The Indian EXPRESS
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RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Return of Russian oil signals US pragmatism

THE DONALD Trump administration's decision to suspend certain sanctions on Russian oil for 30 days marks an important moment in the geopolitics of energy, war and diplomacy in the Gulf region. The implications stretch beyond the urgent need to stabilise the energy markets. It points to the prospects for a long-overdue political understanding between Washington and Moscow. After the US and Israel launched a military campaign against Iran two weeks ago, Tehran effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz — the chokepoint through which roughly 20 per cent of the world's oil transits — sending crude prices from around $70 to above $110 per barrel. Facing the prospect of an energy shock capable of destabilising major economies, Washington concluded that extraordinary measures were necessary.

Trump's move reflects Washington's appreciation of oil-rich Russia's weight in shaping the global energy market. By letting Russian oil flow into the markets, Washington hopes to ease prices without formally dismantling the broader sanctions regime built since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The International Energy Agency simultaneously announced its largest-ever emergency stockpile drawdown, though neither measure has so far succeeded in fully calming markets. The Russian oil waiver initially applied to India alone before being extended to all buyers. The India-specific origins acknowledged New Delhi's deep energy dependence and its role as a major global buyer. The broader expansion to all buyers signalled that under acute supply pressure, Washington is willing to accept flexibility in the sanctions framework.

While India welcomes this pragmatism, Europe has reacted with alarm, warning that eased sanctions replenish the Kremlin's war chest and release the political pressure on Moscow to end the war in Ukraine. Clearly, there is no escaping the tension, if sanctions are the primary lever of Western pressure on Russia. Beyond the immediate needs of reducing the pressure on energy markets, the easing of Russian sanctions raises the broader question of a breakthrough in US-Russian political engagement. The sanctions architecture is embedded in US domestic legislation, alliance politics, and the challenge of constructing a peace in Ukraine that is acceptable to Europe. Trump's 30-day waiver could be seen as a tactical adjustment under pressure, not a strategic reorientation. It reveals, however, a structural reality that Western policymakers have long sought to obscure: The global energy system remains dependent on Russian hydrocarbons. Russia could also play a significant role in facilitating stability in the Middle East. Building on US convergences with Russia while finding a reasonable agreement on Ukraine is one of the most consequential diplomatic challenges today. It is also a strategic opportunity that Delhi must press Washington and Moscow to seize.

Delhi's new Water Plan confronts old failures

LAST WEEK, the Delhi government announced that it will frame a Water Master Plan for the city. Though belated, the decision is a step in the right direction. Improving water quality — especially cleaning the Yamuna along its 22-km stretch in the capital — was a major campaign plank for the BJP in the run-up to the 2025 Delhi assembly election. Yet, after a year in office, the BJP government's record remains underwhelming. It has claimed progress in cleaning the river. The latest report of the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) suggests that water quality has improved compared to last year. However, the same data indicate that contaminant levels remain significantly above permissible limits. Particularly worrying is the fact that the city's sewer system carried far more pollutants into the river in January than it did in October. Although the pollution load eased somewhat in February, the volume of untreated sewage entering the Yamuna remained worryingly high. The pattern suggests that after the abundant monsoon rains, a dry winter has left the river without the flows necessary to cleanse itself. The data should prompt a serious conversation on how pollutants can be reduced during the lean season.

So far, the Delhi government's approach to cleaning the Yamuna has relied heavily on sewage treatment plants. Over the past year, several of these facilities have been upgraded. However, the latest DPCC data indicate that they are still not adequately equipped to tackle the scale of the river's pollution. More importantly, large parts of the city remain outside the sewer network. Earlier this month, the Delhi Jal Board informed the National Green Tribunal that it is putting systems in place to accurately assess the volume of sewage discharged into the river through the city's major drains. Such systems are long overdue.

The water board also told the tribunal that the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board is working to address delays in connecting settlements to the city's sewage network. Its statement points to a chronic problem. Fragmented institutional responsibilities have long hampered the interceptor drain project, which was meant to capture sewage from smaller drains in the city's slum clusters before it could flow into the larger drains that empty into the Yamuna. Addressing this more than decade-long deficit will be among the many challenges the proposed Water Master Plan must confront. The Delhi government has little time to lose.

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY

What could have been done to avert a cooking gas crisis — and wasn't

MANI SHANKAR AIYAR

I INITIALLY resisted the offer of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas when the UPA government was formed in May 2004 because I considered MoPNG a notorious den of bribery against patronage to undeserving second-rate politicians and their clients. But, when I was overruled and given "temporary" charge of the ministry, I was pleasantly surprised to discover through briefings by senior officers and public-sector oil honchos that the ministry had, in fact, a key role to play in "energy security" to complement, on an equal footing, the external affairs ministry's responsibility for "geopolitical security" and the finance/commerce ministries' responsibility for "economic security", which together with MoPNG, add up to "national security".

At that time, two decades ago, our dependency on oil and gas imports was about 70 per cent of our requirements. It is now nearer 90 per cent. Deeply impressed by economist Vijay Kelkar's comment that natural gas would be to the 21st century what petroleum had been in the 20th and coal in the 19th and wood till the 18th, I focused my energies, and those of the ministry and its subordinate bodies, in particular the Directorate General of Hydrocarbons (DGH), as well as the public-sector oil companies, on the critical issue of "energy security".

This required a two-track approach: Domestic and external. On the domestic track, we had to build a global network of research institutions that would provide the technology to drill through the lava and volcanic rock-laden "Deccan trap" to get to our own domestic on-shore reserves, which were at a depth hundreds of metres below the surface and had only been tapped in similar circumstances, but on a much smaller scale, in Colorado. Offshore, we had to penetrate some 10,000 metres in the Arabian Sea (against the North Sea's 150 metres) to replicate our principal source of offshore energy, Bombay High, discovered in 1973. This, too, required a global science and technology network but held greater promise because Exxon was drilling at deep depths in the Gulf of Mexico. Wherever I travelled, I sought to bring into our ken the networking of technological institutions as the key to energy security through technology that held the potential to yield abundant domestic Indian supplies of oil and gas.

I also prioritised, against some objection from both the finance and external affairs ministries, securing against fierce Chinese competition our own foreign exploratory fields, especially in our abundantly petroleum-endowed proximate neighbourhood, ranging from Iran and the Gulf to Central Asia, especially around the Caspian Sea: Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan, even landlocked Uzbekistan, visiting exploration sites and pipelines from Baku on the Caspian to the terminal at Ceyhan on the eastern Mediterranean in Turkey. I even overcame my instinctive dislike of Israel to examine whether we could avoid the choke point of the Strait of Hormuz (whose closing is now causing severe cooking-gas shortage in India) by extending the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline through Ashkelon and Eilat at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba to bring Central Asian oil and gas direct to the Indian Ocean and parallel pipelines from North Africa to the Indian Ocean, escaping the choke points of the Bab al-Mandab on the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz.

Above all, I pitched for piping natural gas from Iran through Pakistan to energy-and-coal deficient Rajasthan, as well as from Sittwe (Akyab) off the Myanmar coast (where GAIL had discovered natural gas) through Cox's Bazar and Jessore in Bangladesh to supply vast quantities of piped natural gas to the upcoming giant petrochemical complex in Haldia, West Bengal.

Little of this fructified because I was relieved of my "temporary" charge of MoPNG within 20 months. My successors did not prioritise "energy security", through the domestic or external routes, concentrating instead on procuring as much petroleum and gas as could be procured from foreign markets, thus raising our external dependence to 90 per cent and leaving us even more dependent on outside sources instead of focusing on our own domestic and external sources of supply.

> Far too late, the Essential Commodities Act has been invoked, oil refineries ordered to ramp up LPG output and the minister says he is in touch with 'over 40 countries' to secure LPG. But why was all this not done a year ago?

It is this lack of attention to "energy security" in the pursuit of purchasing external supplies that has brought us to the present cooking-gas crisis. Instead of treating MoPNG as the handmaiden of S Jaishankar's external affairs ministry, the Hamas attack on Israel in 2023 — three years ago — and the sharp Israeli response of undertaking genocide in Gaza should have alerted MoPNG to the imperative need to stock up on cooking gas, especially as our overall petroleum policies had resulted in our becoming the world's second largest consumer of LPG cooking gas at 3 million tonnes a month, 60 per cent of which is imported.

Far too late, the Essential Commodities Act has been invoked, oil refineries have been ordered to ramp up LPG output and the minister says he is in touch with "over 40 countries" to secure LPG. But why was all this not done a year ago when it became clear, especially after the vicious 12-day war of June 2025, that when all-out war happened, as it obviously would, the obvious Iranian retaliation would be to close the choke point of the Strait of Hormuz?

We have strategic reserves of crude oil. We even have two strategic caverns of LPG at Visakhapatnam and Mangaluru, but the total "strategic" stock of LPG, we now discover, is no more than a day's consumption or perhaps a couple of days more. Is this not gross irresponsibility? Why did we not order LPG purchases on the high seas to stock up — albeit at higher prices but not so high as now? Why did we not pursue domestic and external energy security as the principal goal of the ministry over the last two decades, but especially after West Asia started tottering on the brink of war? Hardeep Puri is now closing the stable door — but long after the horse has fled.

The writer is former Union Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, 2004-06

NCERT must heed the lesson in the Court's rebuke

J S RAJPUT

THE NCERT has disturbed the highest court of India, and its credibility stands bruised. Anger and anguish have been expressed in no uncertain terms by the Supreme Court of India over a section on corruption in the judiciary. One is shocked and disturbed by all that has followed media reports on a certain chapter in a Class VIII Social Science textbook.

On a broader canvas, the institutional relationship between these bodies deserves to be examined to ensure higher levels of professional competence and the delivery of justice to all — whether an individual, an institution, or an organisation. Public institutions are expected to be mutually supportive in their pursuit of excellence. Institutional credibility is a consequence of the competence, commitment, and contributions of its internal professionals.

The SC enjoys the trust and confidence of every Indian. There are other institutions that also make Indians proud. The NCERT is one of them, an institution that I served for three decades as a professor, including five years as its director. The NCERT is an autonomous body created and funded by the Government of India. It nurtures the future of India and attempts to transform innocent persons into responsible personalities. It sustains dynamism in education and prepares the young in their pursuit of knowledge. The judiciary at every level consists of judges and lawyers who hold the NCERT in great respect. From extensive personal experience, one can say that they have never hesitated to express their gratitude to the organisation.

However, the section on corruption in the judiciary has exposed vulnerabilities in the preparation of textbooks and, it must be stated unhesitatingly, dented the credibility of the NCERT, credibility that has been built over six decades by its academics, many of whom have enjoyed great reputations for their illustrious contributions.

> The section on corruption in the judiciary has exposed vulnerabilities in the preparation of textbooks and dented the credibility of the NCERT, built over six decades

The SC passed a judgment on March 11, imposing a ban on three senior professionals in connection with the chapter on corruption. Their names were included in the submission made by the NCERT to the Court. Presumably, they never got an opportunity to present their case. None of them is an NCERT academic, yet their reputations stand tarnished. As a lay person, fully conscious of one's own inadequacies, one wonders whether such a situation should be inflicted upon any citizen without being given an opportunity to present his or her version.

One also wonders how the NCERT could publish books without ensuring that someone is fully responsible for suitability of the content. The NCERT has around 500 academics, including teachers. The practice followed in the preparation of textbooks up to 2004 was to solicit expert advice from across the country to ensure the national character of the output, but the final responsibility rested with the regular academic experts of the NCERT. Morally and ethically, every word published by the NCERT is the responsibility of the director. It may appear harsh on my part, but an organisation entrusted with educating the young in human values must also practise those values. Autonomy necessarily brings accountability. The ministry cannot be faulted for what is fully and completely the responsibility of the NCERT.

I was privileged to be a member of the committee set up by the Government of India under the chairmanship of Chief Justice J S Verma to conceptualise ways to teach Fundamental Duties to citizens. Though the focus was on duties, it was not possible to do justice to the assigned task without bringing in the mutuality of rights and duties, fundamental rights included. The report quoted Mahatma Gandhi: "I learned from my illiterate but wise mother that all rights to be deserved and preserved come from duties well done." It deserves to be recalled and analysed in the present context.

The NCERT must play its role with reassured professional competence and confidence. Let it help prepare the best minds, including those who may serve at every level of the judiciary. Let the NCERT receive the reverence of a national guru from everyone, including the Supreme Court of India.

The writer, former director of NCERT, works in education, social cohesion and religious amity

Air power deters, but enduring outcomes need more

G S BEDI

THE US-Israel air campaign against Iran highlights both the power and the limits of air-delivered retribution. Air strikes can penetrate deep, hit critical nodes with precision, and signal resolve within hours — yet even with this intense barrage, few serious observers believe Tehran's regime will fall to just bombs and missiles. While acknowledging the prowess of air power, military historian T R Fehrenbach articulated the importance of boots on the ground over bombs in the sky. That logic frames the central question for India: Air power can punish and deter, but who will convert those fleeting effects into enduring political outcomes?

