abruptly freezes new visa interviews for international students, disrupting their academic plans

In a move sending ripples through global academic circles, the Trump administration has ordered a temporary suspension on new visa appointments for international students and exchange visitors. The decision — spearheaded by Secretary of State Marco Rubio — comes as part of a broader plan to expand social media vetting of all F, M, and J visa applicants. While US officials describe the measure as "temporary," its ramifications may be far-reaching, affecting students, US universities, and America's position as a global education hub. The State Department has directed US embassies worldwide to halt scheduling new visa interviews for student and exchange visitor visas, including the commonly used F-1 (degree programs), J-1 (exchange programs), and M-1 (vocational training). No timeline has been given for when new interviews will resume. The department cites a planned overhaul of screening and vetting processes, with expanded scrutiny of applicants' social media as a central feature. The immediate impact is on students hoping to begin their studies in the US in Fall 2025. With the visa process already requiring weeks to months, this halt could mean delayed or cancelled plans for thousands of students who have already secured admission but not yet completed their visa interviews.

In the 2023-2024 academic year, over 1.13 million international students enrolled in US institutions, a record high. A staggering 71.5 per cent came from Asia, with India and China being the top contributors. For many of these students, this sudden freeze introduces uncertainty and potential derailment of life-changing academic and career plans. US universities stand to suffer significant consequences.

Institutions like New York University, Northeastern and Columbia rely heavily on international tuition revenue and research contributions. At Harvard, Yale and Northwestern, international students make up one-fifth of the student body. Harvard, embroiled in recent tensions with the administration, had its approval to enrol new international students revoked just last week. Losing international students would impact not only financial bottom lines but also the diversity, innovation, and global reputation of these institutions.

Research labs, graduate programs, and cultural exchange efforts could all take a hit. While the official reason for the pause is national security and vetting improvements, but it may well be politically charged. The move comes amid escalating tensions between the administration and university campuses over pro-Palestinian protests and free speech issues. Though the administration maintains its focus is on safety and screening, incidents like this suggest a blurred line between legitimate security concerns and political repression.

The feasibility of this suspension rests on a complex balance. On one hand, enhancing vetting processes may be viewed as a legitimate national interest. However, the broad and undefined nature of this pause risks undermining the US's standing as a destination of choice for global talent. For now, students, universities, and global academic partners are left in limbo.

PIC TALK



Dean Faculty of Veterinary Sciences at Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology (SKUAST) Puzos Ahmad Shah with India's first gene-edited sheep, in Srinagar. PTI

China's modern warfare without war

Despite boasting formidable military capabilities and engaging in loud sabre-rattling, China consistently avoids direct military entanglements, choosing instead a path of deception, diplomacy and economic entrapment

Chinese philosopher, Sun Tzu (author of Art of War) has influenced the thinking and policies of the Chinese leadership, for eons. Amongst his most potent and famous treatise is on the military doctrine of asymmetrical warfare, which is increasingly relevant in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world of constant churn and dissonance.

One key feature of expansionist China's strategy has been to follow Sun Tzu's very cost-efficient dictum of "subduing the enemy without fighting". Much has been made of China's militaristic prowess, aggressive postures, 6th Generation technology and weaponry. "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy et al, but a quick scan of all recent global conflicts and wars will show the stark absence of Chinese boots-on-ground, despite much noise of China's positions on the conflict.

As seen, when the US-NATO abandoned Afghanistan, in the Israel-Gaza war, Russia-Ukraine war, or even very recently in the four-day Indo-Pak conflict, the much-banded intervention by Pakistan's "iron-clad brother" i.e. China, was limited to adopting a pro-Pakistan position, diplomatically only.

In India, specifically, imagined scenarios like the "two-front war" led to much discussion and strategising to ensure deterrence and dissuasion of a simultaneous conflict along the China-Pakistan border. The sense of acute vulnerability was heightened by the reality of the already-stretched, resource-constrained, and over-deployed Indian where-withal, which would test its ability to take on two powers simultaneously (one of which would be China).

Yet again, those fears came to nought as the Chinese reaction to Indian retaliation against China's ally, Pakistan, led to support in terms of words and not boots-on-ground, as feared. Has the Chinese appetite for an all-out conflict waned or does it prefer to hide its time (with some sabre-rattling thrown in) and use other levers to push its agenda?

Despite siding with Putin on the Russia-Ukraine war, it has remained steadfastly out of military presence (unlike other countries like North Korea or NATO countries who have supplied weapons and personnel). Similarly, it hasn't exactly swooped down on the anti-West sensibilities of the Afghan Taliban or attempted to co-opt the same despite the vacuum left by the abandonment of US-NATO troops.

In the violent Middle East theatre too, China seems to please all sides, without



attempting to irate any, leaving no clear picture if it is pro-Israel, pro-Iran, or even pro-Palestine — mealy-mouthed platitudes and generous Chinese doles (economic) to whichever party looks like controlling the ground, are offered. All this has ensured

that China is the favourite fallback option for all illiberal, autocratic, option-less or even paralysed nations when all other doors close.

But, as the United States of America remains busy piling up the body bags and burning precious amount of dollars to pursue prohibitively expensive wars in the Middle East, and Afghanistan, or even supporting the Russia-Ukraine war, the Chinese sit out and instead plough their resources to win over territories through economic, diplomatic and technological influence.

However, the Chinese do not shy away from arm-twisting their commercial imperatives (eg. taking over Hambantota port in Sri Lanka for a 99-year lease), economic and cyber coercion (eg. "Volt Typhoon" attack on critical infrastructure in

Australia) and even cartographical expansionism (eg. making artificial islands in South China seas) — but do so, without provoking full-on conventional warfare.

Right throughout Sun Tzu's pearls of wisdom seem apparent in Chinese tactics. "All warfare is based on deception. Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity. When near, make it appear that you are far away; when far away, that you are to lure him; feign disorder and strike him. When he concentrates, prepare against him; where he is strong, avoid him. Anger his general and confuse him. Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance."

Chinese have become masters at playing geopolitical mind games which may suggest a lot, but lead to rather muted material action, ultimately. Therefore, while China shows intent (typically to adopt an anti-US position to attract traction towards itself) to take a daring position, it stays away from militaristic intervention and indulges in sabre-rattling, at best.

The four-day Indo-Pak conflict may have resulted in China (along with Turkey and Azerbaijan) adopting a decidedly pro-China stance — but the support of the "iron-clad brother" did not extend to it intervening militarily or even adopting an aggressive posture along its border with India,

which would have led to discomforting dynamics for Delhi.

The Chinese seem to choose their militaristic target rather selectively as they shadow-box with the Philippines on the high seas, invoke "Salami tactics" to creep onto Bhutanese territory, or even conduct reckless exercises in proximity to Taiwan — but remain cautious in not overstepping their belligerence.

China understands that intervening militarily could disrupt its trade, commercial and economic stability which is already under stress with the ensuing US-China trade war, domestic weakening of demand, unemployment, and demographic decline. Therefore ensnaring vulnerable countries with "debt traps" will remain its most potent weapon to fructify its expansionist and hegemonic dreams.

Another aggressive and alternative means is via technological-cybersecurity where-withal using companies like Huawei that have raised many suspicions, globally. China is expected to pursue its calculated "shoot-and-scoot" approach at best but perhaps not beyond that. As Sun Tzu also said, "The greatest victory is that which requires no battle."

(The writer is Li Guo (Rishi) and former IAS Governor of Andaman and Nicobar Islands & Puducherry. Views are personal)

A common man's journey to God and self-mastery

SECOND Opinion

This is a normal feeling for a common man. One starts with great hopes: "I am different; I am very intelligent," which has nothing to do with intelligence as such. "I will show the world that I am superior." The *ahankar* (ego) starts to become prominent very early in one's life. Nothing much happens as life meanders. Middle age arrives, and the realisation that what was hoped for has not materialised sets in.

This affects physical health and one starts to age, with wrinkles and lines becoming more pronounced, and, yes, hair starting to grey. Mental health suffers too, with some requiring medical help. Old age starts to show its harmful effects with loss of memory, unless one is mentally active, not glued mindlessly to television. If changes are not made, the realisation comes that one has lost. The precious human life has been squandered. But we don't have to lose. I am one of those determined characters who refuses to quit. Nor will I let my close ones live an ordinary life. What did I do? I gradually underwent a complete transformation. I got used to very simple, bland foods, which had high nutritional values. It doesn't take long.

In my case, it was three months or so. Simultaneously, I started a regimen of walking and yoga exercises. Physical health started to get better. I began to cut out entertainment, which had lots of excitement and,

yes, harmful content. Slowly, I got used to healthy entertainment. And I began to do spiritual practices like chanting, 'darshan', 'naman', praying and thanking God for favours done. The realisation came that God was getting involved in my life. I began to get lots of intuitions by which God was giving me subtle hints. I was receptive and caught on. Solutions to inevitable challenges of life became apparent and life started to become smooth. I was now ready to help my near and dear ones. They were already learning from my behaviour. Don't people learn from what we do, not from what we say? If whatever we say is so good, why don't we practise them ourselves?

This fact misses almost everybody. I can lie all day and tell my children to be truthful. Surely, we get disappointed when children become dishonest. We complain, but who is listening? The question is: why don't more people do what I did? There are many excuses. "I am not sure it works" is one. It won't work unless we implement what God has instructed. It is a matter of personal experience. Nothing else will motivate me. Knowledge is great but it has to be applied. Another problem is faulty nature, which all of us suffer from. Our natures are made up of the three 'gunas' (modes), which are goodness, passion and darkness. They are present in various proportions in all of us. (The Bhagavad-Gita 18.40) The more passion we have, it was more difficult to persuade ourselves to

take shelter in God. And if we have lots of darkness, we are well and truly doomed. Lust, greed, hate, etc, will keep on rais-

ing their ugly heads, and we will succumb helplessly. God could have helped because His help is crucial in improving one's nature. But for God to help, one must take His shelter. What I have realised is that not only is my nature becoming better but my impious 'karmas' of past lives are not able to cripple me. God bails me out every time. (18.58) I feel bad for people who are busy earning for their near and dear ones even in advanced age. What happens when bad 'karmaphalas' manifest? Children put their parents in ICUs with little sympathy. This is the way the world is; we don't learn from the example of Valmiki, who changed when Naradaji made him realise the reality. He was asked to go and check with his family members if they would share his punishments on account of the bad deeds he was doing. Valmiki should be a role model for all of us. Then, everything will change. The balance of life will start to get better because God is everything. (7.19) He can help in all aspects of our lives. God begins to reform us, as only He can. God knows what our faults are, and how they are hurting.

In my case, it was done on alternate days with one fault taken up. God made me realise that if I want a superior life, I must get rid of it. And God made the next day blissful to prove it. Then, God guides us so that we don't keep on committing the same mistakes out of habit. God alerts as only He can, through intuitions. Thus we begin to make our present better and future still better. But as we are limited in what we can achieve on our own, God actively helps.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher. Views are personal)

Letters to the Editor

Empowering the farmers with science

Kamini Singh, a former scientist, traded her lab coat for the fields of Uttar Pradesh, empowering over 1,000 farmers with organic moringa farming. What began with a ₹9 lakh loan transformed into a thriving business worth ₹1.75 crore, demonstrating how science and sustainability can uplift lives. Kamini Singh's journey is one that began in the halls of some of India's top research institutions — the Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture (CISH) and the CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (CIMAP). Promotion of Moringa cultivation and developed value-added by products like Moringa powder, oil, handmade soap, Moringa tea, Moringa tablets etc.

CIMAP is steering multidisciplinary, high-quality research in biological and chemical sciences and extending technologies and services to the farmers and entrepreneurs of medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) with its research headquarters at Lucknow and Research Centres at Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pantnagar and Purara. CIMAP Research Centres are aptly situated in different agro-climatic zones of the country to facilitate multi-location field trials and research. A little more than 50 years since its inception, today, CIMAP has extended its wings overseas with scientific collaboration agreements in Malaysia.

JAYNTHI ANANDAMBAL | MUMBAI

SEBI new chief's pitch for transparency

The new SEBI chairman, Tuhin Kanta Pandey, has acknowledged the gaping holes at the helm given the allegations levelled by Hindenburg Research against former SEBI chairman, Madhabi Puri Buch, for indulging in corrupt practices.

Moreover, when MLAs, MPs, and even Judges of High Court and Supreme Court do not shy away from disclosing their assets and liabilities publicly, SEBI also should come out clean. In this respect, the constitution of a high-level committee for managing conflict of interests and disclosure for the regulator's board members is a step in the right direction.

At a time when millions are entering the stock market, the number of demat accounts now exceeds 170 million with account holders all over the country; their faith in the market regulator and the efficient functioning of the market must be fortified. When we consider the market regulator's wide ambit of influence, any line between the market regulator and the regulated entity must be fully disclosed.

The sooner this ambiguity is removed, the better it would be for the financial and economic health of the country. Transparency and clear separation between regulator and regulated are essential to uphold market integrity and protect India's growing base of retail investors.

VIJAY SINGH ADHIKARI | NAINITAL

Monsoon drowns Mumbai

Around 250 mm torrential rains lashed India's "financial capital" and "vibrant city" Mumbai on Monday. The deluge brought sourdough memories of 2005, 2017, and 2020 back. Mumbai is known to reel under heavy rains around July-August.

This time around, the monsoon arrived in advance but there was a clear IMD warning about the same. Visible misery caused to thousands of people due to heavy downpour, overflowing drains and waterlogging was there to see. The important message that emanates from the massive yearly rains is clear: like many major cities of the country, Mumbai is paying the price for massive urbanisation and poor planning.

Due to its geography, rainwater absorption and emptying is extremely vital for the city to secure itself from waterlogging and flooding. Unfortunately, the necessary water accumulation prevention mechanism is still to be effectively put in place. Old drainage systems require an urgent look-in. More often, the old drains are clogged by waste materials. Ineffective drainage systems put a high load on the final outlets that empty into the sea. The basic groundwater absorption system has taken a hit by the concretisation of lands. Removal of encroachments, a move that can address most of the rain problems, is not forthcoming for obvious reasons.

GANPATHE BHAT | AOLA

INDIA'S HISTORIC PUSH FOR INDIGENEOUS 5TH-GEN FIGHTER

Today, India stands witness to a revolutionary shift in its strategic policy. The Defence Minister's decision to manufacture indigenous fifth-generation advanced fighter jets with active private sector participation is not merely a policy, but a historic leap toward India's pride, security, and emergence as a global superpower. This step breaks the shackles of foreign dependency in the defence sector, ushering India into a new era of self-reliance.

For decades, India's reliance on foreign defence equipment led to delays in supply, technical constraints, and political pressures, challenging our military strength. However, with modern technology and indigenous capability playing a decisive role in warfare, this decision is the need of the hour.

Examples like the BrahMos missile, Tejas fighter jet, and indigenous air defence systems prove India's scientific and technical prowess is second to none

globally. This decision transcends the defence sector, attracting investment, creating millions of jobs for the youth, and propelling technological innovation. The surge in related companies' shares post announcement reflects the unwavering confidence of the nation and investors. This is not just a policy but a resolve to establish India as an invincible force on the global stage.

The path of self-reliance defence will not only make India secure but also prosperous and empowered. India's decision to build indigenous fifth-generation fighter jets marks a transformative leap in defence and self-reliance. It ends foreign dependency, boosts national security, drives technological innovation, creates jobs, and inspires global confidence. This visionary step positions India as a rising superpower, determined to shape its own destiny with pride and strength.

DR. JAIN ARJUN | BARWAN

Climate resilience must be at the core of growth

Without embedding climate and disaster resilience into its core development strategy, the nation could face escalating disruptions that threaten not only its economy but also the livelihoods, infrastructure, and future of its people

FIRST Column

India has recently achieved a remarkable milestone by becoming the world's fourth-largest economy, surpassing both Japan and Germany. This achievement highlights the country's strong economic growth, expanding international influence, and increasing economic resilience. As India aspires to become a fully developed nation by 2047, marking the hundredth anniversary of its independence, there is a strong sense of optimism that prevails. Nevertheless, this aspiration is overshadowed by significant challenges, especially those arising from climate change and natural disasters. If India does not incorporate climate and disaster resilience into its fundamental development goals, it may jeopardise the numerous economic gains it has worked so hard to achieve.

The effects of climate change and associated disasters pose serious limitations on development, disrupting business activities, damaging infrastructure, and jeopardising supply chains — concerns that are particularly relevant for developing countries like India. With the rising frequency and severity of climate-related disasters, their impacts are being felt across multiple sustainable development goals, especially those associated with economic growth, trade, transportation, energy, environmental sustainability, and public health. These escalating risks not only slow progress but also reveal how specific development priorities can increase vulnerability to disasters and climate change through emissions, land-use modifications, and exposure to hazards. Consequently, a comprehensive and proactive strategy for climate and disaster resilience is essential.

India's distinct geography — characterised by tropical monsoon systems, a 7,500-kilometer-long coastline, and the seismically active Himalayan region — along with its socio-economic realities, makes it one of the most disaster-prone nations in the world. On average, the country encounters five to six cyclones each year, with two or three usually classified as severe. Unpredictable monsoon patterns lead to recurring floods in major river basins. Over the past two decades, India has faced significant economic losses due to extreme weather events, which have severely undermined development progress. A 2022 report from the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) stated that India experienced economic damage of around \$80 billion between 1999 and 2020 due to floods, cyclones, droughts, and earthquakes — events whose frequency and severity have been worsened in the recent past.

Numerous high-profile disasters highlight the connection between climate — induced events and setbacks in development. The Chennai floods of 2015 impacted over three million individuals, disrupted



more than 20,000 small and medium enterprises and resulted in damages estimated at \$2.25 billion. Likewise, the Kerala floods of 2018 — considered the worst in a century — affected 5.4 million people, damaged over 10,000 km of roads, and caused losses exceeding \$4.3 billion. The tourism sector, contributing 12 per cent to the state's GDP, halted operations, and recovery needs were estimated at \$3.8 billion. In 2020, Cyclone Amphan struck West Bengal and Odisha, resulting in damages estimated at \$13 billion, disrupting infrastructure, agriculture, and livelihoods across both states.

The agriculture industry, which employs almost half of India's workforce, has proven to be particularly susceptible to severe weather. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)'s 2023 report, The Impact of Disasters on Agriculture and Food Security 2023 — Avoiding and Reducing Losses Through Investment in Resilience, approximately 25 per cent of the overall economic losses resulting from disasters are incurred by the agriculture sector. This highlights the sector's considerable susceptibility to natural hazards such as droughts, floods, and storms. The report emphasises the urgent need for investment in resilience to mitigate these impacts. In India, repeated droughts in states like Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Karnataka have resulted in consistent crop failures, worsening rural hardship and leading to significant migration. According to the World Bank's Climate Risk Profile for India (2021), climate-related catastro-

phes could potentially decrease India's GDP by up to 2.8 per cent each year. Information from CREDA's EM-DAT database (2023) shows that flooding constitutes nearly 50 per cent of all disaster-related financial losses in the country. The disruption of livelihoods, mass displacements, collapse of infrastructure, and halts in economic activities further strain public finances and obstruct developmental progress, particularly in regions most vulnerable to climate impacts.

Major urban centres in India, which are essential to the nation's economic development, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather phenomena. Cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, and Kolkata frequently experience flooding, heat waves, storms, and unusually heavy rainfalls. These occurrences damage infrastructure, disrupt transportation systems and interfere with essential services. Megacities like Delhi and Mumbai, which have high population densities and depend heavily on climate-sensitive infrastructures, are particularly at risk.

Recently, Mumbai experienced its wettest May in over a century, with a month's worth of rainfall falling in just 24 hours. This record-breaking rainfall flooded roads, disrupted flights and local trains, and caused parts of the newly constructed Worli underground station on Metro Line-3 to become non-operational. Meanwhile, the National Capital Region (NCR) and Delhi faced severe, off-season rainfall and dust storms that damaged infrastructure, caused power outages, uprooted trees, and halted traffic. In May 2025, unexpected storms followed by heavy rains compromised

public infrastructure, leaving typically dry areas inundated. These events indicate a significant, climate-led transformation in urban weather patterns and highlight the pressing need for resilient infrastructure and urban planning.

The financial burden of disasters is primarily shouldered by state Governments. Relief efforts, emergency medical assistance, and evacuation costs exert pressure on public finances, particularly as revenues from sectors like tourism and agriculture decline. While states that experience fewer disasters can often manage these expenses internally, more vulnerable states typically depend on central assistance or borrow from financial markets, which increases public debt and diverts resources from long-term development goals. Procedural challenges in accessing the State Disaster Response Fund, including spending limits and bureaucratic red tape, further hinder recovery processes.

Beyond the economic impacts, disasters worsen social inequalities and obstruct inclusive development. In Chennai, major companies relocated their operations while informal workers and small exporters suffered heavy losses. In Kerala, the cancellation of tourist reservations drove small business owners and homestay operators into debt. These trends recur with each disaster, displacing vulnerable communities, often into urban areas that are similarly at risk.

There is no doubt that India has made significant progress in disaster preparedness. The nation has developed advanced cyclone warning systems and an expanding array of disaster shelters. Nevertheless, sub-

stantial policy and institutional deficits persist. Disaster risk financing in India remains largely reactive, relying on budget reallocations after disasters occur. Financial instruments like catastrophe bonds, parametric insurance, and resilience bonds — widely used in regions like the Caribbean and Mexico — are still in the experimental phase within India. Barriers such as high premiums, inadequate actuarial data, and ambiguous regulatory frameworks impede their broader adoption.

India possesses a significant opportunity to take the lead in this domain. The nation's effort to establish the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), now supported by the G20, offers a robust basis for integrating disaster resilience into infrastructure planning and development. The effectiveness of this initiative will rely on aligning it with major national programs like the PM Gati Shakti master plan, as well as state-level climate adaptation strategies.

What India requires is a development paradigm focused on climate resilience. All future infrastructure developments — such as high-speed trains, solar parks, smart cities, and coastal highways — should be assessed for their exposure to various hazards and designed to withstand the climate challenges expected by 2050 and beyond. Early warning systems need to expand beyond just cyclone notifications to include alerts for flash floods, lightning-prone areas, and cloudbursts in hilly regions. Fiscal resilience must be enhanced through a structured approach to disaster risk financing that merges strong disaster response resources with innovative financial instruments and contingent credit options. Environmental protections — including stricter land-use regulations, nature-based solutions, and ecosystem restoration — should be integral to national development frameworks.

Global research indicates that investing a single dollar in disaster preparedness can save up to seven dollars during recovery and response. However, disaster prevention and preparedness still garner only a small share of climate finance. If India harnesses its demographic advantages and advancements in technology to enhance robust infrastructure, promote community-oriented adaptation, and implement efficient risk financing, it can transform disaster risks into opportunities. This would lead to inclusive and sustainable development. The next two decades are critical. Whether natural disasters continue to drag down development or become a driving force for better planning and innovation will depend on the policy decisions made today. As India looks forward to celebrating a century of independence in 2047, embedding climate and disaster resilience at the core of its development strategy is not merely wise — it is a national necessity.

(The writer is a former Executive Director, National Institute of Disaster Management, GDI and former Director, SAARC Disaster Management Centre. Views are personal)



SATENDRA SINGH

Lokmata Ahilyabai Holkar: The embodiment of dharma and good governance

The development of any country depends on the welfare policies of the Government and its good governance system. The history of India is full of stories of such rulers who did a lot for the development and upliftment of the country. One such name is Punyashlok Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar.

Her welfare policies inspire Governments even today. This year is her 300th birth anniversary and the entire country is celebrating her legacy. She was born on May 31, 1725, in Chaudni village of Ahmednagar (Ahilya Nagar) district. The Bharatiya Janata Party, under the leadership of its National President Shri Jagat Prakash Nadda ji, has dedicated a 10-day campaign from 21 May to 31 May in the memory of Lokmata Ahilyabai. Inspired by the multi-faceted personality of Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar and her life's deeds, BJP workers are working to spread the poor welfare schemes of Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and his resolution of "Vishwas se Virasat" to the people. This work is being accomplished through intellectual dialogues, exhibitions, competitions among students, cleanliness of temples and ghats, art and processions. State Governments and local administrations have also named many schemes and institutions after Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar.

Western scholars spread propaganda about India and said that "Hindu governance was chaotic." James Mill wrote that "India was a morally hollow and selfish society which was not governable" whereas in Western countries, terrible atrocities were being committed in the name of religion.

In India, Ahilyabai Holkar established a welfare Dhammarajya. In India, Dharma is a broad concept which paves the way for economic and moral progress. Dharma teaches the path from earning money and development of human qualities in personal life to salvation.

For the rulers, it teaches policies and plans to increase economic prosperity and in personal life, it teaches one's relationship with mutual cordial behaviour, society, nature etc.

This has been conveyed by sage Kanada in Vishnu's Sutra: "Yato abhyudaya nishreyasa siddhi: sa dharma" which translates to "That which leads to both Abhyudaya (material well-being) and Nishreyasa (spiritual well-being), is Dharma".

In India, the rule based on religion is considered to be the ideal rule, in which everyone is happy and healthy. That is, economic prosperity from the material point of view, policies that provide a healthy life to all, mutual love, fear-free environment, an



environment in which everyone can follow their religious duties, such an environment became an example of an ideal state. Such a capable rule was given by Lord Shri Ram, so Ramrajya became an ideal and exemplary state for all. Many kings like Emperor Vikramaditya, Raja Bhoj, Emperor Harshvardhan tried to follow this ideal of Ramrajya. Rulers like Maharana Pratap, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj sacrificed their lives to protect these values during foreign invasions. Ahilyabai was also a queen who followed these eternal values.

Ahilyabai took over the rule of Malwa state in 1767 after the death of her father-in-law. Due to her devotion towards Narmada, commercial and strategic skills, she made Maheshwar on the banks of Narmada her capital. She ruled this state for 28 years till her death. Schemes for the development of farmers, providing land to landless farmers, tribal development, making her rule crime-free, employment-oriented economy, women empowerment, production of Maheshwari sarees for her and soldier welfare were the specialties of her rule. She also created a women army by forming a military contingent of 500 women. Maheshwar sarees even today reflect her women-centric industrial policy. Due to her affection towards the people, the public gave her the title of Lokmata.

Along with the economic development of her state, she also played an important role in the cultural upliftment of India. Even after being the queen of Malwa state, she did the work of cultural upliftment through Aaseta Himachal, which reveals her Pan-India vision.

Construction of innumerable temples including all the Dhams, all the Jyotirlingas, all the Shakti Peethas, construction of river ghats, arrangement of Dhammarajyas for the stay of the travelers, this is a series of incomparable works done by her.

She also had a role in the reconstruction of Badrinath, Kedarnath located in the Himalayas, Lord Shri Vishwanath located in Kashi, Sonmatt, Dwarika, Puri Jagannath, Rameswaram. The number of these works done by her across the country is over 12,500. Its specialty is that she got this work done from her own wealth, not from the treasury. Starting a Sanskrit school and honoring scholars reveals her deep interest in education.

Shivakamani Ahilyabai considered her rule as the rule of Shiva. For this reason, his name was not inscribed on his Government seal but "Shri Shankar: Aagye Varunah" was inscribed. She used to run her rule with full sacrifice considering service to the people as service to God. While describing a good king, Vidur Niti says: "Chakshusha Manasa Vacha Karma Cha Chaturvidham. Prasadahayati yu lokam tam loka nu prasadi". It means "The king who pleases his subjects with his eyes, mind, speech and deeds, his subjects are pleased with him. Due to these qualities, Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar was honoured with the title of Punyashlok".

On the 300th birth anniversary of Maharani Ahilyabai, let us commit ourselves to the welfare of the world by becoming the centre of good governance and cultural renaissance. This will be a true tribute to Lokmata Ahilyabai.

(The author is the National Joint General Secretary of BJP. Views expressed are personal)



SHIV PRAKASH

India's Soaring Cooling Demand: A call for energy-efficient choices

India's rapid economic expansion and urban transformation have fueled an unprecedented rise in energy demand. One of the most visible outcomes of this growth is the surge in electricity consumption, which has climbed from 136 gigawatts (GW) in 2013-14 to 243 GW in 2023-24. On May 30, 2024, the country recorded an all-time high of 250 GW in peak power demand. This trend shows no sign of slowing, with a major contributor being the increasing need for cooling solutions amid rising temperatures and expanding urban populations.

In 2024 alone, sales of air conditioners (ACs) jumped by 40-50 per cent, underscoring the growing demand for indoor climate control. Looking ahead, summer 2025 is expected to see a further 9-10 per cent rise in peak electricity demand, driven heavily by cooling needs. Already, fans and ACs contribute to nearly half of household electricity usage in urban India. Yet, despite this, only about 3 per cent of households use super energy-efficient ceiling fans. The primary barrier is affordability, as these fans typically carry a higher upfront cost. Addressing this affordability gap is not just an economic concern but also a strategic imperative. Encouraging the widespread adoption of energy-efficient cooling appliances offers India a unique opportunity to ease grid stress, reduce energy consumption, and enhance long-term energy security.

Peak Demand

Every year, India adds between 10 and 15 million new AC units. By 2035, the country could see as many as 150 million more installed. Alongside ubiquitous ceiling fan usage, this surge creates a sharp seasonal increase in electricity demand — particularly during the hottest months. This seasonal peak puts immense strain on power infrastructure, often leading to blackouts, increased procurement costs for electricity providers, and unreliable supply for consumers. In this context, improving the efficiency of cooling appliances becomes not just a household issue but a national priority. By reducing the load on the power grid, energy-efficient appliances can help stabilise the electricity supply.

Total Cost of Ownership

Many consumers hesitate to purchase energy-efficient appliances due to their slightly higher price tags. However, these appliances often save significant money over time. The concept of Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) includes not just the initial purchase price, but also the operating costs over the product's lifespan. High-efficiency appliances like 5-star ACs and BLDc (Brushless Direct Current) fans consume up to 50 per cent less power annually compared to their less efficient counterparts. Over 10 to 15 years of use, these savings can

far exceed the initial price difference. Studies indicate that the overall cost of ownership can be reduced by up to 17 per cent, making high-efficiency models not only environmentally sound but financially wise.

The 'Mileage' Rating for ACs

To help consumers make informed decisions, India introduced the Indian Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio (ISEER) system for air conditioners. ISEER is akin to a "mileage" label for ACs, measuring cooling output per unit of energy consumed across seasonal variations. A higher ISEER rating signifies better energy performance. For instance, a 5-star AC with an ISEER value of 5.0 or more is comparable to a car giving 30 kilometers per litre, whereas a 3-star AC with a 3.5 rating might be closer to 20 km/l. Over time, this difference translates into substantial electricity bill savings — making 5-star ACs a smart investment, particularly in climates like India's, where summer cooling needs are intensive.

Why BLDc Fans Makes Sense?

Ceiling fans are the most widely used cooling appliances in Indian homes and offices, operating for 15 to 18 hours a day, especially in warmer regions. Traditional induction-based fans typically consume 70-80 watts, while energy-efficient BLDc fans require only 28-35 watts. At the household level, this translates into energy savings of up to 15 per cent on electricity bills. While a BLDc fan costs around INR 2,700 compared to INR 1,300 for a conventional fan, the difference can be recovered in just 18 months through energy savings. After that, the fan operates almost cost-free for the remainder of its 7-8 year lifespan. Widespread adoption of BLDc fans could have a transformative effect. If every Indian household installed just two such fans and operated them for 15 hours daily, national savings could exceed INR 78,000 crore annually.

Debunking the Wattage Myth

One common misconception is that higher wattage means better performance. This misunderstanding is especially prevalent in the lighting space, where consumers often believe that a 9-watt bulb is brighter than a 6-watt one. Wattage indicates energy consumed — not brightness. Efficiency-focused technologies like LEDs produce more lumens per watt, meaning a well-designed 6-watt LED can actually outperform a 9-watt bulb. The benefits of energy-efficient cooling extend far beyond individual savings. Environmentally, these contribute to reduced greenhouse gas emissions, supporting India's commitment under the Paris Agreement.

(The writer is Chief General Manager (CGM) at Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL). Views are personal)



ANIMESH MISHRA

Opinion

FRIDAY, MAY 30, 2025

Jolt for Trump tariff plan

Uncertainty will nevertheless continue as the US President is unlikely to back down

THE US COURT of International Trade (CIT) has delivered a major setback to President Donald Trump's weaponisation of tariffs to pressurise nations — especially those that registered persistent bilateral trade surpluses — to strike deals that are more favourable to the US. On Wednesday, a three-member panel of federal judges ruled that the US President had overstepped his authority to impose tariffs on nearly every country around the world. This ruling effectively blocks him from levying the steepest tariffs on China and other major trading partners as the federal law did not grant him "unbounded authority" to do so. Before Trump 2.0, no US president had invoked provisions of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act — intended to address "unusual and extraordinary" threats during a national emergency — to levy duties on virtually every nation. Tariffs are not part of this 1977 law. The CIT also said that the US Constitution provides Congress exclusive authority to regulate trade with other nations that is not overridden by the invocation of national emergency powers to impose tariffs to safeguard the US economy.

While this landmark ruling would doubtless be a relief to countries like India — that is scrambling to ink the first tranche of a bilateral trade deal to avert the threat of Trump's reciprocal tariffs — it is premature to uncork the bubble. The global trade environment will remain highly uncertain as the US President is unlikely to back down. True to form, his administration immediately filed an appeal that questioned the authority of the CIT. The decisions of this Manhattan-based body can be appealed to the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit in Washington and eventually land up in the Supreme Court that is packed with Trump's nominees. It bears mention that days before this ruling, key members of his administration like secretary of commerce Howard Lutnick, United States Trade Representative Jameson Greer, secretary of treasury Scott Bessent, and secretary of state Marco Rubio told the CIT that an adverse ruling could imperil ongoing negotiations, stating that the ongoing ceasefire between India and Pakistan — which averted a full-scale war between nuclear powers — was achieved by Trump offering both nations greater trading access with the US.

The ruling of the CIT nevertheless provides breathing space for India to reassess its strategy to strike a deal that is currently being negotiated under fire. Trump, for his part, is not making it any easier with his gratuitous statements that India has "offered a deal where basically they are willing to literally charge us no tariffs". That is far from being the case although India has no doubt offered deep cuts in levies to provide greater market access for US goods while seeking to retain high tariffs on sensitive farm and dairy products. There is a need for similar strategic intent to ensure that we train policy space on non-tariff barriers like licences, standards including quality control orders, and intellectual property rights. Taking lessons from our free trade agreement with the UK, there is no need to agree to rules that weaken our patents regime and threaten industry's ability to produce affordable generic drugs. Although reports indicate an interim deal is likely before June 25, there is absolutely no warrant to hasten our trade negotiations while the Trump administration's appeal against the historic CIT ruling winds its way through the legal system.

Wall Street interns are safe from AI. Here's why

SUMMER IS HERE. And for a select cohort of college students, that means swapping lecture halls for trading floors and seminar rooms for Wall Street office suites. In the next few weeks, thousands will begin internships at Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, and other major financial institutions. What awaits them could define their careers.

Getting there, however, has become harder than getting into the top universities where many of them study. Goldman Sachs begins its process more than a year out, interviewing candidates as early as the end of their sophomore year. The bank's 2024 intern class saw over 315,000 applications for 2,700 spots — an acceptance rate of 0.9%. JPMorgan revealed at its investor day last year that it had received 493,000 applications for about 4,000 positions. Mary Erdoes, head of the asset and wealth management division, called the volume "mind-blowing", noting it left the firm "in the competition to pick talent" from an enormous pool. Both banks now have acceptance rates lower than Harvard University's 3.6%.

The competition for places has intensified dramatically. A decade ago, Goldman's acceptance rate was around 5%, with roughly one-sixth the number of applicants it receives today. One reason applications have surged is the growth of technology platforms that make it easier for students to discover and apply for opportunities. UK-based Trackr, which follows 1,500 programmes, shows its users submitted an average of 66 applications each year, up from 54 last year, leading to 4.73 interviews per candidate and 0.88 offers — equivalent to one offer for every 75 applications. Success clusters at the top: 10% of the candidates claim 44% of all offers.

Despite increased scrutiny around working hours, many interns still put in long days and nights. As one former summer analyst put it, "People complain about working hours in banks, but for me they were not a problem. Yes, there were a few 3 am finishes and some 4 am spikes, but I enjoy intensity." It's not all about endurance, though. Blackstone President Jon Gray advised interns at their welcome presentation last year that success comes to those who "work hard or care more", adding that "treating people nicely can be a bit of a secret weapon".

The prize makes it all worthwhile. As well as the pay (interns take home the equivalent of up to \$125,000 in annual salary), the internship pipeline now like the majority of full-time entry-level positions at major banks, which explicitly design their recruiting around these 10-week programmes. Surviving the summer doesn't guarantee success — the overall intern offer rate across industries stood at 62% in 2023-24, its lowest in more than five years, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers — but compared with other channels, it is the best way to secure a full-time position.

Blackstone is a good example. The private equity firm had 169 open analyst positions in 2023 and although it received 62,000 applications, the majority were filled via internships. "Getting an entry-level job at Blackstone is 12 times harder than getting into Harvard," Chief Executive Officer Stephen Schwarzman observed. "I doubt I would be able to be hired today. Not sure that's a great thing." Fortunately for Gray, the pipeline produces results. Gray, his number two, started as an analyst in 1992. At Goldman Sachs, Dan Dees, co-head of banking and markets, joined fresh from university the same summer. The analyst programme remains a proven pathway to the top.

This explains why firms persist with massive internship programmes even as artificial intelligence automates many tasks traditionally performed by junior staff. Excel modelling, pitch book formatting, and data analysis, which once consumed analyst hours, are increasingly handled by algorithms. Banks no longer need armies of interns to power through spreadsheets and PowerPoint slides.

Yet the programmes aren't just about immediate productivity; they're about identifying and developing future leaders. Today's summer analysts may spend less time on mechanical tasks, but they're still learning to ask the right questions, build client relationships, and navigate high-pressure environments under deadline pressure. These skills — reading clients, structuring deals, managing teams — remain irreplaceable. The internship is evolving from a training ground in technical skills to an extended academy for leadership potential. And that makes it more valuable than ever.



MARC RUBINSTEIN
Bloomberg

INDIA'S BROKING INDUSTRY has long operated under a framework that restricted its ability to diversify or expand, despite evolving client expectations and the changing nature of financial services. New-age investors increasingly prefer platforms that offer a full range of financial services, beyond just stock trading. For decades, rules 8(1)(f) and 8(3)(f) of the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Rules, 1957 (SCRR), imposed a blanket prohibition on brokers from engaging in any business outside securities or commodity derivatives. This regulatory architecture, rooted in a different era of market activity, came under increasing stress as new-age brokers evolved into multi-service platforms, competing not only with peers but also with fintechs, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), and wealth managers.

In a significant move poised to recalibrate the regulatory perimeter for brokers, the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) issued a gazettified notification dated May 19 amending rules 8(1)(f) and 8(3)(f). The amendment clarifies that investments made by brokers from their own surplus funds will no longer be deemed as engaging in "business" provided they do not involve client assets or create financial liability for the broker. This change addresses longstanding ambiguity that had clouded investment activity, particularly in group entities and other adjacent sectors.

Rules 8(1)(f) and 8(3)(f) of the SCRR have long stifled brokers, restricting them from engaging, either as principal or employee, in "any business" other than that of securities or commodity derivatives, except as a broker or agent not involving personal financial liability. It intended to ensure a broker, whether applying for admission to a stock exchange or already registered, did not expose itself to unrelated business risks that could compromise client interests or undermine market stability. The aim was straightforward: to ring-fence client assets and ensure a broker's other activities don't undermine its core responsibilities in the capital markets.

But over the years, these rules began to suffer from excessive literalism, and the

lack of clarity over what would "any business" entail, leaving the phrase vulnerable to increasingly restrictive interpretations for brokers. A series of circulars issued by the National Stock Exchange (NSE), probably with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) directions, in 2022 to clarify the scope of permissible activity went on to prohibit brokers from investing even in group firms engaged in non-securities businesses. These included passive, capital-only investments made from retained earnings, and not involving client funds. The circulars expanded the scope of "any business" so broadly that virtually any strategic capital allocation outside traditional broking could be construed as a violation.

The result was interpretive overreach and regulatory uncertainty. The distinction between business operations and capital deployment began to blur, making it difficult for brokers to determine what was permissible and what was not. This interpretation found its way into enforcement actions and market-wide compliance pressures, pushing brokers into a position where even commercially sound decisions became regulatory risks.

In one such high-profile case, Kotak Securities challenged NSE's circular before the Bombay High Court, arguing the stock exchange had no legislative mandate to effectively rewrite the contours of rule 8 or, consequently, to direct Kotak to submit a restructuring plan over its legacy investments. The finance ministry through its department of economic affairs, in an affidavit in court, endorsed this view, emphasising that only the Centre could make interpretative or substantive changes to the SCRR. Importantly, the DEA in its affidavit drew a critical distinction between doing business and making investments, noting that the former entails recurring engagement and financial liability whereas the latter — when ring-fenced and responsibly managed — did not pose systemic risks.

Recognising the operational challenges created by the earlier regime, the DEA issued a consultation paper in early 2025 to revisit the rule. It acknowledged the broking ecosystem had moved beyond traditional models and now demanded flexibility to manage surplus funds, expand services, and grow responsibly. Crucially, it argued that blanket prohibitions on investment were excessive, especially when brokers were already segregating client assets under Sebi's framework.

This paved the way for public feedback, evaluating whether the interpretation of rule 8(1)(f) and 8(3)(f) had outlived their regulatory utility, eventually culminating into the new amendment. The amendment strikes a careful balance. It does not dismantle the guardrails around client asset protection, nor does it open the gates to indiscriminate diversification. It simply affirms that investments made by a trading member shall not be construed as engaging in "business", except where such investments involve client funds, client securities, or arrangements that create financial liability on the broker. This is not a blanket exemption. The carve-out is narrowly tailored, preserving the regulatory objective of protecting cli-

For too long, the interpretation of rule 8 was guided by maximum compliance rather than risk-based assessment

ent assets and maintaining systemic integrity. What it does change is the treatment of surplus fund deployment. Brokers may now invest in group firms or other businesses, provided such investments are made using proprietary funds, do not lead to contingent liabilities, and are routed through appropriate corporate structures. For the broking industry, this reform brings both relief and opportunity. Diversification into non-securities businesses can provide brokers with additional revenue sources. Restricting them to narrowly defined securities-related activities not only stifles innovation but also distorts competition, especially against unregulated or differently regulated players like fintech platforms, NBFCs, or wealth managers. The ability to invest in adjacent verticals offers brokers a path to reduce reliance on transaction-linked income. For instance, a group entity may provide tax planning, estate advisory, or loan distribution services which complement core broking activities but fall outside the regulatory definition of securities business. This, in turn, enhances financial resilience, particularly in cyclical markets where trading volumes may fluctuate sharply.

For too long, the interpretation of rule 8 was guided by maximum compliance rather than risk-based assessment. This change marks a shift towards regulatory proportionality, where conduct is assessed based on its effect on market integrity and investor protection. For a sector that plays an increasingly vital role in capital intermediation, especially among retail investors, the course correction was overdue. It reinforces the principle that regulation must keep pace with innovation, not to encourage risk but to avoid rigidity. The move to realign regulatory intent with market realities is an example of responsive governance that listens to feedback. It not only restores balance but also sets a precedent for financial regulators for evidence-based policymaking, one that preserves the fine balance between prudence and progress.

Co-authored with **Namrata Shandhu** and **Manish Daga**, associates at **Finesse Law Advisors**

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BEYOND THE BULL

AMENDMENT OF SECURITIES CONTRACTS (REGULATIONS) RULES BRINGS BOTH RELIEF AND OPPORTUNITY

Brokers get a side hustle

Are we game for collaboration?



BHAVIT SHETH

COO and co-founder, Dream13 & Dream Sports

FROM A VERY young age, a number of athletes dream of representing India at the highest level of sport. However, a lot of this talent wanes over time, with key factors being the lack of structured tracks for athlete development and representation along with fewer opportunities for career advancement.

While India houses one of the largest youth populations, the success rate in global sporting events is still not proportionate, bringing to light a stark dichotomy. As much as 66% of our population is represented by youths, but only 10% of it engages in sports.

Even within this limited share, the potential of talent at the grassroots remains passive due to fewer opportunities for conventional exposure. Such talent, in comparison to elite athletes, hasn't been able to garner an equal measure of support, with the latter making more progress through focused backing and investments.

What is required is greater collaboration and equality in action — where public and private institutions, corporates, and entrepreneurs pool efforts to improve the sports ecosystem. This, along with the right balance of guidance across funding, wellness, training, and opportunity, is of prime importance to promote sports at the grassroots.

Globally, the sports industry contributes 0.5% to GDP, while in India it stands

at only 0.1%. Similarly, while the global average for contribution to sports-related employment is 2-4%, India's share is notably lower, at 0.5%. This gap is on account of how global institutions, corporates, and academics, etc. have partnered to dedicatedly work towards grassroots development. The Laureus Sports for Good Foundation is a shining example of how corporate houses like Daimler and Richemont came together to build a global Laureus Sport for Good platform, showcasing some of the best talent from the sporting world.

At a local level though, India faces something far more fundamental but complex at the same time. The lack of interventions during early education years, such as quality exposure, interlinked competitions from school to higher ranks, and focused development programmes with the best coaches, are causing athletes to slip away from the talent pool at the preliminary stages.

Before foraying into professional training, more focus needs to be placed on promoting sports as a viable and inspiring career path, and this is where corporate involvement becomes crucial. Their investments need to go beyond funding, to initiatives that drive enthu-

siasm for sports — local community centres, integration of sports as course modules, health literacy programmes, and sports facilities in and outside schools to name a few. Additionally, early investment in sports science assessments, when seamlessly integrated with India's grassroots ecosystem, can help track and enhance young athletes' progress, ensuring they receive the right guidance at the right time.

The lack of a robust sports ecosystem results in a country needing to battle larger social issues like youth inclusion, collaboration, and well-being. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which have become a global benchmark, also directly implicate the importance of youth sports towards the overall health and well-being of society.

While India's National Sports Federation — with a primary focus on elite development and performance — has institutional guidelines for sports, corporate support can prove useful in drawing out similar pathways for grassroots talent. With greater resources and innovation at their disposal, they can provide for improved local infrastructure, advanced equipment, modern training techniques, and systematic competition structures.

Many of Dream Sports Foundations' partnerships have helped integrate backward and forward linkages to complete the current chain of actions in the Indian sports ecosystem — starting from talent identification at the institutional level to high performance development programmes for each sporting discipline.

When we teamed up with the Bhachung Bhutta Football Schools (BBFS), we saw this impact come through. A young boy of 15, Manbhakumar, was identified by the school in 2019 in Meghalaya. After a residency at the BBFS, he emerged as the youngest goalscorer in the U-21 development league. He then went on to help India lift the SAFF U-16 Cup, and is now part of the national team. This wholesome journey was made possible primarily due to talent identification, and the provision of a platform to showcase that talent.

If we want to nurture grassroots athletes, the corporate sector's involvement in sports development can't merely be seen as philanthropic — it needs to be an active investment in the form of continued support. We need to minimise the gap between potential and opportunity, and together build road maps that considerably enhance early-stage performance.

While this is just one step in the right direction, more companies need to dip their ink to help write India's sporting future, and make us a global sports powerhouse.

Corporate investments need to grow beyond funding, to initiatives that drive enthusiasm for sports

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Preserving India's federal structure

Apropos of "It takes two to tango" (FE, May 29), the editorial highlighting the need for more effort to inspire the trust of the states is a pitch for preserving the federal structure of the Indian union. The author's exhortation for synchronous action by the states and the Centre to realise Viksit Bharat goal, by itself, is no guarantee for such action, given the precarious nature of

Centre-state relations. Rather than a monolithic leviathan of a homogeneous nation, the echoing sentiment of the Constitution is one with diverse cultural, linguistic, and regional traditions which subscribe to the larger national identity of India. This is best served in mutual trust and not in twisting and abusing gubernatorial positions or national agencies, which are evident aplenty in court proceedings.

—Jose Abraham, Kottayam

Reality check

"Missing competitive edge" (FE, May 29) highlights India's ground reality. The Centre's active consideration and a policy approach on global trade, reforms, and outreach to trade and economic cooperation bodies are a necessity. Arrives for sports, corporate support can prove useful in drawing out similar pathways for grassroots talent. With greater resources and innovation at their disposal, they can provide for improved local infrastructure, advanced equipment, modern training techniques, and systematic competition structures.

surprise us when the results are contradictory. Southeast Asian nations have registered huge growth and exports, with foreign manufacturing bases yielding supply chain benefits. India needs to invest in innovation and R&D to match global standards of products and productivity. Our large corporates should enhance global presence in industrial output and exports.

—Vinod Johri, Delhi

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

IN THE LIMELIGHT

The city of Chennai's vanishing role in Tamil cinema

Since the '60s and '70s, Tamil filmmakers have found fascinating ways to celebrate Chennai on celluloid. However, in the last five years, filmmakers have largely refrained from using the city as a storytelling instrument

Bhuvanesh Chander

In *Super Deluxe*, Thiagarajan Kumararaja walks us through narrow lanes of a city, with dry walls guarding frames tinged with saturated hues. As it is, there's nothing flashy that indicates the setting is Chennai (the film was set and shot in the city), but the filmmaker held a fascinatingly hyperreal lens on the city, showing us an urban landscape one is familiar with, but in a world only imagined. Cities have distinct energies, a sense of controlled chaos that only cinema comes close to simulating. How Chennai has evolved on celluloid is a storied exploration with some compelling patterns.

In the 1970s, Chennai was regularly featured in anti-urban narratives that portrayed cities as pockets of debauchery, a foreign land that preys upon the ignorant newcomer. Before K. Balachander critiqued the regressive norms of rural India, he made *Pattina Pravesam* in 1977, in which a family from a village endured extreme hardships in Chennai, forcing them to return. Though setting a serial killer story like *Sigappu Rojakkal* in the city points to a similar mindset from Bharathiraja, his *Nizhalgal* spoke about youths moving to Chennai to fulfil their lofty dreams. Kamal Haasan's *Mahanadhi* (1994) also hinted that perhaps the family wouldn't have faced such unspeakable miseries had they stayed back in their village. Even comedian Vivekh, who has sung praises of the city, showed this perspective in 2002's *Run*, where his character gets creatively swindled of all his belongings upon landing in Chennai.

The early 2000s were an interesting period in how films continued balancing these perceptions with fresher takes. Where *Alaipayuthey*, *Enakku 20 Unakku 18*, *Priyamaana Thozhi*, *Minnale*, and *7G Rainbow Colony* embraced modern urban life, Chennai became the capital of crime in films like *Thirupachi* and *Thool*.

Similar was the case with Saran's *Amarakalam* and *Gemini*, set in north Madras. The 2000s was also the time when more non-native residents of Chennai started to reap the benefits of the IT boom, and films began reflecting this. *Autograph* wasn't set in Chennai, but it spoke of a man who found prosperity in the city, looking back at his roots. Ram's *Katradhu Thumizh* is arguably the loudest critique of gentrification, Western lifestyle, and the Anglicisation from Silicon Valley. While all the above films have Chennai in the backdrop, in *Katradhu Thumizh*, Chennai becomes a character by itself. In the film, Chennai turns the protagonist into a sociopath.

The city was also intrinsic in how Venkat Prabhu captured the frenzy of street cricket, the carefree lives of youngsters, and how they deal with new-age problems in *Chennai 600028*. That film, along with *7G Rainbow Colony* and later, *Madras, Idharukathane Aasaiptai Balakumara, Kodiyl Oruvan* and *Maaveran* – were films that depicted lives within housing boards and colonies. Going back to the 2000s, films weren't just painting Chennai as a city of hope; in *Angadi Theru*, Vasanthabalan, a staunch critic of urban life, made a persuasive case by showing the heart-wrenching ordeals that happen behind the curtains



A still from 'Angadi Theru'. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

of an activity most Chennaiites must relate to – shopping in T. Nagar.

Of Vetri Maarams and Pa Ranjiths
Angadi Theru also pointed towards the rise of an almost neo-realistic, hyperlocal approach to filmmaking in the 2010s – ushered by the likes of Thiagarajan Kumararaja, Vetri Maaram and Pa Ranjith – where the city isn't just a concrete shelter for the protagonists, but a thriving socio-political organism that houses millions. You cannot take Chennai out of *Aaranya Kaandam*, *Madras, Metro*, *Vada Chennai*, or *Maanagaram*. Most of these films, especially those of Vetri Maaram, indeed fall in line with themes that stereotyped north Madras as a land of crime – a stigma many residents know to have real-life effects.

But a silver lining did emerge. These stories weren't interested in single-mindedly exposing the darkness of the underworld; they had characters, black, grey, and white, somehow interacting with the crime lords and local politicians due to circumstances or socio-economic factors. This is why you wouldn't mind climbing a water tank with Anbu from *Vada Chennai* rather than hanging out with Kokki Kumar in *Pudhupettai*. Further, the likes of *Ooram Po*, *Kaikka Mutai*, *Sarpatta Parambarai*, and *Irudhi Suttu* managed to break the stereotype surrounding Chennai north of the Cooum – an ever-fascinating region rich in history, culture and art.

There's yet another angle to look at

when it comes to Chennai's representation in films – in how the city was shown in songs rather than scenes.

A musical heritage walk
Chennai is a never-ending open concert enlivened by the likes of T.M. Soundararajan, M.S. Viswanathan, Ilaiyaraaja, A.R. Rahman, Yuvan Shankar Raja, Anirudh Ravichander and Sean Roldan. So it's only befitting that we find the most memorable depiction of the city in the visuals of songs.

Somehow, 'Madrasai Suthi Paaka Poren' from 1994's *May Madhiam* comes to mind instantly, but it's quite something to revisit the old Madras in older songs. It seems song sequences were a great opportunity for the characters and the audiences to get some air and respite from the studio sets, and what better place to do that than Marina Beach? It feels surreal to watch 'Nenjirukkum Engalukku' from *Nenjirukkum Vurai*, in which Sivaji Ganesan, R. Muthuraman and V. Gopalakrishnan walk and dance on a Kamarajar Promenade we can no longer recognise. If you thought hitting the beach to shake away the blues is a modern trend, watch Gemini Ganesan walk and sing 'Manidhan Enbavan Mirugamagalam' in *Sumaithangi*. Or when he takes his squad to the beach in a car in 'Naalai Naam' from *Punnagai*. Songs like 'Enna Paarvai' from *Madhalika Neramillai* and 'Nee Ketala Naan Maatenendru' from *Ilamai Onjal Aadukirathu* turned the gardens of Marina

into Eden.

When it comes to showing other parts of Chennai, 'Madras Nalla Madras' from *Anubhavi Raja Anubhavi* is often cited as an example. But listen to the lyrics and you will realise it is anything but a tribute. Interestingly, the song that features the maximum number of heritage sites, as pointed out by heritage activist Sriram V. is 'Azhagaya Mithalai Nagariniley' from the movie *Anna*.

On shooting in real locations

Over the years, however, fewer and fewer songs were shot in live locations in Chennai. Managing the crowd of eager onlookers rendered shooting films featuring popular stars in real locations impossible, which is why you might find many songs, like 'Nenjani Undu Nermai Undu' and 'En Kanmani En Kadhalai', have actors perform in front of a screen.

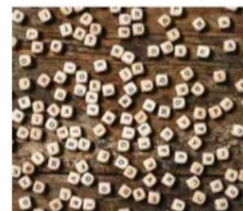
While the '90s and early 2000s had films like *Kadhal Kottai* and *Kadhal Desam* that were shot in popular locations in Chennai, in the mid-2000s, the Tamil Nadu government's restrictions on shooting films in public locations prompted filmmakers to shoot in studios or outside Chennai or move to suburban locations where getting permissions was easier. Still, even then, there were exceptions to this, like 'O Ringa Ringa' from *7 Aum Arivu*, a 2011 Suriya-starrer that was somehow shot in the congested Ranganathan Street in T. Nagar.

Fascinatingly, despite these restrictions, the 2010s saw many small and mid-budget films – such as *Onayum Aattukkuttiyum*, *Chennaiyil Oru Naal*, *Goli Soda*, *Vadacurry*, *Vathikuchi*, *Meyaadha Maan*, *8 Thottakkal*, *Irumbu Thirai*, *Sillu Karupatti*, *Maanagaram* and others – that were shot in real locations and had intriguing takes on the city, perhaps as a result of a certain drive towards realism among the younger crop of filmmakers who made their way to the fore by making short films or small features that couldn't afford a studio.

Chennai has featured in more than a dozen Tamil films since 2023, but never as a character by itself. Films still establish the city with a shot of the Kathipara flyover or the Central station, but the city never becomes central to storytelling. Prashanth, Shaam, Attakathi Dinesh and Shakti Vasudevan no longer climb onto MTC buses; only in *Blue Star*, a film set in Arakkonam, not Chennai, romance blooms in a local train. The autorickshaw drivers and passengers are now involved in discussions too different from what Rajinikanth sang about in 1995. The Central railway station we see in films no longer lets a woman find her mystery lover wearing a rose-knit sweater. Interestingly, only Bharathiraja appears as an exception here, as he tells the story of a married man falling in love with a woman he meets on the Metro train in *Modern Love: Chennai*.

The current crop of Tamil filmmakers have largely refrained from romanticising Chennai, but even sobering explorations of a lifestyle, community, or neighbourhoods are few and far between. Except for films like *Ram's Tarunani* or *Chennai 600028* (must add *Demonte Colony*), even films that carry a specific neighbourhood as the title – *Kodambakkam*, *Nungambakkam*, *Kizhaku Kadarkarai Salai*, and so on – do not tell a memorable story rooted in their milieu.

And yet, you would still find youngsters romanticising the city on social media, and aspiring filmmakers in their short films. So while this may not be the reason for Chennai, on screen and in IPL, this city was never known for invincibility. This is, after all, the kingdom of Rajinikanth, an actor who became a superstar by turning the rising-from-the-ashes arc into his signature style in commercial cinema.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"I found a spelling mistake on the very first page of this book."

"Books that come out these days have lots of spelling mistakes in them. What's the mistake you found?"

"On the top of the page, the word 'forward' has been spelt f.o.r.e.w.o.r.d."

"That's not a mistake."

"What? Shouldn't it be spelt f.o.r.w.a.r.d?"

"No, it shouldn't. F.o.r.e.w.o.r.d and f.o.r.w.a.r.d are pronounced the same way, but they are two different words. They have a totally different meaning. A 'foreword' is an introduction to a book by the author or by someone else."

"An introduction to a book! You mean it has nothing to do with moving forward?"

"No, it doesn't. Here's an example. In the foreword, the author explains the aim of the book."

"Can I say, the author wanted the President of India to write the foreword to his book?"

"Certainly. In fact, that's what many first time authors try to do. They try to get somebody famous to write the foreword to their book."

"I suppose they think they can sell more books that way."

"You suppose right. Are you preparing for your exams?"

"I'm trying to. I find it difficult to study in the evenings. I study in the night."

"I study 'at night', not 'in' the night. You don't say 'in the night'."

"Wait a minute! I can say 'in the evening, can't I? Why can't I...'"

"...these are fixed expressions. You say 'in the morning', 'in the afternoon', 'in the evening', but 'at night'."

"They do? I didn't know that! I know that many students study at night."

"I prefer to study in the morning. I like to watch TV at night."

"I used to watch at night. Because of the coming exams, I no more watch TV."

"I no longer watch TV, not 'no more watch TV'."

"But why can't I say 'no more'?"

"Because 'no more' is not usually used to talk about time. You don't use it to mean 'once, but not now'. For example, you cannot say, Sandhya no more lives in Hyderabad. Instead, you'll have to say, Sandhya no longer lives in Hyderabad."

"Can I say, Sandhya doesn't live in Hyderabad anymore?"

"You can."

"Can I say, Sandhya lives in Hyderabad no longer?"

"No longer usually comes before the verb. I no longer smoke beedis."

"Geetha no longer plays the drums. Geetha doesn't play the drums anymore."

"Good examples. People no longer believe in politicians."

"That's true. But tell me, when do you use 'no more'?"

"It's normally used to talk about quantity. For example, there are no more idlis left in the bowl."

Published in *The Hindu* on September 10, 1996.

THE DAILY QUIZ

The monsoon has come a week ahead of its scheduled arrival on the 1st of June. How well do you know the monsoon?

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1

In which State does the south-west monsoon arrive first?

QUESTION 2

This region, which houses the longest sandstone cave in the world, also has the highest average rainfall. Name this place in the East Khasi Hills.

QUESTION 3

This mobile app, created to provide crop advisories to farmers based on weather information, is named after an epic poem. An operation of the same name was carried out by the Indian military against Pakistan in 1964 in the Siachen Glacier. Name the app.

QUESTION 4

If 10 cm of rainfall is received over a small area

at a station in one hour, this phenomenon is called _____. Mountainous regions are more prone to it than plains. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 5

A flow of air originates near Mauritius and travels across Madagascar, Kenya, Ethiopia and finally Somalia, before crossing the Arabian Sea and reaching the Indian western coast. It attains maximum strength in July and gives rise to a strong monsoon in peninsular India. What is this flow of air called?

QUESTION 6

X was established in 1875 in Calcutta, a year after a disastrous cyclone struck there. Later its headquarters were shifted to Shimla, then to Poona (now Pune), and finally to New Delhi. Name X, which is cited in every newspaper report during the monsoon.



Visual question:

A comet and a research station in Antarctica are named after this astronomer and mathematician who published a treatise on the Indian monsoon. Name this man.

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

1. The significance of the phrase "Snow conditions bad stop advanced base abandoned yesterday stop awaiting improvement." **Ans: This was the coded message sent by The Times' journalist James Morris to announce the successful attempt.**

2. The primary route taken by Hillary and Tenzing to the summit. **Ans: The South Col route**

3. The two other flags Tenzing held aloft on the summit. **Ans: The Union Jack and United Nations flags**

4. The height at which the final camp was set up. **Ans: 25,900 feet (7,890 m)**

5. Name the two institutions that made up the Joint Himalayan Committee. **Ans: The Alpine Club and Royal Geographical Society**

6. The answer given by Hillary when asked why there was no picture of him atop Mt. Everest. **Ans: He said Tenzing did not know how to use the camera and 29,000 feet was not the place to teach him!**

Visual: Name this person. **Ans: John Hunt, the leader of the 1953 expedition**

Early Bird: Tushit Pratap Singh

Word of the day

Bastion:

a group that defends a principle; a stronghold into which people could go for shelter during a battle; projecting part of a rampart or other fortification

Synonym: citadel

Usage: This college was once the bastion of the privileged few.

Pronunciation: newsth./live/bastionpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈbæstɪən/

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

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The decline in the U.S. GDP in the January-March period

0.2 In per cent. The U.S. economy contracted less than estimated in the first three months of this year, data showed, revising data that came after an import surge triggered by President Trump's tariffs. The downturn in first quarter GDP reflected an uptick in imports. *AFP*

Cost of Syria's energy deal with Qatari, Turkish, and U.S. firms

7 In \$ billion. Syria signed a \$7 billion energy deal with a consortium of Qatari, Turkish and U.S. companies as it seeks to revive the war-torn country's crippled power sector. The agreement was sealed at the presidential palace in Damascus in the presence of interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa. *AFP*

'New settlements' to be created by Israel in the West Bank

22 Israel announced the creation of new settlements in occupied West Bank, putting further strain on relations with the international community already taxed by the Gaza war. Both Britain and Jordan slammed the move, with London calling it a "deliberate obstacle" to Palestinian statehood. *AFP*

The International Monetary Fund's loan payout to Ukraine

500 In \$ million. The International Monetary Fund on Thursday announced that it had reached an agreement with Ukraine on a loan program review to unlock around \$500 million dollars of funds to support macroeconomic stability. *PTI*

Cybercrimes recorded by the Hyderabad police last year

3,111 The Hyderabad city police launched Zonal Cyber Cells across all seven zones of the city to strengthen the response to cybercrimes. The initiative aims to provide swift and effective solutions to cybercrimes. *PTI*

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Autonomous warfare in Operation Sindoor

In the recent India-Pakistan war, over four days of hostilities, both sides effectively rewrote their rules of engagement, ushering in a 'new normal' of airborne deterrence without pilots, but with autonomous platforms, armed drones and loitering munitions

FULL CONTEXT

Rahul Bedi

Launched in early May, in retaliation to the April 22 Pahalgam terror attack, Operation Sindoor marks a historic milestone, in which Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) played a primary role in direct military combat between two nuclear-armed neighbours, signalling an uncharted era of drone-centric warfare in South Asia.

Over four days of hostilities, both sides effectively rewrote their rules of engagement, ushering in a 'new normal' of airborne deterrence without pilots, but with autonomous platforms, armed drones and loitering munitions, all operating below the threshold of a full-scale war, and shaping a calibrated, escalation-managed conflict.

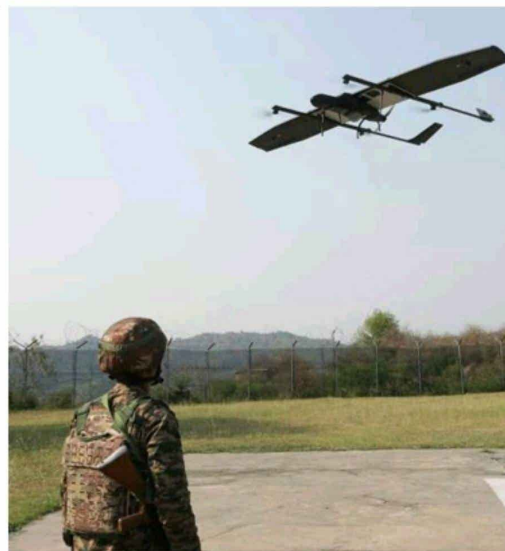
In the 48 hours preceding Operation Sindoor, Israeli Heron MK-II and indigenously designed TAPAS-BH-201/ Rustom-II-Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance (MALE) Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) are believed to have flown deep into Pakistani airspace to gather electronic and signals intelligence and thermal signatures of suspected Islamist terror camps.

Thereafter, from May 7 onwards, after the Indian Air Force (IAF) attacked nine targets inside Pakistan, both sides employed a broad spectrum of UAS – from ISR UAVs to armed drones, kamikaze loitering munitions, electronic decoys and quadcopters – as dual-purpose tools for real-time intelligence gathering and precision strikes. And as this drone war intensified, both countries sought to dominate the battlespace through persistent aerial surveillance by mapping out enemy air defences, missile batteries, command centres, troop clusters and logistical nodes. Decoy drones too were widely employed to spoof radars, 'bait' air defence systems and exhaust interceptors, minimising risk to manned assets, before ceasefire ensued on May 10.

India's array of aerial systems
In the intervening period, India claimed to have downed some 600 Pakistani drones, releasing intercepted footage and wreckage to reinforce its assertions in a high-stakes information war, paralleling the kinetic exchanges. Pakistan, in turn, alleged that 300-400 Indian drones had unsuccessfully targeted its military and strategic infrastructure, before being shot down. India has neither confirmed nor denied these avowals, citing Operation Sindoor's enduring operational status for its silence.

Open-source intelligence and drone-tracking data, meanwhile, revealed that India's offensive against Pakistan featured a diverse UAS inventory. It was spearheaded by indigenously developed loitering munitions like the GPS-guided Nagastar-I and Israeli-origin Harop drones, capable of autonomously homing in on enemy radar systems.

To overwhelm Pakistan's air defences, India also deployed swarm drone formations developed jointly by the Defence Research and Development Organisation and private contractors to create radar clutter, trigger premature defensive responses and saturate surveillance networks. Priority targets included ammunition depots, Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) batteries, radar sites, and forward operating bases. The strikes were delivered in carefully



New war: A soldier looks at a drone at the Akhnour sector near the LoC in Jammu on May 19. *AFP*

sequenced waves. Initial sorties deployed decoy drones and electronic warfare payloads to saturate radar coverage and provoke early, albeit futile SAM launches. These were followed by precision loitering munitions and armed UAVs, guided in real-time by Heron MK IIs and TAPAS-BH-201/ Rustom-IIs. Quadcopters and micro-UAVs played a critical role in relaying live ISR feeds and target acquisition data via the Army's Integrated Battle Management System (IBMS) to forward units, ensuring dynamic targeting and reaction.

Notably, media reports claimed that India's drone strikes disrupted a cricket match in Rawalpindi, forcing a stadium evacuation due to air defence alarms. Another significant Harop strike reportedly destroyed a Chinese-supplied HQ-9 air defence system near Lahore, delivering both a psychological blow and a strategic setback to Pakistan's layered air defence shield.

Consequently, military analysts noted that India's overwhelming use of varied UAS to deliver calibrated, cross-border strikes without risking manned aircraft, represented the emerging regional model of deterrence. They said it also visibly showcased India's growing competence in autonomous, cost-effective, and networked warfare, demonstrating a significant shift in the balance of aerial power in South Asia.

Pakistan's retaliation
Pakistan, for its part, in its reactive Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos (wall of lead), deployed a range of UAS, including its indigenously developed Shahpar (feather) II MALE UAVs, armed Burraq (lightning) drones, Turkish-origin Bayraktar TB2s, and Chinese-supplied CH-4 and Wing Loong II platforms. These assets were complemented by CH-901 and WS-43 loitering munitions from China and domestically produced kamikaze drones, launched at multiple targets across a 1,500-kilometre expanse, stretching from Kashmir in the north to Bhuj in the west.

While the Shahpar-IIs, TB2s, and Wing Loong IIs primarily conducted ISR

missions – streaming real-time imagery of Indian troop concentrations, artillery positions, and logistics depots – Pakistan's loitering munitions targeted radar stations, forward operating bases and critical Army and IAF command nodes in the northern and western sectors. However, these attacks were effectively neutralised by India's robust, multi-tiered air defence grid, inflicting minimal or no damage at all.

Strategic urban and military infrastructure hubs – including Jammu, Pathankot and Amritsar in Punjab, Bikaner and Jaipur in Rajasthan, and Bhuj in Gujarat – too were frequently targeted. But despite the density of these assaults, India's integrated air defence network – comprising layered radar coverage, SAM batteries, automated threat response mechanisms, and upgraded Cold War-era legacy platforms and systems – mitigated damage, preventing disruption.

India's multi-layer air defence system
Pakistan repeatedly sought to probe and bring to heel India's Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) – its air defence nerve centre – by launching drones via varied routes, altitudes and diverse timings, to disrupt its communication nodes and forward-deployed command centres, albeit unsuccessfully. The IACCS fuses surveillance inputs from ground-based radars, airborne early warning and control platforms, satellites, and other sensors into a centralised but distributed command-and-control network. It integrates with SAM systems and fighter aircraft, enabling the rapid detection, tracking, and interception of low-altitude threats, including UASs. Its built-in mechanisms ensured continuity of operations, even if any individual nodes were damaged, jammed or destroyed.

Pakistan attempted to overload the IACCS's radar coverage, confuse response loops, and expose vulnerabilities for follow-on drone or missile strikes. However, military officials confirmed the IACCS's core network remained intact,

with all and any temporary disruptions swiftly mitigated through alternate data links and pre-positioned mobile radars.

Analysts further noted the system's 'mesh' architecture allowed seamless failovers when nodes were hit, with satellite uplinks and mobile platforms sustaining full situational awareness. The IACCS also displayed its Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs) capability in which high-powered lasers or microwaves, via a real-time network, detected, tracked and neutralised airborne threats like drones speedily.

Complementing the IACCS at the tactical level was the Akashteer (Sky Arrow) air defence control and reporting system, developed by Bharat Electronics Limited, which provided a digitised command layer for Army Air Defence units, enabling seamless coordination between sensor units and weapon platforms. Designed to rapidly disseminate targeting data and manage low-level threats – including UAVs – it ensured that frontline SAM units could engage targets with minimal delay, even under electronic warfare or communication stress.

The accompanying air defence shield was built around a layered architecture combining retrofitted legacy Low-Level Air Defence (LLAD) systems with advanced missile platforms in an unparalleled innovative mix that remains a hallmark of the Indian military's improvisation.

Ingenuously upgraded with radar-directed fire capability and electro-optical sights, Cold War-era systems from the early 1960s, comprised the LLAD network for close-in protection against drones. These included Pechora and OSA-AK SAM systems and ZSU-23-4 Shilka, ZU-23-2 twin barrel 23mm anti-aircraft (AA) guns from Soviet times, and the L/70 Bofors 40mm AA platform dating back to the 1940s. Army and Border Security Force snipers too were part of the LLAD structure, shooting down numerous incoming drones in Jammu, Punjab and Rajasthan.

These 'heirloom' LLAD platforms were supplemented by the Israeli SPYDER short and medium-range air defence missile system using Python-5 and Derby missiles for point defence against UAVs, cruise missiles, and aircraft.

A new kind of war

The domestic Akash and Akash-NG (New Generation) missile system provided medium-range coverage, while the long-range Barak-8, jointly developed with Israel, defended high-value assets and strategic nodes from aircraft, drones, and ballistic/cruise missiles. These were all backed by Russia's Almaz-Antey S-400 'Triumf' self-propelled surface-to-air missile system – renamed Sudarshan Chakra – one of the world's best, of which India had acquired five units for \$5.5 billion in October 2018 and, so far, taken delivery of three.

All these systems were centrally integrated through the IACCS, enabling coordinated, real-time responses and full-spectrum aerial threat mitigation. In conclusion, Operation Sindoor was not merely a skirmish; it was a seismic shift in which two nuclear-armed rivals stepped into the age of autonomous warfare, where deterrence is digital, and dominance is algorithmic. And as the smoke subsides, one truth remains: the next war will not begin with a soldier's charge, but with the silent whir of drones in the sky.

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

THE GIST

Open-source intelligence and drone-tracking data, meanwhile, revealed that India's offensive against Pakistan featured a diverse UAS inventory.

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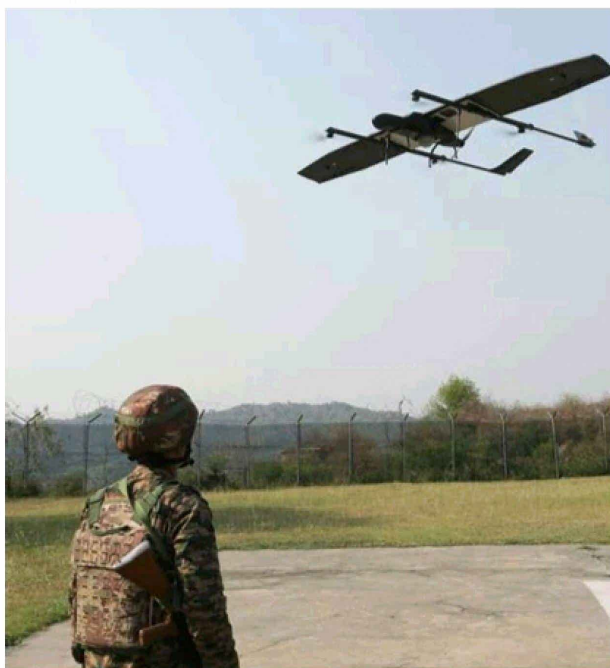
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with all and any temporary disruptions swiftly mitigated through alternate data links and pre-positioned mobile radars.

Analysts further noted the system's 'mesh' architecture allowed seamless failovers when nodes were hit, with satellite uplinks and mobile platforms sustaining full situational awareness. The IACCS also displayed its Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs) capability in which high-powered lasers or microwaves, via a real-time network, detected, tracked and neutralised airborne threats like drones speedily.

Complementing the IACCS at the tactical level was the Akashteer (Sky Arrow) air defence control and reporting system, developed by Bharat Electronics Limited, which provided a digitised command layer for Army Air Defence units, enabling seamless coordination between sensor units and weapon platforms. Designed to rapidly disseminate targeting data and manage low-level threats – including UAVs – it ensured that frontline SAM units could engage targets with minimal delay, even under electronic warfare or communication stress.

The accompanying air defence shield was built around a layered architecture combining retrofitted legacy Low-Level Air Defence (LLAD) systems with advanced missile platforms in an unparalleled innovative mix that remains a hallmark of the Indian military's improvisation.

Ingeniously upgraded with radar-directed fire capability and electro-optical sights, Cold War-era systems from the early 1960s, comprised the LLAD network for close-in protection against drones. These included Pechora and OSA-AK SAM systems and ZSU-23-4 Shilka, ZU-23-2 twin barrel 23mm anti-aircraft (AA) guns from Soviet times, and the L/70 Bofors 40mm AA platform dating back to the 1940s. Army and Border Security Force snipers too were part of the LLAD structure, shooting down numerous incoming drones in Jammu, Punjab and Rajasthan.

These 'heirloom' LLAD platforms were supplemented by the Israeli SPYDER short and medium-range air defence missile system using Python-5 and Derby missiles for point defence against UAVs, cruise missiles, and aircraft.

A new kind of war

The domestic Akash and Akash-NG (New Generation) missile system provided medium-range coverage, while the long-range Barak-8, jointly developed with Israel, defended high-value assets and strategic nodes from aircraft, drones, and ballistic/cruise missiles. These were all backed by Russia's Almaz-Antey S-400 'Triumf' self-propelled surface-to-air missile system – renamed Sudarshan Chakra – one the world's best, of which India had acquired five units for \$5.5 billion in October 2018 and, so far, taken delivery of three.

All these systems were centrally integrated through the IACCS, enabling coordinated, real-time responses and full-spectrum aerial threat mitigation.

In conclusion, Operation Sindoor was not merely a skirmish; it was a seismic shift in which two nuclear-armed rivals stepped into the age of autonomous warfare, where deterrence is digital, and dominance is algorithmic. And as the smoke subsides, one truth remains: the next war will not begin with a soldier's charge, but with the silent whir of drones in the sky.

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

THE GIST

Open-source intelligence and drone-tracking data, meanwhile, revealed that India's offensive against Pakistan featured a diverse UAS inventory.

Pakistan repeatedly sought to probe and bring to heel India's Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) – its air defence nerve centre – by launching drones via varied routes, altitudes and diverse timings, to disrupt its communication nodes and forward-deployed command centres, albeit unsuccessfully.

Operation Sindoor was not merely a skirmish; it was a seismic shift in which two nuclear-armed rivals stepped into the age of autonomous warfare, where deterrence is digital, and dominance is algorithmic.