Air power has become critical to contemporary statecraft. It satisfies domestic expectations for visible retribution and sends deterrent signals to foes, while avoiding full-scale conflict. In May 2025, the IAF conducted long-range strikes at will, forcing Pakistan to seek a ceasefire. However, the outcomes of air power are also easier to question. As arguments following Balakot demonstrated, observers can doubt the degree of the damage inflicted, despite the value of the strike's political signal. The adversary, then, has significant incentives to downplay losses. Air campaigns can be operationally successful and tactically beneficial, but claims of "victory" remain vulnerable to narrative warfare. For India, this means swift air retribution cannot be the single foundation upon which military victory is built.

In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, every movement in the frontline is regarded as a strategic milestone. Similarly, the purpose in Kargil was to remove Pakistani intruders and restore the LoC's integrity. Gaining territory requires superiority in contact warfare. The Army's primary objective is to win contact battles, then occupy and protect captured territory. Land forces worldwide often prioritise "strategic" capabilities, like long-range missiles and advanced stand-off systems. When an army acts like a second air force, it risks under-equipping the infantry and artillery.

Clear roles are the solution. The Air Force and authorised tri-service strategic forces should be responsible for long-range deep strike operations. The Army should prioritise suppressing enemy artillery, neutralising local reserves, and enabling manoeuvre over pursuing independent strategic strikes. The Navy must avoid becoming a small "air force at sea" at the cost of underinvesting in submarines, anti-submarine warfare, logistics and upkeep.

> Air campaigns can be operationally successful and tactically beneficial, but claims of 'victory' remain vulnerable to narrative warfare

India's indigenisation effort offers an opportunity to align technology, doctrine, and budgets. The Army can create a soldier-centric ecosystem by incorporating reliable indigenous small arms, night sights, integrated infantry radios, armoured and mine-protected vehicles, artillery, loitering munitions, counter-drone systems, and field-ready software tools. These will be more important in the next crisis than any long-range platform.

The Army's ability to march into hostile territory when directed is important. To get there, the services must embrace technology while remaining true to their basic missions, and the Army, above all, must invest in the hard, vital qualities of close combat that have always determined victories in wars.

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40 YEARS AGO

March 16, 1986

INDIAN EXPRESS

Disarmament fitting tribute to Palme: PM
Call for North-South talks

Jayewardene rules out solution till Tamils' defeat

Four killed in Punjab

Anderson's plea to PM on 'Rajiv's India'

Killings in Punjab

FOUR PEOPLE, a farmer, a patwari, a doctor, and an ASI of the Punjab Police, were killed in different incidents in the state during the past 24 hours. Two persons crossing over from Pakistan were arrested in Gurdaspur district on the Indo-Pak border. They are being interrogated, the police said.

PM for nuclear test ban

PRIME MINISTER Rajiv Gandhi called for a comprehensive nuclear test ban and strongly urged the world's nations to resume "in the interest of all" their dialogue for economic development. Gandhi joined other world leaders, including the United Nations Secretary-General Perez de Cuéllar and the former West German chancellor Willy Brandt, in reaffirming his commitment to the cause of development and disarmament as a fitting tribute to the slain Swedish prime minister Olof Palme.

Jayewardene on peace

PRESIDENT J R Jayewardene has ruled out a political solution to the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka until the Tamil militants are defeated or surrender. Striking an uncompromising posture, Jayewardene claimed that the last time there was a political compromise between the Tamils and the government over devolution of power to district councils, the ensuing elections were disrupted by "terrorists" and a peaceful political development became impossible.

Documentary 'Rajiv's India'

SYNDICATED US columnist Jack Anderson has sent a personal appeal to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to permit the showing of his documentary film about India on Doordarshan. The documentary, *Rajiv's India*, was broadcast in the United States and Europe in January, but its Indian debut was cancelled shortly before a scheduled February 7 showing on Doordarshan, following objections raised by some officials, invited to a preview, that the film did not present an exact or balanced picture of the country or of recent events.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Yet another pounding of Lebanon... will weaken its authorities long before it truly brings Hezbollah to its knees
— *Le Monde, France*

Disruption carries a reminder: Policy reforms in fertiliser sector are overdue

ASHOK GULATI AND RITIKA JUNEJA

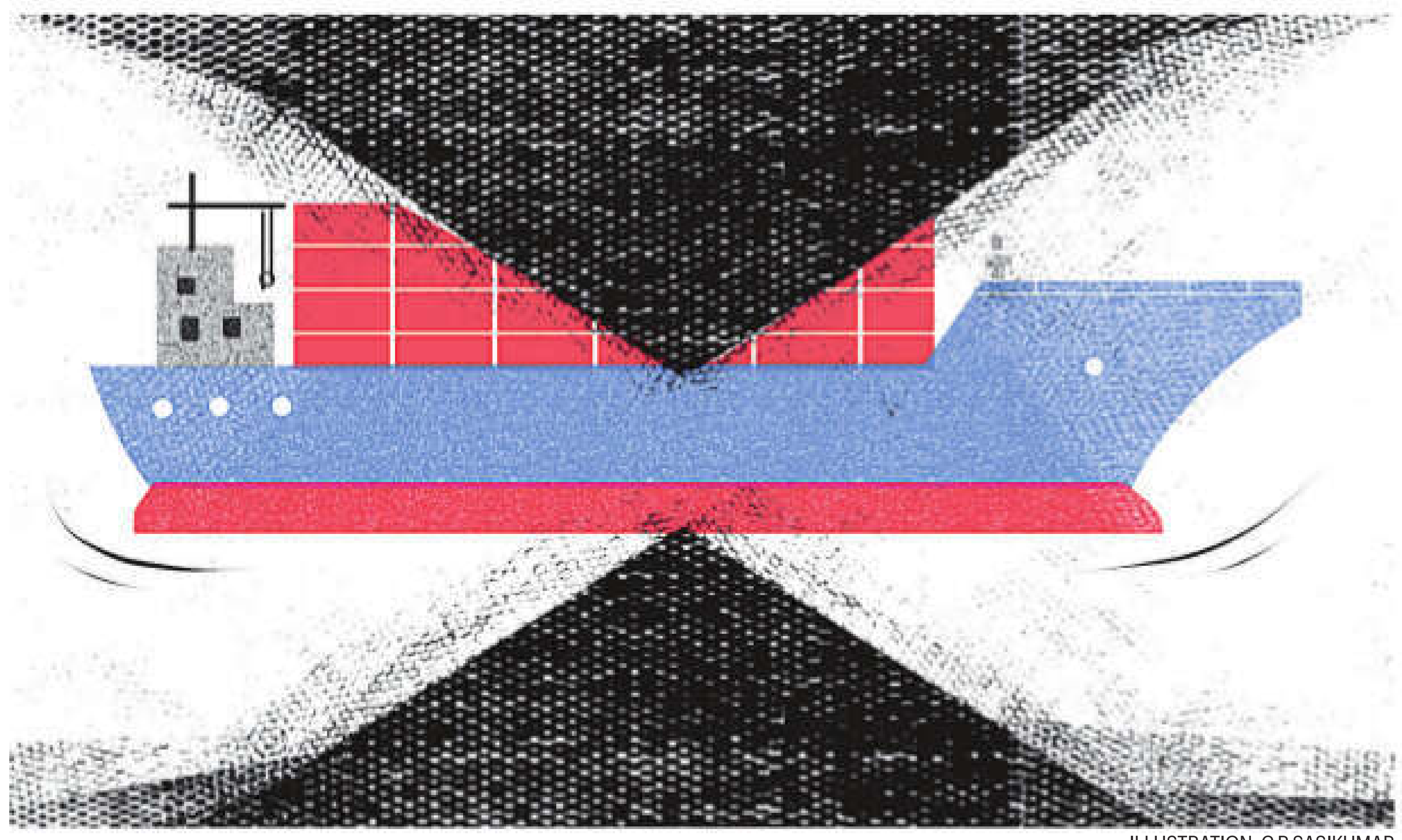

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

THERE IS a famous saying, "never let a serious crisis go to waste". India's landmark economic reforms in 1991 were the result of a balance-of-payments crisis. And today the country sits on comfortable foreign exchange reserves of over $728 billion, providing a good cushion to absorb external shocks. But the ongoing war in the Gulf between Iran on one side and Israel and the US on the other has exposed the vulnerabilities of energy and fertiliser supplies. The situation calls for strategic thinking and reforms in the fertiliser sector to ensure food security.

The escalating war is threatening a major disruption in energy and fertiliser supplies. The risks extend to vital maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial share of global oil and gas trade passes. Any disruption in this corridor quickly ripples across commodity markets. Oil and gas, and by extension fertilisers, especially urea, have already felt the tremors.

For India, crude oil is the largest import item, with about 88 per cent of its requirement being met through imports. In the financial year 2024–25 (FY25), India imported approximately 243 million tonnes (Mt) of crude oil worth $137 billion, nearly half of which was sourced from the Middle East via the Strait of Hormuz. Just before tensions escalated in late February, Brent crude averaged $66 per barrel, but within two weeks, prices spiked to around $120 per barrel before settling near $100 on March 13. India's exposure extends to cooking gas as well. The country imports about two-thirds of its LPG (31.3 Mt in FY25), much of which moves through the same corridor. As supplies tightened and import costs rose, domestic LPG prices were raised by Rs 60 per cylinder.

India's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports have also been hit. In FY25, the country imported about 27 Mt of LNG — roughly half of its requirement — worth around $15 billion, with Qatar accounting for nearly half of these imports. The disruptions across the Middle East pushed Asian spot LNG prices from around $10/mmBtu to $24-25/mmBtu within two weeks. By invoking the Essential Commodities Act, the government has prioritised gas allocation for households and transport, leaving fertiliser producers with only 70 per cent of their usual six-month consumption. This is likely to adversely hit the domestic production of urea.

This matters because India's food security hinges heavily on fertiliser security, and urea production is closely tied to global energy markets. India consumes about 40 Mt of urea annually, but domestic output has stagnated at around 30 Mt, forcing rising imports that could exceed 10 Mt in FY26, nearly double the 5.6 Mt imported in FY25. Over 60 per cent of these imports come from the Persian Gulf region. Following the escalation in the war, global urea prices surged from about $484/tonne to $652/tonne within 10 days — a 35 per cent jump — and may rise further as uncertainty persists. The dependence runs deeper: Natural gas, the key feedstock for urea, is largely imported, supplying about 85 per cent of the gas used in domestic production. Once both direct urea imports and imported gas feedstock are considered, India's effective import dependence in urea goes up to about 55 per cent.

Diversify fertiliser imports and their feedstocks by involving countries other than those from the Gulf. Reform the fertiliser sector either through DBT and decontrolling prices, or quantitative restrictions, or bringing urea under the NBS

Dependence is similarly high for other fertiliser inputs. Over 80 per cent of ammonia and sulphur imports come from the Gulf, while around 40 per cent of DAP imports are sourced from Saudi Arabia. India also relies almost entirely on imports for potassic fertilisers (MOP) and about 90-95 per cent for phosphatic raw materials (rock and acid). Once the import content of intermediates and feedstocks is considered, India depends on global fertiliser supply chains for about 68-70 per cent of its requirements in FY25, leaving the sector — and India's food security — highly vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions, price volatility, and supply shocks.

India also exports agri-products to the Middle East ($11.8 billion in FY25), which are under strain. But the biggest worry is about imports of oil, gas, and fertilisers. If this crisis continues beyond a month or so, the country's fertiliser subsidy bill in FY27 could cross Rs 2 lakh crore, against a budgeted figure of Rs 1.7 lakh crore. This calls for immediate reforms in this sector.

How do we do that? First, India must diversify its imports beyond the Gulf countries. Complementing this, India should expand overseas investments in fertiliser minerals and production assets while accelerating domestic exploration of fertiliser resources. Establishing a dedicated fertiliser investment fund of say, $1 billion, could enable Indian companies to acquire equity stakes in global mining projects and finance domestic exploration, shifting India from reactive import dependence to investment-led supply security.

Second, policy reforms in fertiliser pricing and subsidies are essential and overdue. Direct transfer of fertiliser subsidies to farmers and gradual deregulation of macro-nutrient prices would encourage balanced fertiliser use of N, P and K, while reducing fiscal pressures. It will plug leakages as well— at about 20 per cent, they are quite substantial. If such reforms appear too ambitious in the short run, an alternative would be to put quantitative restrictions on sales based on farm size, cropping patterns, and nutrient doses recommended by state agriculture universities. With the government already developing AgriStack, implementing such targeted allocation mechanisms seems feasible.

Third, if this is also not possible, then at least bring urea under the Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) framework, aligning its price with other fertilisers (P and K) and promoting more balanced nutrient application.

In essence, policymakers need to work on two fronts: First, diversify fertiliser imports and their feedstocks by involving countries other than those from the Gulf region. Second, reform the fertiliser sector either through DBT and decontrolling prices, or put quantitative restrictions in place, or bring urea under the NBS scheme. If Prime Minister Narendra Modi can convert this crisis into an opportunity to reform the fertiliser sector, it will bring rich rewards. But will he bite the bullet?