Is the three-year practice mandate for judicial service welcome?



Prashant Reddy T.
Co-author of 'Tareekh Pe Justice: Reforms for India's District Courts'



Bharat Chugh
Delhi-based advocate and former civil judge

PARLEY

In May 2020, the Supreme Court restored a minimum of three years of legal practice as a mandatory condition to apply for entry-level judicial service. The ruling reverses the Court's 2002 decision that had removed the practice requirement, originally mandated by a 1993 judgment. Is the three-year practice requirement a welcome move? Prashant Reddy T. and Bharat Chugh discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

Is this a welcome reform?

Bharat Chugh: I do not believe that three years of practice at the Bar significantly enhances a candidate's legal acumen or preparedness for judicial office. Such a brief tenure is unlikely to provide any meaningful exposure to the nuances and complexities of legal practice. The verdict also appears unsupported by empirical evidence and does little to address the systemic concerns it purports to resolve.

Prashant Reddy: I believe that it is a step in the right direction. However, it may still be insufficient. Ideally, candidates should get more courtroom experience before assuming judicial office. The near-consensus among the High Courts offers compelling empirical evidence to this effect. Barring two, all 23 High Courts have opined that the recruitment of young law graduates into the judicial service has yielded unsatisfactory outcomes. Moreover, in 2021, the Bar Council of India issued a scathing statement asserting that judges who do not have practical experience at the Bar were "found to be incapable and inept in handling matters".

Is it more effective to focus on strengthening the judicial training programmes instead?

PR: Judicial academies are under-equipped to provide meaningful training to newly appointed judges. More importantly, it is difficult to impart real-world skills within a classroom setting. It would require an exceptionally low faculty-to-trainee ratio to offer the kind of individual feedback and mentorship that these skills demand. Moreover, what cannot be taught in any institutional setting are lived experiences. There is a vast difference in how a recent law graduate perceives the world compared to someone in their mid-30s or 40s. Over time, personal and professional experiences foster a degree of emotional maturity that is essential for judicial decision-making. This point was highlighted in the Uttarakhand High Court's



A view of the Supreme Court of India. ANI

feedback to the Supreme Court committee examining the issue.

BC: I agree that a deeper understanding of life is essential to becoming a capable judge and that such understanding cannot be cultivated solely within the confines of a one-year judicial training programme. However, if we expect judges to enter the system with substantial life and professional experience, we must make the judicial service far more attractive than it is. By the time a candidate is appointed as a junior civil judge or first-class magistrate, they are likely to be around 29-30 years old. Given the working conditions and limited incentives, this is hardly an appealing career path, especially when they could instead qualify directly for the District Judge cadre by the age of 33 or 35.

How can we ensure the practice requirement isn't reduced to a mere formality?

BC: As you rightly said, it risks becoming a mere formality. The verdict does not lay down any concrete parameters to assess such experience. This not only undermines the purpose of such certification but also renders the process exclusionary, placing at a disadvantage those who lack mentorship or access to established professionals in the field. If the assessment is to be documentation-based, a more structured and transparent system is essential. For instance, a digital diary could be instituted, requiring candidates to upload verifiable records, such as order sheets and details of court appearances, onto a secure portal. The verdict also does not provide clarity on how candidates working in non-litigating roles, such as those employed by public sector undertakings or in-house legal departments, are to be assessed.

PR: I agree with Bharat. It is a fundamentally flawed and poorly conceived reform. Had the process been more democratic, with a public consultation mechanism in place, stakeholders could have pointed out the numerous practical



Had the process been more democratic, with a public consultation mechanism in place, stakeholders could have pointed out the numerous practical challenges associated with implementing such a measure.

PRASHANT REDDY T.

challenges associated with implementing such a measure. The disconnect becomes even more evident when one considers the realities of legal practice in India. In their formative years, most junior advocates are relegated to peripheral tasks, such as seeking adjournments, rather than engaging in substantive litigation. To regard such limited exposure as meaningful courtroom experience is deeply problematic.

Will it deter top talent from joining the judiciary, particularly candidates from marginalised or impoverished backgrounds?

BC: Yes. Previously, when such a requirement was absent, the judicial service offered a level playing field and a meaningful route to public service for many law graduates, particularly those from lesser-known law schools. Moreover, those who discover an aptitude for litigation may be reluctant to abandon their practice to start over as entry-level civil judges or magistrates in their late 20s.

It is equally important to note that persistent delays and procedural lapses in the conduct of judicial service exams deter serious candidates. Without systemic reforms, even if these exams attract a large number of applicants, the judiciary risks losing individuals best equipped to strengthen and transform the institution.

PR: As the qualifying age for the exam increases, the pool of applicants is likely to shrink. Offering the same pay and incentives to candidates in their late 20s as were previously offered to those in their early 20s will inevitably diminish the exam's appeal. That said, given the intense competition and limited opportunities in litigation, there will always be law graduates interested in joining the judicial service. However, the more pressing question is whether the exam attracts the most capable candidates. In my view, the current exam format, even with the addition of an interview stage, does not succeed in drawing the best talent.

The India Justice Report shows that the proportion of women judges in the district judiciary rose from 30% in 2017 to 38.3% in 2025. Could the practice requirement

disproportionately impact women?

PR: Certainly. For many women, the lack of financial resources or familial support makes it difficult to sustain three years of litigation. In contrast, a career in the judiciary offers greater financial stability and social legitimacy. That said, most States have reservations for women in the district judiciary, which will help preserve its appeal as a viable career option. However, it is vital to recognise that the composition of the Bench is intrinsically tied to the diversity of the Bar. A judiciary that lacks gender representation often mirrors broader systemic exclusions within the legal profession.

BC: In recent years, notable strides have been made in enhancing gender representation within the district judiciary. Without this added hurdle, the progress might have reflected in the higher judiciary. Litigation presents many entry-level barriers for women; many encounter resistance from conservative families that are more supportive of careers in academia or corporate law. Moreover, increasing the presence of women on the Bench is not just a matter of representation, it also helps foster greater sensitivity within the legal system.

Is this an instance of 'courtroom policymaking'? If so, should it be avoided?

PR: Absolutely. This is also a case of constitutional impropriety. Under Article 234 of the Constitution, the power to prescribe eligibility criteria for members of the district judiciary rests with the executive, in consultation with the State Public Service Commissions and the respective High Courts. The Supreme Court has no authority to appropriate these powers for itself. Yet, it has been doing so since the first All India Judges' Association case in 1991.

BC: Before advocating a reform of this scale, it is essential to gather thorough and reliable data. For instance, are there more complaints or disciplinary proceedings against judicial officers without prior advocacy experience compared to those who have it? Is the system able to retain judicial officers over time? These are complex questions that require data-driven analysis – something the Court, with its limited jurisdiction and time-bound hearings, is not equipped to carry out effectively.



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

NOTEBOOK

The movie marketing mania

Film-makers have always gone all out to promote their films in person, but in the age of social media, these efforts can get tiresome

Srinivasa Ramanujam

I met Kamal Haasan for an interview last Friday in Chennai for his much-awaited movie, *Thug Life*. The next day, he was at Sri Sai Ram College along with the entire team for the film's audio launch. On Sunday, he was present at the finals of a popular musical reality contest, Vijay's Super Singer Junior 10. In between these two big music events, I decided to watch an IPL match. Sure enough, Mr. Haasan was there on TV too, at a special programme hosted by Star Sports Tamil featuring the *Thug Life* team.

"I enjoy talking. It's a learning experience for me, because only when I talk, people get an opportunity to correct me," he told me, when I pointed out his hectic travel schedule for the film's promotions. It is hard to escape the film and its team, as *Thug Life*'s PR game has been on an overdrive in the last few weeks. I'm sure even die-hard fans of Mani Ratnam and Mr. Haasan are tired of it. At the same time, it is also heartening to watch a 70-year-old Haasan croon old melodies with a little girl, or shake a leg to a fast-paced number on stage.

The world has changed a lot over the last 20 years when I began as a rookie reporter. I remember attending the launch of Mr. Haasan's *Mumbai Xpress*. The invite to the event was quirky: it was printed on a fake ₹500 currency note. The title read 'Raajkambal Bank of India' – a reference to both the Reserve Bank of India and his production house, Raajkambal Productions. The line below said: 'I promise entertainment for the entire family'. Before the age of mobile phones and social media, information about a film or album was scarce, so film-makers went all out to market their films in person. Some adopted traditional ways of promoting their films, such as through newspaper advertisements, while some were others were more innovative.

Promotional material used to be a collector's delight. Cassettes in the 1990s gave us a quick peek into what to expect: the audio cassette of Shankar's *Jaanu*,

with music by A.R. Rahman, was packed in denim in 1998. I remember walking in to a neighbourhood shop to buy a special edition audio cassette of *Laysa Laysa* in 2003. Priced at ₹10 at a time when cassettes cost around ₹50, it had just two versions of the title song in its Side A and Side B, serving as a curtain-raiser for the album composed by Harris Jayaraj. In contrast, today's audio invites arrive as WhatsApp notifications.

Over time, promotions became more and more geared towards grabbing eyeballs. I remember the buzz surrounding the launch of *Madraspatnam* in 2010 – the invite featured old maps of Madras and old currency, and the venue of the event, Chennai Trade Centre, was transformed into the Madras of the 1940s, replete with soldiers and people marching along shouting slogans.

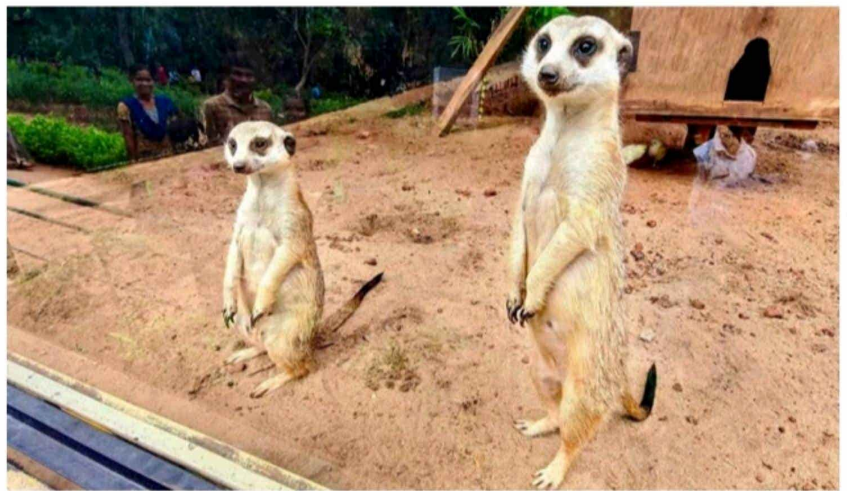
Actors too have various promotion styles. While Rajinikanth did not personally promote *Kabali*, the 2016 film was a massive hit in terms of promotions. Mr. Rajinikanth's face was everywhere, from billboards to aircraft. Parthiban has always been the most wacky. Attendees to his *Travin Nizhal* audio launch in 2022 were greeted with a mouth organ, while the invite to *Tenz* (2024) came with a large ruler and pen. On the other hand, actors such as Ajith and Nayanthara stay away from promotions.

Today's launches are aimed at digital audiences. 'Singles' and 'hook steps' rule the roost. Unlike earlier, people unfortunately seldom wait for an entire album with songs in different genres to drop. Songs themselves are chopped up in films given our dwindling attention spans. The goal seems to be to come up with a catchy line and a distinctive dance that will go 'viral' on Instagram. So much so that the team of *Thug Life* had a 'Thug-fluencers' event in Chennai recently, and reels of Mr. Haasan flooded Instagram feeds. Is there any place where Kamal Haasan, aka *Vinnel Nayagan* (Space Hero), is not present?

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

'Hi, we are ready to be clicked'



A pair of meerkats peer at visitors from their glass enclosure at the Indira Gandhi Zoological Park in Visakhapatnam. They were recently brought to the zoo as part of an animal exchange programme with the Greens Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre, facilitated by the Radhe Krishna Temple Welfare Trust, in Jamnagar, Gujarat. K.R. DEEPAK

FROM THE ARCHIVES The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 30, 1975

Newspapers hold their own against TV and radio

New Delhi, May 29: The saturation point for the press, radio and television appears to have been reached at 14 European States as well as in Australia, Canada, Cuba, Japan, New Zealand, the U.S. and the USSR, according to a unique survey of the mass media in 200 countries by the UNESCO.

The survey shows that despite retreats in some traditionally strong newspaper reading countries, statistically the press across the world is about holding its own. For example

France and the United Kingdom may now have fewer newspapers and smaller circulations than ten years ago but Europe still has more dailies, non-dailies and periodicals than any other region of the world.

The British, once the world's champion newspaper readers, have yielded the title to the Japanese and Swedes, who buy more than one newspaper for every two persons, the survey reveals. Africa still has nine countries without a daily and circulations are low, but the signs are that the press will develop there as it has done in other parts of the world. Asia has 20 countries having only one copy of a newspaper for every 50 persons, but Japan heads the circulation table and China with 1,908 newspapers tops the list for the number of newspaper titles.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 30, 1925

North-Western Ry. Strike

Lahore, May 29: According to an N.W. Ry. Union communique the following resolution was passed in an open meeting of the strikers held at Lahore yesterday: This mass meeting of the strikers at Lahore assures Messrs. Hall, Miller and Khan that if the Railway authorities do not negotiate an honourable settlement with them, they are quite determined to carry on the strike for another month with a view to completely disorganise the N.W. Railway administration by closing each and every Railway station on the line and thus compel the authorities to listen to their demands.



Slow and unsteady

Ethnic violence has abated but peace continues to elude Manipur

It has been a little over three months since President's Rule was declared in Manipur, after a disastrous spell when the State government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party's N. Biren Singh, failed to de-escalate tensions in the ongoing ethnic conflict. By all accounts, there has been a significant reduction in gun violence and arson, which had flared up sporadically since the ethnic conflagration began in May 2023. Some of the weapons that were looted from police constabularies have been returned and the militants do not seem to be roaming around with sophisticated weapons impudently as they did earlier. But that has not meant that peace has returned. The free movement of people and goods across highways and between the hills and the valley continues to be impeded. There have been no signs of any thaw in the hostility between the two communities that were at the centre of the conflict and this has meant that those displaced, and who lost their homes in the valley and the hills, are yet to return. That the peace has been fragile was seen in the way the Imphal valley convulsed in protests following a recent incident during the run-up to the Shikuli festival, in Ukhrul district in late May. When a State transport bus with journalists drove close to Kuki-Zo inhabited areas, some security personnel placed stickers on the bus to hide the name of the State - an act that riled civil society groups in the valley. Ostensibly, this was done to allow for their safe passage through the Kuki-Zo areas but it only antagonised groups in the valley who saw this as an act ofkow-towing to demands for a "separate administration", one of the key demands of the Kuki-Zo community representatives. Apparently, some of the latter's partisans had opposed transport services through their areas but stepped back after a stern stance by the organisers of the festival.

It is understandable that the Union government has to walk a tightrope in Manipur, and that explains the relatively slow pace of a return to "true normalcy". But the government must take strong steps in disarming insurgent and chauvinist groups who continue to hold sway in the valley and the hills. It should also send a message that these sections will not represent the respective communities in the peace and political initiatives that are needed to resolve the conflict. The distrust of state institutions has led to ethnic partisans setting the discourse. In order to reverse this situation, a stronger commitment to implementing the rule of law, while focusing on rehabilitating the victims of the conflict, is the need of the hour. Meanwhile, there have been calls for the restoration of the State Assembly, with some MLAs claiming majority support for a fresh iteration of an NDA government. This step should only be considered if there is some consensus on steps to be taken towards normalcy among the elected representatives of the respective communities and civil society actors.

Danger in the sea

India's response to maritime disasters must be faster and better

In the afternoon of May 24, MSC Elsa 3, carrying more than 640 containers, started tilting off the coast of Kochi, apparently due to an operational problem. The nearly three-decade-old ship was said to be structurally safe. The crew abandoned the ship after unsuccessfully trying to right her. Now, Elsa 3 is lying at the bottom of the seabed 50 metres below. As per the cargo manifest, officials say the ship had 13 containers with hazardous goods. Twelve had calcium carbide, a reactive compound, and one had "rubber solution". Some 50 containers, many empty, were floating and getting tossed around by monsoon weather. Officials say the rubber solution has reacted with the seawater and accounts for the plastic pellets being found on the Kerala coast. Five containers with calcium carbide, another pollution hazard, are lying on the seabed and need to be safely disposed of before they cause damage. Some oil pollution has also been reported. There is as yet no clarity on how to safely dispose of the plastic pellets.

Though containers have tremendously boosted world trade logistics, oversight and control of what each container that passes several hands, ships and yards has is a global problem. Besides the 600-odd containers still lodged inside Elsa 3's cargo space, some 365 tonnes of heavy fuel oil and 60 tonnes of diesel lie inside the ship's tanks. That much of the oil has not seeped out yet is fortuitous but there is every possibility of it happening if quick action is not taken. The Chennai coast was ravaged by 250 tonnes of heavy fuel oil from an oil tanker that collided with an LPG carrier in 2017. MSC Elsa 3 is a toxic dump that needs to be quickly disposed of. Salvagers are being engaged and they will follow international insurance protocols. The National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan (NOS-DCP) names the Coast Guard as the nodal agency for such responses. In Chennai, the response was delayed by several days and there was much confusion and a lack of coordination between agencies. In Kerala, however, there has been enough time to rig up an effective response. With ambitious plans for economic growth that will inevitably lead to a surge in ship traffic, the government has also planned to draw more national and global transshipment traffic into India's waters. India is only set to see a great number and variety of ships of varying cargoes on its coast in future. The Kerala response will show how well prepared India is to handle a major maritime disaster.

The case for a special fiscal package for Andhra Pradesh

Andhra Pradesh is in deep financial distress and there is a strong case for the Finance Commission to make a special dispensation for the State.

When Telangana was carved out of the larger State of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, the rump State of Andhra Pradesh demanded that it be given a 'special category' status to cope with the loss of Hyderabad, the dominant tax generator of the combined State. Even though then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh gave an assurance on the floor of Parliament conceding this demand, the Act dividing the State did not make any provision for a special category status.

The division of the State took effect in June 2014, a time when the National Democratic Alliance government had replaced the United Progressive Alliance government at the Centre; N. Chandrababu Naidu became the first Chief Minister of the rump State of Andhra Pradesh. All through his term (2014-19), Mr. Naidu fought energetically for the parliamentary assurance to be honoured but the Narendra Modi government stonewalled the plea on the ground that the Centre had discontinued the 'special category' scheme on the advice of the 14th Finance Commission.

Mr. Naidu, who returned as the Chief Minister in 2024 is starting at near empty coffers after the blows of structural fiscal handicaps and the pressure of funding unaffordable freebies under the preceding Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy government (which he topped up handsomely in his own campaign). Competitive freebies under electoral pressures are a State-level issue and the Centre is under no obligation to come to the State's aid. But the Centre has a definite obligation to compensate Andhra Pradesh for the structural fiscal losses it suffered on account of the bifurcation of the State.

An option
A straightforward option is for the Centre to make an exception and accord 'special category' status to Andhra Pradesh on the ground that it is only fulfilling an assurance given in Parliament. But for Andhra Pradesh itself, this may not be an attractive choice because the 'special category status' has been watered down. Unlike before, when a special category State received substantial fiscal support through Plan assistance, all that it now gets is external loans such as those from the World Bank on slightly softer terms. Such a diluted 'special category status' will be a hollow



Duvvuri Subbarao

is former Finance Secretary to the Government of India and a former Governor, Reserve Bank of India

It is for the Finance Commission to come up with an apolitical and formula-based solution so that States that have lost fiscal capacity are not abandoned

States and finances

Change in per capita own revenue after bifurcation

S.No.	State	Year	Per capita own revenue (₹)	Change in per capita own revenue
1.	Uttar Pradesh (Mother)	2001/02	759	(-) 4%
	- Uttar Pradesh (Rump)		729	
2.	Madhya Pradesh (Mother)	2001/02	1,335	(+1) 75.9%
	- Madhya Pradesh (Rump)		1,108	
3.	Bihar (Mother)	2001/02	1,041	(-) 6%
	- Bihar (Rump)		1,303	
4.	Andhra Pradesh (Mother)	2015/16	459	(-) 131.6%
	- Andhra Pradesh (Rump)		314	
	Telangana		905	(+197.2%)
	- Andhra Pradesh (Rump)		11,730	
	Telangana		9,007	(-) 23.2%
	- Andhra Pradesh (Rump)		15,623	

NB: The figures relate to the year after the division of States

Source: Comptroller and Auditor General of India: Finance Accounts

victory for Andhra Pradesh.

A better option for Andhra Pradesh is to seek a special package of assistance that is more generous than a straitjacketed special category status. There are many precedents for politically driven, discretionary special packages such as the Koraput-Balangir-Kalahandi special plan for Odisha and the Bundelkhand special package for Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Bihar was also given a special 'pre-election' package in 2015. However, such 'one off' packages on political and discretionary grounds weaken the federal fabric and are best avoided. A neater option is for the Finance Commission to recommend a special package for Andhra Pradesh. Since the Finance Commission is an apolitical, professional body enjoying a constitutional status, its recommendation will have gravitas.

States and divisions

But what is the case for Andhra Pradesh that the Finance Commission should consider?

All divisions of States into smaller units post 1956 have been done on political, administrative or geographical considerations. This has inevitably resulted in an uneven division of fiscal capacity. There are many indicators of the fiscal capacity of a State. One of the most robust is the State's own revenue.

Consider State divisions that happened post 2000: Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar were broken up in the year 2000, and Andhra Pradesh was divided in 2014. The table shows that in terms of per capita own revenue, in each of these cases, the carved out States, namely Uttarakhanda, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Telangana, gained at the expense of the rump States. But the loss in the case of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh was relatively small when compared to that of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh.

One possible formula for a special package is that if the loss in fiscal capacity of a State on account of division is more than 10%, the Centre would give a special package spread over a limited period to compensate for the loss. On this formula, both Bihar and Andhra Pradesh will qualify for assistance.

The Finance Commission could of course consider other formulae that it thinks better capture the gain or loss in fiscal capacity. The important thing is that States such as Andhra Pradesh that have lost fiscal capacity on account of bifurcation are not abandoned to fend for themselves. It is incumbent on the Finance Commission, which is free to make recommendations to put our fiscal federalism on a sound footing, to evolve an objective, apolitical and formula-based solution to the problem.

Rewriting the script of early childhood education

"Some kids win the lottery at birth; far too many don't - and most people struggle to catch up," said the Nobel Laureate Prof. James Heckman. This holds true for India as well where its employment problem is partly a consequence of this 'lottery of birth'. A child born in India has a one-in-five chance of being born into poverty, affecting their health, nutrition, learning and earning potential. Yet, there is a way to beat these odds. From the decision by Uttar Pradesh to hire 11,000 dedicated Early Childhood Care and Education educators for Balvatikas to Odisha launching Shishu Vatikas and Jaidupedi Kits, States in India are showing the way.

The Heckman curve was a powerful economic model that provided a simple yet profound insight - of the relationship between age and the rate of return on investments in human capital. Heckman found that every dollar invested in early childhood education yields a return that ranges from \$7 to \$12, with lasting impacts: children who receive quality early education are four times more likely to have higher earnings and three times more likely to own a home as adults. By age five, many gaps in outcomes - such as earning potential and quality of life - are already evident. Children often struggle throughout life if motivation and learning habits are not nurtured early.

Learning outcomes
Yet, India's ECE system faces three major challenges. First, children are not receiving sufficient instructional time. Nearly 5.5 crore children between ages three to six are enrolled in 14 lakh operational Anganwadis and 56,000 government pre-primary schools. However, Anganwadi workers spend only 38 minutes per



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is the Chairperson and Co-founder of the Indian School of Public Policy and the Chairman of the Centre for Civil Society

Strategic investments in early childhood education and engaging parents will help young learners

day on preschool instruction, which is far short of the scheduled two hours, and only 9% of pre-primary schools have a dedicated ECE teacher. We are planting trees without the right care to help them grow. The effects are reflected in learning outcomes. The India Early Childhood Education Impact Study found that only 15% of pre-primary children could match basic objects, a skill essential for letter recognition in Class one. Similarly, only 30% could identify larger and smaller numbers, which are foundational for arithmetic. As a result, children often start formal schooling without the skills they need, with many bypassing essential ECE years entirely: 2% of three-year-olds, 5.1% of four-year-olds, and nearly one-fourth of five-year-olds are enrolled directly in Class one.

The issue of resources, engaging parents
Second, the thoughtful optimisation of resources for early childhood education remains a challenge. The Government of India spends only ₹1,263 a child annually on ECE compared to ₹17,000 a student on school education - largely on producing teaching-learning materials that are often underused. There simply are not enough teachers to implement these resources, and there is a lack of oversight - one supervisor is responsible for monitoring 282 Anganwadis. To improve oversight, we need targeted funding to hire more supervisors and dedicated ECE teachers. These measures, though modest, promise high returns.

Uttar Pradesh has now moved ahead on the hiring of nearly 11,000 ECE educators for Balvatikas in all districts. The State also organised a six-day residential training programme for 50 master trainers from 13 districts to train them on ECE pedagogy. Odisha

has taken the decision to open Shishu Vatikas in all government schools to make children in the age group five to six school ready.

While increased funding would lead to immediate improvements, sustaining these gains depends on engaging parents, and here lies the third challenge. Most parents care deeply about their children's education but may lack guidance on supporting early learning. Empowering parents with simple, effective ECE practices can make a significant difference. For instance, providing worksheets or encouraging their participation in ECE centre activities can deepen their involvement.

In Madhya Pradesh, the monthly Bal Choupal programme engages with parents directly by showing them the importance of play-based learning. With smartphone access nearly universal, parental engagement can be further strengthened through WhatsApp or EdTech apps, allowing parents to support their children's development.

In perspective

Reversing these odds may seem like an uphill battle, but with targeted funding and increased parental involvement, we can provide our children with the foundation they deserve.

By 2047, over a billion Indians will enter the global workforce, presenting an unprecedented opportunity to reshape India's role in the world economy. Strategic investments in ECE and engaging parents in their children's learning journey could help 200 million Indians escape the lottery of birth and give today's young learners the chance to become tomorrow's leaders. This is a critical pathway to realising India's vision of becoming a true Vishwa Guru, empowering generations to come.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Manipur situation

The intent by some in the National Democratic Alliance to form a "popular" government in Manipur is strange (Page 1, May 29). That these people are unaware of the ground reality is cause for concern. The consensus of all stakeholders and a proper settlement of the ethnic conflict is what will pave the way for a conducive environment. One expects the government of the day to engage with the warring factions and find a lasting solution to the crisis.

Prabhu Raj R.,
Bengaluru

MP's line

Congress Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor

has done a good job of turning the defence of India's position vis-à-vis Pakistan into an unequalled eulogisation of the top leader in the course of India's diplomatic outreach (Inside pages, "Shashi Tharoor faces flak from his own party for remarks on LoC breach", May 29). Reading between the lines, one can say with certainty that the MP awards more marks to the government of the day than previous Congress governments in dealing with Pakistan. For all his scholarship, sophistication, sensitivity and sensibility, are his words laced with the belligerence typical of right-wing hardliners? Is there a desperation to

demonstrate that he wears his patriotism on his sleeves? A poet dreamt that he was a butterfly and was left to wonder which way he was dreaming. The MP seems to share the poet's predicament.

G. David Milton,
Maruthanadu, Tamil Nadu

Had the erudite leader remembered the India-Pakistan war of 1965, he would have known that the Indian Army had not only crossed the ceasefire line but also captured the entire Haji Pir bulge in the Battle of Haji Pir Pass. It marked a turning point in the conflict and held until vacated under the Tashkent Agreement. Not recognising such significant military

achievements would be more than unfair to the valour and the sacrifices of India's armed forces.

S.K. Choudhury,
Bengaluru

The MP's statements have sparked understandable outrage within his own party. While political maturity involves acknowledging national achievements beyond party lines, it is troubling when such statements blur ideological boundaries and confuse people. By appearing to align with the ruling party's narrative, the MP risks weakening the Opposition's position and inadvertently bolstering the BJP's propaganda. It is essential for Opposition

leaders to maintain clarity, consistency, and an accountability to the values their party stands for.

Rukma Sharma,
Jalandhar, Punjab

Digital literacy

Digital literacy in rural India is essential. Many lack Internet access and basic digital skills. Governments and schools must provide the necessary infrastructure and training. Bridging this divide ensures equal opportunities for education, jobs, and growth. As a student, I believe it is time to act.

Buvan Doolia,
Mumbai

Inadequate

Torrential rainfall following

the early onset of the southwest monsoon has undoubtedly exposed the creaky drainage infrastructure of Indian cities. There is no doubt that several of India's metropolitan cities do not have well-equipped drainage systems to deal with the recent changes in weather patterns. With weather vagaries becoming the new normal, cities have to invest more to revamp their drainage systems to avoid the flooding that affects livelihoods and causes damage.

M. Jayaram,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

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

SCIENCE

Tobacco affordability fuelling cancer epidemic in India

Unlike in other countries where higher prices have deterred smoking, prices remain low in India; tobacco affordability undermines the World Health Organization's MPOWER framework and weakens control, hindering efforts to reduce tobacco-related cancers; implementing robust policies are the need of the hour to curb tobacco use

WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY

Vid Karmarkar

Take a walk around any Indian office, and you're likely to spot some employees gathered outside, sipping tea and smoking a cigarette. Sandeep, a young marketing professional, calls such "sutta (smoking) breaks" a creative escape. "It's time to take a break from work stress and make connections. The chai-sutta break is where ideas flow as freely as the smoke." But for many non-smokers, this comes at a cost – involuntary exposure to second-hand smoke.

According to GATS2 data, nearly 42% of men and 14% of women in India use tobacco. Home to 70% of the world's smokeless tobacco (SLT) users, SLT is preferred over smoked tobacco in the country. In smoked tobacco, the bidi is favoured over cigarettes, especially in rural and low-income groups. Despite the preference for bidis, India has seen the largest increase in the market share of cigarettes globally.

Rajesh, a shopkeeper in Mulshi, a village near Pune, says, "Bidis are what people here can afford. Cigarettes are for the city folks. But now even in villages, people want to try cigarettes because they think it's modern."

Both SLT and smoked tobacco drastically increase cancer risk, particularly for lung, head, neck, stomach, and pancreatic cancers. "My uncle chewed tobacco for years," said Sunita, a homemaker from Maharashtra. "He passed away from mouth cancer, and we didn't realise how dangerous it was until it was too late," she says.

India ranks first globally in male cancer incidence and mortality rates. Among tobacco-related cancers in males, lung cancer leads globally, while in India, lip and oral cancers top the list, followed by lung cancer. "Every time I see someone with a gutka (which is banned in India) pouch in their pocket, I feel like warning them," says Manish, a college student whose father died of oral cancer.

Along with the health burden, tobacco use imposed an economic cost of ₹1.77 lakh crore (1.04% of India's GDP) in 2017-2018. Smoking accounted for 74% of these costs, while SLT use made up 26%. With tobacco use on the rise, both health and economic costs are projected to increase. Kajvi, who quit smoking after a cancer scare, says, "I never realised the financial toll until I saw the hospital bills. Smoking doesn't just cost you money – it costs you your life and the lives of those who depend on you."



Call to action: People taking part in a rally against smoking on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day which is observed annually on May 31. K. MURALI KUMAR

India faces a dual challenge of significant health and economic burdens from tobacco-related cancers and the complexities of lung cancer screening in a tuberculosis-endemic country. This underscores the urgent need for evidence-based anti-tobacco policies as a primary prevention strategy. However, the tobacco industry's influence – through policy interference, pricing tactics to maintain affordability, targeted marketing, dense tobacco shop networks, and a lack of political will – ensures widespread tobacco accessibility.

"The fact that a bidi costs less than a cup of tea is a tragedy," says Ashok, a retired clerk. "When I was younger, I didn't think twice about buying a bidi. Now I see how cheap tobacco ruins lives." Taxation is a critical yet underutilised tool in reducing tobacco use. Despite the proposed GST increase to 35%, it falls short of the World Health Organization's recommendation of taxing tobacco at 75% of its MRP to effectively deter use. Even with the steep increase in tobacco tax, its impact decreases if consumers' income increases significantly.

Unlike in many countries where higher prices have curbed smoking, rising incomes in India – especially among the 450 million middle class – have outpaced tax hikes. With more purchasing power, tobacco remains affordable. The 2024

Union Budget's unchanged tobacco taxes worsened the issue, enabling "undershifting," where manufacturers absorb tax hikes to grow their markets.

Unit pricing

A key factor in tobacco affordability is its unit pricing. A pack of bidis has a median price of ₹12 but can be found for as little as ₹5. Similarly, smokeless tobacco products have a median price of ₹5, with some being sold for as low as ₹1. Shankar, a daily wage labourer and cancer patient says he could afford to buy a few packs every day. While cigarette packs have a median price of ₹95, cheaper options are available for as low as ₹5. Sonia, a college student, says, "Cigarettes are so cheap that they're easy to buy. The government needs to make it harder for people like us to afford them."

To enhance affordability, cigarettes are often sold as single sticks – a practice banned in 88 countries but not in India. Priced at approximately ₹15, single sticks become easily affordable and bypass graphic health warnings. Research shows that 87% of Indian cigarette vendors sell single sticks, frequently operating near tea stalls, reinforcing the widespread "chai-sutta" culture.

In India where a significant proportion of the population earns ₹170-180 per day, along with the addictive potential of

tobacco, makes the current tobacco pricing affordable to fulfil their cravings.

Tobacco affordability undermines the WHO's MPOWER framework and weakens tobacco control, hindering efforts to reduce tobacco-related cancers. Reducing tobacco use is vital for cutting cancer incidence. Implementing robust anti-tobacco policies can be effective in curbing tobacco use.

Regular tax hikes that outpace income growth can make tobacco products unaffordable, discouraging their use. Additionally, banning single-stick sales can reinforce health warnings and curb impulse purchases. Further, allocating tobacco tax revenue towards public health initiatives, such as cancer screenings in underserved areas, can have a significant impact. Enforcing plain packaging with prominent health warnings can also reduce tobacco's appeal, while restricting sales near tea stalls can help break the "chai-sutta" association. Robust enforcement, through regular inspections and penalties, is essential to uphold these regulations.

(Dr. Vid Karmarkar is a social entrepreneur, researcher, writer and advocate of advancing equitable cancer care and global health. He is also the founder of the Canseva Foundation, a registered nonprofit organisation. vid.karmarkar@gmail.com)

THE GIST

India ranks first globally in male cancer incidence and mortality rates. Among tobacco-related cancers in males, lung cancer leads globally, while in India, lip and oral cancers top the list, followed by lung cancer

Along with the health burden, tobacco use imposed an economic cost of ₹1.77 lakh crore (1.04% of India's GDP) in 2017-2018. Smoking accounted for 74% of these costs, while SLT use made up 26%

India faces a dual challenge of significant health and economic burdens from tobacco-related cancers and the complexities of lung cancer screening in a tuberculosis-endemic country. This underscores the urgent need for evidence-based anti-tobacco policies as a primary prevention strategy

BIG SHOT



Taking precautions: People wearing masks while waiting at King George Hospital in Visakhapatnam as COVID norms get reinforced in the city. Number of cases have been rising across the country. K.R. DEEPA

Science behind scent: how skin microbiome can influence effect of perfumes on humans

Ramya Kannan

For someone who has been battling bad bugs for his entire professional life, life has produced an interesting deviation for Abdul Ghafur, infectious diseases expert. He has now begun engaging with the good bugs too, looking in particular at the skin microbiome to see what perfume is right for you.

The perfume type has to be at ease with your skin microbiome, for it to actually work. Otherwise, multiple applications and overexposure to the chemicals in the perfumes might turn sour, at the least, and at the extreme, even turn harmful for humans. "We think of bugs as being all 'bad', but that is not true at all. About 99.999% of bugs are either neutral or good for us. It's only 0.001% of bugs that are 'bad', rather, disease causing," Dr. Ghafur says.

"I am a connoisseur of perfume. And I've always wondered why some perfumes work for some people, but not for others. No two people have the same skin microbiome, and that's why a perfume that smells divine on one person may not work the same on another. The secret lies not just in the perfume, but in how your skin's bacteria interact with its ingredients," he explains. If a certain



The perfume type has to be at ease with your skin microbiome, for it to actually work. ISTOCKPHOTO

perfume does not work, "people just keep changing their brands frequently, or they think they have to apply more, spray liberally, or use the perfume multiple times. All of which cannot be good, because these perfumes are essentially a cocktail of chemicals that can impact the skin, cardiac health and may also be carcinogenic," he adds.

That is what led him to studying what determines why perfumes work or not. "It's skin chemistry, basically. The human skin is home to millions of bacteria that control the pH level, dryness, oil content

etc. And we have plenty of data on these skin microbiome," he says. Sweat itself has no odour, it's just salt and water, it is the skin bacteria that lend the smell to sweat.

What causes body odour

As far as body odour goes, there are three key groups of enabler bugs: Cutibacterium acnes, found in areas rich in sebaceous glands (face, back, chest, armpits, groin), contributes to a musky odour through lipid breakdown. The second is Corynebacterium, found in moist regions like the armpit and groin, which converts sweat compounds into pungent volatiles including sulphur compounds.

Finally, there is Staphylococcus epidermidis, common on the face, scalp, armpits, and groin, which plays a balancing role – less directly involved in odour production and may help prevent overgrowth of stronger odour-producing microbes.

The concentration of the skin microbiome is influenced by food, the environment and weather changes, but the percentage composition of the main bacterial group remains the same for an individual for a long while. There are general preferences on where certain fragrance types perform better – for instance, floral notes tend to work well on drier areas like the

wrist, while musky scents are better suited for comparatively moist regions such as the neck.

There is a lot of information available about the skin microbiome from a health perspective, but literally none of that has been adopted by the fragrance industry.

He has now taken up skin microbiome metagenomic testing for other connoisseurs of perfumes. "We are not recommending testing for everyone. There is no viable business model for routine, expensive metagenomic testing before choosing a perfume. Our goal is to share valuable insights from microbiome and VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) research and how they can be applied conceptually to fragrance use," he says.

Recent consumer surveys, he adds, have shown an increased interest in safe and microbiome-friendly products.

"Several deodorants are already microbiome friendly, but that kind of orientation for perfumes is missing," Dr. Ghafur says.

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FRIDAY • MAY 30, 2025

Yen for growth

Euphoria over GDP size should be tempered with realism

The IMF in its latest World Economic Outlook has projected that India's nominal GDP will be \$4.18 trillion in 2025, overtaking Japan as the fourth largest economy in the world. This is a milestone indeed, and the cheerleaders are out. But the euphoria needs to be tempered with some realism. Just six years ago in 2019, Japan's nominal GDP at \$5.11 trillion was 82 per cent higher than India's \$2.83 trillion.