Gulati is distinguished professor at ICRIER and Juneja is research fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

Shift to Seva Teerth, a quiet historical correction

ABHAY KARANDIKAR

SOME CHANGES do not arrive with thunder. They arrive quietly and yet alter the meaning of a state. As a student in the late '80s, while browsing in the library of IIT Kanpur, I recall reading an article by M V Kamath in The Illustrated Weekly of India (I do not remember the exact issue), describing how Mahatma Gandhi spent August 15, 1947, not in Delhi's corridors of power, but in Noakhali, walking among riot-affected villagers. In the same article, Kamath was sharply critical of freedom fighters and wrote something to the effect that while the Mahatma was touring Noakhali, our freedom fighters were busy converting Viceroy's House into Rashtrapati Bhavan.

In many ways, the Narendra Modi government's move to shift the North and South block offices is a historical correction, a shedding of the colonial mindset. The move has brought back the thoughts I had as a student, and got me wondering why it was not done years ago. The structures on Raisina Hill were conceived by Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker after the capital was shifted from Kolkata to Delhi. Monumental and axial, they were designed to communicate permanence and distance. The imposing North and South blocks were conceived as symbols of imperial power, meant to dominate visually and psychologically.

Independent India inherited these edifices. While the Tricolour replaced the Union Jack and the spirit of governance transformed, the language of elevation endured in the architecture. The republic assumed authority within grand imperial buildings, even as its moral centre often stood beside the vulnerable. For generations of prime ministers, ministers, bureaucrats, and government officers, those spaces symbolised arrival, responsibility, and entry into the highest circles of governance. To leave such architecture is, for many, akin to relinquishing something prized.

Yet this moment invites a more searching question: Were we elevated by the building, or was the building elevated by the work done within it? The relocation of the Prime Minister's Office to Seva Teerth and other offices to Kartavya Bhavan may, at first glance, appear procedural. Yet it represents something deeper: A shift in the moral geography of power. This deeper aspect has not been fully fathomed by many and has not received the mainstream attention it deserves.

When institutions move from structures built to signify imperial dominance to spaces named after seva and kartavya, the transition asks something of us. It asks us not merely to occupy new premises, but to internalise a new ethical construct, to decide whether authority is to be projected or practised with humility. The very name "Seva Teerth", with its inscription "*Nagrik Devo Bhava*", reframes the state. It suggests that authority is not to be worshipped. It shifts the grammar of governance from command to service. Today, in a quiet way, this feels like a new awakening.

Citizen-centric governance should not be merely a rhetorical flourish; it needs to be an operational discipline, getting rid of the Raj-style clerical mindset as well. It requires integration across departments, clarity in outcomes, and speed in decision-making and execution. Physical space, however, does matter because it shapes institutional mindset and working ethos. This transition is not merely symbolic; it is also infrastructural. The new governance complexes are built with modern technology and spatial configurations that enable collaboration rather than hierarchy. The lack of elevated architecture also plays a role in ensuring that citizens find government offices accessible and non-imposing.

Of course, this transition does not and should not erase history. South Block and North Block will remain part of India's rich historical heritage, reminders of a complex journey through colonialism, the sacrifices of our freedom fighters, Independence, and democratic consolidation. Their conversion into museums will allow younger generations to understand our long history and the struggles of our forefathers. But authority has moved, and that movement carries an important civilisational meaning.

Indeed, with this move, we shed one of the last visible edifices of imperial hierarchy. In many ways, it signals the maturity of a nation that aligns physical governance infrastructure with its moral philosophy. It rearticulates what Bharat as a nation-state stands for. It is a historical shift whose deeper importance will unfold in the history written for a modern, Viksit Bharat.

The writer is Secretary to the Government of India, DST

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ambedkar and UCC

B R AMBEDKAR'S position on the Uniform Civil Code was far more nuanced than it is often made out to be. ('Ambedkar backed UCC, with a rider — can initially be voluntary', *IE*, March 15). He supported it, but with an important qualification — that it begin on a voluntary basis. That distinction matters enormously in today's debate. Imposing uniformity without building consensus will only deepen mistrust among minority communities. The wiser approach would be to start with areas where broad agreement exists — inheritance and property rights, for instance — and expand gradually.

A Myilsami, Coimbatore

Wangchuk's release

THE RELEASE of Sonam Wangchuk after 170 days in jail has relieved citizens whose faith in justice had been shaken. ('Activist Sonam Wangchuk freed as Centre revokes detention after 6 months', *IE*, March 15) His detention under the NSA appeared inconsistent with his service to education and national welfare. Authorities must explain what actions warranted such charges. If he was wrongly implicated, an impartial inquiry and recognition of injustice endured are essential.

R S Narula, Patiala

Closing the gap

CLIMATE POLICY cannot remain a negotiation between diplomats while science races ahead with alarming evidence. ('On climate change, mind the science policy gap', *IE*, March 14). Reports by the IPCC and recent research indicate that global warming is accelerating faster than earlier projections. Yet policy responses remain shaped by political compromises. For countries like India, where extreme heat already threatens labour productivity, agriculture, and public health, the science-policy gap carries real economic costs. Climate governance must therefore move beyond symbolic net-zero pledges towards measurable adaptation strategies.

Palak Verma, Mandi Gobindgarh

Coming home to Burhanpur

ANURADHA MASCARENHAS

THE CITY & I

I MUNCHED on my homemade parathas on the rail trip to Burhanpur, unsure as I am of food available on trains nowadays. The journey to this historical city in Madhya Pradesh came after nearly three decades. Back then, the homemade theplas sat happily in my stomach with the vada pav, karvandas and ice golas sold by vendors with no FSSAI approval.

Our large family would travel to Burhanpur almost every summer to meet relatives. The quaintness of the place was not lost on us. Narrow, dusty roads, a horse-pulled tonga waiting to transport us after the Jhelum Express chugged in at an unearthly 3 am, an unscheduled but mandatory stop along the Tapti river midway for my mother to take a holy dip, houses with common walls and the earthy smell of cow dung mixed with water spread across the floor to keep homes cool and mosquitoes at bay during the summer.

And then there was falsa — the glorious, dark purple berry with a tangy, sweet taste that thrived in semi-arid Burhanpur during the months of May and June. It is hard to think of Burhanpur without remembering the falsa. We'd eat it raw and then look forward to the extracted pulp of the fruit being turned into a traditional syrup known as falsa murabba. We'd take generous portions back home. Nothing could beat the unconditional love that came through every mouthful.

What is a city without its food? A few other Burhanpur sweets that have lingered on the taste buds are the traditional daraba — a halwa made of semolina, sugar and often singhare ka atta (chestnut flour) — whose origins date back to the 17th century, and the mawa jalebis and shahi tukdas.

While on the theme of taste, it shouldn't surprise you that the water in some parts of the city tastes different. That's because the water in these areas comes from the Khooni Bhandara, an underground water management system built in 1615 that continues to augment the city's water supply.

Rich in Mughal heritage, Burhanpur remained for decades under the patronage of emperor Shah Jahan, whose imprint can still be seen in the architectural splendour of the region

My journey to Burhanpur this time was to offer condolences after two deaths in the family in quick succession. As the 13th day ritual marked the formal end of the mourning period, the kitchen in the unusually large house came alive at 5 am with the noisy whirring of mixers churning out unusually large quantities of coriander-mint-chilli chutney. Sesame seeds crackled in pans for the green pea curry, pooris were rolled out and fried at a furious pace, a load of onions was finely chopped, and the banana leaves to serve the food in were cleaned thoroughly. *Bhabhi*s and *ben*s bustled around, preparing lunch to be served at the local *mataji ka mandir*.

Set up in 1400 AD along the banks of Tapti river, it served as a strategic gateway to southern India. Rich in Mughal heritage, Burhanpur remained for decades under the patronage of Emperor Shah Jahan, whose imprint can still be seen in the architectural splendour of the region. From the Shahi Qila, a riverside palace famous for its *hammam*, to the Jama Masjid, built in 1589, with elegant arches and courtyard; from the Aahukhana, where Mumtaz Mahal was temporarily buried, to the Kala Taj, associated with Shah Jahan's apparent plans for a black marble Taj Mahal, each monument has a story to tell.

Today, Shanwara Gate remains one of the important gateways to the walled city of Burhanpur. Tongas still operate along it, but auto rickshaws and other transport services have outnumbered them. The roads are still dusty, but this is because of the construction spurt.

At our ancestral home, my cousin's photograph joins those of my uncle and aunt, people who had kept this large extended family together, drawing us to the place year after year. Over time, those memories had faded in the din of a hectic work life. It took a funeral to bring me back to the place — and to the love, generosity and warmth that characterised Burhanpur back then and now.

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To fill university posts, reframe recruitment

JAIDEV BISHNOI

FACULTY DEFICIT is a major reason for the precarious state of public higher education in the country. According to a report of the parliamentary standing committee on education, released last year, 26 per cent of the sanctioned teaching posts are vacant in centrally funded institutions. The picture is murkier for state public universities, which face a faculty shortage of up to 40 per cent.

Even when recruitment is conducted, it often gets stalled in courts. The UGC has tried to lay down guidelines for recruitment beginning with its 2010 regulations. But they have been inadequate and have changed frequently. The performance-based appraisal system was complicated and became impractical when the number of applications went up. The UGC had to replace it in 2018 with another criterion, which has its own limitations. On the one hand, a simplified weightage-based academic score for shortlisting the candidates was introduced, and on the other, institutions were left free to decide the number of candidates to be called for an interview.

The minimum eligibility criteria often become the sole parameter of selection — it allows the appointment of a candidate with a fresh master's degree and NET over a PhD holder on the basis of the performance in the interview. At its core, an interview is a subjective exercise and often prone to favouritism. Barring exceptions, it is common for the candidate to be interviewed for less than five minutes behind closed doors.

Compelled by judicial and public pressure, some states have reduced the weightage of the interview. But, efforts have not been made to frame a transparent selection process. This is evident in Haryana's ongoing recruitment controversy. The Haryana Public Service Commission (HPSC) reportedly changed its objective-type test and interview-based criterion at the last minute to a subjective-type subject knowledge test (SKT) with an additional qualifying condition of 35 per cent marks, followed by an interview.

Even when recruitment is conducted, it often gets stalled in courts. The UGC has tried to lay down guidelines for recruitment. But they have been inadequate and have changed frequently

The argument that the UPSC's civil examinations have a subjective test is not convincing. The civil services exam has a different mandate from that of a test to select assistant professors. An aspirant for the post of an assistant professor has passed subjective exams at the university level. It's wrong to examine her again through subjective testing at a stage where objectivity must be ensured as far as possible. The UPSC has tried to overcome some of the limitations of a subjective test by clearly outlining the rubrics and diversifying the nature of questions. In contrast, the HPSC's test comprised 15 essay-type questions to be attempted in three hours. Answering an essay-type question requires critical reflection. Expecting a candidate to write 15 essays in three hours is not an evaluation of subject knowledge or pedagogical skills — it's a writing speed test.

When the exam's results were declared in December 2025, it was clear that the evaluation was no less arbitrary. Against 613 advertised posts in English, only 151 candidates had qualified. The candidates who have not been selected have been left with very little recourse to know, let alone challenge, the yardstick applied in evaluation, except for approaching the court. The Punjab and Haryana High Court has stayed the exam.

It is not a healthy sign that courts have to adjudicate educational recruitments. It is high time a robust and transparent procedure was put in place, and pending recruitments were fast-tracked.

The writer is assistant professor of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY M SRINIVAS

Under Dr M Srinivas, who has been director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Delhi since 2022, the institution has seen several significant changes, including the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) through the establishment of the Centre of Excellence for AI. A professor in the paediatric surgery division at AIIMS until 2016, he also served as Dean of ESIC Medical College and Hospital, Hyderabad, where he is credited with transforming the facility into one of the busiest hospitals in the region. Over the last two years, AIIMS Delhi has made notable advances, ranking sixth in the Global Top 250 Hospitals Report 2026

‘Doctors are not handing over final decisions to machines. AI is functioning as a filter, a triage tool’

Dr M Srinivas, director of AIIMS Delhi, on AI in diagnostics, public healthcare pressures, lifestyle diseases and how AIIMS is a health university hospital. This session was moderated by Ankita Upadhyay, Special Correspondent, *The Indian Express*

Director of AIIMS Delhi, Dr M Srinivas (right), with Ankita Upadhyay, Special Correspondent, *The Indian Express* RENUKA PURI

ON A UNIFIED HEALTH RECORD

‘We are going to have a robust system of not only cyber security hosting and network but also hospital information systems. Once we have that, we will be helping other institutions. We will have a data sharing system’

ON INTRODUCING A REFERRAL SYSTEM

‘A referral system would definitely make our job easier. Unscheduled appointments do put pressure on the institution. There is always a mismatch between the load, expectations and availability of beds’

Ankita Upadhyay: AIIMS sees around 15,000 patients in its OPDs every day, many of whom come from across the country, not just Delhi. Since taking over, how have you balanced healthcare delivery with research and teaching?

We are not just a hospital. AIIMS is ideally a health university hospital. The mandate given by Parliament is patient care, teaching, learning and research. We are also adding a fourth pillar — good governance and transparency. Each of these pillars is supporting each other. If we do not do research, who will generate solutions for the country’s needs? India is known for frugal innovation. Technology, treatment protocols, guidelines and evidence-based medicine suited to our conditions must come from here. It’s not going to come from the rest of the world. In fact, it is the other way around. Many of our solutions can serve the Global South. Research also helps us generate evidence and be part of policy and advocacy. We go to NITI Aayog and Health Ministry, share treatment protocols and tell them what research is needed. We look into vaccine trials, nutritional fortification. The iodisation of salt is a result of research from AIIMS.

The second component is teaching and learning. Our mandate is to create leaders — teachers, heads of departments, vice-chancellors, policy experts — not only for India but for the world.

Ankita Upadhyay: Despite newer AIIMS institutes coming up across the country, why do so many patients still come to AIIMS Delhi?

I call AIIMS Delhi the “mother AIIMS”. We are hand-holding the 20-plus AIIMS institutions across the country. We help with design, administration, recruitment, procurement, SOPs and guidelines. What is especially important for us is the work culture — that is something we want to share. We have also created referral protocols so that patients from other AIIMS institutes can come through a green channel for seamless admission and treatment. The referral is two-way: patients can come to us, then they can also go back.

Patients still come to AIIMS Delhi because of trust. People believe this is the biggest and best hospital in the country. At times we tell them that our own colleagues and students are leading the institutions elsewhere, and we refer them back.

You can’t say the other institutions are not doing well. No institution becomes popular from day one. It takes time. What we are building is a pan-AIIMS consortium. Recently, we brought together directors and deans of research across AIIMS and said that if we are doing research for the country, we cannot work in silos. We must work together, share knowledge, teaching practices, administrative experience and take up big research questions jointly.

We have software enabling a two-way referral system. The Health Minister launched one such system at AIIMS Delhi and AIIMS Bilaspur. Even without software, doctors call one another and say that I am redirecting the patient. If a patient from a peripheral AIIMS comes to mother AIIMS because of lack of expertise, equipment or a team approach needed for a complicated disease, we are happy to help. Once the critical component of care is completed, the patient can return to the nearest AIIMS for follow-up.

Ankita Upadhyay: A lot is happening at AIIMS around AI — from the new Centre of Excellence and collaborations with France to AI-based work in cancer diagnosis and mammography. Many young MBBS students wonder whether AI can replace doctors. What is your view?

AI will not replace doctors. It just helps them do more than what they were able to do. In fact, AI is required for institutions like AIIMS because we are dealing with large numbers. When the quantity increases, there is a possibility that quality will suffer. That is where AI comes to the rescue, say in triaging systems.

Take a simple example of chest X-ray reporting. Today we can generate hundreds of reports the same day within a few hours. The report goes to the clinician with a rider that it is AI-generated and must be clinically correlated. If something needs review, it comes back to the radiologist and they fine-tune the diagnosis. Earlier each specialist had to review huge numbers manually. AI reduces that pressure and gives doctors more freedom to do higher-quality work. At the same time, AI also learns because the data is here. We see millions of patients. That means systems trained here will keep improving. AI is definitely a supplement to our services.

Ankita Upadhyay: To what extent is AI being used for cancer diagnosis?

In cancer, take mammography. If you want to reach remote places, you will not always have a radiologist available. AI can help make the initial diagnosis, after which confirmation can be done by a specialist. The same applies in tuberculosis screening, where large community-level screening, in the periphery and community settings, can be done using AI-driven tools.

We are also looking at how AI can improve lower-end technologies. For instance, AIIMS is going to have India’s first designed MRI in collaboration with MeitY, IIT Bombay. If you have a lower-end MRI machine, AI can enhance diagnostic accuracy of the software. Cheaper equipment can produce standards closer to the best systems. That is where frugal innovation comes in.

Most departments are working on AI projects; many are still in research mode. We are the clinical partners for IISc and IIT Delhi.

Ankita Upadhyay: Diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS have dedicated national programmes. Do we need similarly structured programmes for obesity, diabetes, hypertension and preventive health in general?

The government is already working on this, addressing non-communicable diseases through the 160-plus Ayushman Arogya Kendras. Screening for oral, breast and cervical cancer is happening. Diabetes and hypertension are also being taken up. So, lifestyle diseases are very much on the agenda.

Kaunain Sheriff M: AI in healthcare is being used very loosely as a term, especially in the private sector. Do we need regulation for AI in healthcare like we have in drug regulation?

AIIMS has always taken the lead in regulations, policies and technology assessment. But we are allowing people to do what they want with the intention that they will increase their diagnostic accuracy, treatment protocols and make the patient’s experience safer. If we do a lot of regulation, people will not have the freedom to innovate. Doctors are not handing over final decisions to machines. AI is functioning as a filter, a triage tool, an initial or provisional diagnostic aid.

Anonna Dutt: Is AIIMS looking at any incentives to retain its doctors? In recent years several of them have moved to private hospitals.

Why do people join AIIMS in the first place? Because of the pleasure of working here. It is the ecosystem. You get complex cases, difficult surgeries, challenging patients and you have the pleasure of saying that you are the best in the country and the world. It is not only money that gives professional fulfilment. There is freedom in the institution to focus on a particular area if one wants.

Kaunain Sheriff M: One of the solutions discussed is to have an all-India cadre. The top talent from AIIMS goes out for a few years, trains doctors at local centres, comes back and a legacy is created. Is the government thinking about that?

That’s a policy question that the government will answer. But it’s happening at a low level, it is happening as a deputation. Second, we are helping institutions, like we went as a team to some of them to start renal transplants and other complex procedures. Also, we have MoUs with other institutions, including the Institute of Medical Sciences, BHU, Varanasi. We are establishing those departments and facilities there. The government has also given an opportunity. We retire at 65. Up to 70, I can be a consultant and a specialist teacher at the new AIIMS.

SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH THE VIDEO

Anonna Dutt: Public hospitals are always overcrowded. What is the solution to that? Previously, there was a discussion on introducing a referral system in Delhi.

A referral system would definitely make our job easier. Unscheduled appointments do put pressure on the institution. There is always a mismatch between the load, expectations and availability of beds. Our job is to ensure patient experience, safety and standards. We were the first AIIMS to start NABH (National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers) quality accreditation systems.

Rinku Ghosh: What has been done on Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) at AIIMS as antibiotic development takes time? Second, the HPV vaccination drive is on, but what is being done to dispel myths and fears around it?

On AMR, AIIMS Delhi has taken a leadership role. We are networking with institutions. We are bringing a lot of institutions here, telling them the SOPs, guidelines, what kind of culture sensitivity we undertake, how the department is generating data on antimicrobial requirements, resistance, and sharing it with them. A lot of funding is also coming from the Department of Health Research, Indian Council of Medical Research. We have formed a consortium and data is being shared for policy and advocacy.

As for HPV, scientifically we know it is safe and effective. The country is moving in mission mode on this. It is part of immunisation efforts now.

Ankita Upadhyay: Out of about 1,306 sanctioned faculty positions at AIIMS, around 446 are currently vacant. What is being done to fill them?

We have introduced a recruitment system using blockchain technology and the process is ongoing. Almost two-thirds of the interviews are over, and in the next one or two months, we should be able to finalise results for many of the existing vacancies.

Gayathri Mani: The previous Delhi government planned to construct around 15 hospitals in Delhi but they could not be completed due to cost escalation. The current government is now planning to complete these hospitals through PPP (Public-Private Partnership) mode. Is it a good idea to privatise government hospitals?

I can’t answer on policy matters. If the Delhi High Court or the Delhi government asks us to handle something like this, we can definitely do a training and teaching programme. In fact, when the former L-G asked us to lend a helping hand, we did a gap analysis for all Delhi hospitals. Some of the recruitment has happened because of our push. What we did, intelligently, is to ask the doctors and nurses getting inducted into the system to get that experience of AIIMS. Connecting doctors is the most important thing.

We are also looking at how we can have a two-way referral system. The secondary hospitals in Delhi are not fully occupied and there is a huge load on tertiary care and quaternary care. We have to see if the patient who is stable in a tertiary hospital can be referred back to the secondary hospital. So, we will make optimal utilisation of resources. There is going to be a lot of hand-holding, inter-two-way referral between the hospitals.

Deepto Banerjee: Every year there is some concern around NEET-PG. This year, there were minus 40 cutoffs. Do you think this could lead to talent dilution 10-15 years from now?

We have almost one lakh-plus MBBS doctors coming out. And we hardly have up to 80,000 PG seats. Clinical seats are definitely less. Just MBBS is as good as not having anything. One needs to have post-graduation and the seats are limited. Then look at the other side. Hospitals are there but they are not being run 24x7 because there is a lack of doctors and only resident doctors can be working in the middle of the night. That means for the hospitals to have patient care, you also need resident doctors. So, there is a need for post-graduate seats on one side and patient care on the other. If we match them together, there is definitely nothing wrong in pushing more people into post-graduate courses.

Uma Vishnu: Should there be a NEET exam at all? Should the entry barrier be lowered?

These are all policy decisions. The National Medical Commission (NMC) will decide at an appropriate time whether to do it or not. If it is to be done and we come into the picture for how to do it, then definitely we will help. AIIMS will take the leadership role and then we will conduct the examination. If the government or NMC asks us to give modules for competency or give AI-driven teaching learning processes, we are there. If they ask us to create an infrastructure or ecosystem or material for teaching and learning for undergraduates or postgraduates, we are there. We are enablers, we are supporting the government.

Devansh Mittal: What role do you see for the Ministry of Ayush, given the proliferation of untested drugs and treatments in the country?

Many of our departments are doing work on yoga, meditation and are supplementing and complementing therapies with holistic therapies. But evidence is important. If research happens in AIIMS and if it is tested, validated, stamped and published from the institution, the trust of the people will increase. Of course, Ayush also has its own research institutions. We are trying to break silos. There has been an MoU between AIIMS and the All India Institute of Ayurveda. Then we are also working on research at the molecular level.

Anuradha Mascarenhas: Data exists in silos across private hospitals, diagnostic labs and government portals, making it difficult to create a unified health record. Any observation on this?

This is being addressed. If you look into the National Health Authority today with PMJAY (Pradhan Mantri Jana Arogya Yojana) and other things, there is a good amount of data with them. We are going to have a robust system of not only cyber security hosting and network but also hospital information systems. Once we have that, we will be helping other institutions. We will have a data sharing system. The DPDP (Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023) Act gives provisions for that. If we have structured data, we will be in a position to analyse that and help the nation make not only protocols, but also look into the demography and anthropometric measures.

Kaunain Sheriff M: Will AIIMS recruit engineers and data scientists in-house, the way Mayo Clinic has worked with DeepMind and in-house data scientists?

That work has already begun. Some of our doctors are doing PhDs in AI at IITs. We are also recruiting data scientists and have MoUs with IIT Delhi, IISc Bengaluru and other technology partners. Collaboration is the best way. What prevents progress is silos. If doctors, scientists and technologists sit together, understand national needs and develop solutions jointly, that is the best model. For some areas like rare genetic disorders, molecular biology and bioinformatics, we will also build more in-house support.

Sohini Ghosh: What is being done to ensure better supply of medicines for patients of rare diseases?

Rare disease may be rare as a disease per se but when you look into our 1.4 billion population, numbers are so big, it doesn’t appear to be rare. Our job is to ensure early diagnosis. Our job is to create the right ecosystem for teaching, learning, research and training doctors on the kind of regimen, protocol, drugs and guidelines to follow. We are doing that.

ON JOINING AIIMS

‘Why do people join AIIMS? It is the ecosystem. You get complex cases, difficult surgeries, challenging patients and you have the pleasure of saying that you are the best in the country and the world’

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• POLICY

Behind Karnataka liquor tax tweak from price to alcohol content

Akram M
Bengaluru, March 15

COME APRIL, Karnataka will be the first state in the country to transition to an Alcohol-in-Beverage (AIB) based excise duty.

In the Budget presented on March 6, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said that "the government administered price fixation will be completely deregulated" under the new policy. Distillers will decide the slabs under which their products will fall, with the government hoping that the change will help shore up more revenue.

The government describes AIB as "globally recognised as the gold standard for alcohol taxation, as it directly targets the alcohol content which is the primary source of negative externalities." This means that the percentage of alcohol in a liquor brand will determine the duty levied on it, effectively ending the existing taxation system.

Revamping excise duty policy

• NUMBER OF SLABS TO CHANGE

• Currently, a product gets slotted under one of 16 tax slabs based on the selling price determined by the distiller.

• These slabs will be gradually phased out, with alcohol percentage determining the duty levied.

In Karnataka, alcoholic products currently fall under 16 slabs. A product gets slotted under a particular slab based on the Declared Price, which is the selling price determined by the distiller. The Additional Excise Duty levied by the government was dependent on the per-litre price of the product, which resulted in products in the premium liquor segment being priced on the higher side.