India suffered a much larger contraction than Japan (5.7 per cent versus 1.2 per cent) in the pandemic year of 2020. But since 2020, a scorching annualised growth rate of 9.4 per cent in India's nominal GDP has helped it race ahead of Japan, which has suffered a 3.7 per cent annual contraction in this period. India's climb in the global GDP rankings is thus a function of its economic resilience post-Covid. It must also be acknowledged that India managed this recovery without excessive fiscal stimulus. This left its sovereign debt parameters in better shape than the advanced economies. But then, as home to the world's largest population with favourable demographic tailwinds, it is hardly a surprise that the Indian economy is growing in absolute size, relative to the greying advanced economies. Now, India should aspire to level with nations such as Japan on growth with equity and superior human development indicators.

Though India is marginally ahead of Japan on the size of its economy, its GDP per capita (current dollars) will still average just \$2,878 in 2025 compared to \$33,955 for Japan, \$89,105 for the US and \$55,911 for Germany. Even populous China will manage \$13,687. India's per capita income appears better on PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) at \$12,131 but still lags China (\$28,978) and Japan (\$54,677) by wide margins. India's high growth rates in the last decade have lifted millions out of poverty. But income inequality remains pervasive. The recently published Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) showed that in 2024, average per capita household spending in rural India were just ₹4,122 per month, 41 per cent less than urban households. In urban India, a creamy layer (top 5 per cent) household managed per capita spending of over ₹20,300 a month, while a bottom 5 per cent household eked out a living with ₹2,376. Yawning regional disparities are evident with households in Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh getting by spending less than half of those in the Southern States.

We are not in the big league on human development indicators. UNDP places India at the 130th rank among 193 nations in its Human Development Index (HDI). Poor rankings on parameters such as years of schooling and life expectancy are a sure sign that excessive reliance on the private sector to deliver universal health and education simply isn't working. It is good to see India surpass yet another developed country, but ultimately, GDP milestones should make a difference to the aam aadmi.

POCKET

RAVIRATH



"It's not Covid-19. It's the morning walks you take for good health!"

KARNAL SINGH
VEDIKA PANDEY

In his 2024 Independence Day address, the Prime Minister called for India to lead the global gaming industry, highlighting its cultural potential and the need for indigenous innovation. To achieve the vision of a clean, compliant foundation for the gaming ecosystem, the government has reportedly decided to bring online real money gaming (RMG) under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Gaming operators will now have to register with India's money laundering watchdog, the Financial Intelligence Unit-India (FIU), conduct know-your-customer (KYC) procedures, maintain transaction records, and report suspicious transactions.

India has a fragmented regulatory landscape for gaming, particularly when it comes to online activities. The Public Gambling Act of 1867, which several States still follow, bans public gambling but exempts games of skill. Post-independence, the Constitution placed betting and gambling under State jurisdiction and brought games of skill under central regulation. This means that skill-based real-money games—like poker, rummy and fantasy sports—are protected as legitimate business activities across the nation. On the other hand, the permissibility of games of chance or gambling, varies from State to State.

Illicit offshore operators exploit India's fragmented regulatory landscape, often misleading users into believing their services are legitimate. Operating without regulatory sanction, they evade taxes, deceive users, and perpetrate large-scale fraud by siphoning funds abroad and abruptly shutting down operations—leaving users high and dry. Notable cases include the Mahadev betting app, linked to suspected proceeds exceeding ₹6,000 crore, and Fiewin, which defrauded users of over ₹400 crore. These operators rig outcomes, fabricate winnings, and use networks of shell companies, crypto wallets, and bank accounts to launder money and move it abroad.

The solution lies in subjecting all gaming operators to financial compliance obligations under the PMLA. Once safeguards are enforced across the board, it will no longer be possible for fly-by-night or offshore operators to operate with impunity. Those unwilling to comply will be forced out, while legitimate, accountable platforms will continue to operate and grow. Financial regulation, in effect, becomes the filter that separates the wheat from the chaff.



GLOBALLY RECOGNISED RISK Money laundering, terror financing and fraud are among the most significant risks posed by illegal gaming operations. Weak cybersecurity also leaves users, particularly minors, vulnerable to data theft and online abuse.

RMG attracts over 155 million yearly users. Due to the high volume and velocity of transactions, often involving real money or virtual assets, gaming services can be exploited for money laundering. The process typically involves three stages. In the placement phase, operators inject illicit funds through deposits or virtual credit purchases. During layering, they obscure fund origins using in-game transfers, currency conversions, etc. Finally, they withdraw the "cleaned" funds as winnings or refunds, often via crypto or cross-border payment channels.

Terror financing is another serious concern, as the anonymous and borderless nature of services enables transfers using prepaid gaming credits or virtual items, which are difficult to trace. Terror operatives may also use gameplay as a cover to communicate and facilitate such transfers. Jurisdictions like the UK, EU, and US impose robust anti-money laundering (AML) and counter the financing of terrorism (CFT) requirements to mitigate risks. The Financial Action Task Force, an international AML/CFT watchdog, also advocates for similar safeguards.

FINANCIAL HYGIENE NECESSARY The inclusion of online gaming under PMLA will be the latest in a series of

financial regulations aimed at reining in digital services that operate in a legal grey zone. A parallel can be drawn with the cryptocurrency ecosystem, where PMLA rules notified in 2023 brought virtual asset service providers under regulatory oversight. This enabled the FIU to monitor transactions more closely and take penal action against violations, therefore improving accountability in the sector.

Online gaming now finds itself at a similar crossroads. Just as crypto service providers evolved from opacity to accountability under the weight of financial regulation, real money gaming operators must now operate with responsibility.

However, as with any compliance regime, it is important to anticipate the downsides of applying AML regulations too rigidly.

Chief among them is the risk of users shifting to unregulated offshore platforms to avoid the friction of KYC requirements. This is especially concerning given that such platforms often market themselves with slogans like "no GST" and "no KYC".

Overly burdensome onboarding

Notable cases include the Mahadev betting app, linked to suspected proceeds exceeding ₹6,000 crore, and Fiewin, which defrauded users of over ₹400 crore

processes could alienate casual or low-risk users, driving them towards riskier alternatives—undermining the very goal of curbing money laundering. The Singapore banking system offers a cautionary example—when unprecedented numbers of users recently abandoned bank services due to frictions in KYC processes during onboarding.

A graded KYC approach, where the level of due diligence increases with user activity and risk is appropriate. Initial onboarding can involve minimal but effective verification—for instance, a one-time password (OTP) check of the user's mobile number. Full KYC can be triggered after a spending threshold is crossed, requiring ID, address, and bank account verification.

This tiered approach is already used in other regulated sectors. The RBI permits OTP-based onboarding for pre-paid instruments with a ₹10,000 cap, recognising their lower risk. SEBI similarly exempts mutual fund investors from PAN submission for annual investments up to ₹50,000.

The goal of the proposed rules should not be to punish compliant platforms, but to close the gaps that bad actors exploit. A well-calibrated PMLA framework should prioritise intelligence-led enforcement and proportionate compliance, ensuring resources are directed where risks are highest.

Karnal is former head of the Enforcement Directorate and Managing Partner at Circle of Counsel, and Vedika is a lawyer. Views are personal.

Misleading debate on RBI draft gold loan norms

The proposed lending and collateral directives are fair to all parties concerned. The current debate misses basic issues

S Kalyanasundaram

On April 9, 2025, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) released a draft notification titled "RBI (Lending against Gold Collateral) Directions, 2025". As is customary, the draft was opened for public comments and stakeholder feedback.

In the past week, a sudden and intense debate has erupted—primarily in Tamil Nadu. Politicians across party lines have urged the RBI to withdraw the "new conditions" on gold loans, citing their potential impact on poor and middle-class families who rely on such loans during emergencies. It is worth noting that these are draft guidelines, not final rules.

Much of the criticism appears to stem from a misunderstanding—or misrepresentation—of the draft notification. To understand the RBI's intent, it's helpful to refer directly to its communication:

"The Reserve Bank has restricted lending against primary gold/gold bullion due to broader macro-prudential concerns as also due to the speculative and non-productive nature of gold."

However, it has allowed lending against gold jewellery and ornaments to meet short-term financial needs. The RBI emphasised that current regulations aim to:

"...provide borrowers an avenue to tide over tight liquidity conditions by



LOAN NORMS. Political firestorm

leveraging idle gold jewellery, while simultaneously addressing risks for the lenders."

RISING RISK

Over the past year, gold prices have surged significantly, which has driven a sharp increase in gold loan portfolios. This trend raises concerns about potential market corrections and increased credit risk.

The total outstanding gold loans—including those from banks and NBFCs—stood at ₹11.11 lakh crore in December 2024, a 27.26 per cent rise from ₹8.73 lakh crore in December 2023. Per data presented in Parliament, gross non-performing assets (NPAs) from gold loans in scheduled commercial banks and NBFCs rose by 18.14 per cent between March and June 2024.

The draft guidelines introduce a clearer distinction between:

• Consumption loans—For emergencies, medical needs, consumer purchases, etc. These do not generate income.

• Income-generating loans—For business or productive purposes. These loans shall primarily be categorised as per the purposes for which they are extended and shall not generally be categorised as gold loans.

The quantum and tenor of income generating loan shall be assessed on the basis of credit requirement and cash flows likely to be generated through the economic activity and not on the basis of value of the collateral.

KEY PROVISIONS

Proof of ownership: RBI mandates that lenders verify the ownership of pledged gold. If original purchase receipts are unavailable, borrowers may provide a declaration explaining ownership. This measure is crucial to prevent pledging of stolen jewellery, which does not create a valid legal pledge.

Loan tenure: The draft caps the tenure of consumption loans (particularly bullion loans) at 12 months. This aims to ensure that such loans remain short-term and emergency-oriented. While this may affect borrowers used to rolling over loans through interest payments, it is not a ban on renewals—banks may allow renewals if interest is serviced regularly.

Loan-to-Value (LTV) ratio: The maximum LTV ratio for gold loans is proposed at 75 per cent, applicable to both banks and NBFCs.

This is a protective measure for both

lenders and borrowers:

- Higher LTVs reduce the margin of safety.
- In a price fall, low-margin loans are more likely to result in jewel forfeiture and forced auctions.
- A lower LTV helps maintain borrower commitment and protects asset value.

Valuation/Appraisal of Gold: Contrary to claims by some politicians and union leaders, the RBI has not proposed mandatory external appraisers. The guidelines simply state: "Lenders shall appoint qualified assayer(s)/valuer(s), who do not have any negative records."

This allows banks to continue using their existing appraisers—whether internal or contracted—provided they meet basic quality standards.

Return of collateral: A borrower's gold jewellery must be returned within seven working days of full loan repayment or settlement.

Surprisingly there is no comment or objection to this provision. Once the loan is closed, there is no need to hold the securities and on the same day or at the most within a day the lenders must be able to release the jewels.

The RBI's draft guidelines are aimed at risk mitigation and financial discipline in the gold loan segment. Unfortunately, the public discourse has been clouded by misinformation and political posturing.

The writer is a retired banker

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MSME credit woes

While micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) have been identified as foremost engines of growth, as this sector is made up of 63 million registered enterprises that account for 29 per cent of the country's GDP, 40 per cent of the exports, and a whopping 60 per cent of the workforce, easy access to credit has continued to plague their functioning. Under these circumstances, the NITI Aayog has suggested a six-pronged

strategy, including providing access to working capital with a ₹5-crore credit card facility and a rapid disbursement mechanism through banks, along with proposals aimed at upgrading technology and a focused skill development program. It is welcome. Considering the poor credit penetration, which stands at an abysmal 14 per cent compared to China's 37 per cent, the government needs to set up a separate, easy-access non-banking mechanism

for disbursing to the MSME sector.

M Jayaram
Bhubaneswar (78)

Punish fraudsters

This refers to the news report "Banking fraud amount triple to ₹36,014 crore in FY25, public sector banks hit more: RBI" (May 29). While such a surge could be driven by reclassification of 122 past cases per Supreme Court ruling, digital and loan frauds dominate. Banking frauds of this magnitude call for launching a

sort of "surgical strike" on modern day fraudsters. Moreover, banks, both public and private, ought to be a step ahead, if they really wish to "outsmart" them. Any lacadaical approach on their part could be harmful.

S K Gupta
New Delhi

Uniformity in rainfall

Apologies "Farm sector set to reap monsoon gains this year" (May 29). The monsoon setting in a couple of

weeks earlier than normal with a downpour, although it may fill reservoirs and strengthen annual rainfall data, may not help all the crops since a uniformly spread rainfall with measured variations over a period is desirable.

However, with the unpredictable nature of late, it is too early to conclude the monsoon pattern and its gains since there is a long way to go.

Rajiv Magal
Kudalore Village, Karnataka

Headache of a Bill

'Big Beautiful Bill' faces rough Senate passage

Sridhar Krishnaswami

US President Donald Trump had to go to Capitol Hill to cajole and coerce House Republican holdouts on his 'One Big and Beautiful Bill'; and the House Speaker Mike Johnson along with a few of his colleagues had to pull an all-nighter to enable passage by one vote: 215 to 214.

But were these efforts worth the trouble? Indications are that it is not only the Democrats in the Senate who are itching for a showdown; a handful of Republicans too seem eager to take the House version apart.

The chances of the Senate returning an exact version of the House 'Big and Beautiful Bill' is between one of three: fat, slim and none. It is not just the Democratic Senators who are objecting to the \$4.5 trillion in tax breaks, though they would be reluctant to slam the new add-on like no taxes on tips, overtime and car loans.

And given the nature of their constituencies there will be some Republicans and Democrats in the Senate who will be inclined to oppose the raise in the federal deduction cap for state and local taxes, known as SALT; and the rollback on green energy tax breaks of the Biden era.

DEFENCE SPENDING

What has irritated some fiscal conservatives, who are looking to reduce deficits, is that the House package adds some \$350 billion including additional money for the Pentagon and funds for Trump's Golden Dome defence shield. And of course there is the additional spending for deportations and border security. Some Democrats are incensed that federal deficit will be increased by about \$4 trillion and cuts in Medicaid and food stamps will amount to \$1 trillion in reduced spending.

"This is one big ugly bill", House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries remarked.

The buzzword among Republican Senators is "changes", especially pertaining to energy tax credits at micro level and overall deficit management at the macro. What House Republicans find difficult to digest, especially those who thought they had made big sacrifices, is that their colleagues in the Senate believe a more bitter pill is on the way.

DEFICIT WORRIES

As Republican Senator Ron Johnson put it, "The goal of the House was to pass 'one big,



TRUMP'S BILL. Bipartisan criticism ensues

Some Democrats are incensed that federal deficit will be increased by about \$4 trillion and cuts in Medicaid and food stamps will amount to \$1 trillion in reduced spending

beautiful' bill. It is rhetoric. It is false advertising. The goal should have been to reduce average annual deficits".

The deficits in the House Bill, according to the Wisconsin law maker, were "completely unacceptable". Another fiscal hawk, Republican Senator Rand Paul bluntly said "I'm not voting to raise the debt ceiling \$4 trillion to \$5 trillion".

ADVANTAGE DEMOCRATS?

Without a doubt Democrats are seeing an opening in the passage of the House Bill, an avenue they have been waiting for since last November's drubbing. "Let me just say what the House just passed last night makes it significantly easier for us to take back the Senate", said Senate Minority leader Chuck Schumer.

If House Republicans in the blue states are worried about the political fallout of cuts in Medicaid, Republican Senators in the red states could not care less about increasing federal deductions cap of state and local taxes in wealthy blue States.

The Senate version is expected to be ready by July 4 with Democrats only to be expected to use every available legislative manoeuvre before a conference committee drafts the final version which will have to be voted again in the House. To the Republican leadership, the final push will make the recent all-nighter look like a school picnic.

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

Dollar uncertainty on the rise

THE GREENBACK. While the world's dependence on the dollar and US growth remains, pockets of independence are emerging



SMITA ROY TRIVEDI ABHIMANYU DAS

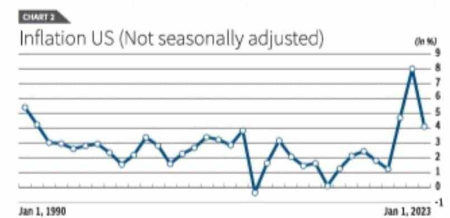
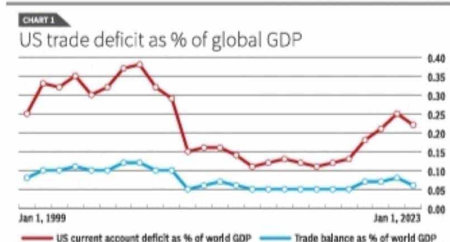
On April 4, the US President announced tariffs on various countries; the subtext being US growth is no longer a public good for global citizens to enjoy. Meanwhile, the uncertainty around tariffs has peaked with Wednesday's Manhattan Court ruling striking it down. The impact of all this turmoil on the dollar and the US economy, on which the world remains heavily dependent, remains to be seen. Amidst this heightened isolationism, is US growth indeed a public good global citizens enjoy anymore? We argue here that while the world is still dominantly dependent on the US growth, yet in the ocean of dollar hegemony, islands of dollar-independence are emerging. However, they remain polarised, making the global economic structure vulnerable.

BURDEN OF PAST

The fall of the pound sterling and the parallel rise of the dollar by World War II marked the establishment of the dollar as the global currency and the US growth as a quasi-public good: benefits of which could be enjoyed by global citizens. With currencies pegged to the dollar under Bretton Woods, the provision of more and still more dollars was the basic necessity for global growth.

While the collapse of the Bretton Woods sprang from this notion of overt dependence on dollar, yet after 50 years we remain on a quasi-Bretton Woods structure where the dollar continues to be the *numeraire* currency. A Bank of International Settlements report (2022) shows the dollar is involved in around 90 per cent of transactions in global markets: average turnover per day (with the dollar on one side of the transaction) was \$6.6 trillion in 2022.

A recent IMF report shows that in 2023 over 80 per cent of trade financing was done using the dollar and around 60



Source: Federal Reserve of St Louis

per cent of forex reserves of the central banks were maintained in dollars. These ratios haven't changed much since 1990 ('Geopolitics and its Impact on Global Trade and the Dollar', Gita Gopinath, May 7, 2024). Chart 1 shows the trade deficit and current account deficit of the US as per cent of global GDP. This is the direct exposure for firms worldwide, and second order effects of this include the dependence of local economies on exports to the US.

What is the impact of the dependence? First, the dollar serving as the only viable global currency leads to a quasi-currency union structure. For long

The dollar acting as a global currency facilitates trade, yet it also prevents the independent monetary policy by member countries

the dollar has acted as global money: perceived 'safe', because of US political dominance; 'available', because of the continued deficits; and 'fluid', given the full capital convertibility for the US.

Adopting the currency of a low inflation country buys stability. But US inflation has hardly been stable (Chart 2). Thus, value of the 'global money' remains unstable, leading to burden of adjustment falling on firms and economies that use the dollar. With tariff policy driven uncertainties, there are serious questions on the dollar as a 'safe' and 'available' currency.

Second, while the domestic inflation situation in the US informs the Federal Reserve's decision on policy rates, given the largely liberalised capital markets around the world, countries synchronise policy interest rates wanting to avoid capital outflows. The dollar acting as a global currency facilitates trade, yet it also prevents the independent monetary policy by member countries.

Third, fiscal policies around the world cannot be coordinated because of different domestic needs. The synchronisation of monetary policies without a corresponding synchronisation of fiscal policies reduces policy effectiveness, tying up domestic liquidity condition with the global liquidity provision, which till date happens through dollar flows.

While the world has no control over the American political process and hence public policy, yet the US policy and its eccentricities determine the provisions of dollars and hence liquidity for the rest of the world.

THE FUTURE

As much as the dependence on the dollar remains, there are pockets of independence. China has followed a strategy to internationalise the renminbi (RMB) for a decade now with increased use of RMB in cross-border settlements, currency swap arrangements, and bilateral trade arrangements. China may, to a certain extent, be able to isolate its growth from the US market.

Moreover, the US may continue to consume Chinese products reaching the US markets circumvented through other countries, or produced with Chinese inputs given China's spread in the supply chain.

However, without full capital convertibility, the renminbi is unlikely to replace the dollar as the global reserve currency. Problems remain with the alternative payment systems as well: China's Cross-border Interbank Payment Systems (CIPS) could lead a move away from the dollar based international payment system. However, its usage remains in pockets, diminishing integration.

That said, the search for alternatives will continue. The dependence of the world on the dollar and on US growth as a corollary has no doubt received a sharp setback post the 'Trump-tariff ambiguity'. To the extent US economic policies become unpredictable and inward looking, dollar dominance will decline as the world looks for and accepts alternatives.

Trivedi is Associate Professor, NIBM, Pune, and Das is IICI Bank Chair Professor, IIM Ahmedabad. Views are strictly personal

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 30, 2005

Maharashtra wants coal blocks back from KPCL

Faced with the need to mobilise additional coal supplies to feed its power plants, the Maharashtra Government is likely to exert pressure on the UPA Government at the Centre to revert to an earlier decision of the Coal Ministry to allocate a string of coal blocks located in the State to Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd (KPCL).

KPMG to help revamp postal network

The Government has roped in global consultant KPMG to prepare a report on restructuring the postal network across the country. The mandate given to KPMG includes identifying new areas of business. The idea behind this corporate restructuring is to wipe out the Rs 1,400-crore deficit of the Department of Posts.

IA fleet purchase plan awaits CCEA nod

The long delayed fleet purchase plan of Indian Airlines (IA) is expected to be placed before the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) next month. The Ministry of Civil Aviation expects to get the comments of other Ministries, including Finance, by next week.

Trump-Xi truce under fire over student visas, tech curbs

Bloomberg News

Just weeks after US President Donald Trump declared a "total reset" with China following a trade truce in Geneva, tensions are rising again between the world's biggest economies.

Trump's administration on Wednesday announced it would start revoking Chinese student visas, while also introducing new restrictions on the sales of chip design software and reportedly some jet engine parts to China.

That came shortly after it sought to

block Huawei Technologies Co. from selling advanced AI chips anywhere in the world, prompting an angry rebuke from Beijing.

TECH FACTOR

"Geneva was positive because both sides are officially talking to each other," said Alfredo Montufar-Helu, senior adviser to the China Center at the Conference Board. "But the negotiations didn't really deal with the core issues that are driving competition between the two sides. Chief of them all — technological dominance."

While US and Chinese negotiators brought down tariffs from eye-watering levels for 90-days, they still need to hammer out a deal to rebalance trade — that took years in Trump's first term. Both sides are also in disagreement over Beijing's role in the illegal fentanyl trade, as well as rare earths and chip controls.

In a sign any larger deal is a way off, Trump has yet to speak with his Chinese counterpart since returning to office, despite suggesting several times such a call was imminent.

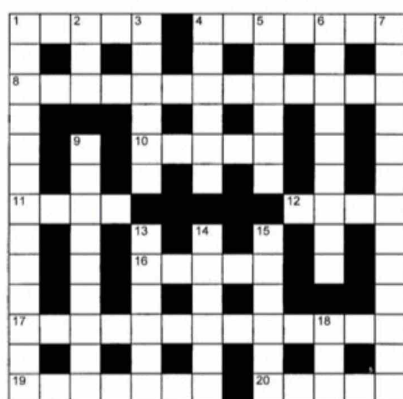
The crackdown on Chinese students — the second largest international

group in the US — was unveiled by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who before taking office was twice sanctioned by Beijing.

That dispelled any notion China hawks within the Trump administration are losing influence, after trade officials in Switzerland showed a preference for dealmaking with Beijing.

China's Foreign Ministry called the visa policy "discriminatory" at a regular briefing in Beijing on Thursday, with spokeswomen Mao Ning saying it would "only further undermine" America's global reputation.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2707



EASY

ACROSS

01. Fundamental (5)
04. One employed for domestic duties (7)
08. The making of something clear (13)
10. Concerning birth (5)
11. Sound bell (4)
12. Type of aerial (4)
16. Crinkly fabric (5)
17. Entanglement, interweaving (13)
19. Tusked whale (7)
20. Measured minute-wise (5)

DOWN

01. Percentage for keeping back delivery of stock (13)
02. Health resort (3)
03. Professional man's customer (6)
04. Evasive, tricky (6)
05. In truth (6)
06. Ill-will (9)
07. Full of feeling (6,7)
09. One directing orchestra or choir (9)
13. Burn the surface (6)
14. Bring back to mind (6)
15. Mortar (6)
18. Tree with serrated leaves (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. Fundamental degree should be read as it's printed (5)
04. A domestic may be civil, working in Whitehall (7)
08. Racial friction about the making of it understandable (13)
10. About the birth of Atlanta? No thanks! (5)
11. To get one on the blower is Wagner's work (4)
12. A good-looking person of the opposite sex to outfit (4)
16. Material used for a pancake in France (5)
17. The weaving together of mental centre one organised (13)
19. Right hand has a lawn to play around with tusked monster (7)
20. Found out how long it took to go back to sea (5)

DOWN

01. Postponement of stock delivery in reverse to lan, maybe (13)
02. In South Africa leading politician may go here for his health (3)
03. One employing a lawyer to get Celt in trouble (6)
04. Furtive way to move before end of May (6)
05. It is truly a motoring event that involves the East (6)
06. Bad feeling is aim Tony must disperse (9)
07. Is compassionate but may have threatened Red revolution (6,7)
09. It may transmit charge to the man with the baton (9)
13. Have a burn-up, or burn it superficially (6)
14. Remember to ring one back (6)
15. It glues the last part of 17 (6)
18. Himmel gave up holding a tree (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2706

ACROSS 1. Proud 4. Stump up 8. Endorsing 9. Soc 10. Eminent 12. Beau 14. Demonic 17. Tout 18. Gondola 20. Rub 21. Bone china 23. Lines up 24. Eagle
DOWN 1. Premature 2. Ordain 3. Darkened 4. Sai 5. Urge 6. Poster 7. Picture palace 11. Thong 13. Pinnacle 15. Turban 16. Coping 19. Ebbs 22. Nip

Why US trade court struck down many of Trump's tariffs

RISHIKA SINGH & ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

A US TRADE court on Wednesday struck down many of Donald Trump's global tariffs as "contrary to law", ruling that an emergency federal Act invoked by the administration did not give the President "unbounded authority" to tax imports.

A three-judge panel of the Court of International Trade in New York found that Trump had overstepped his authority when he invoked the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 (IEEPA) on April 2, which he called "Liberation Day".

The court also ruled against tariffs previously imposed on Canada, Mexico, and China. The ruling does not affect tariffs imposed by the administration under other, separate legal authorities. The *New York Times* reported.

The court gave the executive 10 days to complete the process of ending the tariffs. The Trump administration has urged the

court to pause the enforcement of the order citing a "foreign policy disaster scenario". It has also filed plans for an appeal to the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit.

The case & court

Twelve US states and five small businesses had challenged the tariffs. The states had argued that the burden fell on them, and that the tariffs did not specifically focus on drug cartels, which was cited as the reason for targeting Mexico, Canada, and China.

The key question before the court was the extent of the President's emergency powers on economic matters, and if these tariffs fell within their scope.

The US Court of International Trade (USCIT) is tasked with providing a comprehensive system for judicial review of civil actions "arising out of import transactions and federal transactions affecting international trade". It is also supposed to ensure national uniformity in judicial decision-making that affects import transactions.

The USCIT can hear and decide cases arising anywhere in the country. The nine judges of the court, who have lifetime tenures, are appointed by the President. One of the three judges on the panel that gave Wednesday's opinion was appointed by Trump. The *NYT* reported.

The question in the two cases [which the court clubbed together] is whether the IEEPA delegates these powers to the President in the form of authority to impose unlimited tariffs on goods from nearly every country in the world," the court said.

The ruling

"The question in the two cases [which the court clubbed together] is whether the IEEPA delegates these powers to the President in the form of authority to impose unlimited tariffs on goods from nearly every country in the world," the court said.

It held: "The court does not read IEEPA to confer such unbounded authority and sets aside the challenged tariffs imposed."

The court reasoned that while the World Wars and the Great Depression had led to in-



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creased powers for the President in economic matters, these had been created by the IEEPA. Under the Act, these authorities "may only be exercised to deal with an unusual and extraordinary threat with respect to which a national emergency has been declared".

Trump declared a national emergency under the IEEPA on his first day in office, citing the threat of international cartels that "have engaged in a campaign of violence and terror throughout the Western Hemisphere...[and] flooded the United States with deadly drugs, violent criminals, and vicious gangs".

The subsequent "trafficking tariffs" are now at 25% for Mexican and Canadian products and 20% for Chinese products. The court ruled that these tariffs "fail because they do not deal with the threats set forth in those orders".

On April 2, Trump imposed "retaliatory tariffs" on US trade partners as a response to "underlying conditions, including a lack of reciprocity in our bilateral trade relationships, disparate tariff rates and non-tariff barriers", which amounted to an "unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and economy of the United States".

These tariffs have now been lowered to a flat 10% until July, with the US government expecting that countries will negotiate trade deals with it. Indeed, over the past few weeks, the US has finalised trade agreements with the UK and China, and talks with India on a trade deal are ongoing.

However, the USCIT held that "The President's assertion of tariff-making authority in the instant case, unbounded as it is by any limitation in duration or scope, exceeds any tariff authority delegated to the President under IEEPA. The Worldwide and Retaliatory tariffs are thus *ultra vires* and contrary to law."

It also said that the Trade Act of 1974 grants the President limited authority to impose restricted tariffs in response to "fun-

damental international payment problems", including "large and serious balance-of-payments deficits".

That these powers are granted under "narrower, non-emergency authorities" implies that tariffs cannot be imposed unconditionally, it said.

What comes next

The S&P 500 and Nasdaq rose on Thursday, boosted by Nvidia, which posted strong revenue growth, Reuters reported. However, investors also assessed the court ruling blocking most of Trump's tariffs.

The ruling does not seal the door on tariff announcements indefinitely. The White House has reacted aggressively, with a spokesperson saying, "It is not for unelected judges to decide how to properly address a national emergency."

Trump will likely use the ruling as fodder for his continued criticism of the legal system. "We are living under a judicial tyranny," White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller said on Thursday.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

WHAT EXPERIMENT SIMULATING DROUGHT IN AMAZON FOUND



A dead white tree inside the plot of the Escalfor project in Brazil. AP

A SHORT walk beneath the dense Amazon canopy, the forest abruptly opens up. Fallen logs are rotting, trees grow sparser and sunlight hits the ground in some places.

This is what 24 years of severe drought looks like in the world's largest rainforest. But this patch of degraded forest, the size of a football field, is a scientific experiment.

Launched in 2000 by Brazilian and British scientists, Escalfor — short for "Forest Drought Stress Experiment" in Portuguese — set out to simulate a future in which the changing climate could deplete the Amazon of rainfall. It is the longest-running project of its kind in the world.

Understanding how drought can affect the Amazon is important because the rainforest stores the equivalent of two years of global carbon emissions, according to one study. When trees are cut, or wither and die from drought, they release into the atmosphere the carbon they were storing, which accelerates global warming.

Creating drought conditions

To mimic stress from drought, the project, located in the Caxiuanã National Forest, assembled some 6,000 transparent plastic panels across one hectare, diverting around 50% of the rainfall from the forest floor. They were set 1 metre above ground on the sides to 4 metres above ground in the center. The water was funneled into gutters and channeled through trenches dug around the plot's perimeter. Next to it, an identical plot was left untouched to serve as a control.

In both areas, instruments were attached to trees, placed on the ground and buried to measure soil moisture, air temperature, tree growth, sap flow and root development, among other data. Two metal towers sit above each plot, from which NASA radars measure how much water is in the plants.

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Concerning findings

"The forest initially appeared to be resistant to the drought," said Lucy Rowland, an ecology professor at the University of Exeter. That began to change about 8 years in, however. "We saw a really big decline in biomass, big losses and mortality of the largest trees," said Rowland. This resulted in the loss of approximately 40% of the total weight of the vegetation and the carbon stored within it from the plot.

The main findings were detailed in a study published in May in the journal *Nature Ecology & Evolution*. It shows that during the years of vegetation loss, the rainforest shifted from a carbon sink to a carbon emitter.

Escalfor's drought simulation draws some parallels with the past two years, when much of the Amazon rainforest, under the influence of El Niño and the impact of climate change, endured its most severe dry spells on record.

"In both cases, we're seeing a loss of the forest's ability to absorb carbon. Instead, carbon is being released back into the atmosphere, along with the loss of forest cover," said Rowland.

The decades-long drought did not, however, turn the rainforest into a savanna, as earlier model-based studies had predicted.

Now, measuring recovery

In November, most of the 6,000 plastic covers were removed. Now, scientists are observing how the forest changes. "The forest has already adapted. Now we want to understand what happens next," said meteorologist João de Athaydes, vice coordinator of Escalfor, a professor at the Federal University of Pará and co-author of the *Nature* study.

"The idea is to see whether the forest can regenerate and return to the baseline from when we started the project."

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



SHUBHAJIT ROY

THE FOUR-NIGHT military confrontation between India and Pakistan that began early on May 7 was the most expansive outbreak of hostilities since the war of 1971. During Operation Sindoor, India hit targets up to 100 km inside Pakistan and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), while Pak launched aerial attacks on J&K, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Haryana. In terms defined by the American military strategist Herman Kahn's 44-step "escalation ladder", the situation can be seen as having begun with the terrorist attack in Pahalgam on April 22 — the "Ostensible Crisis" — and gone up to the stage of "Dramatic Military Confrontation" before India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire of May 10.

Kahn's escalation ladder

The idea of escalation began to appear in strategic literature in the years after the end of World War II. Kahn, who co-founded the think tank Hudson Institute with the vision of "thinking about the future in unconventional ways", was the preeminent Western theorist of the "structure" of escalation.

Kahn's metaphor for escalation was a ladder, each rung of which denoted a rising level of conflict.

In 1962, Kahn proposed a 16-step ladder of escalation from "Subsidiary Disagreement" to "Aftermath". Then, in his book *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (1965), he developed a more detailed, 44-step ladder of escalation — with "Ostensible Crisis" as Step 1, and "Spasm/Insensate War" as Step 44.

The India-Pak escalation

The Pahalgam terror attack, in which Pak-backed terrorists killed 26 civilians, can be described as an "Ostensible Crisis" — Step 1 in Kahn's ladder.

This led to Step 2, "Political, Economic and Diplomatic Gestures". India's decisions from April 23 onward, from putting the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance to cancelling visas of Pak nationals, can be labeled as such.

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(From left) Lt Gen Rajiv Ghai, Air Marshal A K Bharti, V Adm A N Pramod, and Maj Gen S S Sharda during a media briefing on Op Sindoor on May 12. IIS

Then came Step 3 — "Solenn and Formal Declarations". Prime Minister Narendra Modi vowed to "pursue the terrorists and to those who shelter them to the very end". And Pak Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif promised a "crushing reply to any Indian misadventure".

Kahn's Step 4 is the "Hardening of Positions — Confrontation of Wills". India blamed Pak for not taking action against terrorist groups, while Islamabad asked for evidence of India's accusation, adding that India's position on the IWT would be deemed as an "act of war".

The matter escalated to Step 5 — "Show of Force" — when the Indian Navy on April 27 carried out multiple anti-ship missile firings, underlining its preparedness for long-range offensive strikes. On May 3, Pak test-fired Abdali, its surface-to-surface ballistic missile with a 450-km range.

Step 6 — "Significant Mobilisation" — was quick and stealthy, and from May 7 onward, the escalation quickly reached rungs 8 ("Harassing Acts of Violence") and 9 ("Dramatic Military Confrontations"). India struck at nine terror locations in Pak and PoK, and successfully thwarted Pakistani drone attacks along the western border.

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The two militaries remained at Step 9 for four nights before agreeing to stop military action.

Change of doctrine

In *Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy*, former National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon concluded the chapter on the 26/11 terror attacks with the line: "A personal matter. With a difference of people at the helm, it is quite possible that India would have chosen to [act] differently [after 26/11]. In fact, if India is forced to make a similar choice in the future, I am sure it will respond differently."

The book was published in November 2016. On September 29, Indian special forces had crossed the Line of Control to carry out surgical strikes on terrorist launchpads in PoK. This came days after terrorists had attacked an Army brigade headquarters near Uri in J&K.

That October, Modi told a gathering in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh: "Earlier Israel used to be spoken of like this [in the context of carrying out targeted military strikes against its enemies]. Now everyone knows our Army can do it too and is no less capable."

India went a step further after the Pulwama terror attack of February 14, 2019 when it carried out aerial strikes against ter-

rorist launchpads in Balakot, PoK. On February 26, the day of the strikes, Modi said at a rally in Churu, Rajasthan: "I won't let the nation be destroyed. It is my promise to Bharat Ma that I won't let her head be bowed."

There was a clear shift in India's strategy against Pak-sponsored terrorism.

In his address on May 12 this year, Modi articulated India's current doctrine: a befitting response on India's terms; zero tolerance for Pak's nuclear blackmail; and no distinction between terrorist leaders and state sponsors of terrorism.

This is a qualitatively more aggressive policy than before. Targeting the Pak establishment that has long used cross-border terrorism as an instrument of policy means the military and government of that country are not off-limits for future retributive actions.

By linking Pak-based groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed to terrorist attacks in the US and UK, Modi also framed Op Sindoor as India's war on terrorism.

Takeaways, future outlook

New Delhi has its task cut out — politically, diplomatically, and militarily.

LOWER THRESHOLD FOR ACTION: India's "new normal" has lowered the threshold of response in case of a major terrorist attack in future. India's response will likely begin from Step 3 and could very quickly escalate to Steps 9 and 10 ("Provocative Breaking off of Diplomatic Relations"). Step 12 ("Large Conventional War") would be very much on the horizon.

DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE: With Pakistan trying to project itself as the victim before the international community, New Delhi is concerned at the false equivalence between the two countries that some in the West have suggested. New Delhi wants to make it clear that India was the original victim, and that it responded in self-defence.

THE TRUMP FACTOR: President Donald Trump's claim of a "US-brokered ceasefire" has created a challenge for India, which has always rejected any third-party involvement in India-Pakistan issues. New Delhi has to navigate Trump's unpredictable statements and posts on social media.

NEW FRONTIERS OF WAR: Besides upgrading its military prowess to dominate in the air, at sea, and on land, India will have to also build capacity in the new frontiers of war where evolving and improving technology is changing the rules very rapidly.

Beijing & Vatican: a short history of religion and Catholicism in China

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

POPE LEO XIV has asked for prayers for China's Catholics to be in communion with the Holy See, wading into a prickly foreign policy issue between Beijing and the Vatican.

On May 25, a couple of weeks into his papacy, the pontiff said: "In the churches in China and throughout the world, prayers have been said to God as a sign of the solicitude and affection for Chinese Catholics and their communion with the universal church."

He was referring to the special feast day of May 24, which was initiated for China's Catholics in 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI.

Communist China severed diplomatic ties with the Vatican in 1951. What has been China's relationship with the Catholic Church over the decades?

Catholicism in China

Christianity is said to have arrived in China

with a monk named Aluoben in the seventh century, during the time of the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). However, in 845 CE, activities of all foreign religions, including Christianity, were limited by an imperial edict.

An Italian Jesuit priest named Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) who travelled from Europe to India, and then to China, is credited with popularising the religion in China.

Ricci learnt Mandarin and the local culture to reach out to the local population. He wrote: "[Jesuits] initially did not attempt to speak very clearly about our holy law. They rather tried to learn the language, literature, and etiquette of the Chinese, and to win their hearts by the example of their good lives."

The Taiping Rebellion, a major uprising against the Qing dynasty that lasted for 14 years from 1850-64, was inspired in part by Christianity. Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the rebellion, believed that he was the brother of Jesus Christ, with the mission of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Harmony.

Mao Zedong's communists saw religion



Chen Chien-jen (right), special envoy to the President of Taiwan, with Pope Leo XIV in Vatican. X/IMMOFA, Taiwan

as being incompatible with their ideology, and a distraction for the working masses. The Nationalist government had maintained relations with the Holy See, but the People's Republic demanded total allegiance from Chinese Christian priests, and perceived their link with the Vatican as a threat of control by Western powers.

In what is seen as a fabricated controversy, the government expelled the Vatican representative in China for "espionage" in 1951.

In 2018, China and the Vatican reached an agreement that allowed the Holy See to have the final say over the appointments of bishops proposed by Beijing. Many in the West saw the agreement as bowing down to Chinese government pressure.

Limited recognition

During Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-76), all elements deemed antithetical to a communist society were purged, including religious groups. It was only after the economic reforms of 1978 under Deng Xiaoping that they began to re-emerge.

Article 36 of the PRC's constitution guarantees religious freedom, but with restrictions. It says, "No one shall use religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the state's education system. Religious groups and religious affairs shall not be subject to control by foreign forces." Members of the Communist Party can-

not have religious affiliations.

Five religions are officially recognised: Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism. However, their administration, such as the appointment of bishops, is under state control. The Vatican has historically opposed this.

Pew Research put the number of Catholics in China at around 10 million in 2020. This included members of underground churches run by local priests. Unlike other religious groups, the population of Catholics in China is estimated to be shrinking.

Tension over Taiwan

An aspect of China-Vatican tensions is the issue of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as a part of China.

After the victory of the communists in China's Civil War, the leaders of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) fled to Taiwan, where they established their government and sought support from Western governments as the "Republic of China".

Under its "One China" policy, Beijing required any country with diplomatic ties

with the PRC to not recognise Taiwan. While many governments backed Taiwan during the Cold War, China's economic rise and the changing geopolitical situation gradually saw them shift their allegiance.

Currently, only 12 governments, mostly small island nations, recognise Taiwan. The Holy See is one of these governments.

Religion under Xi

The Chinese state under President Xi Jinping has moved away from an earlier view of religion as something that could guide people towards morality and balance amid increasing commercialisation.

Since Xi came to power in 2013, the state and Communist Party have stressed on the "Sinicisation" of religions, aimed at maintaining and promoting their "Chinese characteristics". Critics say Sinicisation is, in fact, an effort to homogenise disparate cultures to match the practices of the majority ethnic Han population.

Crackdowns on religious groups have also increased, with those on Uighur Muslims of the Xinjiang province being most notable.

The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

READING THE HIKE

Minimum support price system needs a reset. For now, increase in MSPs is well-timed and well-intentioned

WITH THE SOUTHWEST monsoon setting in over Kerala on May 24, eight days before schedule, it's just as well that the Narendra Modi government has approved the minimum support prices (MSP) for kharif crops. Unlike last year, when they were declared on June 19, the MSP announcement comes early enough this time for farmers to make informed planting decisions. Equally welcome is the MSP of paddy being hiked by only Rs 69 per quintal, as against Rs 117 and Rs 143 for the last and preceding year's crops. Ideally, given the record 63.1 million tonnes (mt) of rice in government godowns, the paddy MSP should have been frozen. The latest increase, the lowest in five years, is a second-best solution to a problem that has both economic and environmental dimensions: India is producing too much rice (public stocks at over 4.6 times the required buffer, even after exports of 20.2 mt in 2024-25, is proof), which is a water-guzzler to boot.

The MSPs of other crops have been raised significantly. These range from 5.4-6 per cent for urad (black gram) and arhar (pigeon-pea), to 7.1-8.3 per cent for groundnut, maize and cotton, and 8.9-13.9 per cent for soyabean, jowar (sorghum) and ragi. When compared to the mere 3 per cent higher MSP granted for paddy, these seem quite major and well-intentioned too. India should definitely be growing more pulses and oilseeds considering the value of their imports, touching \$5.5 billion and \$17.3 billion during 2024-25. The same goes for cotton (where India has turned a net importer) and maize (the domestic consumption of which, both as feed and fuel grain, is rising faster than production). Their nutritional advantages, apart from lower water requirement and climate hardness, make millets similarly worthy of MSPs providing fair and remunerative returns over cultivation costs. But why would farmers grow crops where the MSPs are simply on paper? Take soyabean, which is currently selling in Maharashtra's Latur market at Rs 4,300 per quintal. That's below not only the just-announced MSP of Rs 5,328, but even last year's level of Rs 4,892.

The MSP system needs a reset. The government must procure grain that is sufficient to meet its requirements for the public distribution system and open market operations. This would mean capping the quantity of produce purchased — say, 100 quintals of paddy per farmer. Over time, it should move from crop-specific MSPs to flat per-acre income support. This will incentivise farmers to grow crops that the market wants and also produce these through cost-efficient use of water, nutrients, energy and other inputs. Poultry, dairy and vegetable farmers are already doing this. There's no reason those growing regular field crops can't — with some government direct income support.

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CONGRESS VS CONGRESS

By training its guns on its own leaders and a few imagined enemies, Congress shoots itself in the foot

COURSE, THE Congress leadership has a problem with Shashi Tharoor — distancing itself from him after he was chosen by the government to be part of the Operation Sindoor diplomatic outreach; wearing its displeasure on its sleeve, day after day, tweet after snarky tweet, small-minded in a large national moment. In their running commentary against the Thiruvananthapuram MP, the party's leaders show, however, that the Congress's reaction to Tharoor's support for the government's response to Pahalgam is only a symptom. The problem is larger and knottier: The party has failed to frame a clear and cogent response to Operation Sindoor — as it has on other important issues.

To say that its Lok Sabha MP doesn't speak for the party only begs the question: What exactly is Congress's position, anyway? In the immediate aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, along with other Opposition parties, Congress sent out a strong, clear message of unity, pledging support to the government. Since then it has failed to make room for itself, and struggled to find the language and the tone, to raise the questions that a vigilant Opposition arguably needs to ask — about the terror attack, and the government's response. Instead of stepping up to its challenge, Congress has taken recourse to the language of pique. Its approach to the multi-party delegations was muddled, to begin with. Spokesperson Jaishankar Ramesh — his erudition clearly wasted in the daily task he has taken on, of making social media jabs and jibes — described them as "weapons of mass distraction" even as the party submitted its own list of nominees. Rahul Gandhi's targeting of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar — addressing him as "JJ", accusing him of a "crime" and of tipping off Pakistan — has come across as childish, if not bizarre. This, even as more senior leaders in the party bit their lip and made noises to the contrary. All this has only further shrunk the space for serious questions.

Congress needs to recover its voice as a responsible Opposition party. It needs to, more broadly, reclaim lost ground on nationalism, after Operation Sindoor, as on social justice, after the BJP-led government announced the caste census. There is much soul-searching, and much strategising, to be done if it wants to climb out of its corner. Yet, over one month into Pahalgam, the largest Opposition party's critique is calling the Foreign Minister an "informant" and trashing its own MP every morning. Training its guns on its own leaders and a few imagined enemies, it only shoots itself in the foot.

FREEDOM, HE WROTE

Ngugi wa Thiong'o turned storytelling into resistance, and language into home

NGUGI WA THIONG'O WAS in his teens when he returned from his elite British-run English-medium school one day to find his family home in Kenya razed by the colonial rulers in response to the Mau Mau uprising. Only a hedge that he had planted remained, he later wrote in *In the House of the Interpreter* (2012), "beyond it our homestead is a rubble of burnt dry mud, splinters of wood, and grass". It was a moment that never left him, becoming the seed of a quiet rebellion that would eventually make him one of Africa's fiercest literary minds and unwavering moral voices. The writer, 87, who died on May 28, wrote to rebuild what had been destroyed — not just in his village, but across a continent's collective memory.

Thiong'o's life was shaped by the winds of colonialism, repression, resilience, and the corruption-laden aftermath of independence in Kenya. But he refused to be blown off course. He wrote as if words were weapons to carve out a space for truth. His *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was the first major novel in English by an East African writer. But after imprisonment without trial — punishment for a play he had co-written in his native tongue Gikuyu on corruption — Ngugi turned away from English altogether. In a prison cell, he began *Devil on the Cross* (1980), scribbled on toilet paper, the first modern novel written in his mother tongue. From then on, he insisted that African stories be told in African languages.

Thiong'o's continued exposition of malfeasance in post-colonial Kenya earned him the wrath of political gatekeepers. Exile followed, but so did global recognition, as he became a lodestar for generations of African writers — among them Nigerian greats Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. If there's one lesson Thiong'o leaves behind, it is that the fight for freedom does not end with the fall of a regime. And that the stories of a people, told in their own words, are acts of liberation in themselves.

The deregulation we need

For mass prosperity, a culling of the regulatory cholesterol that is holding India back is required



MANISH SABHARWAL

SINCE 1990, OUR central and state government spending has increased over 100 times to Rs 107 lakh crore, while India's per capita income has increased around eight times to \$2,700. I don't want to live in China, but I envy the 42 times rise in China's per capita GDP since 1990. This rise has many causes and consequences; China's car production has increased 62 times since 1990 to 3.1 crore last year (India made 50 lakh). We need more tools for mass prosperity as we grapple with US President Donald Trump's vandalism on the global trade system that enabled China's escape from poverty, and the higher defence spending needed after Operation Sindoor. One tool could be trusting entrepreneurs, encouraging entrepreneurs and celebrating innovation.

As an entrepreneur, the most puzzling question from Indian bureaucrats, regulators, and policymakers has been, "Who allowed you to do this?" As a big fan of the "Theory of Knowledge," an IB board high school subject that explores the nature, origin, and limits of knowledge, this "prohibited until permitted" philosophy is baffling. It is also the ultimate regulatory cholesterol. The *Avadi* resolution of 1955, which placed our government at the "commanding heights" of the economy, has handicapped India's capital without labour, and our labour without capital. Delivering mass prosperity by 2047 requires "permitted until prohibited" governance with anything only thoughtfully and reluctantly prohibited.

Alas, this is not the reality for India's employers, as research from the think tank Prosperity demonstrates. Can women in India work the same jobs and the same way as men? No, they are banned from 32 operations and 200 sub-processes, including pottery manufacturing, cashew-nut processing, and glass manufacturing. Can employers think about hiring men and women for night shifts similarly? No: Women attract 59 special categories for employers across states. Can factories use all their land? No: Fifty per cent of an industrial plot is lost to just three standards: micro and small factories lose the most land to standards more stringent than those of countries 10 times richer. Can workers work the

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hours they want? No: A factory worker loses 270 plus hours of annual earnings to working hour restrictions, and these limits force workers to give 156 to 416 fewer hours in a quarter than in Japan. Is building one 300-worker factory cheaper than two 150-worker factories in India? No: One 300-worker factory needs 40-80 per cent more land than two 150-worker factories. Do India and Singapore require the same number of floors to build a hotel with the same number of rooms? No: The same number of rooms requires three floors in Singapore and seven in Noida. Can all of rural India industrialise? No: Fifty per cent of rural areas cannot be industrialised due to minimum road width norms.

Our regulatory burden for employers — thousands of laws, compliances, filings and criminal provisions — represents what F.A. Hayek called the "pretence of knowledge" in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1974. He argued against the idea of thinking about the economy as a machine that can be controlled with precision, highlighting the limitations of human knowledge and the importance of recognising the complexity of economic processes. Hayek emphasised that the actions of individuals drive economic systems, and it is a dangerous illusion that any single individual or group has all the necessary information or knows what is best for everyone. Viksit Bharat by 2047 requires deregulation.

This deregulation does not mean lower government spending, *poorna swaraj* for employers, or fewer government employees. A modern state is a welfare state, and government spending on social security, infrastructure, and defence is crucial to mass prosperity. No employer regulation would be disastrous; effective and efficient markets require strong laws for consumer protection, addressing market failures, and mitigating economic externalities. But as every doctor knows, the dose makes the poison. Finally, government employment must focus manpower over and over: municipalities, healthcare, and education. The noisiness and methods chosen by America's Department of Government Efficiency have set back government reform

globally because history suggests the most enduring change comes from sharp silver daggers rather than blunt iron hammers.

If strategy is the art of reconciling unlimited aspiration with limited resources, deregulation will enable better teamwork between what Rohini Nilekani calls *samajik*, *bazaar* and *sarkar*. This requires acknowledging these three actors' different *fit* (nature) by creating a less adversarial partnership. Throwing our crooked entrepreneurs into the Indian Ocean may reduce inequality and improve our Gini coefficient, but it won't help our poor. The only social security and prosperity programme India can afford is massive non-farm, high-wage job creation by formal, high-productivity employers.

The scale of India's challenge means it cannot be finessed within existing structures and philosophies. Once that is accepted, unpleasant truths arise. The massive culling of regulatory compliance, filing, and jail provisions required to improve the ease of doing business for small entrepreneurs now equals civil service reform. India cannot be run from Delhi; we must devolve funds, functions, and functionalities to state capitals, despite new analysis from Niti Aayog and the think tank NCAER showing states' dismal fiscal and debt situation. The journey from India's first government budget of Rs 198 crore in 1947 to spending over Rs 100 lakh crore has delivered many good outcomes, but we must slow down spending and public debt growth if we aspire to be good ancestors.

Poetry in Kashmir, where I grew up, often reminded us that sustainability and happiness are found in aligning your *justi* (strategy, quest or means) with your *arzo* (dreams, goals or ends). Every Indian policymaker's goal has remained unchanged since 1947: Mass prosperity. However, delivering on that goal requires a change in strategy: Signalling that entrepreneurship is permitted until prohibited by culling the regulatory cholesterol holding India back.

The writer is the co-founder of TeamLease Services

WHAT TAMIL & KANNADA SHARE

Pitting one Dravidian language against another obscures their linguistic kinship



ROHAN MANOJ

LATIN HAD ITS roots in the Aeolic dialect of Greek. Or rather, that's what some scholars in antiquity, chiefly Greeks as one might expect, believed. Modern historical linguistics shows this notion, known as *Aeolism*, to be false: the two languages merely share a common ancestor, Proto-Indo-European. In India, the 15th-century Maniravalam grammar, *Lilatilakam*, hewed a little closer to the truth in its speculation: The author groups the languages of the Kerala, Pandya and Chola regions under the name "Dravidia", but rejects the inclusion of the "Kamata" and "Andhra" tongues as they were too distant from the language of the "Tamil Veda", that is, the *Thiruvimozhi*. He does admit, however, that others would include the latter two languages in the category, who these others were, and what exactly they thought, is lost to time. Such passing references offer us tantalising glimpses of a vanished world of Brahminical scholarship, of historical-linguistic imaginations that by far antedated Robert Caldwell's "discovery" of the Dravidian language family.

Let's set this against another piece of historical evidence: A mediaeval *prashasti*, or praise-poem, from Venadu, a kingdom that controlled parts of southern Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which later became Travancore. Dating to the early 1100s, it praises a king of Venadu for his defeat of a Pandya lord, Rajasimha, who is described as "Tamil", implying that his rival was in some sense not Tamil. Perhaps it's a question of Tamil versus Malayalam, as the former had split off from Early Middle Tamil a few centuries prior. However, this particular poem is not in Old Malayalam but in standard literary Tamil. Malayalis would also continue to call even their own increasingly distinct language "Tamil" for centuries to come.

It's a reminder that questions of language on the one hand, and ethnic identity on the other, have long been complex matters in "Dravidian" South India.

Amid the brouhaha over actor Kamal Haasan's statement that Kannada "was born out of Tamil", it's important to set a few things straight. Although there are still yawning chasms in scholarship on the Dravidian family, and more work is urgently needed, the taxonomy of at least the literary South Dravidian languages is broadly established. The split between Kannada and Tamil is older than any of the surviving literary or epigraphic evidence. Their common ancestor, itself a descendant of Proto-South-Dravidian, is conventionally termed Proto-Tamil-Kannada, but we don't know what its own speakers called it. Both branched off from this unattested language; it is meaningless to say that Kannada came from Tamil or Tamil from Kannada. In general, it's also meaningless to say that any natural language (with some exceptions such as sign languages) is "older" than any other, as ancestral forms of both would have been spoken at any given point in time.

The surviving corpus of Tamil literature is likely older than its Kannada counterpart, dating to the last few centuries BCE or first few centuries CE, despite revisionist attempts to cast the Sangam poems as an elaborate faux-historical forgery created at the court of the early mediaeval Pandya, such claims fly in the face of all logic and plausibility. That still doesn't say anything about the age of the languages themselves.

The surviving corpus of Tamil literature is likely older than its Kannada counterpart, dating to the last few centuries BCE or first few centuries CE, despite revisionist attempts to cast the Sangam poems as an elaborate faux-historical forgery created at the court of the early mediaeval Pandya, such claims fly in the face of all logic and plausibility. That still doesn't say anything about the age of the languages themselves.

n't say anything about the age of the languages themselves. Another claim is that Tamil is more conservative than related languages, preserving older forms, but counterexamples are easy to find (even ignoring the advantage Tamil has by dint of being attested in earlier forms): The Tamil word for "ear" is *civ*, whereas Kannada has *kivi*, preserving the older Dravidian "k" (reconstructed form).

That said, several mysteries remain in the classification of the Dravidian languages, the best known being the debate over the origins of Brahui, spoken largely in Pakistan and to an extent in Afghanistan and Iran. The question is whether Brahui arrived in this region in mediaeval times or if descended from a language that was present there thousands of years ago, when Dravidian languages were far more widely spoken. The answer could, perhaps, tie into the origins of the Dravidian family itself, and whether it was spoken in the Indus Valley Civilisation. The classification of the common ancestor, Proto-Dravidian, is another open question, with theories such as the one positing a connection to Elamite, spoken in Iran before it was Iran, having found little support.

The controversy over Haasan's comments reveals the minfield of competing ethno-linguistic claims that any appeal to Dravidian brotherhood must navigate to be successful. To rise above it would require a politics of regional aspiration and counter-hegemony that is shorn of chauvinism and claims of historical priority, leaving the linguistics to the linguists.

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MAY 30, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

PAK BORDER SEALED

INDIA HAS SEALED its border with Pakistan in Punjab, Rajasthan, and Jammu and Kashmir and banned the movement of people to check any kind of infiltration over the next fortnight. Both ISF and the CRPF, manning the borders in these states, have been directed to intensify vigilance. It has been left to the authorities to take appropriate action against infiltrators.

ANAND VIOLENCE

THE DAIRY TOWN of Anand was placed under an indefinite curfew following large-scale arson since daybreak. The police opened fire

twice during the day to quell rioting mobs indulging in violence and arson there. Over two dozen shops were set ablaze by the rampaging crowds in the town since morning. The police had to fire several rounds in the main market as tear gas proved ineffective in dispersing the mobs. Casualties in police firing, if any, are not known.

FLATS SCANDAL

THE DELHI DEVELOPMENT Authority vice chairman, Prem Kumar, ordered the suspension of an executive engineer and two junior engineers for dereliction of duty with respect to the supervision of the construction

of 192 flats in Kishangarh off Mehrauli. One assistant engineer has been sent back to his parent department, CPWD. These flats were found to be constructed without proper foundation. Kumar said no one responsible would be spared.

CYCLONE THREAT

ABOUT ONE LAKH people were reported to have perished in the catastrophic cyclone that hit Bangladesh last week. Several thousand are still missing even after another similar storm began forming in the south-east Bay of Bengal, causing fears of a fresh wave of devastation.



OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS



Trump's tariffs: Turfed out but raring to return

A court struck down US 'reciprocal' tariffs for exceeding the president's authority. As a legal battle over their validity thickens, could the rule of law come to the global economy's rescue?

In a move that sets back US President Donald Trump's idiosyncratic plan to make America 'great again,' but could possibly slow down or arrest America's descent as a democracy, a court has ruled against the 'reciprocal' tariffs announced by him on 2 April, dubbed 'Liberation Day.' The power to levy such tariffs is held by the US Congress rather than its president, ruled the court, giving the White House 10 days to reverse import duties announced under the International Economic Emergency Powers Act (IEEPA). While this law grants the president power to 'regulate' imports, it does not mention 'tariffs.' Given the significance of these tariff measures and their 'unbounded' nature, the court held as invalid the assumed delegation of Congress authority to the White House under that law. In other words, the tariff orders had exceeded his authority. US stock market index futures jumped after the ruling, but it is premature to conclude that Trump's tariff tantrums are behind us. This is so for three reasons. One, as the US Court of International Trade's order is being appealed by the administration, it could be overturned either by a federal appeals court or the Supreme Court. Two, Trump's team might look for another statute to back his trade barriers. And, three, he could try pressuring lawmakers to enact his agenda and thereby secure it from judicial interdiction.

Although aimed at external threats, the IEEPA adopted in 1977 was partly designed to curb and specify the emergency powers granted to the US president under prior laws like its Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917, which had been used by presidents to assume sweeping authority. In 1973, a Senate investigation had found various emergencies declared

since 1933 still in force, which led to legislative efforts to constrain the White House. The IEEPA has hitherto been used to slam hostile countries with sanctions and confiscate foreign assets. Trump has been the first US leader to use this law to erect steep trade barriers against countries alleged to have put the country at threat by selling it more goods than buying US wares. Of the three judges who unanimously ruled against tariffs under the IEEPA, one had been appointed by Trump himself, a second by Obama and the senior-most by Reagan. It is difficult to pin their opinion on any partisan bias.

The court also struck down tariffs imposed on countries for their alleged role in America's opioid crisis, citing a weak link between this action and its ability to deal with this declared emergency, but did not invalidate America's 25% duty on steel, aluminium, automobiles and auto parts levied under the US Trade Expansion Act. Under this law, tariffs can be imposed if the commerce secretary determines that specified imports threaten national security. It is conceivable that the Trump administration will seek to invoke such laws to re-impose levies should its appeal be rejected. However, it might be difficult to argue that garments from Asia pose a threat while clothes from Mexico do not. The win-win economic logic of trade should also make it hard to cast imports from specific countries as perilous, although political postures that feed on economic anxieties can colour popular views of what is good or bad for a country. Whichever way the legal battle goes, this week's court order on tariffs can be taken as a win for due process, even if uncertainty and volatility persist. Global growth is still at risk. Yet, at least on paper, an institutional commitment to the rule of law could relieve the world,

India's complex economy needs a more robust statistical system

The NSO did well to improve its labour force survey but more must be done to guide policy decisions



HIMANSHU
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Recent months have seen a flurry of data and report releases from the National Statistics Office (NSO). While some of these are routine surveys conducted by it, in some cases the NSO has made significant changes in the nature of data made available and the frequency of releases. India's statistical system had come under criticism for denying or delaying access to survey data. We have seen delays in updating the base year for key variables like the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and National Accounts, both of which have a base which is more than a decade old.

Improved survey coverage and data-release frequency would help generate confidence in our statistical system. But it is also essential for statistics to serve as inputs for economic analysis and policy formulation. Regular base-year updates for many macro variables are necessary, given the economy's dynamism.

The NSO has expanded the coverage of its annual Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) and also increased the frequency of data releases from quarterly to monthly, starting with April 2025. Going monthly has meant that the NSO had to increase the PLFS sample size by 2.65 times to 272,304 households, together with changes in sampling design for the generation of monthly estimates. A larger sample also lets the NSO release quarterly estimates for rural areas (done only for urban areas so

far). PLFS data has been a valuable tool to track trends and patterns in India's workforce structure since 2017-18. Along with their precursor Employment-Unemployment Surveys (EUS), available since 1972-73, PLFS results provide a comparable data series on employment patterns. However, these also remain the only credible source of information on the quality of job and earnings from them. While there are several sources for the wages and earnings of casual workers, EUS-PLFS data sets are the only source of information on the earnings of regular workers, who account for almost one-third of all workers in the economy.

The monthly report for April 2025 released on 15 May is the first of the monthly series. It presents estimates of the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Workforce Participation Rate (WPR) and Unemployment Rate (UR) by 'weekly status' for rural and urban areas. For the latter, the findings are broadly similar to what was revealed by the quarterly report for October-December 2024. But its rural estimates are significantly at variance with findings of the annual report for 2024, with a lower LFPR and WPR in April 2025, and significantly higher unemployment rate for the 15-29 age group (and also for the country's 15+ population).

QUICK READ

The NSO has expanded the coverage of its annual Periodic Labour Force Survey and also increased the frequency of data releases from quarterly to monthly. This is welcome.

Deeper research is needed for statistical reforms to spell better policy engagement. To analyse how our employment challenge is best tackled, we should track several more variables.

While monthly estimates of basic indicators are useful, these are of limited relevance for an economy whose employment structure is very diverse and complex. Unlike rich countries where most workers have regular payroll jobs in non-farm sectors, the Indian workforce relies mostly on informal employment. Even today, almost half of all Indian workers are engaged in agriculture, compared to less than 5% in most developed countries. Variations in the LFPR, WPR and UR are less relevant in an economy with a large proportion of the population vulnerable in terms of job quality and income assurance.

If the purpose of the monthly series is to provide meaningful insights into our labour market, it requires detailed data on sectoral shares, the nature of enterprises and earnings from employment. Fortunately, the data lets us generate most of these estimates. The PLFS's re-introduction of land information allows rural analysts to delve deeper. The principal challenge now relates to how we understand and characterize the labour market. Given the emergence of new employment categories such as gig work and new forms of labour arrangements interlinked with land and credit markets, we need a better understanding of what holds back the creation of quality jobs in the economy. The revamped PLFS series also expands its questionnaire on education and skills, which have emerged as important drivers of changes in the economy's employment structure.

While the NSO has stepped up to provide the basic data necessary for us to analyse and understand the complexity of the country's labour market, deeper research is now needed for this move to spell meaningful policy engagement. Research and policy must look beyond basic estimates of the WPR and unemployment rate. Expanding the monthly release to include wages/earnings, job quality and other relevant co-variables would aid the process of analysing India's employment challenge.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

As US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt learned when he tried to pack the Supreme Court, the three branches of government are coequal for a reason. Neither the executive branch or the legislative branch should use the third branch to pursue a partisan agenda.

DANIEL PFEIFFER

GUEST VIEW

Will AI ever grasp quantum mechanics? Don't bet on it

NISHANT SAHDEV



is a theoretical physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US. He posts on X @NishantSahdev

Artificial intelligence (AI) is moving fast—faster than many of us ever imagined. It can diagnose diseases from images, write complex computer programs, predict market trends and help simulate the birth of galaxies in just a few seconds. It would not be a joke to say one day it will find the final secrets of the universe—perhaps even of quantum mechanics (QM), that most puzzling theory in modern physics.

As a physicist, I've used AI tools myself and been impressed by what they can do in seconds—things that used to take us years and huge amounts of funding. But I have a big doubt: AI may never truly 'understand' quantum mechanics. One might think that cracking the most mysterious theory in modern physics should not be difficult for AI, which is already helping scientists solve complicated equations and design quantum computers. But I am not so sure. And it's not about the power or programming. It's about something AI doesn't have: consciousness. Let me take you back to my student days.

I was sitting in a quantum physics lecture, listening to my professor talk about the famous double-slit experiment. It showed something interesting: tiny particles like electrons behave like waves—until we try to observe them. The moment we 'watch,' their behaviour changes. This strange result led to a shocking idea: the act of observing something can change reality itself. This is just like a person at a gathering who behaves freely when unobserved but changes behaviour once noticed. Similarly, electrons act like waves when not observed but change to particle-like behaviour upon measurement.

Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems, proven in the 1930s, drew attention to the question of whether a formal system (like those AI is built on) could grab all mathematical truths. There will always be true statements that such systems cannot prove. This limitation applies to AI, which basically operates within algorithmic bounds. The British physicist and mathematician Roger Penrose—winner of a Nobel Prize in Physics and co-architect of modern general relativity—went where few dared. He extended Gödel's incompleteness theorems into the mind itself. In *The Emperor's New Mind* and *Shadows of the Mind*, Penrose argued that no algorithm, no matter how sophisticated, can

truly mimic human consciousness. Why? Because consciousness, he suggested, doesn't arise from classical computation, but from quantum processes inside the brain.

I tend to agree. AI can mimic quantum behaviour, but does not experience it. It calculates probabilities but never truly observes. It outputs solutions without thinking of their philosophical connections. It is like a brilliant student solving the Navier-Stokes equations (famously tied to a million-dollar prize), but without sensing the turbulence of the waves they describe.

Modern AI, especially models that use machine learning and neural networks, is based on pattern recognition. They take large data-sets and find patterns, gathering and optimizing statistical regularities. This works well for visual recognition, language generation and even solving some physics problems, like calculating energy levels in molecular systems. However, QM goes beyond problem-solving. It is a

philosophical dare. It asks questions that go beyond 'what happens?' to 'why does this happen this way?' and 'what does it mean for something to happen at all?' The debates between Einstein, Bohr and Schrödinger weren't about the output of calculations; they were about the nature of reality.

Simulation isn't comprehension: There is a nice but critical difference between mimicking a phenomenon and understanding it. AI can simulate quantum systems with precision, especially with hybrid quantum-classical algorithms.

Take the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment. A large language model can cite 'Copenhagen interpretations,' but it does not wrestle with the paradox of a cat that's neither dead nor alive the way a physicist does. AI doesn't 'lose sleep' over it. It doesn't look for an explanation that 'feels' right in its deepest sense. Its answers are not born of statistical curiosity, but of statistical association. Understanding requires

Until AI can come up with questions it wasn't trained to ask, challenge patterns it was built on and develop a sense of awe about its place in the universe, it won't match the human mind.

not just prediction, but a jump of abstraction and an act of belief—something deeply human. QM inherently resists usual logic. It is probabilistic, contextual and often counter-intuitive. AI, by contrast, is built atop layers of statistical models and optimization processes. Ironically, this might make AI more naturally aligned with the probabilistic nature of quantum physics than classical human thinking. Will AI ever generate such a revolutionary conceptual leap? Can it doubt the axioms it's trained on? It's not just math; it is a window to the basic nature of existence. Whether it reveals a multiverse or a single unlearned reality, it poses questions that touch on consciousness, causality and the limits of knowledge itself.

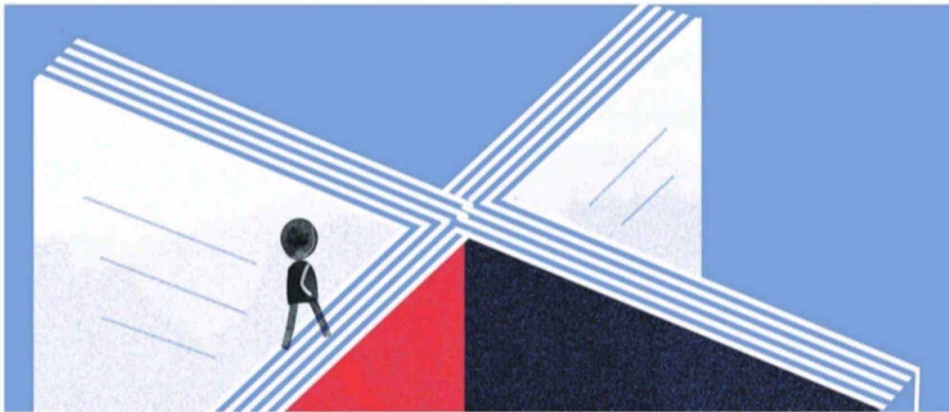
AI is a powerful tool—perhaps the most powerful we've built. But as a physicist, I remain cautious. Until AI can construct questions it was not trained to ask, challenge patterns it was built upon and develop a sense of awe about its place in the universe, it will remain an assistant, not an originator of quantum understanding. At the end, it's not just about numbers, but about tackling the mysteries of the universe with curiosity, humility and imagination. And that, for now, remains uniquely human.

These are the author's personal views.

THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



CBSE's new directive on the medium of instruction in primary schools has sparked a debate. Is the shift away from English out of sync with a rapidly changing knowledge economy?

Early learning needs mother tongue

Teaching in English from day one, especially to first-generation learners, often results in confusion and lower overall comprehension



SHAMBAHAVI GUPTA

DURING A CLASS on "cultural capital", my students and I found ourselves discussing the role of the English language in the Indian context. The conversation turned out to be a comparison with countries like France and China, where people have deep-rooted pride in their language. In contrast, many of my students admitted that they barely know their native tongues — some can understand them, but few are able to speak or write with confidence. They expressed a quiet sense of loss, even as they acknowledged the prestige and professional opportunities that come with speaking "good" English in India. It is this sense of confusion that shapes my view on the CBSE's proposal to introduce mother-tongue instruction at the primary level. I find it hard to take a definitive stance, but if I had to describe my position, I would call myself a sceptical supporter.

The idea of supporting one's mother tongue comes from many writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon, and J M Coetzee, who have long written about decolonising the mind and reclaiming identity through native languages. Their work highlights how colonial legacies and global hierarchies have privileged English and sidelined local languages, entrenching cultural and cognitive hierarchies.

Yet, even if we agree in principle, practical questions remain, like which language to choose in a country as linguistically diverse as India. That's why the ongoing language mapping exercise in schools is not just welcome — it is essential. While I agree that collecting languages children speak at home is a smart and necessary step, I think it should have been done before issuing the directive.

Children are now entering school at a much younger age than in the past. Students normally enter school at about three years of age. For a child entering school for the first time, everything is unfamiliar — the space, the people, the routines and expectations. Language, at the very least, can offer continuity and comfort. The emotional security of being taught in the language spoken at home can ease this early transition and help children settle into learning more naturally.

Having said this, we also do see a generation of students in elite private schools who are growing up with little connection to their native languages. At home and in public life, most children communicate in English. They are growing up within a single language system, disconnected from their linguistic roots. Mother-tongue instruction holds the poten-

tial to reverse that trend.

When children are taught in a language their families understand, learning becomes a shared experience. Parents and even grandparents, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, can engage more actively with their child's education. This strengthens the link between home and school and can lead to improved outcomes. Critics argue that such a directive may disadvantage children later, given English's dominance in higher education and the job market. But this policy move is about the primary level, where the focus should be on building core literacy, numeracy, and confidence. The transition to English can still happen, but must take place thoughtfully. What we need is a gradual, well-supported, and pedagogically sound design for that transition.

Even from a cognitive standpoint, support comes from UNESCO and UNICEF, which advocate for mother-tongue instruction in early education. Early literacy in the mother tongue lays a strong foundation for later academic achievement. Teaching in English from day one, especially to first-generation learners, often results in confusion and lower overall comprehension.

This topic made me think of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence". The term is used to describe a wide range of actions that involve imposing meaning or authority in an arbitrary way — actions that appear neutral or natural but actually reflect power. The education system, through form and content, exercises symbolic violence in different ways — it imposes ideas, values, or norms that carry hidden power. English-language instruction can be seen as a form of symbolic violence where students are alienated from their mother tongues. Instruction in the mother tongue is a pedagogical choice that resists the treatment of children's home languages as inadequate or inferior.

Choosing which language to prioritise in each region will involve tough decisions, and owing to India's multilingualism, there are no perfect answers. Ensuring that schools once again do not fall into the cycle of symbolic violence by imposing a few people's mother tongue on others is important. Now that the CBSE directive has been issued, what matters most is how this is implemented.

The timeline for implementation raises serious concerns. Expecting schools to pivot over a single summer break, already too short, is unrealistic. Overhauling curricula, training teachers and preparing materials will take time. Without this investment, the risk is a superficial rollout driven more by political optics than pedagogical substance. One should not reduce a well-intentioned intervention to another hurried rollout. Done right, this could be the beginning of a more inclusive, just, and effective education system.

The writer is a Sociology teacher in a Delhi school

English is language of aspiration

Students gravitate towards the promise of socioeconomic mobility. For many, English serves that purpose



SHAILAJA MENON

A FEW DAYS ago, we attended the orientation programme for our child who is in high school. The purpose was to make parents/guardians aware of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) guidelines on promotions based on the NEP 2020. Notably, most parents wanted the school to offer foreign languages — French, German and Spanish — instead of Hindi for Class X and above, on two grounds. First, it is difficult to score high marks in Hindi, and second, the foreign languages increase their future employability.

How does one read this demand alongside the CBSE's latest directive to offer education at the primary level in the mother tongue or the dominant language prevalent in the state? The idea aligns with the objective of the NEP 2020, which emphasises education in the mother tongue. A laudable initiative, it is fraught with many practical problems and invites questions. First, which language will be given preference in linguistically diverse cities like Delhi? Many children speak in different dialects at home, but their mother tongue is considered Hindi. Second, is it possible for the school to recruit teachers and build up academic infrastructure based on the students' linguistic preferences? Who will bear the expenses for the extra resources?

If the CBSE were really serious, it would have conducted assessment studies to understand the specific requirements of the students based on regional diversity and language preferences, and trained teachers accordingly. The pedagogy and curriculum of the teachers' training institutes also need to be changed. Schools located in non-metropolitan cities would suffer more due to their lack of infrastructure and resources. Schools have been given the task of mapping students' languages and training teachers accordingly for the new academic session by July 2025.

The process of knowledge production in India is dominated by the English language right from primary to institutions of higher learning. This is more apparent in technical, medical and scientific research. The policy to impart engineering education in Hindi was not very successful. Most Hindi textbooks contained several English words. The nodal agency to promote translation in India under the National Translation Mission is the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysuru. One wonders whether the CBSE sought its expertise as even the translated textbooks (links are provided in the CBSE circular) carry multiple English words. To illustrate, lesson No 10 of the Class II

Mathematics textbook in Telugu, titled "Joyful Mathematics", depicts kids at a fun-fair. The entire event is described in English. There are 13 English words, such as project, market, pen, bread packet, snacks, notebook, etc. Similarly, in the Class III Gujarati textbook for Art and Visual Images, Activity 7 contains nine English words to explain various activities for children. A simple Google search will provide the translation for these English words into Telugu or Gujarati. What purpose do these half-baked textbooks serve?

In numerous families in India, parents belong to different regions, and the children speak multiple languages at home. Who decides which will be the mother tongue? Some languages do not have a standardised script. Then there are languages that exist only in an oral form. Will they be sidelined from pedagogy? Many families with transferable jobs or even migrants will find it difficult to cope with such policies.

In 2020, Payal Kumari topped the BA Archaeology and History exam of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. She was the odd student in the Malayalam-medium local school, the daughter of migrant labourers. The student population is rapidly declining in the state due to the low birth rate and the shift to English-medium schools. For migrant families, access to quality education even in the local language is a great investment for their children's future.

Studies have found that, barring North India, where children are mostly proficient in only one language, in other regions of the country, children grow up speaking two or more languages. So, in northern India, if the schools fail to recruit teachers for multiple languages, they would end up falling back on Hindi. The easy availability of Hindi textbooks will facilitate such a choice. In a recent judgment, the Supreme Court said that it is not mandatory for states to implement the NEP 2020. Will the CBSE circular end up making the NEP mandatory?