Over the next four years, the government plans to abolish the slab system of excise duty collection completely. For FY 2026-27, the government will merge multiple slabs and reduce their number from 16 to eight, officials said. A notification regarding the same is likely to be published over the coming week.

Gradually, the government wants to do away with these slabs altogether. "We cannot do it in a go because it will have an adverse effect. We will do it in phases," Excise Minister RB Thimmapur told *The Indian Express*.

"Currently, the duty levied for a bulk litre of say, McDowell's (which is at the lower end) and Blue Label (which is at the higher end) is different and is based on the Declared Price. Both have 42% alcohol. Under the new system, both drinks will attract the same percentage of additional excise duty irrespective of the declared price," he added.

Impact on excise revenue

Karnataka draws considerable income from the state excise duty levied on alcohol. For FY 2026-27, the Budget targets Rs 45,000 crore in revenue collection. While it is unclear yet how the transition will impact revenue, officials predict that the transition will affect the revenue structure once the AIB-based excise duty is fully implemented.

"Around 60% of the excise revenue is from the first few slabs in the existing system," an official noted, highlighting that duty from cheaper liquor contributed to the lion's share of the income generated. On the other hand, the premium liquor segment did not generate higher revenue and saw its sales affected by the high prices.

"With the AIB duty structure, we are anticipating the premium sector to add more to the revenue by virtue of increased sales," he said, indicating that premium liquor prices could see a downward revision.

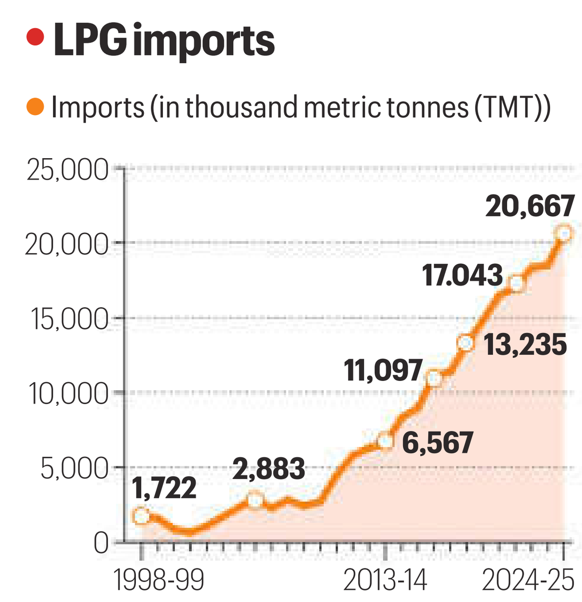
How merging different price slabs will affect liquor prices will be clear once the new slab structure is notified, the official added.

• ECONOMY

Why LPG sector is the worst hit by Iran war

India's import dependency for LPG supplies is around 60 per cent. The now-choked Strait of Hormuz is a major passageway for the imports

SUKALP SHARMA



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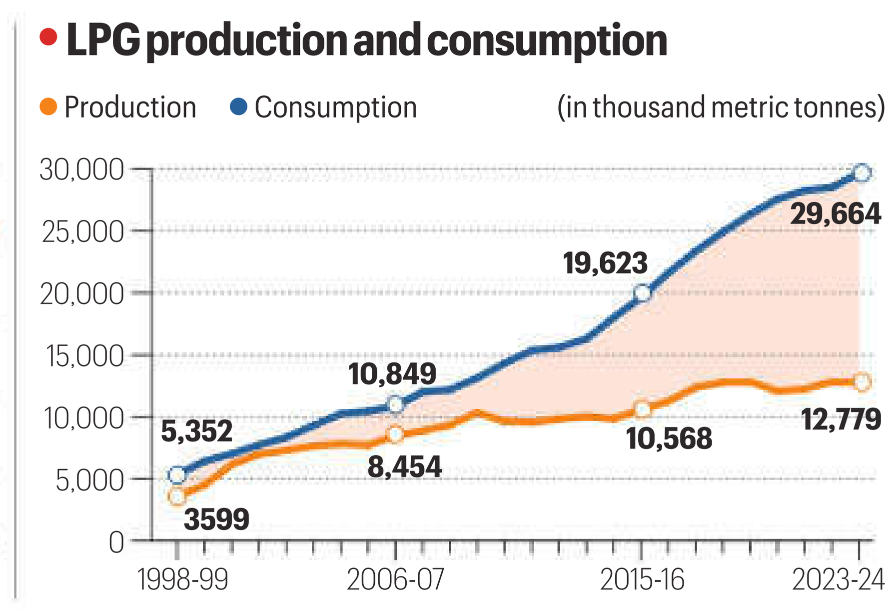

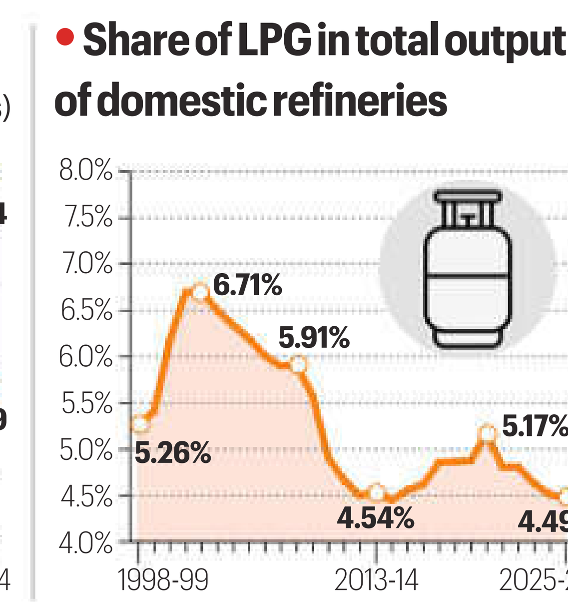

* DATA AS ON JANUARY 31, 2026; COMPILED BY ANJISHNU DAS

THE WAR in West Asia has affected India's overall energy imports, be it crude oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG), or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). But the country's overall supply challenge in the case of LPG — used as kitchen fuel by crores of Indian households — is far more acute than oil and LNG.

While India so far appears comfortable on crude oil, petrol, and diesel stocks, the government has prioritised LPG supplies so that sectors that need the fuel the most get it, while others receive curtailed volumes. But in the case of LPG, relatively drastic steps have been undertaken.

Given the scale of LPG use in homes, the government has prioritised LPG supplies to households over commercial and industrial consumers, which has led to massive shortage of the fuel for these segments across India. It has also ordered refiners to maximise LPG production, and directed them to divert propane, butane, and other streams from petrochemical manufacturing to LPG production.

The government has also increased waiting times between cylinder bookings by households from 21 days to 25 days in urban areas and 45 days in rural areas. Such is the supply crunch, particularly for commercial consumers, that the government has activated alternative fuel streams like kerosene, fuel oil, biomass, and even coal for them.

Why is LPG the hardest-hit?

India's annual LPG consumption is currently estimated at around 33 million tonnes, of which domestic production is around 13 million tonnes, or around 40%. This means that India's import dependency for LPG supplies is around 60%. Now, in the case of crude oil, the reliance on imports is much higher at over 88%. So why is it that so far India appears to be doing fine on crude oil and major fuels like petrol and diesel, while LPG supplies have been affected?

At the heart of the problem is the Strait of Hormuz — the narrow waterway between Iran and Oman that connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea — where maritime traffic has effectively come to a halt since the conflict began.

India's reliance on the Strait of Hormuz for crude is around 40%, while in the case of LPG, it is a whopping 90%. This effectively means that with the chokepoint all but closed, over 50% of India's LPG supply has disappeared.

Although the government's emergency measures have led to about 30% increase in domestic production of LPG vis-à-vis the pre-conflict levels, it essentially translates to just 10-12% of additional production when total consumption is considered. So even with higher LPG output from domestic refineries, 42-44% of the country's LPG supply is still offline for all intended purposes.

The government and oil companies are getting some LPG cargoes from non-Hormuz regions, particularly North America, but these will take weeks to reach India, as compared with West Asian cargoes, which usually take a few days.

Why is there no panic on crude oil, petrol, diesel supplies?

As for crude, getting extra cargoes from regions other than West Asia has been relatively easier so far. For instance, millions of barrels of Russian crude that were idling in tankers in international waters around India before the conflict are taking just a few days to arrive at Indian ports. India also has relatively higher levels of stockpiles of oil, petrol, and diesel than LPG and LNG, which hardly have additional stocks beyond what is there in the supply chain.

Russian oil factor

With the US no longer objecting to India buying Russian oil, New Delhi's daily average oil imports from Moscow have shot up by over 50% from February levels.

"Crude supply risk can be partially mitigated through diversification and Russia flows. LPG availability is the variable to monitor in the coming weeks," said Sumit Ritolia of Kpler

Last week, a top government official said that India had six-eight weeks of crude and petrol and diesel stocks put together—including commercial stocks as well as strategic reserves—and expected the position to remain "comfortable" going forward, considering additional volumes of oil from non-Hormuz-dependent regions was being bought. The regular oil supply from outside West Asia is continuing unabated.

What about natural gas supplies?

There is some stress in natural gas supplies as well, though not as much as LPG. India depends on imports to meet around half of its natural gas needs, and roughly 60% of those imports came through the Strait of Hormuz, mainly from Qatar and the UAE. This means that the Strait's effective closure has cut off roughly 30% of India's natural gas supplies.

The government has decided to divert natural gas to the critical "priority sectors" that are dependent on the fuel. Segments that directly impact millions of common consumers—PNG for households, compressed natural gas (CNG) for vehicles, and LPG production—will have precedence. Also, as is the case with crude oil and LPG, Indian companies are actively scouting for spot LNG cargoes from regions other than West Asia.

The government order on natural gas supplies lists four priority categories that shall receive, subject to availability, natural gas in varying quantities based on their average gas consumption levels of the past six months. The top priority category, which will receive 100% of the average gas consumption of the last six months, includes PNG for households, CNG for transportation, natural gas used for LPG production, and gas consumed for essential pipeline operations.

The second priority category, according to the order, is fertiliser units, which will receive 70% of their average gas consumption of the past six months.

The third category includes "tea industries, manufacturing and other industrial consumers supplied through the national gas grid", for which supply will be maintained at 80% of their six-month average consumption.

In the fourth category are commercial and industrial consumers of city gas distribution companies; they will get 80% of their past six-months average gas use.

LONGER VERSION
INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED

LPG imports rose with urbanisation, schemes, growing middle class

Anjishnu Das
New Delhi, March 15

INDIA'S RELIANCE on imports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), used in crores of domestic and commercial kitchens, has grown consistently in recent decades. Now, as much as 60% of India's LPG supply comes from outside the country.

According to data published by the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), which falls under the Union Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, India has been a net importer of crude oil and LPG since 1999, the earliest year for which data is available.

While the country has gradually been able to produce and export its own petroleum products, LPG in particular has remained a laggard and is now the country's most imported petroleum product.

Imports have skyrocketed

LPG is produced as a byproduct of refining crude oil or processing liquified natural gas (LNG). Between 2011-12 and 2024-25, crude oil imports have grown by 40% in volume and LNG imports have doubled.

Direct imports of LPG itself have grown from 1,722 TMT (or thousand metric tonnes) in 1998-99 to 20,667 TMT in 2024-25 — a 12-fold increase over 27 years. Given the significant domestic demand for LPG, Indian exports of cooking gas have been minimal, peaking at 551 TMT in 2024-25.

Though India has managed to reduce its import dependence for other fuel products, the growing demand for cooking gas has largely been met with increasing LPG imports.

In terms of expenditure, the government went from importing Rs 1,274 crore worth of LPG in 1998-99 to Rs 1.06 lakh crore in 2024-25 — an 83-fold growth. In 1999, LPG accounted for 10% of all petroleum product imports in monetary terms. Now, nearly 53% of import expenditure on petroleum products is on LPG alone.

LPG demand is growing

Behind the growing imports is the rising demand for LPG — on the back of accelerated urbanisation, growth of middle-class households, and Central and state governments' schemes for free or subsidised LPG cylinders, especially for rural households.

In 1998-99, India produced 3,599 TMT of LPG and consumed 5,352 TMT. The supply deficit (or the gap between production and consumption), therefore, was 1,753 MT.

But in 2023-24, the latest year for which this comparable data is available, India produced 12,779 TMT of LPG and consumed more than twice that quantity or 29,664 TMT. This amounts to a deficit of 16,885 TMT.

This means that India has been reliant on imports to meet as much as 60% of its demand — almost 90% of which is sourced through the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial chokepoint for global energy flows.

Other fuel products

• Though India has managed to reduce its import dependence for other fuel products, the growing demand for cooking gas has largely been met with increasing LPG imports.

• Imports of diesel, kerosene and petrol, for instance, have now shrunk to their lowest levels since 1999, and India has in fact been a net exporter of these products since the early 2000s amid expansion of its refining capacity.

While LPG consumption between 1998-99 and 2023-24 has grown more than five-fold, production grew by just over three-fold in the same period.