For many Indians, knowledge of English is a ticket to upward socioeconomic mobility. The changing aspirational trend is reflected in the enrolment figures of English-medium private schools, even in rural India. When the world is rapidly transitioning towards AI and digital literacy, students and parents will gravitate towards languages that ensure better employability. It seems that the CBSE is unaware of the needs and aspirations of its stakeholders. The new initiative is full of good intentions but requires more precise planning. The education scenario in India is plagued with systemic inequities that have created a huge gap between those fortunate enough to be schooled in the language of global opportunities and others languishing in the shadows of mediocre schools, unimaginative pedagogy and inadequately trained teachers.

The writer teaches History at the School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi. The views expressed are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"New legislation allowing the annual Budapest Pride celebration to be banned contravenes basic rights. Brussels needs to draw a line in the sand."

—THE GUARDIAN

Drifting far from Bandung

Amnesia on landmark conference marks the loss of India's distinctive voice that once commanded attention in global forums



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

ANNIVERSARIES CAN BE powerful moments of reflection in international diplomacy. Yet, the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference passed without commemoration in India. This lapse in memory is one of the many signs of the transformation of Indian foreign policy.

The Bandung Conference was much more than a diplomatic gathering. Emerging from the shadows of colonialism and devastating wars, it was the collective expression of the aspiration of 29 newly independent nations to define their destinies unencumbered by the push and pull of superpower politics. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) sprang out of this radical context, and India assumed its moral leadership under Jawaharlal Nehru's stewardship.

In the decades after Independence, India's foreign policy was based on certain fundamental principles: Anti-colonialism, sovereignty and equality of nations, peaceful coexistence and non-interference in internal affairs. These weren't then, and aren't now, abstract ideas. For a young nation seeking to secure its identity and autonomy in a world order structured by the Cold War, these were non-negotiable political and policy instruments. India's stance earned it respect that may have been disproportionate to its material heft, but it was a recognition of the country's moral authority.

India's leadership of the NAM communicated to its peers as well as to the world powers several important lessons. To post-colonial countries, it demonstrated that pluralism and progress can and should go hand-in-hand. Economically, India pursued an industrial policy aimed at self-reliance, offering a development model that was an alternative to both Western capitalism and Soviet communism. This earned India goodwill that extended beyond its boundaries. Indian universities were seen as alternative learning centres for students from Africa, West Asia and South Asia. We accumulated "soft power" and used it even before it became popular as a concept. When India spoke in international fora, it did not do so only for itself. It represented a broad constituency of developing countries.

Today, Indian foreign policy has gone far away from these principles. I will try to make a few points that can help understand the extent and impact of this shift.

Nothing explains the deep reluctance to acknowledge the sophisticated diplomatic positioning of the NAM era except that India's approach to international relations seems to have shifted from institution-based multilateralism to personality-driven engagement. While it is true that personal diplomacy has always been an element of statecraft, foreign policy now increasingly revolves around leader-to-leader dynamics. The current regime's disproportionate staging of personality seems to be at the cost of institutional memory and professional diplomatic expertise. Our foreign policy decisions appear to be reactive.

Studies have found that, barring North India, where children are mostly proficient in only one language, in other regions of the country, children grow up speaking two or more languages. So, in northern India, if the schools fail to recruit teachers for multiple languages, they would end up falling back on Hindi. The easy availability of Hindi textbooks will facilitate such a choice. In a recent judgment, the Supreme Court said that it is not mandatory for states to implement the NEP 2020. Will the CBSE circular end up making the NEP mandatory?

For many Indians, knowledge of English is a ticket to upward socioeconomic mobility. The changing aspirational trend is reflected in the enrolment figures of English-medium private schools, even in rural India. When the world is rapidly transitioning towards AI and digital literacy, students and parents will gravitate towards languages that ensure better employability. It seems that the CBSE is unaware of the needs and aspirations of its stakeholders. The new initiative is full of good intentions but requires more precise planning. The education scenario in India is plagued with systemic inequities that have created a huge gap between those fortunate enough to be schooled in the language of global opportunities and others languishing in the shadows of mediocre schools, unimaginative pedagogy and inadequately trained teachers.

The writer teaches History at the School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi. The views expressed are personal

FDI CONCERNS

THE RECENT DECLINE in net foreign direct investment (FDI) raises questions about India's attractiveness as an investment destination. Successful trade talks with the US and EU could boost investments and exports. A US-India trade agreement could open up new market access and energise exports. With the China+1 strategy unfolding, India needs to seize opportunities and address challenges to enhance its global appeal and ensure sustained economic growth.

Yuvraj Singh, Hissar

While such an approach may yield short-term advantages or concessions, it risks undermining long-term objectives. Our longstanding partners increasingly perceive India not as the stable, principled actor that once anchored regional stability, but as an unpredictable force.

Traditionally, nations believe that international engagement requires continuity. Therefore, they attempt to build domestic consensus around foreign policy priorities, overcoming electoral cycles and political rivalries. Today, however, foreign policy decisions are increasingly framed not through the lens of national interest, but through narratives designed to strengthen the ruling party's domestic political position. Diplomatic events are choreographed as spectacles for domestic consumption.

The recent conflict with Pakistan presents a revealing case of these dynamics. It is a matter of deep concern when the American effort of ceasefire talks comes from Washington. The US's equivocation in holding Pakistan responsible for cross-border terrorism weakens India's ability to dictate terms in its immediate neighbourhood. Add to this US President Donald Trump's statement that the issue is viewed simultaneously as a security issue and a business opportunity, where India could be persuaded by the US to do its bidding through an offer of a "lot of trade". Such presentation of diplomatic offers as strategic advantages, from Washington, has diminished the distinctiveness of India's position. From being a nation that once articulated a broad vision of international justice, we seem to be maintaining international relations primarily through commercial considerations. Or, at least, this is what we have allowed our partners to suggest and get away with.

The ascendance of "strongman" politics, characterised by personalisation of power, confrontational rhetoric, and performative displays of national strength, is no longer a domestic concern but also a risk in international relations. Once such messaging takes root, deviating from it is difficult — as the trolling of our foreign secretary has regrettably shown.

Historically, India's foreign policy was pragmatic. Even if aspects of it may seem idealistic today, the policy recognised that for a developing nation with limited material capabilities, principled and reliable consistency offered strategic advantages. Non-alignment was never about disengagement but about preserving decision-making autonomy in a polarised world.

The world has, of course, changed dramatically since Bandung. India's approach must evolve accordingly. Our country's regional and global aspirations remain substantial and legitimate. However, realising these ambitions requires a rejuvenation of the diplomatic strengths that once defined its international identity.

The lack of enthusiasm for Bandung's anniversary is not just a failure to observe an important historical moment. It represents a missed opportunity that might have been used to express a new vision for India's engagement in the international arena, building upon the principles of that era. India can and must reclaim the distinctive voice that once commanded attention in global forums.

The writer is Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, Rashtriya Janata Dal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CURRICULUM REVAMP

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Break from the grind" (IE, May 29). It is a bitter irony that students' concerns are hardly addressed while framing curricula. It is an esoteric exercise involving academics who tinker with the curriculum by introducing new concepts and chapters, unmindful of the stress inflicted on students. While it is true that for a developing country like ours, the education system should be periodically revamped to work in tandem with technological advancements, care should also be taken to lighten the burden on students. IIT Delhi's initiative to revamp its curriculum is a welcome move.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

ENGLISH MATTERS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Wrong lesson plan" (IE, May 28). If India wants to stay on track to become "Viksit Bharat" by 2047, it must ensure skilling and employability. The fact is that English, currently, is the only language that can provide global interconnectedness. It's a living, breathing, and continually evolving language. While we should preserve our traditional languages, it shouldn't be at the cost of the place in the world.

Swati Rishi, Mumbai

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "No more kirakira" (IE, May 29). While Japan moves to allow only the generally accepted pronunciations, imagine the horror for parents debating whether to name the baby Rei, Ray, or Rhee. In India, we've been surviving our own set of name confusions — Rishi starting with an 'H' or 'R' or 'A' or 'N'. Not to forget the double 'a's or 'e's. But shouldn't the choice of what we like to be called be fundamental? Ask "Kalu" who can't even choose the druggy sound of its acronym — "Chitta". If such rules came here, half the population would need a renaming ceremony. At least now the Japanese know. What's in a name? Apparently a government policy.

Aerika Singh, Chandigarh



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Trade relations that leave the US out could outdo Trump's tariffs

The rest of the world could prosper from a multilateral free-trade arrangement while a self-isolated America would lose out



SUDIPTO MUNDLE
is chairman, Centre for Development Studies.

Donald Trump rambles on in his second term as US president, disrupting institutions and policies both at home and abroad. Several months on, his behaviour reveals a pattern, even if it is somewhat fuzzy. He lays down his cards with outrageous announcements and then backtracks, especially in bilateral negotiations. It is a pattern repeated in his domestic interventions in different fields as well as his dealings with US neighbours like Canada and Mexico, allies like the UK, EU, Japan and Korea, rivals like China and Russia, and other countries like India. But how much he will backtrack in a particular case, if he backtracks at all, remains uncertain. Indeed, uncertainty is the leitmotif of Trump's exercise of raw power. Given this, specifically in the context of trade and tariffs, I asked Professor C. Veeramani, one of India's leading trade economists, what the outcome would be if other members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) continued to trade in compliance with WTO rules but without the US. It is as if the other WTO members—or most of them—were to forge a massive free trade agreement (FTA) without the US.

This is a most unlikely scenario. Other countries, especially allies of the US, are too tied up with the US through security and other linkages for them to decouple from the US in the field of trade. However, economists follow this method of abstracting from the real-world to first address a question in a very simplified context, constructed through simplifying assumptions—which is sometimes called a model. The question is then revisited as the context is gradually enriched by incorporating stylized facts from ground reality to verify whether the original conclusion survives successive approximations back to the real world. Hence, my hypothetical question for Veeramani. His answer is quite interesting.

Veeramani said that the US accounts for a small fraction of global trade. Current data indicates that its share is down to 10% and declining. Meanwhile, the share of China, the EU and emerging market economies has been rising. In other words, 90% of global trade occurs without any direct US participation. An FTA among major non-US economies, including the EU, ASEAN, China, Japan, India, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, etc., would deepen supply chain integration among these countries by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers. Assume, conservatively, that this non-US trade bloc initially accounts for 60% of global trade. Assume further that deeper integration among them raises intra-bloc trade by 5-10 percentage points over the medium term. A part of this would be attributable to trade diversion from the US, with consequent adverse effects on the US economy. But the rest would be additional trade creation. Overall global trade could increase by 3-6



percentage points, by Veeramani's estimate.

Depending on the relevant response elasticities and complementary policy reforms in these countries, global GDP could also go up by 0.5-1 percentage point. But the impact on the US economy would be negative. Its share of world trade and GDP would decline, while that of European economies and the emerging economies of Asia, Africa and Latin America would rise.

The scenario described above is unlikely. The rest of the world is unlikely to decouple from the US because of their security and other linkages cited earlier. Nevertheless, this boundary scenario yields an important qualitative conclusion: namely, that the path Trump has chosen is likely to hurt America, while other countries are likely to be better off. This only captures the impact on the global economy via the trade channel; this is indeed one of the main channels through which US policies will impact the world economy. But there are two other economic channels that also need to be considered: finance and technology.

As for the financial channel, a large number of countries in the Asian region and West Asia are already reported to be participating in a payment system promoted by the central bank of China, presumably supported by US-sanctioned coun-

tries like Russia and Iran, as a more efficient alternative to Swift. The more the US attempts to isolate its geopolitical rivals, the more it will accelerate a worldwide shift away from the present US-dominated global financial architecture. The market mechanism can bite in both directions.

The battle for access to technology—and it is indeed a battle—is being fought on the artificial intelligence (AI) front. When the US government tried to block China's access to recent advances in large language models with Generative AI capability developed in US companies, China shocked the world with its own Generative AI products, made available for free—or a fraction of the prices charged by US companies. As with the financial architecture, so also here: the more the US attempts to isolate its rivals, the faster it will drive them to develop their own competing technologies.

This column has been limited to the economic domain and not gone into security relationships. In this domain, the lesson is very clear: the more that Trump pursues a pugnacious approach to subdue US neighbours, allies and rivals, the more he is likely to hurt America and help its rivals. In this context, the wisdom of India's approach of 'strategic autonomy' should be evident to all.

These are the author's personal views.

QUICK READ

About 90% of global trade occurs without any direct US participation and an FTA among major non-US economies would deepen supply chain integration among them by lowering barriers.

Such a scenario is unlikely but it yields an important conclusion: the path that Donald Trump has chosen is likely to hurt America's economy while other countries could find themselves better off.

Football World Cup: Will US hostility trump its hospitality?

Scaring foreign football fans off will not help make a success of it



ERIKA D. SMITH
is a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion.

Not long after Los Angeles (L.A.) was selected as one of 11 American cities to host next summer's FIFA World Cup, tourism officials started predicting the potential economic impact. Among the most optimistic? That the weeks-long tournament could pour almost \$600 million into the local economy, mostly from international fans of football.

Pessimism has since taken over. At a time when the US should be preparing to roll out the proverbial welcome mat to the world, President Donald Trump's erratic immigration policies and draconian rhetoric are instead scaring tourists away.

Stories abound of travellers with visas in hand being denied entry at the border over minor infractions or, in some cases, being held for weeks before being allowed to return home.

The World Travel & Tourism Council, pointing to the Trump administration, recently projected that spending on international trips to the US would reach only \$109 billion this year, down \$12.5 billion compared to 2024 and well below the 2019 peak of \$217 billion.

Travel from Canada is down for the third straight month. Numerous countries, including Germany, have issued travel advisories warning their citizens to strictly follow the United States' tighter rules for entry, or risk being detained.

Trump, however, appears unconcerned. During his visit to Qatar, where the previous World Cup was held, he insisted that next year's tournament—billed as the last ever, with 48 teams playing matches in the US, Mexico and Canada—is "going to be really exciting."

Meanwhile, his Homeland Security secretary Kristi Noem has promised that travel for tourists "will go smoothly." FIFA President Gianni Infantino, a long-time Trump ally, has claimed that the world is welcome in America. "This doesn't come from me. This comes from the American government," he told the FIFA Congress.

Such empty boosterism hasn't gone over well in L.A., the US city with arguably the most at stake when it comes to sports tourism. Not only is it hosting eight World Cup matches, including the high-profile men's opener, it's also on the hook to host the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2028.

Planning is well underway for both mega events, which, so far, have largely been funded with sponsorship and licensing deals. However, taxpayers and the city's depleted coffers will be on the hook if there are cost overruns, which is usually the case.



Los Angeles was expecting a tourist boom in 2026 but can't be sure of it. **ISTOCKPHOTO**

Of the last 14 World Cups, all but two ended up in the red for their host countries, researchers from the University of Lausanne found. And with the Olympics, most host cities usually exceed their budgets and fail to recoup their expenses. London broke even in 2012 and that was considered a success. Hotels and restaurants, flush with customers, tend to turn a profit during mega events. But with many expecting the Trump administration's policies to act as a tourism deterrent, exactly how much profit is now in question.

This was the gist of a heated debate before the Los Angeles City Council recently, as tourism officials and business leaders objected to a plan to ramp up the minimum wage for hotel and airport workers to \$25 per hour in time for the World Cup and to \$30 per hour in time for the Olympics.

"An overwhelming majority of visitors from our key international markets now have an unfavourable view of the United States as a travel destination," warned Adam Burke, president of the Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board, citing the projected slowdown in international travel, which is already being felt in California resort towns, such as Palm Springs. "The 2025 outlook is not encouraging," Burke added.

Also of concern is whether the Trump administration even has the resources to quickly process millions of applications for tourist visas, and, if so, whether it has the patience to manage the flow of fans and players repeatedly crossing into Mexico and Canada during the World Cup.

To this, US Vice-President J.D. Vance recently joked—at least, I think it was a joke—that the US wants tourists to "watch the game. But when the time is up, they'll have to go home. Otherwise, they'll have to talk to Secretary Noem."

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, meanwhile, encouraged tourists to take a road trip, but "don't overstay your visa." Such comments are unlikely to inspire confidence in any would-be tourists.

As Adam Sacks, president of the research firm Tourism Economics, recently told the *New York Times*: "The brand of the country has taken a beating."

It seems the bruises will show up first in Los Angeles. **©BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Women won't put careers first? That's soft patriarchy

DEVINA SENGUPTA



writes on workplaces and education at Mint.

was part of a panel discussion in 2023 on how India Inc is testing out different retention tools. The pros and cons of work-from-home came up in our discussion. I pointed out that one needs to be cognizant of the reality that being 'seen' at the workplace carries more weight than one may realize, especially for women.

A panelist battling for flexible work hours chimed in, "But what if you want to give that time to your family, be around for that one hot home-cooked meal a day?"

The gender ratio of the panel was three men to one woman. All three male heads, plus the fourth one of the moderator, turned towards me. The panelist who had raised that question did not take my name. But people are so deeply conditioned by social norms that hearing the keywords 'family', 'meal' and 'home cooked' was enough for everyone to turn to me. It was a reminder that in society's word associations, women were responsible for all of that.

Soft patriarchy is amply found among both men and women. It is not harsh and obvious, so it cannot be easily stomped down and argued against. Instead, it mellifluously shackles you to the belief that men and women have inherent duties that they are destined to fulfil, and that not doing this would expose you to the charge or guilt of being neglectful.

Even today, the usually-male household 'provider' is seen to be fulfilling his 'duty' just by pursuing a career, even if home chores are left out. A woman, on the other hand, must 'nurture.' A job, let alone a career, is considered an added advantage at best. Many of us are so busy fighting obvious gender biases that we often fail to notice the judgements that come our way from those who are under the influence of the gentler but steely resolve of soft patriarchy.

Women can be just as harsh as their male counterparts in judging those who they see as failing to balance their 'family' and 'work' commitments. If someone asked about why there should be any such balance at all, how much support would they get? Yet, not everyone wants an equilibrium; some may want the see-saw loaded just one way, and if their career is on top, why not?

A McKinsey & Company study released in May points out that women's representation in India Inc stalls at the starting line: "It is low at the entry level (33%) and drops sharply at the move up to manager (24%) before somewhat levelling out." The data gets suffocating for those battling for more women in the workforce. "A man at the entry level is 2.4 times more likely to be promoted to a managerial position than a woman in the same role. At the same time, women are 1.3 times more likely to leave their positions than men at this stage," states the study titled 'Women in the Workplace.'

As kids, one believes that all are equal. But slowly, biases crawl into sight and accidents of birth become obvious. Something similar often happens at the workplace. Initially, just graduated job-takers enter a workplace where only the hours put in matter. Then cliques shape up, opportunities

grow increasingly unequal, and, for many of us, the need to be heard means adopting a louder voice. It can be jarring, but there is often no other way.

Allegations of being 'too ambitious' or wanting a 'career at the cost of family' hit many women hard. It is rare for a woman to muster the courage and unapologetically say 'no' to striking a balance.

And contrary to what colleagues, bosses, family and society tell us, I do not think it is a 'fine' balance. I think it is a huge broad beam—and I refuse to vault over it all the time.

It is increasingly common now to hear interviewers questioning women candidates on whether marriage or children feature in their five-year plan. Sure, given the high drop-out rates and pressures of business performance, one can understand the need to recruit employees who will more than 'pay back' what's invested in their training.

Not all working women want a 'fine balance' between family and career commitments. Many would like the seesaw tilted in favour of their jobs but people often seem puzzled by this.

QUICK READ

Soft patriarchy is not harsh and obvious, which makes it harder to call out. It takes the form of feigned empathy for women assumed to have duties dictated by gender that must be fulfilled.

But what these interviewers are doing, perhaps unwittingly, is sowing doubts in the minds of many young candidates. Forget their intrusion of privacy, many young women are not trained or encouraged to say, "In five years, I would like to be in a senior designation in this firm or handle an account worth a certain amount." We are usually taught 'world peace' answers, which include "I see myself growing into a better employee." "I want to learn and lead by example," etc. At this juncture, if questions on family and children are thrown in, one is flummoxed. If those responsibilities are assumed, you may face pressure to prove yourself as a good multi-tasker. And that dreaded 'fine balance' creeps in again!

Soft patriarchy lurches at us from every nook and corner, but we do not call it out because it could quash office conversations. Many of us ignore it or laugh it off.

Two years ago, I took that microphone and answered the question I had seemingly been asked by the panelist: "No, I do not care a dime if people at home eat frozen food. For me, at this juncture of my career, being visible in my work is more important than being visible at home."

I rest my case.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Musk goes

Turbulent stint to improve govt efficiency

A S billionaire tech entrepreneur Elon Musk wraps up his time with Donald Trump's administration, it caps his turbulent four-month run as an unpaid special employee with the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). His contentious effort to slash spending and reshape the bureaucracy upended the federal government. The Tesla CEO's short stint saw layoffs, buyout offers, cut in grants and programmes, and several court challenges. Coinciding with Musk's departure, a federal court has blocked President Trump's April 2 plan to impose sweeping import tariffs under emergency powers. These orders had introduced a 10 per cent baseline tariff on most goods entering the US and higher duties. The White House has pushed back, but an unsettling sense of chaos presides over the global trade landscape.

Musk was Trump's top donor in the 2024 presidential election campaign. The relationship appears to have cooled since last year. The world's richest man recently committed to returning \$400 to his businesses, after Tesla suffered a sharp sales slump in part due to his association with the administration. Musk was not on the same page with Trump over the new levies on China. He has also raised concerns about the President's sweeping tax and spending cuts package, saying it would raise the US budget deficit and undercut efforts by DOGE.

Musk may have courted controversy with his methods and brashness, but there is little to find fault with the basic premise behind the endeavour—that government spending needs fixing, a culture of wasteful expenditure must end and efficiency has to be the desired goal. It's a truism that applies to governments across the world, especially India. Musk's departure, of his own volition or otherwise, ends another chapter for the big boss club patronised by Trump—a hallmark of his presidency.

Gang menace

Punjab, Haryana must frame robust laws

B AFFLING—that's the word the Punjab and Haryana High Court has aptly used to sum up the absence of a legislative framework in Punjab and Haryana to curb gang-fuelled violence and intimidation. Both states have been given two months to frame a standard operating procedure (SOP) that can spell out the dos and don'ts for investigators in such cases. The systemic apathy is all the more glaring because it has already been three years since popular Punjabi singer Sidhu Moosewala fell to the bullets of hitmen hired by gangsters.

Gang culture is not confined to any state or region or country, for that matter. It has spread its lethal tentacles far and wide. Lawrence Bishnoi, who has been behind bars for the past over a decade, and his aides have been keeping the police on their toes not only in India but also overseas. The impunity with which these gangsters operate underscores a brazen disregard for the law as well as law enforcers. The fallout is that public confidence in the police is getting eroded. The court has rightly observed that the state owes a duty to its citizens to ensure their safety. The state's failure to perform this duty leaves people vulnerable to being targeted by gangsters. Murder, rape, assault, extortion—hardcore criminals will stop at nothing unless the police are empowered by a robust legislation.

Punjab and Haryana need to take a cue from the Uttar Pradesh Gangsters and Anti-Social Activities (Prevention) Act, 1986, and the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999. An anti-gangster task force and a special task force at the state and district levels can be beneficial, but in the long run, strict laws are needed to instil the fear of exemplary punishment in every gang leader or member. At the same time, it is crucial to firm up witness protection measures. Those who lodge complaints against gangsters should not be left to fend for themselves. Prioritising their safety will motivate others to come forward and help the authorities combat this scourge.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MAY 30, 1925

Sir Ganga Ram on unemployment

BY a strange accident, the publication of the matriculation results for the recent year virtually coincides with the strong and earnest plea put forward by Sir Ganga Ram in his evidence before the Economic Enquiry Committee for immediate attention to be paid to the question of unemployment among the educated youth of the province. There were twenty thousand students who came out of Punjab University last year," he said. "There was unemployment among these, not among the labourers whose condition was far better." We do not think Sir Ganga Ram meant to suggest that the condition of the labourers themselves was all that it should be. What he did say was that whatever the condition of this particular class, the condition of a very large number of people who belong to what is usually called the educated middle class was far worse. In making this statement, Sir Ganga Ram was undoubtedly on firm ground. There can be no question that while the wages of many, if not most, classes of labourers have been going up, the wages of the average matriculate or graduate, even when he does find employment, show a distinctly downward tendency. The reason is obvious. The supply in one case is far more in excess of the demand than in the other. It was to this fact that he made a pointed reference. He said: "Don't create university men more than you need. Of course, I don't want you to shut up your schools and colleges, but where is the need for increasing your arts colleges when more technical schools are wanted?"

OPINION

A professor and a draconian law

Mahmudabad's post doesn't reflect any intent to endanger the nation's unity, sovereignty and integrity

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

I CONCEDE that liberal humanists like me cannot expect the Supreme Court to meet all our expectations. Judges have case law to contend with, for instance. But the SC Division Bench's order in Prof Ali Khan Mahmudabad's case puzzled and disappointed me. And I am not the only citizen whom the honorable court has stunned.

Reading the professor's post, which I sourced from an acquaintance (since I am not on Facebook), I could find not a single word to make me wonder if the scholar had intended to endanger the unity, sovereignty and integrity of our nation-state. Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), under which he was arrested, penalises secession, armed rebellion and subversive activities. The professor has certainly not displayed any such intention in his post.

If the court had read any such intent into his post, it would not have released him on bail. But surprisingly, it passed on the task of decoding the post to an SIT (special investigation team) consisting of three IPS officers, including a woman because two women defence officers were mentioned in his post. Incidentally, courts are frequently ordering the setting up of SITs nowadays.

I am proud to learn that IPS officers are deemed more competent to interpret English words than members of the higher judiciary. I doubt if the judges' opinion on the comparative abilities to fathom the nuances of English will be shared by the majority of Indian citizens.

What could have offended

the Chairperson of the Haryana State Commission for Women, Renu Bhatia? In his post, the professor was positive on every aspect of the official response to the terror attack on innocent Hindu tourists in Pahalagam. While commending the government for choosing a Muslim woman officer to brief the media, the professor had stated that right-wing forces should commit themselves to real secularism by condemning lynchings and bulldozing of houses mostly of Muslims who are suspected of involvement in crimes.

There was nothing wrong in that argument. Many Indians (including this writer) have deplored such acts of vandalism, which are patently unlawful. Even the Supreme Court has come down heavily on the use of bulldozers by local authorities without following the due process. In a country governed by the "rule of law", such vigilante shortcuts are far from kosher. Well-meaning critics of the executive's excesses, like I felt I was and still am, will have to

Surprisingly, the court passed on the task of decoding the post to a special investigation team.

revise our approach to criticism of the government when its actions or lack of action, as the case may be, violates the principle of the "rule of law". As a corollary to this stand, I need to deplore the lack of spine displayed by the police, first, and the subordinate judiciary, next, in rushing to arrest the professor, and remanding him in police custody for crimes that many believe he did not commit!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Books and ideas are the most effective weapons against intolerance and ignorance. —Lyndon B Johnson

A General, a shrine and the whispers of fate

COL. GULJIT SINGH CHADHA (RETD)

NESTLED in the rugged terrain of Sikkim lies not just a strategic military zone but also a region steeped in mystery, faith and folklore. During my tenure in the Eastern Himalayas as Officer Commanding of 214 Field Workshop and Divisional Troops Workshop at Gangtok from 1997 to 1999, I heard a poignant anecdote that predated my posting—one that continues to echo through the mountains and among the troops stationed there.

In May 1988, Lt Gen Javed Mahmood, then GOC-in-C, Eastern Command, visited the 33 Corps zone in Sikkim. As per custom, senior officers visiting the sector made it a point to pay homage at the shrine of Baba Harbhajan Singh at Nathu La. He was a soldier of the Punjab Regiment, who passed on in 1968 but is still believed to protect Indian soldiers posted in the high Himalayas.

Pressed for time, the General skipped the shrine, stating that he would visit it on his next tour. However, inclement weather prevented helicopter clearance for his return journey. Officers gently suggested that this delay could be used to visit the Baba's shrine. He declined once more.

He then opted to travel by road to Silguri, but the convoy was halted after his vehicle reportedly suffered a minor mishap. Once again, some advised him to reconsider visiting the shrine—perhaps this was a signal. The General, known for his professionalism, dismissed the suggestions, remarking that he was not superstitious and needed to adhere to his schedule.

Ultimately, despite the poor weather, the helicopter took off from Gangtok. On May 7, 1989, the Mi-8 chopper crashed near Pano, Bhutan. All eight onboard, including Lt Gen Mahmood and his wife, were killed. A Court of Inquiry reported a sudden loss of power but could not establish the precise cause.

What made this tragedy resonate deeper was the story of Baba Harbhajan Singh. Revealed by soldiers, he is believed to appear in dreams, warning troops of enemy plans. His uniform is maintained daily, and every year on September 11, his belongings are sent to his village in Punjab with full ceremonial respect. A seat is reserved for him on the train. Soldiers stationed near Nathu La contribute to support his family. Bath coexists with discipline in the Indian Army, especially in the forbidding terrain of the Himalayas.

This tale, though part folklore and part lived history, isn't just about superstition or fate. It's about the delicate balance between duty and belief, between military precision and human intuition. In a profession defined by planning, there are moments that defy logic and stir reflection.

Some stories outlive the moment of their telling. They become part of the soul of a place—whispered in mess halls, remembered by generations and passed on not as warnings, but as reminders that in the world of men and mountains, there are still forces that command reverence.

THREAT: Severe provisions of Section 152 (secession, armed rebellion, etc.) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita have made ordinary citizens like Prof Mahmudabad more vulnerable. RACISMS

I will digress here to bemoan the introduction of Section 152 of the BNS, Section 124A of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code (IPC) pertained to sedition. Many of our great freedom fighters had been arraigned in courts under that provision of the colonial law. But the Modi-Shah government "reintroduced" it without using the dreaded word 'sedition' or its Hindi equivalent.

The provisions of Section 152 of the BNS are more severe than those of Section 124A of the IPC. The definition of 'subversive activities' lends itself to varied interpretations. Ordinary citizens like Prof Mahmudabad find themselves more vulnerable now.

Leaving a beleaguered minority voiceless is a sure recipe for disaster. It is not too late to take corrective action. Start with an education programme that compels women, and Muslim women in particular, to avail of secular education that dwells on three Rs—Reading, Reasoning and Arithmetic. That alone will put them on the road to equality with menfolk. Cases like the one involving Shah Bano will

then not come up.

Reverting to the judgments emanating from the Supreme Court, I have to state that I had great hope when Justice BR Gavai took oath as the Chief Justice of India (CJI). His recent order staying the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) investigation in the TASMAR (Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation) case was welcome. There was a feeling that the ED was being used or even misused by the government to needle Opposition-ruled governments. The agency will need to restrain its enthusiasm after this order.

However, I was taken aback when the CJI recently visited Mumbai. At a reception accorded to him by the Bombay Bar Association, he gently chided the Chief Secretary, the DGP and the city's Police Commissioner for "not following the protocol" by not receiving him at the airport on his arrival from Delhi.

I checked the rules and found that they did not require these busy officers to be present at the airport on the CJI's arrival. Initially, I was a bit worried since I had occupied the Commissioner of Police's chair from February 1982 to May 1985. I had never been asked by the Protocol Department to present myself at the airport. Chief Justices SP Bhattacharya, SH Kapadia, SA Bobde and DY Chandrachud were from the Bombay Bar. They must have visited Mumbai during their tenures. The Secretary, Law and Judiciary, and the Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court had surely received them and seen them off, as required by the rules.

After CJI Gavai's lament, the Maharashtra Government has issued an administrative fiat that whenever the CJI visits Mumbai, he or she will be treated as a state guest. I do not know if that entails the presence of the Chief Secretary, the DGP and the Commissioner of Police at the time of the CJI's arrival and departure.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Setback to Trump's MAGA push

Refer to 'Research reels under US fund squeeze', one of the reasons for the growth of science and technology in the US after World War II was the migration of talented scientists from Europe. If the policies of the Trump administration continue, there may be a reversal of this trend. Despite relatively lower salaries, many bright American students prefer to join US universities out of choice rather than go out and look for jobs. The lower salary is somewhat compensated by the summer salary incorporated in the research projects funded by the NSF and the NIH. In most American universities, the annual salary is for nine months, given in 12 instalments, and the researchers often draw three months' salary out of the research grant. Such a compensation will not be available if funding to the NSF and the NIH is reduced. One just wonders how Trump's MAGA will be achieved with diminished funds for research in STEM subjects.

SP SINGH, KURUKSHETRA

Students will look for other options

It refers to 'Studying in America', US President Trump is not leaving any stone unturned in creating uncertainty in the minds of foreign students for no fault of theirs. Due to the new visa norms, the student fraternity is in a limbo. First he revoked the Student and Exchange Visitor Program and now he has instructed consular offices and embassies to halt new student visa interviews. It will jeopardise their careers and US universities will also suffer because they rely heavily on foreign students to raise funds. More than one million foreign students enrol for various US universities courses each year. The latest measures will adversely impact enrolment. Moreover, students would be forced to opt for other countries or streams.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

US victimising students

Apocryphal of 'Studying in America', the latest visa restrictions on international students in the US undermine access to education as well as international academic cooperation. Victimising students for their political opinion goes against the principles of free speech and education. America stands to lose great minds

and alienate its foreign partners. Universities must be strengthened as temples of learning, not as battlefields for political purposes. Hope, not fear, should inform policy.

RUDRAVEER SINGH PANWAR, UJAIN

Quota demands will only grow

With reference to 'Caste census is a case study of divide & misrule', divisions have always existed in Indian society and we need to acknowledge them. Nearly every state has its own caste structure. The entire Northeast has tribes which are at loggerheads with one another. One does not know how the census will change the way the nation is administered. But one thing is certain: There is going to be a huge clamour and demands from different sections of society for quota will only grow, instead of dying down.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

BJP to benefit from caste census

Even though the BJP-led NDA government has agreed to include a caste survey in the next Census, it is apparently just an attempt to counter the Opposition's agenda. Caste is central to Indian politics. The demand for the inclusion of a caste count in the Census has been on the Congress' agenda for quite some time. Over the years, even as the original votaries of 'social justice' forgot about the caste census, the Congress became more insistent in its demand. However, it's the BJP that will benefit the most out of it.

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

Emotion woven in nostalgia

Apocryphal of the middle, the article beautifully captures the soul of an ancestral home and the quiet magic of memorable moments. The writer's evocative storytelling transported me to my own childhood memories—of warmth, belonging and the timeless comfort of the family. Her ability to portray nostalgia with delicate emotions is remarkable. The narrative is a gentle reminder that love and memories outlast time, and that our roots continue to anchor us even as the world around us changes. Write-ups like this reaffirm the power of storytelling to connect us.

JOSHITA LAMBIA, BY MAIL

NDA's first women cadets ready for tomorrow



MAJ GEN SANJEEV DOGRA (RETD)
FORMER DEPUTY COMMANDANT
AND CHIEF INSTRUCTOR, NDA

TODAY, the first batch of 17 women cadets (19 had joined, two dropped out) will pass out from the National Defence Academy (NDA), marking a historic milestone for the armed forces and the nation. They came from a generation accustomed to speed and instant connection — but they adapted to bugles, boots and discipline.

These cadets stepped into the precincts of the NDA to undergo one of the toughest regimens imaginable. Their journey was not just about breaking barriers; it was about setting benchmarks. A transformation not only of individuals — but of an institution.

It all began on a rain-washed afternoon in July 2022. As the girls stepped on the platform at the Pune railway station — bags on their backs, hearts in their throats — a tall, broad-shouldered 'drill Ustad' greeted them. His voice cut through the rain-wash din, firm yet proud: "From this moment, you are not civilians. You wear the honour of the Indian armed forces." That single sentence set the tone. No fanfare. No

exceptions. Only expectations and the start of something historic.

The drive to Khadaewasia was quiet, each cadet lost in thought. As the Tri-Shakti Gate loomed and they entered the NDA, the imposing architecture greeted them — aircraft on display, cadets sprinting past on cross-country routes, others executing crisp drills on the parade ground. Cadets in mid-air during volleyball spikes, squads barking out drill commands — it was a world already in motion.

Everything looked rehearsed, efficient, overwhelming. 19 newly inducted girls, surrounded by over 2,200 male cadets — what were they thinking? Some wore pride, others caution. They were excited, but unsure. Brave, but still seeking belonging.

The Academy had prepared with precision. Romeo Squadron was refurbished — rooms restructured, lights upgraded, drill officers reassigned. New security protocols were drawn. A revised code of conduct was institutionalised.

Yet, the essence of training remained untouched. The NDA wasn't creating exceptions — it was raising the bar. Traditions were respected, but inclusivity was now part of that tradition.

Training began like a thunderbolt. The first term was a whirlwind of early wake-ups, punishing PT, relentless drills, academic lectures and quiet nights of aching limbs. The 'drill Ustad' — tower-



BREAKING BARRIERS: The journey of the women cadets was about setting benchmarks. IN

ing, sharp-eyed and fierce — became icons of fear and respect. They roared on the parade ground, yet shielded their cadets like elder brothers. PT instructors focused not just on physical toughness but on inner resilience, adapting routines to match cadets' progress with silent encouragement.

Academics brought a different kind of challenge. Held in the stately Sudan and Manoj Pandey Blocks, the classes offered everything from geopolitics and military history to physics and service fundamentals.

Cadets rushed in breathless from morning PT, faces still wet from drills, uniforms slightly out of place. They tried to sit upright — but heads nodded off mid-lecture, not out of disinterest but sheer fatigue. The instructors understood. They'd been

As the terms rolled on, their bond extended beyond gender. Male course-mates, earlier unsure, now stood shoulder to shoulder with them in training and triumph.

cadets too. Questions flew, notes scribbled furiously and quiet moments of clarity landed like victory.

The Divisional Officers — often the first and most enduring influence on a cadet — understood that these girls were not just joining a course; they were creating a legacy.

When a woman cadet faltered in a PT test or struggled with drill, it was the Divisional Officer who stood beside her — sometimes with quiet advice, sometimes with a stern word that stung, but strengthened.

They guided them into the military way of life — adjusting to routines, accepting command structures and building mental toughness. Over time, these cadets didn't just adapt — they flourished. They led drills, topped academics and inspired juniors. By the sixth term, they weren't seen as women cadets — they were seen as leaders.

The rhythm of the NDA gradually became their own — echoed in parade commands, squadron assemblies and the quiet rustle of fatigues at dawn. For the girls, it meant trading portly tails for close-cropped crew cuts. They picked up the drill vocabulary, learned to march with poise, and synced their energy to the beat of the Academy. In this routine, they found rhythm and resilience.

The NDA has its own scent — the sharpness of polish, the earthy smell of monsoon drills, the metallic scent of rifle oil at the range and the steamy comfort of early morning *chai*. For the cadets, this rhythm is not imposed — it seeps in, until it becomes their own heartbeat. The NDA stopped feeling like an institution. It became home.

When the girls were integrated into squadrons, the dynamics changed. The male cadets adjusted, watched, then welcomed. Together, they competed in games, parades and obstacle courses. They failed, they won, and they cheered each other. The squadron spirit didn't shrink — it grew. With-in squadrons, bonds evolved.

As the terms rolled on, their bond extended beyond gender. Male course-mates, earlier unsure, now stood shoulder to shoulder with them in training and triumph.