While India sees seasonal spikes in LPG consumption every year, particularly during festive periods and in the winter, consumption has seen a consistent year-on-year growth over the past two-and-a-half decades as more and more households turned to LPG as a clean fuel source for cooking.

LPG consumption saw the highest growth rates in the 2000s and 2010s, between 8% and 11% each year.

In 2016-17, after the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), which provides free LPG connections and heavily subsidised cylinders to poor and rural households, LPG consumption recorded a growth spike of 10.1% over the previous year. That year also saw a sharp rise in LPG imports, to 11,097 TMT from the 8,959 in the previous year.

Earlier, rural households traditionally relied on fuel sources like firewood and animal dung for cooking. But the introduction of the PMUY resulted in an increasing acceptance of LPG as a cooking fuel. According to a Lok Sabha answer, 80% of PMUY beneficiaries were rural households as of end-2024.

Since 2020, growth in consumption has slowed as LPG connections reached a saturation level. In 2021-22, LPG consumption grew by 2.5% over the previous year, by just 0.9% in 2022-23 and by 4.1% in 2023-24. As of today, there are 33.37 LPG customers across India, and 10.56 crore PMUY connections.

LPG production has hit a ceiling

But even though LPG consumption growth has slowed, India has struggled to expand its production capacity to meet the demand. After seeing fairly rapid production growth through the 2000s and parts of the 2010s, domestic LPG production has largely flatlined since 2017-18, hovering at just under 13,000 TMT per year.

Despite expanding the capacity of its crude oil refining, a process of which LPG is a byproduct, India appears to have hit a ceiling in domestic LPG production.

This is exemplified by the share of LPG in the total production of petroleum products from domestic refineries — in 1998-99, LPG accounted for 5.2% of total refinery output by quantity, but by 2024-25, despite growing production capacity, LPG accounted for just 4.2% of refinery output.

In contrast, the share of petrol production in domestic refineries' output grew from 8% to 17% in the same period.

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• SCIENCE

SHANTI Act: How thorium can power India's path to energy independence

EXPERT EXPLAINS

ANIL KAKODKAR

FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION

THE SHANTI Act 2025 represents a watershed moment for India's atomic energy programme. It opens the doors of nuclear energy to the public and private sectors, academia and industry alike, fostering an ecosystem that responds to India's needs and opportunities in this field. There is visible enthusiasm among stakeholders.

While legislation is an enabler, a conducive regulatory framework, free from monopolistic tendencies, is equally essential to realise our development goals.

The growth of our nuclear generation capacity currently depends heavily on imported uranium. Domestic uranium ores are lean and costly to extract, though this does provide some insulation against supply disruptions. The "100 GWe by the year 2047" nuclear energy mission announced by the government consists largely of thermal reactors, which would require around 18,000–20,000 tonnes of mined uranium annually — roughly a third of current global production.

By the time India reaches 100 GWe (GWe stands for Gigawatt electrical, a unit of electric power capacity equal to one billion watts), global nuclear generation capacity is expected to grow from around 380 GWe today to around 1,400 GWe. At that scale, known global uranium resources of around 8 million tonnes could sustain the reactor fleet in once-through mode for only about three decades.

Two conclusions follow: uranium use in once-through mode is not sustainable, and securing our share of global uranium supply will become progressively more difficult.

Recycling as an alternative

Nuclear capacity will need to grow well beyond 2047. Energy demand is perpetual, and fission must play its role, at least until fusion energy arrives at the requisite scale. The solution to uranium supply constraints in once-through mode is nuclear recycling, which increases the energy potential of nuclear fuel 50- to 100-fold. Yet, with a few notable exceptions — France, India, and Russia — most countries have not adopted recycling, citing fears of fissile material diversion for weapons proliferation.

Shifting to thorium recycling changes this situation: India holds the world's largest thorium reserves, and thorium use not only offers energy independence but also virtually eliminates proliferation risk. Resolving the remaining challenges of thorium utilisation is therefore urgent and demands a large, multidisciplinary effort with significant scope for innovation.

FBRs and HALEUs as pathways

India's three-stage nuclear power programme, designed to leverage thorium resources, envisages fast breeder reactors (FBRs) as the stage beyond thermal reactors. The first 500 MWe Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor is almost ready. Beyond this, metal-fuelled FBRs with associated fuel recycling technology must also be developed to achieve the short doubling times needed to support rapid capacity growth. The phase in which fast reactor capacity grows in step with economic demand is, realistically, still about three decades away.

The principal purpose of FBRs is to irradiate thorium at scale and produce the uranium-233 needed for the third stage. While that is delayed, the 100 GWe mission — fuelled largely by imported uranium — is driving pressurised heavy water reactor (PHWR) capacity well beyond the 10 GWe previously envisaged. This creates a valuable opportunity: irradiating thorium in PHWRs can advance uranium-233 production and accelerate deployment of third-stage thorium molten salt reactor (TMSR)-based small modular reactors (SMRs). Doing so would recover some lost time and ease the inevitable slowdown in nuclear power growth between the first and second stages.

Large-scale thorium irradiation can, in fact, be carried out in PHWRs with no significant design changes by using thorium in combination with HALEU (high-assay low-enriched uranium) as fuel. This approach offers additional benefits in economics, safety, and, as noted above, proliferation resistance. Burnup levels comparable to light water reactors become achievable, leading to considerably less spent fuel and lower back-end costs.

Qualifying such HALEU–thorium fuel requires accelerated irradiation testing and demonstration in actual PHWRs. India currently lacks facilities for accelerated irradiation testing, but existing international cooperation agreements can be leveraged — preferably as genuine partnerships rather than simple vendor-buyer arrangements. On fuel supply, India already imports both natural and enriched uranium; the HALEU supply chain is evolving rapidly, driven by demand from numerous next-generation reactor programmes worldwide.

Alongside the TMSR, SMRs capable of producing low-cost green hydrogen via direct thermochemical routes must also be developed. Both these systems, together with metal-fuelled fast reactors, could share a common back-end technology: the pyrochemical nuclear recycling process. Irradiated HALEU–thorium fuel could likewise be recycled using this approach. These are challenging developments, but achievable with concerted effort. China has already taken the lead. This should be India's priority focus for SMR development as highlighted in the 2025-26 Budget.

One hopes that the broader ecosystem envisaged in the SHANTI Act will soon take shape, and that efforts towards India's energy independence will gain the momentum they deserve.

{ WEEKLY CAPSULE }

Super antibiotic spares the good bug

A newly-developed antibiotic called EVG7 could offer a powerful new way to stop *Clostridioides difficile,* a dangerous gut bacterium that often returns after treatment. In mice studies, researchers of Leiden University, Netherlands, found that even a very small dose of EVG7 was highly effective at clearing the infection and preventing it from coming back. Unlike many current antibiotics, which wipe out large portions of the gut microbiome, EVG7 appears to spare beneficial bacteria that naturally keep *C. difficile* in check. The intestinal bacterium can cause serious illness, especially in older adults and the immuno-compromised.

Colour blindness hides cancer

Colour blindness may be doing more than making traffic lights confusing — it could also be hiding a life-threatening warning sign. Researchers from Stanford Medicine analysed millions of medical records and found that people with bladder cancer who are also colour blind have a 52 per cent higher mortality rate over 20 years compared to those with normal vision. The reason: Many people with colour vision deficiency struggle to see red, making it harder to notice blood in urine, the most common early sign of bladder cancer. About one in 12 men and one in 200 women are affected by colour blindness.

Another magic mushroom drug

Scientists are exploring a new way to harness the medical promise of psychedelic compounds without their mind-bending side effects. Researchers created modified versions of psilocin — the active form of psilocybin from "magic mushrooms" — that still target key serotonin pathways linked to depression and other brain disorders but appear to cause fewer psychedelic-like effects. The findings show that it may be possible to design stable psilocin-based compounds that reach the brain and activate serotonin receptors while reducing the intense mind altering effects commonly linked to psychedelics.

A pill for sleep apnea

A European clinical trial found that the drug sulthiame significantly reduced breathing interruptions in people with moderate to severe sleep apnea. Patients taking higher doses experienced up to 47 per cent fewer pauses in breathing and improved oxygen levels during sleep. The drug helps stabilise breathing signals in the brain, reducing airway collapse. Scientists say the findings could pave the way for a pill-based alternative to CPAP machines. Researchers at the University of Gothenburg say the results raise the possibility of a drug treatment for patients who struggle to tolerate breathing masks.

Parents' stress vs childhood obesity

A Yale University study found that lowering parent stress can help protect young children from obesity. When parents practised mindfulness and stress-management skills, their kids showed healthier eating patterns and avoided the weight gain seen in families that only focussed on diet and exercise. Previous work has shown that stressed parents are more likely to depend on fast food and less on healthy eating habits. These choices can influence children's behaviour and food preferences. When parents feel overwhelmed, family routines can break down and positive parenting behaviours can decline.

WHAT'S IN THE RESEARCH PIPELINE

Gamechangers in reversing obesity

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The focus of 2026 is moving towards increased accessibility

DRUGS LIKE Mounjaro and Wegovy belong to a class of medicines called incretin mimetics — they mimic the action of the gut hormones called incretins to improve secretion of insulin, inhibit secretion of glucagon that stimulates glucose production in the liver and reduce appetite by slowing down digestion.

Bolstered by the success of semaglutide and tirzepatide, several other drugs are now in the pipeline. The initial versions of the semaglutide drugs targeted one gut hormone called GLP-1. Naturally released from the gut in response to food, it lends satiety after a meal and also promotes insulin secretion to keep blood sugar in check. GLP-1 receptors are distributed across the body, particularly in the brain. Injected semaglutide binds to these GLP-1 receptors and reduces appetite for nearly a week, ultimately causing people to eat less and lose weight. For extra punch, the US pharma major Eli Lilly developed a "dual agonist" called tirzepatide (sold as Mounjaro), which hits the GLP-1 receptor and a second receptor — gastric inhibitory polypeptide (GIP). The double whammy increased body weight loss by about six percentage points compared with semaglutide in a clinical trial. Now trials are ongoing for drugs such as retatrutide that uses three targets — GLP-1 and GIP used by its predecessor tirzepatide along with glucagon. Two other drugs that use two targets, GLP-1 and glucagon, Survodutide and Mazdutide, are also under trials. Drugs that mimic the hormone amylin such as Cagrilintide are under development, which is likely to be combined with semaglutide for the drug CagriSema. Oral GLP-1 drugs such as orforglipron and danuliprон are being trialled.

In clinical trials, people on the highest dose of retatrutide lost nearly 30 per cent of their body weight in 68 weeks

In clinical trial results released in December 2025, people on the highest dose of retatrutide lost nearly 30 per cent of their body weight in 68 weeks. In a clinical trial comparing tirzepatide and semaglutide, people taking tirzepatide showed roughly 20 percent drops in weight in a similar amount of time, while people on semaglutide lost around 14 percent. Eli Lilly is expecting results from several more phase 3 trials of retatrutide for obesity and Type 2 diabetes this year. Depending on those results, the company will seek US FDA approval. Advancing into Phase II trials, AT-7687 is showing potential for improving body composition and insulin sensitivity without the typical gastrointestinal side effects. The focus in 2026 is moving toward increased accessibility with daily oral pills aimed at making treatment more convenient.

ANONNA DUTT

As patent lapses, generic weight loss shots may cost 60% less

Innovator brands may hold on to loyalists but market boom expected with affordability

Anonna Dutt

SURAJIT PATRO

WITH THE patent of the blockbuster diabetes and weight loss drug semaglutide set to expire on March 20, nearly 50 generic brands are expected to enter the market later this month. Not only will this expand access to the new class of medicines, the prices are also likely to drop by at least a third, according to market experts.

The new products will be launched at a third to a fifth of the cost of the innovator drug and are already being called 'generic Ozempic' and 'generic Wegovy.' With pharma majors such as Dr Reddy's, Zydus, Sun Pharmaceuticals, Cipla and Lupin in the fray, the monthly cost of the once-a-week semaglutide injectable is likely to come down to anything between Rs 3,000 and Rs 4,000. The current price of Ozempic ranges between Rs 8,800 and Rs 11,175 per month, depending on the dosage (0.25 mg, 0.5 mg and 1 mg) while Wegovy costs between Rs 10,850 to Rs 16,400.

With the semaglutide patent expiring, the weight loss drug boom in the West is now expected to hit India more strongly with generics, which will be the same as brand-name drugs in dosage, safety, strength, quality and performance, but usually cost significantly less as they do not have to repeat costly clinical trials.

Semaglutide: The most wanted

Semaglutide has been a hot-seller because it mimics the GLP-1 hormone, which is released in the gut after eating, to stimulate insulin production, lower blood sugar, slow digestion and reduce appetite. It was first approved for the treatment of Type-2 diabetes by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2017. However, it soon gained popularity for its off-label use as a weight loss agent. A higher dose version of the medicine was finally approved for weight loss by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2021.

Danish pharma major Novo Nordisk, the primary patent holders of semaglutide, sold Ozempic primarily for Type 2 diabetes but its appetite-suppressing ability made it highly effective for weight management. Its Wegovy is specifically tailored to control chronic obesity. Both were launched in India last year before the patent expired.