By the third term, jokes flew in the ante-rooms. By the fourth term, they were picking each other up after falls — literally and figuratively. By the sixth term, they weren't just the first women

batch — they were a united course, bound not just by shared memories but a shared spirit of excellence. When parents came during mid-terms, they found someone different. The girl who left with a small suitcase returned taller, tanned, and sharper in tone and thought. The transformation was unmistakable — and deeply moving. Even hesitant parents now carried pride in their eyes.

The Adjutant — immaculate in dress, commanding from his white charger — represented everything the NDA stood for: precision, honour and presence. Cadets lived under his gaze with a mix of fear and pride. The institution never just taught drills or strategy. It instilled values. Cadets learned that character isn't optional — it's non-negotiable.

The future they step into is starkly different. Operation Sindoor made it clear that warfare has moved beyond trenches and tanks. The battlefields of tomorrow will involve AI, drones, satellites and cyber strikes. These girls must lead in tactical formations as well as tech-driven command centres.

Today, as they march across the Khadakpalle Parade Ground, the chief guest will salute — not 17 girls, but 17 officers-in-the-making. There will be no special reference. No gender called out.

As they walk past the Tri-Shakti Gate one last time, the NDA will not bid them farewell. It will whisper: Go lead. You are ready.

Cutting financial aid to Harvard an act of self-sabotage



ADAM EZRA COHEN
PROFESSOR, CHEMISTRY AND
PHYSICS, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

LAST week, I was among hundreds of researchers at Harvard University who received termination notices for our federal research grants. Mine was for a project to study electrical signalling between neurons in the brain. My lab research has led to progress in treatments for pain, epilepsy and ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). We have been working to map the physiological basis of memory, enabling new ways to study Alzheimer's disease. All our work is available for the public to see.

I am a long-time member of the Harvard community (18 years on the faculty, plus four years as an undergraduate), and I am visibly and proudly Jewish. The government's decision to withhold federal funding in the name of combating anti-Semitism is wrong, bad for Jews everywhere, and terrible for the US.

Yes, anti-Semitism on the campus is real and must be confronted. Harvard's recent

report on the matter documents harrowing incidents of bias and harassment. But in my 22 years here, I have never personally encountered anti-Semitism. From many conversations with Jewish students and colleagues, I am confident that Harvard is and has been a welcoming and supportive home for the vast majority. The problem of anti-Semitism is serious but not systemic.

A proportionate and effective response requires local knowledge and nuanced leadership, exactly the sort that Harvard's president, Alan Garber, provides. His Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israeli Bias, and the parallel Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Muslim, Anti-Arab, and Anti-Palestinian Bias, studied these problems extensively and provided strong recommendations that strike a thoughtful balance between the demands of free speech and protections against harassment. Some are already being implemented.

By contrast, US President Donald Trump's administration is seeking to destroy Harvard, and its assertion that it is doing so to combat anti-Semitism effectively pins the blame for the wreckage on the Jews. Whatever the administration's intent, the effect is indistinguishable from genuine anti-Semitism.



GREAT HELP: Federal money has been subsidising research costs by supporting Harvard's graduate students. REUTERS

The intent, apparently, is to turn hatred towards Jews into a political weapon, associating it solely with the Left and portraying the Right as protectors of Jewish students, and hence America's Jews. The government's charges of anti-Semitism at Harvard and other universities have been supplemented with a litany of other accusations: that students are indoctrinated with leftist ideology; that academic standards have slipped; that Harvard's faculty and students are living off taxpayer dollars. Trump claimed, "Harvard can no longer be considered even a decent place of learning."

I invite any Trump administration official who thinks

The US itself stands to lose because global leadership in science and technology will be ceded to China and other countries.

our academic standards have decided to sit for an exam in my class. If you can explain the quantum principles underlying the structure of the Periodic Table (like my 18-year-old freshmen can), then you can lecture me on academic standards. The notes for my graduate biophysics class are online. I challenge any reader to guess my political leanings from these notes (be careful, you might learn some physics while searching). My classes are the norm, not the exception.

Trump supporters argue that, given its \$53.2 billion endowment, Harvard doesn't need federal money. But the opposite is true. The endowment has been subsidising research

costs by supporting graduate students, financing core facilities and providing funds to help new researchers get started. This support provides additional leverage for taxpayer investments in science. Every dollar of my grants is scrutinised. There is no fat. Overhead charges to federal grants pay for compliance with federal regulations, safety standards, and lab infrastructure.

The Republican Party that Trump leads has long championed local control, limited government and the free market, especially when it comes to education. For decades, US conservatives have fought for school choice, opposed federal overreach, and insisted that parents, teachers, and local communities — not federal bureaucrats — know best how to educate their children. These values should apply just as much to higher education as they do to primary and secondary schools.

Yet today, some of the same voices calling for decentralisation are applauding a heavy-handed federal effort to punish a private university, to dictate who gets to study and teach there, and to interfere in research funding decisions that have traditionally been merit-based and apolitical.

The federal government has no more business telling Harvard who it can admit or hire, or what its faculty can

teach, than it does setting the curriculum at my kids' public school. Students come to Harvard to learn; if we don't deliver, they will go elsewhere. If Harvard faculty doesn't produce valuable research, it will lose grants. The academic marketplace is self-correcting, and it is fiercely competitive. When government steps in to micromanage that system to score political points, it undermines the principles conservatives have defended.

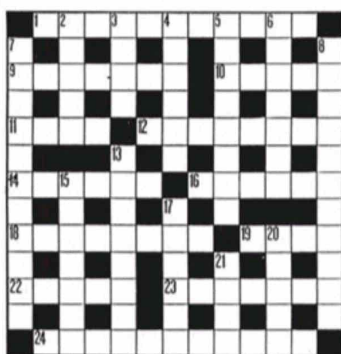
In the short term, the people most affected by the Trump administration's funding cuts are not tenured professors, but rather early-career scientists, postdoctoral researchers, and graduate students, very few of whom have any connection to campus activism.

In the long term, the US itself will be worse off, both because of the discoveries that don't happen and because global leadership in science and technology will be ceded to China and other countries.

The US needs more research funding, not less. Federal investment in science — at Harvard and other US universities — is an investment in a healthier, wealthier, and more secure future for Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs. Cutting it off is a wanton act of self-sabotage.

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QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Occasionally (3,5)
- 9 Also not (7)
- 10 Landlocked country of south Asia (5)
- 11 Entreat earnestly (4)
- 12 Under cover (2,6)
- 14 Oblige (6)
- 16 Ski-race down zigzag course (6)
- 18 Irritation (8)
- 19 Impatient desire (4)
- 22 Financially sound (5)
- 23 Vague suspicion (7)
- 24 Punctually (2,3,6)

Yesterday's solution

- Across: 1 Gaiky, 4 Umbrella, 9 Little, 10 Strangle, 12 Mine, 13 Onset, 14 Foil, 17 Nothing doing, 20 In confidence, 23 Open, 24 Slack, 25 Fund, 28 Thorough, 29 Splash, 30 Docility, 31 Invert.
- Down: 1 Gold mine, 2 Intimate, 3 Talk, 5 Matter-of-fact, 6 Real, 7 Legion, 8 Age-old, 11 In a good light, 16 Snide, 18 Undulate, 19 Dead shot, 21 Wonted, 22 Heroic, 26 Cool, 27 Spin.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 30, 2025, FRIDAY

- Shukla Samvat 1947
- Jyestha Shukla 9
- Jyestha Purnimite 17
- Hijari 1446
- Shukla Paksha Titthi 4, up to 9.23 pm
- Ganda Yoga up to 12.57 pm
- Purnar Nakshatra up to 9.29 pm
- Moon enters Cancer sign 3.43 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	38	29
New Delhi	37	28
Amritsar	39	28
Bathinda	43	29
Jalandhar	39	28
Ludhiana	40	28
Bhrawani	41	30
Hisar	41	30
Sirsa	42	31
Dharamsala	28	18
Marnoli	24	13
Shimla	25	15
Srinagar	27	14
Jammu	38	25
Kargil	23	09
Leh	20	08
Dehradun	35	21
Mussoorie	24	15



The Free Press Journal
Founder Editor: S Sadanand

A clean hit, but questions exist

The exoneration of former Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) chairperson Madhavi Puri Buch by the Lokpal was not entirely unexpected. Allegations that she and her husband had used obscure offshore funds to benefit themselves and the Adani Group, though explosive, lacked verifiable substance. Yet, the case and its context raise deeper concerns about regulatory credibility, political gamesmanship, and the ever-shifting sands of public perception. The allegations surfaced in the wake of the Hindenburg Research report, which caused a seismic jolt to Indian markets. The report not only sent Adani Group shares tumbling, erasing billions in market capitalisation, but also laid bare the vulnerabilities of India's financial regulatory system. In the spotlight was Buch, entrusted with safeguarding the integrity and robustness of India's capital markets.

The fact that she and her family were allegedly involved in questionable dealings with the very corporate entity under scrutiny—Adani—cast a long shadow over SEBI's impartiality. While the accusations were unproven, the optics were troubling, prompting concerns about conflict of interest at the highest level of market oversight.

Politics was clearly at play, just as it was more than a decade ago during the agitation for the creation of the Lokpal.

In the Indian legal framework, the Lokpal is the sole authority competent to examine complaints of corruption or impropriety against the SEBI chief. To its credit, the Lokpal took up the matter swiftly and gave it due seriousness. Its final ruling, that the complaint was based entirely on "presumptions and assumptions" with no "verifiable material", effectively shut the case. Nonetheless, the process raised more questions than it answered. The political backdrop cannot be ignored. Politics was clearly at play, just as it was more than a decade ago during the agitation for the creation of the Lokpal. That the case lost steam after Hindenburg Research abruptly shut in February only muddled the waters. The firm's retreat was seen by many as a loss of credibility, an unwillingness to face the consequences of its claims.

Interestingly, Buch retained the government's unwavering support throughout. In a more accountable system, she might have been asked to step aside pending investigation. Instead, she completed her term in February, undisturbed. The case served as an unlikely revelation—that the Lokpal is functional, if not omnipotent. Once hailed as the silver bullet against corruption, the Lokpal has rarely delivered headline-grabbing justice. The fervour that once surrounded its creation, driven by the din over "presumptive losses" in telecom and coal, and later over the Common-wealth Games, has faded. For many, the Lokpal is more a chimera than a champion. Buch may have emerged unscathed, but the larger system remains fragile. Until allegations, however unfounded, can be addressed with transparency and without political interference, public trust in institutions like SEBI will continue to erode.

Pushback to Israel over Gaza

The world is witnessing a tragedy of epic proportions in West Asia, but the tide is turning slowly and surely amid efforts to halt it. The relentless and brutal assault on Gaza by Israeli defence forces has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Thousands of Palestinians have been killed, many of them women and children, and thousands more have been displaced in the continuous strafing. The Israeli's blockade of food supplies and humanitarian aid to Gaza has triggered another crisis, with thousands on the verge of starvation amid fuel and water scarcity. In heart-breaking scenes, desperate and starving Palestinians, in the wake of a three-month blockade, stormed past barricades in southern Rafah as the US and Israeli-supported Gaza Humanitarian Foundation opened its first aid distribution point even as Israeli forces fired on the crowd to bring the situation under control. The GHF's distribution methods have been criticised by the United Nations and other aid groups, alleging that it does not abide by humanitarian principles and can further displace people. Israel's response to the October 7, 2023, attack on the country by Hamas terrorists, killing 1200 people and taking over 250 Israeli hostages, has been unrelenting. The Gaza Strip has been rendered unrecognizable, and nothing has been spared, including hospitals and educational institutions.

However, gradually public opinion is turning against the Netanyahu government, and even its trusted European allies are calling out Israel on its actions. Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Kier Starmer and Canadian PM Mike Carney issued a joint statement slamming Israel's assault on Gaza as "wholly disproportionate" and have threatened concrete action, while the European Union has announced that it will review political and economic relations with Israel. In a severe blow to Israel over its Gaza offensive, one of its most trusted allies, Germany, has announced unspecified measures and has said it will not export weapons used to break humanitarian law. Even President Trump skipped a visit to Israel during his recent tour of the region but spoke of the starvation looming large over Gaza. Arab nations have for long been calling for a two-state solution envisaging a legitimate homeland for the Palestinians as the only way out, but Netanyahu has vehemently opposed it. Though the recent shooting of two Israeli embassy staffers in Washington DC generated some sympathy, Israel is increasingly facing global isolation for what is being perceived as targeting of a community and a virtual genocide. Netanyahu's refusal to listen to reason is perhaps prompted by internal compulsions, as he is hugely unpopular within the country, and his need to continue the war is a bid to deflect from corruption charges that he faces. The irony is that the Jewish nation, which came into existence nearly 77 years ago as a counter-narrative against the Holocaust and Hitler's pogrom, is itself subjecting the Palestinian people to similar horrors.



Comment

A L CHOUGULE

There is nothing wrong with patriotic journalism during times of national crisis, provided the media does not fail to question and/or cross-check official claims and does not stifle dissenting voices. But when media houses parrot press releases and studio debates instead of on-ground reporting, and do not hold those in power to account, journalism, to quote journalist Ravish Kumar, becomes "stenography". Considering that the media is a vital watchdog over government and other powerful institutions in a democratic country, ensuring accountability and transparency, the sheer absurdity of passing propaganda and jingoism as journalism is not only a disservice to the profession but also a disgrace to the nation.

But then we are living in "New India", where propaganda is presented as news and news channels have become so politically biased that it is difficult for common viewers to disentangle news from political propaganda. The race to break news and biased and jingoistic approaches to reporting have crossed the limits of principles of ethics and journalistic standards of accuracy, objectivity, and impartiality. Given the way several social media news platforms and televi-

sion channels have been weaponised by the government to control the political narrative, both have become increasingly sensational and theatrical in recent years, particularly during moments of geopolitical tension. So, when the borders heat up, so do the newsrooms, often prioritising jingoistic fervour over journalistic integrity.

The question arises—have television news channels become propaganda platforms? The answer is obvious. Take, for instance, some of the news reports that chronicled India's overwhelming success during, and since, India and Pakistan's recent intense military confrontation. Much of the disinformation on social media, some of it highly specific, like "Indian attacks had struck a Pakistani nuclear base and downed two Pakistani fighter jets and blasted part of Pakistan's Karachi port", was not true, but some of it also made its way into the mainstream media, which alarmed many media analysts monitoring falling journalistic standards in India, particularly of television news channels.

More than 200 million Indian households own a TV set, and around 450 TV stations are dedicated to news, making TV one of the major sources of information in the country. However, the credibility of most of the leading news channels has hit the lows, so much so that

they are referred to as the lapdog media and the "government's propaganda platforms". The Centre for Media Studies has reported that trust in Indian media fell by 17 per cent from 2018 to 2023, particularly during times of national crisis. During the four-day conflict between India and Pakistan, the race to break news and an aggressive nationalistic approach to reporting reached such a feverish pitch that TV news anchors and commentators became cheerleaders for war, collateral being damned as long as the image of political leadership shines.

Some well-known news TV networks are reported to have aired unverified information or even fabricated stories amid the burst of nationalistic fervour. As "evidence", they reportedly played clips from war games, downed wars in other countries or AI-generated visuals. Some news verification sites tried to identify fake news, but the sheer volume of it was too much. In an armed conflict, warring sides do spread lies and propaganda, and mainstream news outlets have not been immune from presenting their countries' battlefield efforts in a favourable light. But rushing to publish or broadcast information that later turns out to be incorrect is overzealous prime-time patriotism that does not just misinform, but polarises.

When news channels prioritise

dramatic headlines over facts, the casualty is verified news, and viewers get to hear only what they want to believe. Take, for instance, the coverage during the Balakot airstrike in 2019, when leading TV channels featured dramatic visuals of fighter jets and fiery monologues by news anchors. And news debates, needless to add, sounded more like war rooms than balanced discussions. A NewsLaudry study in 2020 found that 64 per cent of conflict-related news segments lacked diverse perspectives, often excluding voices that questioned government narratives. The news ecosystem this time was not any different from 2019, as manufactured emotions took centre stage. Did the electronic media forget that during war, psychological operations, in which the media can play a vital role, are meant to manage the perception of the enemy country's populace and not misinform own countrymen?

The problem with fervent prime-time patriotism and sycophant journalism is that it is excessively flattering towards a powerful political leadership or a political party and tends to present a one-sided, positive view, rather than an objective and balanced perspective. A compromised mainstream media that prioritises pleasing powerful individuals or institutions over in-

forming the public raises ethical questions and, therefore, is a liability for democracy and the country's image. But over the last decade, many news outlets have become the "mouthpiece of the ruling party", suppressing news damaging to the government's reputation. Many news television networks have come to broadcast news and debates that are blatantly favourable to the government and hostile towards the Opposition.

Surprisingly, this is the same media that had taken the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government to task on several issues from corruption to crony capitalism, policy paralysis, and so on. The decline of what once was a vibrant and reliable journalistic scene in India is a sad reflection of today's political ecosystem that pressures for loyalty from media instead of letting it do its duty as an independent entity. This is not surprising for the chroniclers of "New India", where every occasion is an opportunity to pitch for votes with the help of a pliant media. The selection of news of prime-time debates confirms the steep slide in the media's credibility as an important pillar of democracy that it was before 2014.

The writer is a senior, independent Mumbai-based journalist. He tweets at @al_chougule



HerStory

DEEPA GAHLOT

A new book with the title *Queen of the Blood-soaked Life and Mysterious Death of Belle Starr* is just begging to be picked up. And what a fascinating chronicle Dane Huckelbridge has written about the legendary "gun-slitting, horse-thieving, bandit-causing outlaw" of the Wild West.

The period of the 19th century, when Myra Maybelle Shirley, aka Belle Starr, was raising hell wherever she went, was tumultuous in American history—the fierce battles with the native tribes whose lands the white immigrant settlers grabbed, the terrible toll the Civil War took on the people, and the madness of the Gold Rush. The times were marked with horrific violence, unimaginable cruelty and criminal activity so brazen that no law-keeping forces could control it. It was also the time of the legendary outlaws Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Butch Cassidy, Sundance Kid, Jim Miller, and Holliday, now immortalised in books and movies. Among them is a single female name—Belle Starr.

When women tended to homes and children, Belle Starr flamboyantly rode side-saddle, dressed in black velvet, a plumed hat, and pis-

tols at her waist. The weapons were not for show—she was an expert shooter. The daughter of a prosperous father, she was also, unlike the women of her time, well educated, well read and had learnt to play the piano.

She was taught to ride and shoot by her older brother Bud and had an untamed sense of adventure even as a young girl, called "wild" by her school teachers. During the Civil War years, she was known to spy for the Confederate side that her family supported because nobody would suspect a pretty teenager. She would not obey the rules of feminine behaviour that had been laid down for women of that conservative era.

The end of the Civil War and the defeat of the pro-slavery Confederates left the region smouldering in ruins, teeming with aimless and angry young men with nothing to do and nowhere to go but capable of fighting and killing without compunction. Many of them took to crime, robbing banks, trains and rich homesteads.

There were a few female rebels like Calamity Jane, Big Nose Kate and Annie Oakley, but none had a life as colourful or courageous as Belle Starr. She was a true outlaw—she counted Jesse James and Cole Younger as friends; she married a



The Gun-toting Rebel: Belle Starr

criminal, Jim Reed, and participated in at least one of his big heists. But he was unfaithful and left her alone to raise their two children, and when Jim was killed, Belle not just refused to identify or claim his body but also gave up on white society altogether, and that's when the legend started to build up.

She married, with some severe opposition from tribal elders, Sam Starr, son of Cherokee warlord Tom Starr, and soon took over his criminal empire, which, along with stealing horses, smuggling and banditry,

also included a protection racket, and because the white cops had no jurisdiction over native territory, she sheltered outlaws on the run from the law—including the notorious Jesse James. She named her compound Younger's Bend, supposedly after her former lover Cole Younger. Old Tom, who had once killed 32 men who had been involved in the murder of his father, saw the value of having a smart and intelligent woman in his gang. She was a better leader than her husband and more enterprising too. Luckily for her, Cherokee tribes are matriarchal, known to have female warriors and leaders—and here she came into her own. After Sam was killed, and as a white woman faced with having to vacate her property on native land, she pulled one over on the white cops walking outside the boundary and left her her by marrying a younger native man, Jim Lucy, and making him take the Starr surname.

She did serve a short stint in prison for the relatively minor crime of horse theft but otherwise managed to keep herself out of the grasp of the police. There is no evidence of her ever doing any Robin Hood kind of deeds, but she still gathered admirers. The media, pandering to a sensation-hungry public,

fed them stories of her exploits. She was murdered at the age of 40, and the killer was never caught, but her death made national news and was followed by the publication of a salacious and mostly fictitious book, *Belle Starr: the Bandit Queen* or the Female Jesse James. The lurid paperback described her as "more amorous than Antony's mistress, more relentless than Pharaoh's daughter, and braver than Joan of Arc," and went on to comment, "Mother Nature was indulging in one of her rarest freaks when she produced such a novel specimen of womankind."

Inevitably, she became a legend after her death, with novels, biographies, poems, and folk songs written about her, and after the first film in 1941, Belle Starr, with Gene Tierney playing her, several Hollywood movies and television serials too, none of which bothered much about facts. Huckelbridge's book is painstakingly researched and places her in the right social and historical context. It is about time Belle Starr was rediscovered and placed back on the pantheon of outlaws from which the passage of time has erased her.

Deepa Gahlot is a Mumbai-based columnist, critic and author.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TN law and order

Though there are a lot of complaints against the DMK government about the deteriorating law and order situation in Tamil Nadu, hats off to the police department and the SIT, who solved the Anna University assault case within a span of six months. The efforts of Mahala Court, too, are laudable for delivering quick justice. We sincerely hope that the DMK government will keep the law and order situation in the state under control.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

Ability, disability

See the ability and not disability, says 29 years old Angmo, Kinnar's Everest conqueror, who is the first visually impaired woman to scale the world's highest mountain peak. Angmo focused less on her personal struggles and reflected more on how her achievement might shift society's perception of differently-abled individuals. Disability is a socially constructed term that reflects an error in the thinking process of

society. It lies more in the mind and less in the body.
Yash Pal Raihan, Jalandhar

A lesson

A man getting a 4-month jail term for letting his dog bite a neighbour is a warning to all the pet owners that while they may consider their pet as members of their family, for others pets are animals, and they may have a sense of fear about it. The incident that happened in a Worli building was very unfortunate. The pet owner should have been sensitive to the fear of the other person.

Maya H. Bhatkar, Mumbai

Fear is life's opponent

This has reference to the Guiding Light column (FPI, May 28) wherein three varjyas, i.e., longing, fear and anger, are mentioned. It is worthwhile to note what Yann Martel in his New York Times bestseller "Life of Pi" says on fear: "I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It can defeat, treacherous and



Make cities hoarding-free

It is good to see the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) act against illegal hoardings in the city. Mumbai is yet another city facing this issue. Some of the hoardings are so huge that they even block footpaths. The civic authorities need to review their policy about hoardings. The fact is, hoardings are an eyesore and need to be done away with. There should be no such thing as legal or illegal.

Melville X. D'Souza, Mumbai

Kamal in the RS

After his Makkal Needhi Maiam formally joined the DMK-led alliance in Tamil Nadu ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, Kamal Haasan was offered the option of either contesting in the Lok Sabha seat or

accepting a post-pol Rajya Sabha berth. The versatile actor preferred the second one and now would be one among the elections of eight Rajya Sabha seats out of six in Tamil Nadu. One hopes that his action can speak louder than words.

A.P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

Greedy humans

Among all the species, only humans have had the ability to damage the environment. The Living Planet Report states that 73% of the global wildlife has shrunk in the past 50 years. The shrinking biodiversity is a consequence of man's increasing greed in using the natural resources for his personal gain. Nature had created a perfect balance between the living and the non-living components on earth.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

Vaibhav's test

Former Australian Captain Steve Waugh is dead right that the young and per-

forming Vaibhav Suryavanshi has a lot of skills and attitude to shine for India. He is mentally tough and has a great backstory and, hence, is someone who can be successful at the international level. But it will be a challenge for him to play the same way, with enthusiasm and freedom, as he has done during this IPL season.

Vinay Mahadevan, Chennai

A lot required

That India has managed to cope with the uncertainties of Trump tariffs and the global impact of wars in Ukraine and Gaza better than other economies showcases its resilience and strong macroeconomic fundamentals. Modi has made tall claims of India becoming a developed nation by 2047, but a lot needs to be done on several fronts to improve the country's growth trajectory, rising living costs and unemployment in check.

Vijay Singh Adhikari, Nainital

CONTRAPUNTO

The illegal we do immediately.
The unconstitutional takes a little longer

— HENRY KISSINGER

Getting Judged

Trump's logic for tariffs was always shifty. Just how shifty became clear in a court case US govt lost

Govt work is hush-hush, but every few years declassified files spill old beans. So we now know that CIA trained pigeons to take photos inside USSR during the Cold War. That was Project Tacana. Now the curious term 'Taco' is floating around. Is it a secret US tariff strike aimed at Mexico? On Wall Street, it's shorthand for 'Trump always chickens out'. After all, the 47th prez lowered tariffs on China from 145% to 30% in a month. But Trump has a different take. 'It's called negotiation,' he told reporters on Wednesday.

Also on Wednesday, Trump's aides tried convincing the US Court of International Trade that his tariffs had facilitated a different kind of negotiation — brokering the May 10 ceasefire between India and Pakistan. 'This ceasefire was only achieved after President Trump intervened and offered both nations trading access with the United States to avert a full-scale war,' commerce secretary Lutnick said while opposing a plea to block Trump's sweeping tariffs.

That's either a slip or a file declassified too soon, for as far as we recall, Trump on May 11 wrote, 'While not even discussed, I am going to increase trade, substantially, with both of these great nations.' Note: not even discussed. Forget a tariff threat, even trade was not on the table. And as far as India is concerned, US was not at the table either. Jaishankar made it clear again on Monday: 'It was the Indian military action that made Pakistan say: We are ready to stop.'

Neither Lutnick nor secretary of state Rubio — who said a negative ruling could 'lead to embarrassment of the United States on the global stage' — could persuade the court, which faulted Trump's use of emergency powers to impose tariffs. It's a setback, but the tariffs will remain for now. Trump's admin has already filed an appeal.

This battle could continue for many months, and since only the basis for the tariffs — not the tariffs themselves — is legally flawed, Trump could find a workaround. But what he needs to settle urgently is the rationale for tariffs. They were meant to right America's balance of trade, and bring back manufacturing. Then they became a tool to stop illegal immigration and drugs. Then, a diplomatic bargaining chip. A veritable Swiss army knife. Hardly the blade for a hegemon. It can read global trade, but won't make China cower.

Bullet Isn't The Point

Assam's move to liberalise arms licences in some state areas can turn seriously wrong. It should scrap the policy

Assam cabinet's decision to approve a special scheme to grant arms licences to 'original inhabitants' and 'indigenous citizens' in vulnerable areas of the state has rightly raised eyebrows. The last thing the Northeast needs is more guns. After years of painstaking security operations and negotiations leading to more than 10,000 militants across the region laying down their arms, giving guns back to the people defeats security objectives. It also undermines the narrative of normalisation that was taking hold in the Northeast.

Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma says it is meant to deter threats and enhance personal security among indigenous communities in areas like Dhubri, Nagaon, Morigaon, Barpeta, South Salmara-Mankachar and Goalpara. He also cites recent developments in Bangladesh. But this would mean that Assam police and other security forces in the state haven't been able to ensure law and order. Second, Assam has a terrible history of insurgency-induced lawlessness. Kidnappings, extortion and targeted killings were rampant during the height of Ufa terror. What if the new liberal gun licence policy turns the clock back? As a state opposition leader said, govt can give gun licences but has no control over how those guns will be used.

Third, in recent years, the Northeast has been talked up as a growth hub and a key pillar of India's Act East policy. But will investments flow to the region if an atmosphere of lawlessness prevails? Note that Morigaon — where the new gun licence policy will supposedly apply — is earmarked for a semiconductor plant. Will hundreds of supporting companies required for semiconductor manufacturing make a beeline if there's no confidence in local law and order? Himanta's critics say he is playing his political games with assembly polls due next year. Whatever his reasons, he should take back the gun policy.

Talk the talk

The globalisation of English has taken a lot of the foreignness out of foreign travel

Jug Suraiya



Bunny and I are in Torino, Italy. And Bunny is eager to try out the conversational Italian she has picked up through assiduous practice on the Duolingo app on her cell phone.

We go for a morning coffee to Caffè Mulassano, the 118-year-old establishment that looks like what the inside of an antique jewel box should look like, all burnished gleam and gilded gold. Buongiorno, voremmo due cappuccini,deka per me, normale per lui, Bunny says in her best Duolingo Italian.

Okay, two cappuccinos, one decaf, and one regular coming right up, says the barista, sounding like she's been displaced from Queens, NYC.

It's like that wherever we go, Bunny asks for directions to a restaurant or wherever else we want to go, in punctilious Italian. The reply is almost invariably in English.

It was very different when we first visited Italy in 1973. We didn't have a word of Italian, and no locals spoke anything else. We got by with an extempore hit-and-miss mixture of sign language, guesswork, and strokes of sudden inspiration.

It made simple things, like ordering a meal, or asking the way to the train station, into a dramatic adventure, an exciting exploration of an exotic linguistic landscape. It made foreign feel foreign.

Now, everyone, everywhere, in Europe, even in France which once shunned les anglais like a socially transmitted disease, will break into Anglo-Saxon at the drop of a chat.

A linguistic pandemic, English spans the globe, hurdling geographic borders and cultural boundaries like a vocal virus. And the more you try to speak to the local citizenry in their language, the more you'll prompt a response in English, the speaker seizing this opportunity to demonstrate a grasp of what has become the most cosmopolitan of all languages, thanks to global commerce, Hollywood, and the lyrics of pop music. While this makes for ease of communication, it takes much of the foreignness out of foreign.

So we look forward to our next port of call, where no one speaks English at all. It'll make for a nice change when we get to London.

Tamilian Dollar Answer

If India is to exploit manufacturing opportunities tariff wars may open up, the Tamil Nadu model is a fine example of what to do to become a go-to place for foreign investors

Ashish Dhawan and Piyush Doshi



When the Make in India initiative was launched in 2014, it set a target of achieving 25% of GDP from manufacturing by 2025.

In reality, the share of manufacturing has remained almost constant at about 16%. Amidst this underperformance, one state that stands out for getting 25% of GDP from manufacturing is Tamil Nadu.

TN is home to manufacturing facilities of international giants such as Foxconn, Pegatron, Samsung, Hyundai, Ford, Nissan, TVS Motor Company, and Ashok Leyland. Notably, Apple's suppliers in the state employ around 50,000 workers who produce millions of iPhones. Similarly, Feng Toy, a key supplier for Nike, operates multiple factories in the state employing over 37,000 workers. Overall, the state currently has over 31,000 operational factories, the highest in India.

TN has also emerged as a major export powerhouse across garments, automobiles, engineering goods and electronics. While it has less than 6% of India's population, it now accounts for almost 15% of India's total oil exports. Over 41% of India's electronics, 38% of footwear and 45% of auto and auto components manufacturing come from TN.

On the back of its manufacturing success, TN now has third highest per capita GDP in India among large states, only marginally behind Telangana and Karnataka which are largely driven by IT exports.

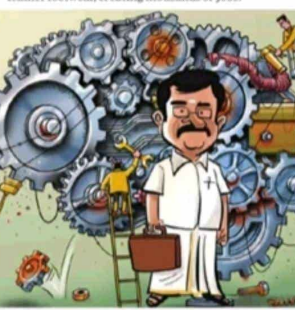
States aspiring to be manufacturing powerhouses can learn some lessons from TN, while several factors have contributed to its success, three key factors stand out.

Building infra & industrial clusters | This did not happen overnight. The state govt has consistently invested in ports (such as Chennai, Tuticorin), road networks, and industrial estates. SIPCOT (State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu), established in 1971, developed industrial parks across the state and provided plug-and-play infra long before it became a national buzzword.

This ensured that before investors arrived land was ready with basic infra in place and clusters developed organically, creating scale and globally competitive ecosystems. Cities like Coimbatore, Chennai and

Tirupur evolved into specialised hubs — for engineering goods, automobiles, and textiles respectively — creating a broad industrial base unlike any other state.

More recently the state has taken the lead in helping build worker housing to facilitate manufacturing at scale where thousands of migrant women can live and work safely. To attract Taiwanese investment and technological knowhow the state plans to set up an industrial park focused on Taiwanese suppliers and component makers in electronics, technical textiles and non-leather footwear, creating thousands of jobs.



Supporting investors | The state has an investment promotion agency, Guidance Tamil Nadu. Many states have fancy 'investor summit' and 'single-window clearances' that exist more in rhetoric than in practice. TN, however, institutionalised investor support in a way few others have.

Guidance Tamil Nadu is a full-service concierge for investors — helping companies secure land, clear approvals, solve labour issues, even assisting in navigating day-to-day operational hiccups after they set up shop.

This professional, proactive approach has meant that companies get real-time handholding, not just ceremonial assurances. Problems are solved before they snowball and investors feel heard and prioritised — critical in a Trumpian world where manufacturers are seeking out reliable global options. Projects are not allowed to drown in slow approvals and unpredictable

red tape, making the investor's experience akin to that of a fast-moving Asian economy.

Functional babudom | TN boasts a bureaucracy that acts not as a roadblock but as a launchpad. The bureaucracy doesn't see itself as a master, but rather as a partner. Officials are empowered — and expected — to think like facilitators and act with speed typically associated with the private sector.

Recently when Centre announced the electronics components incentives policy, TN state govt took just a week to come up with a matching scheme and set itself a goal of achieving \$300bn in electronics exports from the current level of \$14bn. In TN, key clearances are digitised, timelines are tracked publicly and grievance redressal mechanisms are institutionalised.

If a project hits a snag, the goal is not to shrug it off but to clear the road quickly. The role of supportive bureaucracy does not end with landing an investment. Recently when workers at the Samsung plant went on strike, the political and bureaucratic leadership worked behind the scenes to find an amicable solution to the dispute, rather than using worker unrest for short-term political gains. This has encouraged Samsung to invest further in the state.

Importantly, policy continuity has been its hallmark. Bureaucrats feel reassured to take difficult calls because there is no witch-hunt even when the party in power changes. That sort of predictability is gold for investors looking to make billion-dollar commitments.

The southern state has set itself an aggressive timeline for becoming a trillion-dollar economy, but the state does have its share of challenges. With increasing per capita income, TN is largely reliant on migrant labour, but it is not the most preferred destination for migrants due to language barriers. It is also seen as a difficult place to get environment and pollution clearances.

A healthy competition has emerged between states like AP, Telangana, UP, MP, Gujarat and Maharashtra for attracting investments. If competing Indian states can absorb even a fraction of the lessons from TN's success, India will soon have multiple manufacturing flywheels. And the dream of turning India into a manufacturing powerhouse might be realised sooner than we expect.

Dhawan is founder-CEO & Doshi is operating partner, The Convergence Foundation. Views are personal.

Woof! What Some People Are Getting Wrong About Strays

India's Animal Birth Control programme has substantially brought down street dog numbers & rabies cases. Science & empathy, not misleading data & fear-mongering, should guide our action

Ambika Shukla



To those who want street dogs shifted out of cities or worse, the first thing that needs pointing out is history's lessons on what works, and what doesn't. For over a century, municipalities across India tried to eliminate street dogs by killing them — often using horrific methods like electrocution, poisoning, and bludgeoning. Despite these brutal campaigns, dog populations didn't decline. Rabies cases didn't drop.

The turning point came in late 1990s, when courts, activists, and experts pushed for a humane, scientific alternative. The Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme is a WHO-endorsed model that involves catching, sterilising, vaccinating, and releasing dogs in their home territories. This is internationally proven as the only way to check numbers, end bites and eliminate rabies.

In 1996, a pilot ABC project was introduced in Chennai and Jaipur. The results were amazing. In Chennai, rabies deaths fell from 120 to 5 in just 4 years, while Jaipur saw a 28% drop in dog population and zero rabies deaths. Five years later, the central ABC Rules 2001 came into force. Today, states like Goa, Sikkim, Haryana, and Uttarakhand have achieved zero-rabies status, thanks to consistent ABC efforts.

Nationally, the impact is undeniable. In 2024, India recorded just 54 human

rabies deaths — 96% less than before ABC — per gov't April 1 answer to a parliament question. In fact, our ABC programme, the world's largest spay and return programme, has been internationally acknowledged as a milestone in ecological history.

It is this progress that's under threat now.

Uninformed noise around dog bites — often misreported — is pushing cities toward rash policies. The bite figures themselves are misleading. An RTI has revealed that the use of prophylactic vaccines is miscounted as bites, inflating numbers 3.6 times. Also, over 75% of reported bites are from pet dogs, not strays.

We have been successfully controlling street dog numbers. When sterilised dogs are removed from their territory, a vacuum forms. New, unsterilised, unfamiliar dogs enter it and the chances of conflict increase. Street dogs, once sterilised and vaccinated, become a buffer that prevents chaos, not a threat.

Shelters are certainly not the answer. They are overcrowded, hotbeds for diseases, and an ongoing expense — ₹2500/month per dog. In contrast, ABC costs just ₹1500 per dog — a one-time, effective investment. Indian street dogs are more than just

The entire racket is conducted in black money by a powerfully networked mafia. Last March when govt imposed a ban on the breeding and sale of certain breeds including pit bulls and Rottweilers, it was the breeder lobby that obtained an almost immediate stay, causing the notification to be withdrawn.

It should be clarified that there are no 'aggressive' breeds — dog behaviour is the result of what a dog is taught and the circumstances in which he is raised. This is why commercial breeding is so dangerous. Breeders typically provide no veterinary care, proper food, exercise or affection. It is this abuse that leads to poorly socialised, fearful dogs.

Most importantly, removing/relocating street dogs backfires. When sterilised dogs are removed from their territory, a vacuum forms. New, unsterilised, unfamiliar dogs enter it and the chances of conflict increase. Street dogs, once sterilised and vaccinated, become a buffer that prevents chaos, not a threat.

Shelters are certainly not the answer. They are overcrowded, hotbeds for diseases, and an ongoing expense — ₹2500/month per dog. In contrast, ABC costs just ₹1500 per dog — a one-time, effective investment. Indian street dogs are more than just

survivors of the subcontinent's extreme weather — they play an essential ecological role. Acting as natural scavengers, they help clean up organic waste, including leftover food, carcasses, and garbage, thereby reducing disease vectors and controlling rodent populations. In villages and urban neighbourhoods alike, their territorial nature prevents the entry of unfamiliar dogs and even deters wildlife intrusions in rural edges.

Their presence creates a 'canine fence', maintaining a natural barrier that supports both sanitation and public safety. Removing them disrupts this balance and invites a host of secondary problems.

If we are serious about human safety, compassion, and scientific progress, the way forward is clear. Rigorously implement the ABC Rules in all states. Enforce breeder/pet dog registration, shut down online puppy trafficking, and promote pet sterilisation. Educate the public that fear-based behaviour around dogs (screaming, throwing stones, denying food) escalates aggression. Support community caregivers. Encourage local govts to designate feeding spots, coordinate sterilisation drives, and maintain a database in ABC.