However, US pharma giant Eli Lilly's tirzepatide drug Mounjaro, that mimics an additional hormone, GIP, alongside GLP-1, will not have generics soon. Its patent lasts till 2035 and it commands 61 per cent of the Indian weight loss market. Eli Lilly has, however, partnered with Cipla to sell branded tirzepatide while Biocon is preparing semaglutide injectables for launch in 2027.

What will the market look like

While nearly 50 brands will be launched, only three or four of the bigger brands are likely to grab a share in the pie. "Other brands from smaller companies, which only a few doctors prescribe, are likely to fade away. This is what we have seen with other diabetes drugs that have gone off patent," said Sheetal Sapale, vice president (commercial), Pharmarack.

Despite the competition, the two market leaders — Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly — are unlikely to change their current price point. "We are driven by patients, not patents. Patent expiry is a natural part of the pharmaceutical product life cycle and we are well-positioned to navigate this evolving landscape. Semaglutide carries a strong clinical evidence base of proven safety and efficacy with over 50 robust clinical trials across Type 2 diabetes, obesity, heart, liver and kidney disease. This is complemented by 49 million patient years of exposure, extensive real-world evidence, world-class r-DNA manufacturing process, state-of-the-art device and delivery system and high safety standards," said Vikrant Shrotriya, managing director of Novo Nordisk, India.

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DRUG MARKET

While the newer drugs are likely to eat into some of Mounjaro's market share, the change is not likely to happen immediately. "The people who are already on Mounjaro or Wegovy can afford these drugs. They are unlikely to shift to the generic versions immediately despite the lower costs. This is because they value the premium quality of the innovator products and a shift to a new product may lead to the initial side effects again," explained Sapale. The lower-cost generic versions are likely to lead to a two-to-three fold surge in the number of people using it, including those who kept away from the drug because of its prices.

"Generics are likely to capture a bigger volume share as GLP-1 therapy becomes more affordable, accessible and awareness about management of diabetes and obesity goes up... This is expected to enable more patients to initiate therapy while also supporting continuity of treatment," said Dr Vikas Gupta, Chief Executive Officer, Alkem Laboratories. The company is set to launch its generic version of semaglutide on the first day of patent expiry.

The sales pitch

Several drug manufacturers will be launching multiple brands. For instance, Zydus Lifesciences plans to launch Semaglyn, Mashema and Alterme. Companies are also looking at innovations to capture the market. Again, Zydus will launch semaglutide pens, which can be used multiple times, allowing patients to select and administer varying dose strengths from a single unit, which is particularly useful during the titration phase (gradually increasing the dose). The pens available so far could dispense the drug only in a single dosage, meaning patients had to buy different pens for different doses. Dr Sharvil Patel, managing director of Zydus, said, "We are not just planning to bring a critical therapy to market, we are aiming to elevate the standard of care. By introducing the new drug delivery mechanism in India, we plan to simplify the treatment. This leap in convenience will drive better long-term adherence." And push down costs too.

Misuse, marketing push

With the popularity of GLP-1 drugs — driven by celebrity endorsements when the first products were launched globally — there is a risk of misuse. A strong marketing push is already palpable, with companies reaching out to doctors and driving "awareness campaigns", according to an industry expert. That's why the apex drug regulator, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) has issued an advisory warning manufacturers against advertising. "Any promotional activity carried out under the pretext of disease awareness, influencer engagement, corporate campaigns or similar activities that create brand recall or product visibility of the prescription product, shall also be treated as violations," it said.

Local chemist stores are also internalising discipline. "We have written to all our members to ensure that they dispense the products only as per doctors' prescription. We received complaints that in a few cases, Mounjaro was sold without one. That problem is likely to increase with many more drugs becoming available," said Rajiv Singhal, general secretary of the All-India Chemists and Druggists Association.

Shrotriya, too, emphasised vigil, saying, "We strongly discourage self-medication or any form of misuse of these medicines."

While semaglutide has been there in the market for years without such serious concerns in most, it does lead to adverse effects such as nausea, vomiting and other gastrointestinal symptoms when people are starting out. It can also lead to serious side-effects such as pancreatitis, thyroid cancer, and stomach paralysis. "Responsible use remains key. It is important to distinguish between medical obesity management and cosmetic weight loss and ensure that the treatment is taken under appropriate medical supervision," said Dr Gupta.

• SOCIAL MEDIA DEBATE

Why the adolescent brain is more vulnerable to online validation, addiction

As governments consider curfews, AIIMS experts urge families to project tech as a tool, not a trap

Ankita Upadhyay

LIKE MANY 12-year-olds, Rishi* first went online for fun. Multiplayer video games let him chat with other players and the conversations soon shifted to social media. Before long, he was spending 10 to 12 hours a day online — posting photos, checking likes, wondering why some posts drew attention while others didn't. Friends pulled him into conversations far beyond his age, where premature adulthood was presented as something cool. Gradually, the digital world began replacing the real one.

Rishi stopped going to school regularly. His grades slipped and he eventually failed his exams. At home he withdrew from his parents and responded angrily whenever they tried to talk to him. Worried, they took him to Dr Yatan Pal Singh Balhara, professor of psychiatry at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi. For him, the case was familiar. "Children and adolescents are increasingly facing harmful consequences from excessive social media use. We can't deny it anymore," he says. The concern has prompted several state governments to explore digital curfews. Karnataka is considering banning social media for those under 16, while Andhra Pradesh has proposed restrictions for children under 13 — debates that mirror policy in countries such as Australia, France and Spain.

But experts warn that the problem runs deeper than screen time alone. Dr Rajesh Sagar, professor of child psychiatry at AIIMS, says excessive screen use is often a symptom rather than the root problem. Children struggling with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression or emotional stress may turn to screens as a coping mechanism. "If the underlying issues are not addressed, simply cutting down screen time won't solve problems," he says.

Adolescence itself is a vulnerable stage. The brain is still developing, so habits formed during these years tend to stick. According to Dr Balhara, repeated behaviours

If one platform is blocked, children may simply migrate to another GETTYIMAGES

during adolescence can become deeply ingrained patterns later in life. "Heavy reliance on online communication can displace experiences that are crucial to social development. Face-to-face interaction teaches children how to read emotions, express themselves and navigate disagreements. Without those experiences, young people may later struggle with interviews, conversations or social confidence," he says.

Social media also shapes how teenagers see themselves. Young users often compare their lives with the polished images they see online. What they fail to recognise is that these images capture only a moment — not the reality of someone's life. To a teenager, however, it can appear that everyone else is happier, more successful or more popular. "Online exclusion can deepen that insecurity. Being removed from a group chat or left out of online interactions can feel like a major social rejection," says Dr Balhara.

Loneliness is often the hidden driver. Children who struggle to form friendships or feel socially isolated may turn to social media to build virtual connections. Family circumstances can also play a role. When parents are busy with work or when homes are marked by frequent conflict, children may retreat into digital spaces where they find temporary comfort. That emotional cushion can make limits difficult to enforce. "When parents try to restrict phone use, some children react with anger or aggression because they feel their only escape is being taken away," says Dr Sagar.

The relationship between screen use and emotional wellbeing is often two-way. Emotional distress can push children toward excessive screen time, while prolonged screen exposure can worsen mental health by disturbing sleep, appetite and mood. Untangling which came first is rarely straightforward. For this reason, Dr Balhara believes a blanket ban on social media may not be a complete solution. "Enforcing such restrictions can be difficult, especially when children can create fake accounts or access platforms through alternative routes. A ban could simply push their activity into spaces that are harder to monitor," says Dr Balhara.

More importantly, digital platforms are not used only for entertainment. Students rely on them to share notes, stay informed and remain connected with peers. "If one platform is blocked, children may simply migrate to another," he warns. Both psychiatrists advocate a balanced approach at home. Dr Balhara suggests parents ask three basic questions about their child's screen use: how much time they spend online, when they are using devices and for what purpose. Monitoring content is equally important. Rather than allowing endless scrolling through mindless "brain rot", parents can guide children toward healthier uses of technology — study groups, hobby communities or collaborative projects that connect online activity with the real world.

Experts also caution against using screens as behavioural tools. Giving a phone to keep a child quiet during meals may work temporarily, but it often creates dependency. Over time, the child may refuse to eat without the distraction of a screen.

Dr Sagar says solutions must focus on the broader environment around the child. Parents need to model responsible digital behaviour themselves, set limits they follow themselves and create screen-free spaces such as bedrooms and dining tables. Encouraging sports, outdoor play and family interaction can help restore balance between the digital and physical worlds. Technology is now woven into everyday life. The real challenge, experts say, is not eliminating it but ensuring it remains a tool — not a trap.

**Name changed to protect privacy*

THE HINDU

House decorum

The ruling party and the Opposition must rise above partisanship

The Lok Sabha rejected by voice vote, on March 11, a resolution under Article 94(C) of the Constitution for the removal of Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla from office, but only after a hostile debate on the functioning of the House deepened the wedge between the government and the Opposition. In principle, Parliament is the foundation of representative democracy, and its routine functions act as an instrument that holds the cabinet accountable. As a forum for government-Opposition interaction, it is meant to operate in a structured, methodical way. Single-party dominance has eroded all these formal and informal functions of legislatures at all levels, and the Lok Sabha, sadly, has become a platform for political partisanship. In recent years, the chairs of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha have been dragged into political conflict. In 2024, there was an Opposition resolution to remove Jagdeep Dhankhar as Rajya Sabha Chairman. Though the resolution did not pass, he resigned as Vice-President for unexplained reasons. The Opposition has raised concerns over the Lok Sabha's functioning, but what precipitated their protest into a formal resolution for Mr. Birla's removal was, possibly, his statement that he had confidential knowledge that Congress women MPs might act against Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the House floor.

Opposition MPs are routinely denied the opportunity to raise substantive issues, though the government cites statistics in its rebuttal. The Speaker had disallowed Leader of the Opposition (Lok Sabha) Rahul Gandhi from quoting former Army Chief M.M. Naravane's unpublished memoir, which discusses Prime Minister Narendra Modi's role in the 2020 military standoff with China. The microphones of Opposition MPs are frequently switched off during debates. The Opposition has pointed out that in February, Mr. Gandhi was interrupted 20 times while speaking during the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address and also blocked from raising the Gautam Adani investigation issue in the U.S. and the EU-U.S. trade deal. The government argued that the Opposition was given 56% of Zero Hour time, and that NDA MPs, despite their majority, received 321 supplementary questions against the Opposition's 364 during his tenure. Home Minister Amit Shah said that the House's productivity during Mr. Birla's tenure had been high and that it had debated in 14 regional languages. Mr. Shah also cornered Mr. Gandhi for being frequently absent from the House. The resolution and the debate manifested a deeply fractured polity in need of urgent corrective measures. The ruling majority and the Opposition must rise above partisanship and restore the majesty of Parliament.

Another barrier

Mandatory period leave sans parity in recruitment will hurt women

When considering a measure to address a work-related need, care must be taken to ensure that it does not inadvertently reduce the employee's opportunity to work. This was again made evident on March 13, when a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, refused to entertain a petition seeking a law providing menstrual leave for women workers and students. The Court cautioned that mandatory menstrual leave could unintentionally hinder women's careers and deny them "big responsibilities". Instead, it encouraged "voluntary" initiatives by States. In Odisha, women government employees up to the age of 55 can take an additional day of leave each month, while Kerala grants menstrual leave to female trainees in ITIs and universities. Karnataka issued an order that entitles women in the public and private sectors up to the age of 52 to a day's menstrual leave a month, raising concerns whether private establishments might be disincentivised from hiring women. This government order has been challenged in the High Court. Such changes must come with safeguards, and the top court rightly suggested that the government come up with a menstrual leave policy in consultation with stakeholders – as it had done in 2024 as well.

Many women face debilitating menstrual pain and conditions such as endometriosis, PCOD and PCOS. But the Court's reasoning rests on another, more universal reality: women are already disadvantaged at work, facing systemic barriers such as unequal pay. In this context, mandatory menstrual leave could become a form of biological determinism, limiting opportunities, pay and promotions for women. In countries where menstrual leave policies exist, they are either poorly enforced or are not opted for by most women. In Spain, legislation enacted in 2023, and hailed as "... historic ... for feminist progress", saw few women exercising the right a year later. In Zambia, some women said it was being misused. In India, the female Labour Force Participation Rate rose from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24, driven largely by rural women entering work due to distress, insecure employment and unpaid household work. In this context, a blanket menstrual leave policy could be counterproductive: many women cannot afford to lose workdays, and in informal jobs, it may also be unenforceable. Providing free sanitary products and medicines at workplaces and allowing time off under existing leave provisions would be a way forward. That would be an acknowledgement of biological realities without turning such well-intentioned but poorly thought-out initiatives into yet another barrier to women's participation.