This isn't idealism. It's working in Bhutan, which has achieved complete ABC coverage. It's working in India, where rabies deaths are falling fast. It works because it's rooted in ecology, economics, science — and most importantly, empathy. Let's not surrender to fear. Let us lead with facts, intelligence, and the courage to protect all life.

The writer is Trustee, People for Animals

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

You have visits, then you have disappearances. You enter, then you exit. You come, you go. It would be so great if you could just get to human enlightenment on a linear path.

Eve Ensler

Transport From Slavery To Salvation

Soma Chakraverty

"The bitterest thing in today's sorrow is the memory of yesterday's joy," wrote Khalil Gibran, but to let go is easier said than done. It is one of the most challenging things to do. Material objects metamorphose into immaterial objects sooner or later. Ironically, it is physically nonexistent entities like emotions, sentiments and memories that turn into attachments from which it is painful to detach.

Letting go does not necessarily mean getting rid of or throwing things out. The problem arises when possessions become obsessions. A stack of never-to-be-worn clothes, which, if given away, could help someone in need, sits unused, gathering dust. Or a collection of negative reviews: clipped ceramic cups, never-to-be-read books...the list can go on and on. Besides collecting dust and creating clutter, they remind us of days

that never return. All because we have allowed ourselves to become victims of sentiments or emotions. Detachment does not hurt, but attachment does. Memories do not occupy any physical place, though they are often described as bitter-sweet. The past does not come back but can still impact the present and future.

"The root of all suffering is attachment," said the Buddha. These attachments can be both material and mental. According to Buddhism, the key to overcoming suffering is letting go of desires, attachments and aversions. In the universe, which is transcendental, ever-changing, when we hang on, we go against the law of nature, and suffer.

Possession and past restrict, suffocate, confine, ensnare and entangle. According to the Bhagwad Gita, "Attachments interfere with a person's

ability to think clearly or rationally. When the person is free from attachments, he becomes equal to attractions, aversions, indifference, Vaikaraya, relinquishment, translates into freedom from bondages and bindings, a transport from slavery to salvation.

In Christianity, renunciation is the forsaking of worldly desires and possessions to follow the path of Jesus Christ and his teachings. Jesus once advised a rich ruler: "Sell everything you own and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven. Then come and follow me."

Jainism speaks of aparigraha — attachment brings suffering and sorrow, which is why all worldly possessions, emotions, and attachments are to be given up. "Detachment means nothing should own you."

According to the Maitri Upanishad, "Control of thought is liberation." One

must go beyond the elements, senses, object of senses, greed, envy, leisure, self-love, anger, and lust to be on the path of liberation and realising Brahman. Renunciation does not mean being nonliving, indifferent or apathetic. It means surmounting obsession, weakness, addiction, ego or mania as these negative entities cast shadows on our thoughts, affect our emotions, relationships and realities. Imprisonment by ships and moments is the angst that prevents living and enjoying the present. Isha Upanishad says: "Whatever moves in the moving world is enveloped by God. Therefore, enjoy renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others."

Longing for what is not ours can only bring about contentment and conflicts. The best lesson in attachment with detachment is the Sun. Without any demand, desire, or discrimination, the Sun, benevolent nishkamkarmi, sakha, sustains life on earth and the earth itself with its light and warmth.



Industries using cleaner tech, reducing pollution may face fewer regulations

- Industries can achieve better pollution index ratings by improving environmental performance, such as switching to cleaner fuels and reducing pollution levels.
- The pollution index scores quantify the degree of pollution, such as air pollution, water pollution or hazardous waste generation, from an industrial unit.
- The revised index introduces a new category for industrial services in domestic waste management, but it also includes polluting waste incineration plants under this category.

SIMRIN SIRUR

India's Central Pollution Control Board will provide incentives to industries as they adopt cleaner fuels and technologies, giving them the opportunity to fetch a better pollution index number that could, in turn, result in fewer regulatory burdens.

In a letter issued to states in February, the CPCB, India's pollution regulatory body, said that after meeting with stakeholders, a "need was felt to promote/incentivize units for adopting measures resulting in better environmental performance." The newly revised index gives industries the ability to earn a star-rated status if they are able to improve their scores by switching to cleaner fuels and reducing pollution loads. Previously, the CPCB's pollution index had no such provision.

Eligible units need to demonstrate measures taken to treat and reuse wastewater, reduce fresh-water consumption, and switch to alternative cleaner fuels or technology which result in fewer emissions and waste generation. A committee led by the member secretary of the state pollution board, will verify these efforts before revising the pollution index score, the CPCB's report on the revision says. Incentives for improving pollution index scores include longer Consent to Operate certifications (up to five years longer in duration), as well as fewer site visits by pollution authorities.

But even as industries have the opportunity to progress along the index, the revised index relaxes pollution scores across each category. Industries are categorised into red (severely polluting), orange (highly polluting), green (polluting, but to a lesser degree), and white (least polluting). Scores are assigned based on the potential air pollution, water pollution, and waste generation of an industrial unit.

Previously, red industries scored 60 points or higher in the index, but this is now revised to 80 or higher, giving industries more room before being classified as red. Red industries invite the strictest monitoring and regulatory compliances.

Similarly, the score for orange industries has changed from a score between 41 and 59 to between 55 and 80. Green industry scores are revised from between 21 and 40 to between 25 and 54. The least polluting white industries have a score between zero and 25 compared to the previous regime, between zero and 20.

"Adoption of cleaner technology is needed, but inspections are necessary to ensure that these systems continue to work. There have been cases in the past where emission monitoring systems that industries are supposed to install have been tampered with, preventing actual emission data from reaching the pollution control boards," said Meenakshi Kapoor, an independent researcher who closely tracks changes to environmental regulations.

Stakeholder discussions were driven primarily by industry and industry associations, the CPCB's report reveals. The revised index comes months after the CPCB did away with "Consent to



Establish" permits for polluting industries that have obtained environmental clearance. White industries are also exempt from obtaining permits to establish and operate their units. The CPCB says the revised scoring criteria are based on the "precautionary principle," where "the scoring methodology is based on the pollution potential during generation and not at the end of pipe."

Waste incineration given 'essential environmental service' tag

The revised index also introduces a new "blue" category, for industrial services that cater to the management of domestic waste. This category, called "essential environmental services," include a range of activities such as landfill biominer, sewage treatment, and waste processing plants. These services "play a vital role in protecting the environment and human health," and "may also bring value addition by producing various by-products such as secondary raw material, compost, energy, etc. and promote circular economy and sustainable development by converting waste into wealth," the CPCB's report says.

A total of nine industries/activities have been included in the blue category, with the benefit of an extended two-year validity period on their Consent to Operate permits.

Among newly categorised essential environmental services, however, are waste-to-energy (WTE) plants, which are known to be highly polluting. Waste-to-energy plants work by incinerating waste at high temperatures, producing steam

which rotates turbines to generate electricity. Previously, WTE plants were in the red category because of their highly polluting potential, with a score of 97.6 out of 100.

"WTE plants release emissions like dioxins and furans, which are not only polluting but are bad for health. Only the CPCB has the capacity to test these emissions, because most states don't have the facilities to monitor or test these emissions," said Chythyeney Devika Kulasekaran, senior research associate at the Centre for Financial Accountability. "When proper testing facilities to check pollution don't exist, you can't give waste incineration a clean sheet and categorise it as a blue industry."

There are 21 WTE plants in India. A recent report submitted in the National Green Tribunal revealed most monitoring criteria were not met by these plants, with several parameters going without testing.

This includes plants burning mixed waste of low calorific value, not testing bottom ash for heavy metals, and failing to report dioxin, furan, and other air pollution levels. The CSIR-National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) said plants that burn mixed waste "may not be feasible in India" because they don't adhere to waste management rules. "Promoting waste to energy plants for mixed waste (mass burning) defeats the purpose of waste segregation...The mass burning of MSW (municipal solid waste) also defeats the opportunity of Circular Economy for the waste sector," it said in a report.



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Govt must address issue of falling net FDI urgently

THERE is a conundrum that no policy maker or economist has been able to explain, let alone solve: India, despite being the fastest growing major economy, is not able to attract investment, especially foreign direct investments (FDI).

The conundrum became more painful last week as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) published data showing that net FDI dropped 96.5 per cent in 2024-25. Net FDI in the previous fiscal year amounted to \$353 million, the lowest on record, compared with \$10 billion in 2023-24.

This sharp downturn is as inexplicable as it is disconcerting. Inexplicable because, on the whole, India has been doing well on almost all macro-indicators: the fiscal and revenue deficits have been going down; infrastructure building is continuing at apace; there is political stability. And disconcerting because money is not coming in.

Conventional wisdom suggests that robust economic growth should inspire confidence

among foreign investors, prompting them to invest in industries, infrastructure, technology, and services. However, that correlation appears to be weakening in India's case.

Several underlying factors may be contributing to this paradox. First, policy unpredictability remains a deterrent for long-term foreign investors. While India has made significant strides in improving the ease of doing business, concerns remain over bureaucratic hurdles, regulatory overreach, and shifting tax policies.

Second, geopolitical tensions and an increasingly protectionist global environment may also be influencing investor decisions. As companies de-risk their supply chains and capital allocations, India might not yet present the certainty or competitiveness that global investors demand.

Moreover, while FDI inflows have dried up, foreign portfolio investments (FPIs)—which are generally more short-term and market-driven—have recently shown signs

of strength. In May 2025, FPIs poured Rs 14,256 crore into Indian markets, marking the highest monthly inflow in eight months.

This surge offers a glimmer of hope and suggests that global investors are still interested in India's growth story, albeit through more liquid and reversible channels.

FPIs are often driven by factors such as stock market performance, interest rate differentials, and global risk appetite. Their renewed interest in India may reflect confidence in certain sectors or in the macroeconomic outlook, but it does not compensate for the strategic value that long-term FDI brings to the economy. FDI supports infrastructure development, job creation, technology transfer, and sustainable economic growth—benefits that portfolio investments alone cannot provide.

The current trend demands serious introspection. India cannot afford to let its growth story be undermined by a lack of confidence among foreign investors. The government

must conduct a comprehensive review of the entire policy ecosystem governing foreign investment. This includes streamlining approval processes, ensuring greater regulatory transparency, enhancing legal protections for investors, and making India's investment environment globally competitive.

The sharp fall in FDI is not merely a statistical concern; it is a signal that something deeper is amiss. If left unaddressed, it could have long-term consequences for India's ambitions to become a global manufacturing hub and a critical player in the global economy. Reversing this trend requires not just reactive measures but a strategic, forward-looking reform agenda that restores investor confidence and makes India a truly attractive destination for long-term capital.

Ultimately, India's ability to convert its economic potential into sustained investment will determine whether it can truly capitalise on its growth and demographic dividend. The time to act is now.

LETTERS

Kamal's oops! moment...

KAMAL Haasan should know that by his comments he has deeply hurt the sentiments of Kannada speaking public. He commits faux pas often. Previously he had made derogatory statements in his Big Boss reality show. Haasan has a habit of slip of tongue and he goes up in giving speeches in public and in reality shows. He often uses cuss words, derogatory statements and unparliamentary language in his reality shows. Due to this habit, he has even faced the rage of the then Chief Minister Jyothirajitha. Previously also he has done a blunder by naming the name of sexual assault victim and even compared her with "Draupadi". So, it will be better to Kamal Haasan to talk less in public speeches and in reality shows.

Zakir Hussain, Kazipet

II

KAMAL Haasan's "Tamil gave birth to Kannada" has stirred up a hornet's nest. Now, the people of Karnataka will have their pound of flesh, no less, Benjamin Franklin had rightly said -- "A slip of the foot you may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over." This is a classic case of speaking before thinking. Confucius was right when he said -- "The tongue must be heavy indeed, because so few people can hold it."

Avinash Godbole, Dewas (MP)

Bollywood unites entire nation

A PROPOS the article 'Stalwarts from the world of entertainment...', as human beings evolved their inner emotions and desires needed some sort of self-expression, and all the fine arts are nothing but a desire of the human race to project itself. Theatre was the first entertainment in the olden ages and only after the motion pictures were introduced and developed did the film industry in India begin to prosper. Every region has its own film industry but Bollywood or the Hindi film industry towers above them all because of its reach.

The fame of Bollywood stars has touched many other nations too and it is gratifying to note that even in places in Europe, the likes of Shah Rukh Khan has thousands of eager fans awaiting his films release. Bollywood is also the single largest factor that unites the whole nation; even though in recent times the Southern films are finding audiences in the North too. The likes of Satyajit Ray, Dilip Kumar, Lata Mangeshkar and others have enriched the lives of not only Indians but internationally too.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

Develop infrastructure for film industry in AP

THE controversy over the bandh of cinema hall in AP has become a talking point today as Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan's 'Hara Hara Veeramallu' is going to be released in the theatres from June 12 across the Telugu-speaking cinema halls. As it is being prominent person's film both in politics and Bollywood naturally the issue got focused among public.

In the past both politicians and the people in the entertainment field helped each other in times of troubles. The prominent figures and yesteryears helped the government by mobilizing funds from the public as well as from their own pockets especially disasters like cyclone and famine. With that mutual cooperation the Tollywood base was shifted to Hyderabad. Meanwhile the state was bifurcated.

As result of it Tollywood is in typical condition in which shootings in TS and marketing in AP. Thus, it is time for AP government which has roots in Tollywood must develop infrastructure for shootings in AP particularly in Visakhapatnam, Vijayawada and Tirupati. At the same time government must give equal important to big budget films as well as small budget films. Similarly the government ponder over how to make entertainment to common people by focusing on facilities, ticket prices, prices of eatables in the theatre premises.

Pratap Reddy Yaramala, Tirupuru (AP)

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Was '500 pc' sure I will win Booker Prize: Banu Mushtaq

Bengaluru: Booker Prize winner Banu Mushtaq said on Wednesday that she believed she would win the prize "500 per cent" and she wrote the speech three days ahead of the award ceremony. Mushtaq was speaking at a felicitation event organised by the Karnataka Union of Working Journalists in Bengaluru.

"Initially, I did not think much of it, but then I saw the reactions of people in social media after I was longlisted. Only then I realised the importance of the Booker Prize. So, when my family was sleeping in the night, I sat and wrote the speech that I ended up giving after I won," said Mushtaq. She said she actually practiced the speech every day from then on, picturing herself holding the Booker Prize. She also recalled how, when her publisher tried to temper her expectations by saying that never in the history of the Booker Prize, a short story collection has won the prize. Mushtaq told the publisher, "Why won't you believe that we might win? I believe 500 per cent."

She also talked about how people had absolutely no clue about the Kannada language and ended up pronouncing it 'Canada'. "I made them repeat Kan-na-da," added Mushtaq. Mushtaq, who was invited to speak at a panel at the Hay Festival 2025 in Wales on May 24 along with Prize director Gaby Wood and judge Anton Hur, said she was impressed with the "book culture" there.

"The four-hour journey from London itself was so beautiful and reminded me so much of our Sakleshpura and Kodagu (hill stations in Karnataka) or even Kerala. But once there, I realised that the village might be small but it is a mecca for writers and readers. Nearly 25,000 people visit every day and buy books from the 40-odd small bookshops there during the 11 days of the festival," said Mushtaq.

She also said she was impressed by the crowd that stood in line for an autographed 'Heart Lamp' at the festival.

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

SURGICAL STRIKE



K. KRISHNA SAGAR RAO

I strongly believe that a nation's ability to be self-reliant stems from its enabling indigenous culture or, in its absence, from its competence in designing a new enabling culture. No nation can become fully self-reliant in this world without this foundation.

Consider Pakistan, a nation that is separated from India and chose to reject Hindu civilizational culture. Lacking the competence to design a new enabling culture, it has never come close to being self-reliant. Unfortunately, one cannot turn into a beggar and proclaim self-reliance. Many nations without an enabling culture have run their course and slipped into oblivion for various reasons.

I wish to highlight the power of an enabling culture to transform a nation into a truly self-reliant one. India has a great advantage over many nations as it possesses an ancient, knowledge-based civilizational culture. Every Indian citizen must ask: "Does India wield its cultural trump card to unlock its potential as a truly self-reliant nation?"

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the first to issue a national call to action for becoming self-reliant. However, the government alone cannot achieve this humongous task. Citizens must awaken and embrace this national cause. India needs to reclaim its forgotten ancient cultural values that drives education, work culture, skillful, ethical guidance, and big thinking to enterprise, innovate, and professionalize.

Since independence, the callous dismissal of our great indigenous culture as 'old school', 'traditional', 'not cool', or 'not progressive' has been unforgivable and carries an unquantifiable cost, which we are already bearing through rapid personal, professional, family, and social disintegration.

THE WRATH OF GLOBALISATION

To add fuel to the fire, globalization has worsened the situation. No culture remains untarnished by the tsunami of the ultra-capitalist formula of "free enterprise" and "globalisation." This global phenomenon has crushed cultures worldwide. This economic leveller, over four decades, has damaged indigenous cultures more than any foreign oppressor or dictator could over centuries. Even the mighty economic power of the USA, which unleashed this economic tornado, could not escape its wrath.

The USA, which lacked an indigenous culture, has

recently lost the enabling culture carefully designed by its founding fathers through a nation-building process begun in 1787, which sustained for over two centuries. While globalisation has economically benefited most nations that adopted it, birthing economic giants like China and India, it has equally eroded their invaluable cultures.

President Trump has taken it upon himself to reclaim the lost glory of American society, which is fighting bipolar ideological and deeply divided social battles. Above all, the USA has lost its self-reliance along with its designed enabling culture. Overdependence on China, India and other nations for essentials highlights the savagery of unmonitored, hypnotic globalisation. This example validates my statement: "A nation's ability to be self-reliant stems from its enabling indigenous culture or, in its absence, from its competence in designing a new enabling culture."

I strongly believe: "If a nation loses its culture, it loses the capability to be self-reliant forever." Self-reliance as a slogan does not translate to reality unless a nation steps up for this mammoth cause. I propose four interdependent steps for India to rise to self-reliance.

RECLAIMING THE INDIGENEOUS CULTURE

I have always believed that a nation's soul lies in its culture. It is a collective emotion, the invisible thread weaving through every citizen's dreams, ambitions, and sense of self. For India, a land of ancient wisdom and vibrant diversity, our culture is not just a relic of the past; it is the fuel for our future. It is the fire that can ignite self-reliance and propel us to global leadership. Let me be clear: self-reliance is not just about GDP, economic metrics, or massive manufacturing hubs. It is about a mindset, a collective pride, a refusal to bow to mediocrity and a relentless pursuit of excellence, even at the cost of temporary political expediency. At the heart of it all is our culture, our greatest asset, our unyielding strength.

NATIONAL PRIDE

Let us talk about national pride. I am not referring to chest-thumping arrogance but a deep, unshakable belief in our identity as Indians. Our culture teaches us to honour our roots, whether it is the Vedic chants echoing through time, the intricate rhythms of Bharatanatyam, or the resilience of our farmers who have fed this nation for centuries.

This pride is not just nostalgia; it is a call to action. When we take pride in our identity, we stop seeking outward validation. We stop chasing foreign models of success that do not fit our culture and ethos. Instead, we build systems, products, and ideas with unapologetic confidence. Consider our space program: ISRO did not



Since independence, the callous dismissal of our great indigenous culture as "old school," "traditional," "not cool," or "not progressive" has been unforgivable and carries an unquantifiable cost, which we are already bearing through rapid personal, professional, family, and social disintegration. To add fuel to the fire, globalization has worsened the situation. No culture remains untarnished by the tsunami of the ultra-capitalist formula of "free enterprise" and "globalisation." This global phenomenon has crushed cultures worldwide. This economic leveller, over four decades, has damaged indigenous cultures more than any foreign oppressor or dictator could over centuries

just put a rover on the moon; it did it on a shoe-string budget that made the world's jaw drop. That is cultural pride at work: frugal, innovative, and fiercely independent.

SELF-WORTH

Self-reliance demands self-worth, a belief that we, as individuals and as a nation, are capable of good enough. For too long, we have carried the baggage of colonial inferiority, measuring ourselves against Western yardsticks. Our civilizational culture tells a different story. The Upanishads teach us to seek the divine within, to recognize our infinite potential. Imagine if every Indian internalised this, every student, every entrepreneur, every policymaker. We would not just be a nation of 1.4 billion people, we would be a force of 1.4 billion dreamers, each convinced that they could change the world.

This self-worth drove our freedom fighters to face empires with nothing but indomitable courage and determination. It drives our startups today, like OYO, Zoho, or Ola, to take on global giants. I believe: "When we know our worth, we do not beg for a seat at the table; we build our own."

BIG PURPOSE THINKING

Now, let us address big-purpose thinking. A nation without a larger purpose is like a ship adrift. Our culture provides that compass. From the Mahabharata's lessons on delivering one's role, Ramayana's lessons on duties and ethical guidance, to Gandhi's vision of Swaraj, we have always been a people driven by something bigger than ourselves.

Today, that purpose must be self-reliance. It is not just to meet domestic needs but to lead the world. India's ancient knowledge systems, from Ayurveda to mathematics, once drew scholars globally. Why are our youth flocking to Western universities? Whose fault is it? Why cannot we reclaim that mantle? Imagine an India, where our universities rival MIT, Princeton, and Harvard, where our tech hubs outline Silicon Valley, where our green energy solutions power the planet.

This is not a pipe dream; it is a cultural imperative. Our scriptures speak of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," the world is one family. That is just a fed-good slogan; it is a blueprint for global leadership rooted in compassion, innovation, and responsibility.

SKILLING FOR GLOBAL COMPETITION

Self-reliance demands world-class, razor-sharp skills. Our culture has always valued competence, craftsmanship, mastery, whether it is the mathematical genius, precision of a Kathak dancer or the ingenuity of a street vendor turning scraps into solutions. That's the glory of the past. Today we have moved away from being a merit-centric society, we value social engineering over competence, professionalism and integrity. We continue to build on entitlement and free culture for political appeasement and expediency. How can India build a skilled workforce without competence, merit or professionalism being widely respected and promoted?

Our education system must stop producing rote learners and start fostering questioners, thinkers, creators, and problem-solvers.

Consider the global demand for Indian coders, doctors, and engineers. We are already competitive, but we do not yet lead or dominate; we simply facilitate.

Programs initiated by PM Narendra Modi, like Skill India, are a good start, but we need a radical cultural revolution in education, one that blends our ancient culture of holistic learning with professional integrity and paired with cutting-edge technology. That is the India I envision, globally competitive, yet unmistakably Indian.

ELIMINATE CORRUPTION

Now, let us address the elephant in the room, corruption. It is a cancer that erodes self-reliance. Our culture, at its core, is rooted in dharma, righteousness, integrity, and duty. Yet, somewhere along the way, we have let greed, lethargy, jealousy, disloyalty, and shortcuts creep in. Every bribe, every favour, every instance of "chalta hai" attitude betrays our cultural values.

A self-reliant India cannot afford this.

We need a cultural reset, a return to the principles of simplicity, honesty, integrity, and accountability that our epics champion. Consider the success of digital platforms like UPI or Aadhaar. They have cut through bureaucratic red tape because they are built on transparency and efficiency. If we extend that ethos to every corner of governance and society, we will be unstoppable. It starts with us each of us refusing to compromise, demanding better, and upholding the standards our civilizational culture sets.

GREAT GOVERNANCE
A nation's rise depends on

leaders who dream big and act boldly. Our culture has always revered visionary leadership. Think of Ashoka, who transformed an empire through compassion, or Chanakya, who engineered a golden age with strategy. Today, we have a government that channels this legacy: one that sets audacious goals for global domination, not through conquest but through excellence. Whether it is making products for the world, renewable energy, leading in AI, or becoming the world's pharmacy, the vision is clear and uncompromising.

Policies like Make in India or Atmanirbhar Bharat are steps in the right direction, but they need cultural backing. The government must inspire pride, foster self-worth, and align citizens with our larger purpose to galvanize a billion hearts. It is not about control; it is about unleashing India's potential.

Imagine an India where every village has solar-powered microgrids, designed by local engineers trained in both traditional knowledge and modern tech. Imagine our films, music, and literature dominating global markets, telling stories that resonate with our values. Imagine our cities as models of sustainability, blending ancient urban planning with futuristic innovation.

This is within reach if we harness our culture. Japan rebuilt itself after devastating World War II distress by marrying its ancient samurai discipline with indigenous designed management models. Japanese consumer brands dominate the world in cutting-edge technology and uphold the highest quality standards. South Korea's cultural pride fuels its tech leadership in computer hardware, globally renowned telecom, consumer appliances, and precision technology. Why cannot India do better?

CONCLUSION

India can be self-reliant. We must live the culture we preach, take pride in our identity, elevate our self-worth, align with a larger purpose, hone our skills, reject corruption, and demand visionary governance.

Every time we choose Made in India, innovate, or uphold integrity, we are building a self-reliant future. I am not saying it is simple, but it is possible. Our culture is not just a backdrop; it is the engine for our rise. Let us embrace it, wield it, and show the world what a billion-plus proud, purposeful, and skilled Indians can do. We cannot just dream of self-reliance; we must build it, one bold step at a time. When India rises, the world will not just watch; it will follow.

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



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

—Rannath Goenka

TRUMP'S POLICIES CAN HARM THE U.S. AS MUCH AS COUNTRIES LIKE INDIA

DONALD Trump's 'bright ideas'—in the form of a flurry of sweeping executive orders—are worrying people in company boardrooms as well as family drawing rooms across the world. From trade tariffs and remittance taxes to a crackdown on visas, his unprecedented policy proposals may have far-reaching social, political and economic implications for countries like India. Many of the proposals stretch the boundaries of established American jurisprudence, leaving a faint hope that not all of them may eventually materialise. For example, a US federal trade court on Wednesday blocked Trump's tariff moves, ruling that an emergency law the White House invoked to usurp the Congress's power to levy tariffs "exceeds any authority granted to the president" in the matter. The Trump administration has appealed the ruling; but if the court's order prevails, it will be a huge relief for the 180-odd nations that trade with the US.

We may want to hold the jubilation as Trump could land another debilitating punch on the issue, just as we are witnessing in the case of student visas, whose processing the US paused on Tuesday. The move comes close on the heels of Trump's failed attempt to revoke Harvard University's certification to enrol international students, which too was blocked by a federal court. The state department is now working on a new system to scan all student applicants' social media presence for posts found offensive by the administration. Indians account for the largest number of foreign students in the US—at about 30 percent, they surpass even Chinese students. With the next intake just around the corner, prospective students are deeply worried. American universities will also be hit, as foreign students are an important financial source for many of them. In any case, Indians are increasingly turning to destinations like Germany, Ireland and Russia, where their enrolments have more than doubled in the recent past.

India is also the world's biggest recipient of remittances. Trump's 3.5 percent tax on money sent abroad by those who are not US citizens would affect H-1B visa holders and even permanent residents. Some policy watchers argue that India should impose similar levies on US companies and investors in response. But regardless of whether Trump's policies flow from a coherent approach, they could have long-term economic and diplomatic consequences not just for India, but also for the US.

NORTHEAST ON NEW TRACKS TO PROGRESS

THE hallmark of a remote region's integration with the mainland is connectivity that facilitates the easy movement of people and goods. India's northeastern region, which is undergoing a massive railway expansion to reverse decades of institutional neglect, is a prime example. Eighteen projects worth ₹74,000 crore are laying 1,368 km of rail tracks, including 13 new lines. Their completion will pave the way for the simultaneous expansion of intra- and inter-regional movements. The latest development is a railway line finally linking Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, to the national grid. It is the fourth northeastern capital to have a railway station. Tracks are expected to arrive soon at three more of the eight states, including Gangtok in Sikkim. Simultaneous expansion of the region's road, air and river networks would transform trade, productivity and the intermingling of people like never before. This would be a far cry from the earlier decades when people and animals jostled on rickety Dakota and Fokker planes that hopped between distant towns in the region as the Northeast remained tenuously connected with mainland India.

In recent decades, insurgency and militancy have again turned the region into a security nightmare, adding people's alienation to the woes of economic disconnect. The situation has caused a large number of the region's youth to migrate in search of jobs. Manipur is on the boil even now. However, a renewed developmental focus and investment are bringing in dividends. The region boasts new educational, medical and sports institutions, improved conditions for trade, and a more profitable exploitation of the region's natural potential in tea, timber and oil. The expanding rail network will alleviate transport bottlenecks by facilitating faster freight movement. That would reduce prices and storage losses while increasing jobs. Increased economic activity around a transport grid can help reduce insurgency-related issues, stabilise the region through improved incomes, and aid national security with faster deployment of the armed forces when needed.

As the transport corridors through Bangladesh and Myanmar are held hostage to geopolitics, the expanding rail and road networks can enable the Northeast to leverage its unique advantage over the rest of India. The region's eastern borders and cultural ties with the neighbours make it integral to India's Act East policy. Quicker transportation can finally deliver on the region's long-held promise as the gateway to eastern and southeastern Asia, facilitating sustainable, multi-dimensional trade.

QUICK TAKE

FOR MORE RAFAS

AS Rafael Nadal was feted at Roland Garros as the greatest to have graced the French clay court, the world was reminded of his incredible record. Rafa won the French Open nine times in 10 years after debuting in 2005; he went on to win it five more times. But it's not only for his dominance on court that Rafa will be remembered. Maaya Rajeshwari, the 15-year-old prodigy from Coimbatore who won a scholarship to train at the Rafa Nadal Academy in Mallorca this year, remembers his most precious mantra: It's how you behave with others that will remember you for, not just your wins. May we have more Rafas in all walks of life.

JUDGES do not have an easy job. They repeatedly do what the rest of us seek to avoid: make decisions," wrote British lawyer David Pannick. At times, judges who try cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso) Act involving consensual sex between adolescents find it difficult to choose between the law and reality. Recently, in a case titled *In re: Right to privacy of adolescents*, the Supreme Court was confronted with such a dilemma.

The case was from West Bengal. A 14-year-old girl had left her parental home to live with a 26-year-old man. They got married and a child was born. The man was found guilty of offences under the Pocso Act and the erstwhile Indian Penal Code. The trial court sentenced him to long-term imprisonment. The high court set aside the judgement in view of the relation between the victim and the accused, taking note of the subsequent turn of events. The Supreme Court initially reversed the high court's judgement. But instead of punishing the man, thought it fit to make a deeper enquiry into the case's realities—it sought a report from an expert committee. The committee's final report was unconventional.

Relying on the final report about the plight of the victim, the court said that though "initially, passion and intimacy may have taken centre-stage", later "without any coercion from her husband, the victim is deeply committed to him". The court noted that the victim's struggle has been for rescuing her husband from the impending punishment. The court found that "she is ably looking after her responsibilities as a wife and mother". It also noted that the victim had to find lakhs of rupees for saving her husband from the clutches of law. She was bringing up the child while defending her husband when the state of West Bengal had adopted an insensitive position.

The final report of the expert, as extracted in the judgement, reads: "A heinous crime causes trauma in the psyche of the victim. In this case, the law saw it as a crime, the victim did not. Hence, the legal crime did not cause any trauma on this particular victim. It was the consequences thereafter—the police personnel, the legal system, the battle to save her husband and do the best for her daughter while having a financial burden which is taking its toll on her. A young woman who refuses to be called a 'victim', fighting for her husband needs all the support that can be made available. It would be in the

Some provisions of the Pocso Act may seem unkind of lived adolescent realities. A recent Supreme Court judgement highlighted the need to rethink this delicate issue

WHEN THE LAW HAS TO DECIDE ON TEEN SPIRIT

KALEESWARAM RAJ

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ILLUSTRATION BY SUDHAR RAO

best interest of the child if the family structure can be restored."

The court, even after observing that in law the accused had to be sent to jail, in view of the human predicament, thought it fit to ensure that the husband not be separated from the wife; though the accused was convicted, he will not undergo any further punishment. The court also asked West Bengal to "act as the true guardian of the victim and her child"—to take care of their well-being including their education. Thus, the court, in its introspective jurisdiction, corrected its own act of mechanically reversing the findings of the Calcutta High Court.

Criminalisation of adolescent sexuality is a delicate subject. According to Indian law, a consensual sexual act on a minor is punishable because the law does not pro-

vide for "close in age" exceptions. A 2022 paper by Swagata Raha and Shrutika Ramakrishnan says, "The lack of recognition of consensual sexual behaviour of older adolescents has resulted in their automatic criminalisation, as well as a conflation of consensual acts with non-consensual acts... While all children and adolescents are entitled to protection from sexual exploitation and violence, the approach adopted under Pocso Act renders adolescents vulnerable to criminal prosecution for normative sexual behaviour."

This is, precisely, the challenge before lawmakers. Legislation on human relations is not an easy task. The attempt should be to minimise policing power of the state in intimate personal relations. The Supreme Court explained this principle in the *Joseph Shine* (2018) case that de-

criminalised adultery. Given the nature of personal and family relations in India, a mechanistic adoption of Western laws could create problems.

The Pocso Act, to some extent, illustrates this point. According to Section 19(1) of the Act, a person who apprehends or knows about the commission of an offence under the Act is bound to inform the competent authority. Failure to do so is also an offence. This adds to the problem's complexity. Very often in India, adolescent relations may not be endorsed by the families and, therefore, the tendency to use the law to take 'vengeance' is rampant. Again, when youngsters try to get away from their familial ambience because of parental disapproval of their relation, there could be invocation of the law to punish the 'probable offenders' at the instance of the hostile family.

The law also disregards the organic development of human personality during adolescence, which often includes intimate relations between a girl and a boy. In a 2023 decision, the Delhi High Court, while granting bail to an accused, said that the object of the statute is not to criminalise consensual romantic relations between young people. The problem, however, is that this is what the law precisely does. The suggestion of the Madras High Court in the *Sabari* (2019) case that the definition of child in Section 2(d) of the statute should be altered as a person below the age of 16 years, instead of 18, is sensible and realistic. In this case, the court underlined the need to "distinguish the cases of teenage relationships after 16 years from the cases of sexual assault on children below 16 years".

Pocso, a gender-neutral law enacted in 2012, showed a radical shift from the provisions in conventional laws like the erstwhile Indian Penal Code, which focused on sexual crimes on girls only. Yet, the new law has turned problematic in the context of the consensual relations between the young. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr famously said, "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience." The well-considered judgement of the Supreme Court, authored by Justice Abhay S Oka, shows that the case is not yet fully disposed of. The court invoked Article 142 of the Constitution to issue directives to rescue the family.

It is time for the country to think about empowering high courts with similar enabling provisions under the Pocso Act, along with several other reforms. This would call for positive changes in the law, or suitable judicial legislation.

(Views are personal)
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WESTERN DISUNION: IMPACT OF TRUMP'S REMITTANCE TAX

TULSI JAYAKUMAR

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For India, the stakes are even higher—economically, socially and strategically. India is the world's largest recipient of remittances. World Bank estimates show Indians received \$119.5 billion in remittances through formal channels in 2023. Remittances have increased 120 percent since 2010 and contributed 34 percent to the GDP in 2023.

The US has emerged as the largest source of India's remittance inflows, accounting for 27.7 percent in 2023-24, up from 23.4 percent in 2020-21. These transfers have been a key buffer for India's external accounts, playing an important role in offsetting the merchandise trade deficit. As per the latest RBI Bulletin, inward remittances funded

limiting the Reserve Bank's ability to defend the currency and stabilise markets. The knock-on effects—rising inflation, volatile interest rates, and tighter liquidity—could jeopardise macroeconomic stability.

The impact wouldn't be limited to economic aggregates. Remittances support millions of Indian households, funding critical needs such as education, healthcare and housing. A sudden dip would hurt the quality of life for families across the country—especially in remittance-dependent states like Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the top three recipients in 2023-24.

There are also worrying behavioural implications. To avoid the tax, some may resort to informal or illegal money transfer methods, such as the hawala system. This shift from formal to shadow channels undermines financial transparency and poses regulatory and security risks, as hawala networks are often linked to money laundering, tax evasion and terror financing.

The tax, though aimed at revenue generation, could thus trigger far-reaching unintended consequences. Addressing these challenges require coordinated diplomacy and smart policy. India must engage proactively with US counterparts to highlight the contributions of its diaspora and seek exemptions or safeguards for high-compliance migrant groups. Domestically, India must strengthen its economic resilience by diversifying foreign exchange sources, reducing import dependency, and enhancing the efficiency of its formal remittance ecosystem.

It is also vital to improve financial literacy among the diaspora and reduce transaction costs through digital financial infrastructure. Making legal channels more accessible and cost-effective could deter diversion to informal methods.

The remittance tax is not just a line item in a bill—it's a signal of shifting geopolitical, economic and demographic undercurrents. For India, it is a wake-up call to reinforce economic buffers and deepen engagement with its diaspora. For the US, it is an opportunity to re-evaluate how fiscal and immigration policies align with labour market realities. Getting this balance right will be essential for both. (Views are personal)



If Trump's proposal to tax foreign remittances is enforced from next year, it could reduce the substantial amounts that come into India from the US. That would widen India's current account deficit and put pressure on lakhs of families

an average of 42.2 percent of India's trade deficit between 2010-11 and 2023-24 (excluding the Covid year 2020-21, when the figure touched 80 percent). Since 2000, remittances have consistently exceeded India's inward foreign direct investments.

A reduction in remittance inflows could significantly widen India's current account deficit. This would increase India's reliance on external borrowing and place downward pressure on the rupee, potentially leading to a currency depreciation. India's foreign exchange reserves, which stood at \$677.84 billion in April 2025, would also face strain,

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Healing Manipur

Ref: Where neither love, nor fear holds ground (May 29). Instability continues in Manipur despite efforts to restore peace. People should put aside their prejudices and work together to maintain unity.

Pichumani R, Kumbakonam

Cities' shame

Ref: Extreme weather no longer an excuse for infrastructure failures (May 29). Before the monsoon arrives, there is enough time to survey all the repair and restoration work that needs to be done. Those in power must show their commitment to the people. We live in an advanced age, and it is shameful that our cities can do so easily.

R Sampath, Chennai

Help rangers

Ref: Forest rangers deserve better protection (May 29). The job of a forest guard is undoubtedly very stressful. The government should take the initiative to support the forest department by promptly filling long-standing vacancies, providing comprehensive social security measures, and regularly offering updated firearms training.

Katragadda Sarveswara Rao, Bhuvanagiri

Police training

Ref: Police mistake crystal sugar for meth. 2 Kerala men jailed for five months (May 29). This sounds stranger than fiction. It took five months for the authorities to realise that the 100g of sugar they seized was not methamphetamine, but crystal sugar. The two men should be adequately compensated, and the officers should receive proper training to prevent such cases.

Geetha B K, Kannur

Judicial rectitude

Ref: Impach Justice Varma, says HC bar association (May 29). The bribery allegations against the judges should be thoroughly investigated to uphold public trust in the judiciary, a vital pillar of our democracy. The proposed impeachment motion against Justice Yashwant Varma is a step in the right direction.

Fazal Rahman, Alappuzha

Arming citizens

R Ref: Arms licences to indigenous people living in Assam's 'vulnerable' areas (May 29). Granting arms licences to indigenous people in vulnerable areas for self-defence is a positive step by the government. This will help them protect themselves and live without fear. Efforts should be made to ensure the guns are not misused.

Adinarayan Prabukhot, Belagavi