Oil prices reflect geopolitical risks, not only supply

Pankaj Sharma

is a former Additional Director, Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India, and a former Chief General Manager, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL), India

As tensions rise and oil volatility grows, importing nations will need adaptable energy and trade strategies

In the aftermath of the war in West Asia, crude oil prices surged to as high as $118 a barrel last week. Alongside rising tensions, this situation has been building for over two months. Since mid-December 2025, when Brent crude stood at $57.56, prices have surged by more than 100%. They have, however, come down since then but remain in three digits, with no immediate sign of easing.

Historically, geopolitical shocks follow a predictable pattern. There is an immediate market overreaction that is followed by gradual stabilisation as trade routes adjust. However, the global oil market is once again operating under a profound geopolitical shadow.

What has changed in the development now

The developments in West Asia, intensifying strategic rivalries among major powers, and persistent conflict-driven uncertainty have brought geopolitics back to the centre of the energy discourse. Yet, the nature of this influence has shifted. Unlike previously, where regional conflicts rarely removed Gulf barrels from the global pool, the current disruptions have created tangible barriers to supply, fundamentally altering the costs, confidence, and conditions of the oil trade.

For major importing economies such as India, this shift has significant implications. Oil security is no longer just about physical access. It is also defined by exposure to the financial, logistical, and political uncertainties surrounding every shipment.

The vulnerability of global maritime arteries is stark. Around a fifth of global oil consumption is transported through the Strait of Hormuz, and roughly a tenth of seaborne crude passes through the Bab el-Mandeb and Suez corridor. The ongoing conflict involving Israel and Iran has effectively sidelined 20% of global supplies, even in the absence of planned production cuts. The market has reacted sharply to these signals. Over the past year, Brent crude has frequently fluctuated by 5%-10% within days of military or diplomatic developments, regardless of actual production volumes. Currently, however, the impact on physical supply is so drastic that prices continue to climb without a visible peak.

Tensions do more than just inflate the price of a barrel. They make maritime unsecure. Chokepoints remain vital arteries of trade, but their significance today lies in making global machinery vulnerable. Even limited disruptions or attacks on commercial shipping can alter vessel routing and raise freight costs. These drive up freight rates; the world has seen daily rates for supertankers more than double) , affect shipping insurance premiums, and tighten vessel availability. Major container carriers have implemented emergency conflict surcharges or war risk surcharges. These escalations ripple through the supply chain, directly influencing landed import prices.

It is about politics

Furthermore, oil has been transformed from a mere commodity into a political instrument. The redirection of Russian crude following the Ukraine conflict illustrates this dynamic. Although Russia maintained export volumes by pivoting to Asian markets, the shift introduced longer shipping routes, complex payment arrangements, and evolving compliance frameworks. What appeared stable in volume was highly volatile in operational and financial terms.

For importing countries, this creates a dual exposure. Price volatility is no longer driven solely by the supply-demand balance but by changes in geopolitical sentiment. Markets respond to diplomatic signals, military developments and regulatory announcements with a speed that often exceeds the pace of actual trade flows. This weakens the historical relationship between production levels and consumer prices.

The growing role of financial markets amplifies geopolitical sentiment, as oil is traded not only as a physical commodity but also as a financial asset through futures, options, and derivatives. During periods of stress, investors use oil as both an inflation hedge and a risk-sensitive instrument. This explains why speculative positions often expand even when physical inventories are comfortable – prices reflect expectations and portfolio behaviour rather than immediate scarcity.

Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPRs) have also evolved. Originally intended to address physical supply interruptions, they are now deployed to counter psychological volatility in the market. For instance, G-7 leaders have announced the release of 400 million barrels of oil in response to the war in West Asia (which is said to be about 20 days of the usual oil traffic through the Strait of Hormuz). The goal is to stabilise market sentiment as much as it is to provide physical barrels. The news of these discussions recently prompted a sell-off, easing Brent and West Texas Intermediate gains to some extent.

Major powers shape this environment in different ways. The United States, now one of the world's largest producers of various petroleum products, influences markets through its strategic stock policies and diplomatic engagement with producers.

Meanwhile, Asia has become the primary centre of demand growth, accounting for the majority of incremental oil consumption over the past decade. Producer coordination through organisations such as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries continues to influence supply management, but its impact now interacts with geopolitical risk premia embedded in prices.

The continuing relevance of oil

The energy transition adds another layer of complexity. While renewable energy and electric mobility are expanding, oil remains central to the transport, aviation and petrochemicals sectors/industries. Global oil demand still exceeds 105 million barrels per day, and petrochemicals account for a rising share of incremental consumption. This produces a segmented market: one part linked to declining fuel use, another tied to industrial growth. Thus, geopolitics continues to exert influence over a commodity whose strategic relevance is changing but not disappearing.

For India, where oil demand is not expected to peak soon and is projected to drive much of global growth, this environment highlights the need for adaptability rather than alarm. The ability to process diverse crude grades, source from multiple geographies and maintain strategic reserves provides buffers against instability. Equally crucial is building commercial and financial expertise to navigate complex trading arrangements. Energy policy, in this sense, must integrate diplomacy, maritime awareness and market analytics.

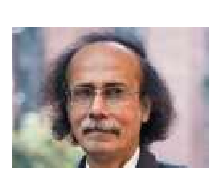
This evolving structure complicates the notion of energy security. It now requires resilience not only against supply disruptions but also against financial and logistical shocks. Payment systems, shipping insurance, and contract enforcement have become integral to the energy security architecture.

The broader lesson is that oil has entered a phase where risk is as significant as the resource itself. Geopolitics will continue to influence oil prices by shaping perceptions of safety, reliability, and continuity, as well as affecting the physical flow of oil. Understanding this transformation is essential for managing a vulnerable world. Stability now depends on preserving predictable trade mechanisms and avoiding diplomatic ruptures that amplify uncertainty. In the years ahead, the resilience of importing nations will depend both on the origin of their crude and on how effectively they manage the political and financial currents surrounding every barrel of oil.

Building India's climate resilience with water at the core

Girija K. Bharat

is Managing Director of Mu Gamma Consultants, Gurgaon



S.K. Sarkar

is Senior Advisor, TERI, New Delhi and a former Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India

Guided by the Belém indicators, India can set an example for the Global South by making water systems resilient

Branded the "COP of Implementation," COP 30, the 30th session of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, held in Belém, Brazil, in November 2025, marked a decisive shift in how adaptation is understood – not as an abstract promise of resilience, but as a measurable, accountable discipline grounded in systems that function under stress. At the centre of this shift is 'water', moving from the margins of infrastructure planning to the core of climate survival. For the first time, global adaptation indicators integrated water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) into climate accountability, reshaping the water-food-climate nexus with implications for all countries, including India.

Climate change felt through water

Climate change is experienced most viscerally through water. Floods submerge cities, droughts hollow out rural economies, glacial melt destabilises Himalayan river systems, saline intrusion contaminates coastal aquifers, and erratic monsoons disrupt food security. Agriculture alone accounts for roughly 40% of anthropogenic methane emissions, with rice cultivation, livestock systems, and organic waste at the centre of the challenge. So, water use efficiency, wastewater reuse, aquifer recharge, and resilient sanitation systems are now climate strategies as much as development priorities.

The 59 Belém Adaptation Indicators, under the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience, signal a new discipline in global governance. Two clusters stand out. The first focuses on climate-resilient water and sanitation systems: reducing climate-induced water scarcity, building resilience to floods and droughts, ensuring universal access to safe drinking water, and upgrading sanitation infrastructure to withstand extreme events. The second emphasises risk governance: universal multi-hazard early warning systems by 2027, strengthened hydrometeorological services, and updated national vulnerability assessments by 2030. Water security is no longer about asset creation; it is about whether systems continue to deliver when climate stress intensifies.

Not starting from scratch

India is building on existing foundations. The consolidation, in 2019, of water governance under the Ministry of Jal Shakti marked a shift toward integrated stewardship, while the Water Vision 2047 aligns with Belém's adaptation framework, emphasising sustainability, equity, and resilience.

Groundwater management illustrates this transition. The evolution of the National Aquifer Mapping and Management (NAQUIM) Programme 2.0 has moved from mapping aquifers to implementing aquifer-level management plans (hydrogeological knowledge to policy action), exemplifying the systems integration that global adaptation indicators now require.

River rejuvenation tells a similar story. The National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) has moved beyond sewage treatment to integrate biodiversity, digital monitoring, and international collaboration, making clean rivers a buffer against climate volatility.

Despite visible progress, three systemic risks threaten to slow momentum. First, water scarcity remains acute and unevenly distributed. Most climate disasters in India are water-related, and WASH systems often serve as the first line of defence. Ensuring rural and urban water supply during floods or prolonged droughts would require climate stress testing of infrastructure, diversification of sources, and redundancy in service delivery – not simply expanding coverage figures.

Second, adaptation finance remains fragile. While global rhetoric speaks of mobilising $1.3 trillion annually by 2035, operational pathways remain uncertain. Without predictable and accessible flows of adaptation finance, post-disaster recovery will crowd out long-term resilience planning. Water projects need explicit classification and funding as climate investments, not mere sectoral costs.

Third, digital fragmentation persists. Despite India's vast hydrological and meteorological data, an Artificial Intelligence-driven real-time integration into planning, budgeting, and local governance systems remains limited.

A closer look at India's institutional landscape reveals that most global adaptation targets already have corresponding domestic missions. Drinking water coverage, sanitation expansion, irrigation efficiency, urban water reforms, and climate action plans exist across Ministries and States. Climate stress indicators must be embedded into mission dashboards.

Belém calls for convergence, not reinvention. India's strength in digital public infrastructure offers an opportunity to integrate hydrological data, crop advisories, insurance and financial flows into interoperable platforms for real-time decision-making.

Belém indicators guide climate survival

The Belém indicators are not a bureaucratic checklist; they are a dashboard for survival. If implemented with seriousness, they can transform adaptation from a peripheral conversation into the organising principle of development strategy. India stands at a pivotal moment. Its domestic water reforms, technological capabilities, and community-led initiatives position it not just as a participant in global climate negotiations but also as a potential leader in operationalising adaptation at scale.

Water must anchor climate action. Implementation must be swift, equitable, and technologically robust. Resilience should be measured not by infrastructure built, but by systems that continue to serve people when the next flood arrives, when the next drought lingers, and when the next climate shock tests the nation's preparedness. India has much of the blueprint in place. India should align its missions, metrics and money quickly enough to convert ambition into measurable resilience – and in doing so, lead the Global South by its exemplary performance.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Poll bugle sounded

The announcement of the election dates for Assembly polls in West Bengal, Kerala/Keralam, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Puducherry, marks a key moment for democracy. It is important that these elections are conducted in a peaceful, transparent and fair manner so that every citizen can cast their vote without fear or pressure. The role of the Election Commission of India becomes extremely crucial in maintaining fairness and ensuring that all rules and regulations are properly followed. At the same time, political parties should focus on healthy debates, development issues and constructive policies instead of spreading hatred, misinformation or creating unnecessary conflict during their election campaigning. Responsible campaigning will help voters make better decisions and strengthen democratic values.

Aarchi Verma,
Rajpura, Punjab

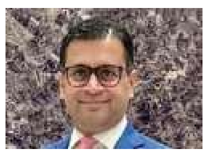
Institutions, scrutiny

Our democracy confronts an unusual moment: challenges to two of its most consequential constitutional offices — the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Chief Election Commissioner — that prompts a reflection on the resilience and the vulnerabilities of our institutional design. Perhaps the very emergence of such challenges would testify to the robustness of democratic culture, when institutions are openly scrutinised and when public debate engages even the highest offices. That said, the frequency and intensity of such confrontations risk signalling a gradual erosion of trust in institutions that depend heavily on perceived and demonstrable neutrality. A question follows. Which lapse would inflict the greater injury on democracy — an election widely doubted for its fairness, or a legislature whose procedural guardrails weaken? Either scenario chips away at public confidence, though electoral credibility arguably forms the foundational pillar of the democratic order. The test for any democracy is not the absence of institutional strain but its capacity to confront such stress without corroding the public faith that sustains it.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

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

On the right to die with dignity



Satvik Varma

is a senior advocate in New Delhi. With inputs from Shantanu Parmar, advocate

On an evening in 2013, 20-year-old Harish Rana fell from the fourth floor of his PG accommodation and sustained critical injuries. His condition confined him to a bed while tubes kept him on life support. Owing to his Persistent Vegetative State (PVS), he responded to no stimuli around him and was largely nursed by his parents, with frequent visits to the hospital. Mr. Rana's closest friends and family, who fondly describe him as energetic and exuberant, were faced with the agonising pain of witnessing his stasis. His parents, along with the doctors, devoted 13 years in tending to Mr. Rana, but no improvement was seen. Confronted with such despairing circumstances, the parents moved the Supreme Court to withdraw life support, so that nature can be allowed to take its course. What followed was a pivotal discourse on the import of life under Article 21 of our Constitution.

A respectable death

The Constitution's tryst with 'Right to Life with dignity' was first laid down in *Gian Kaur vs State of Punjab* (1996) where the Supreme Court held that 'life' under Article 21 included the right to live with dignity. However, in *Gian Kaur*, the Court opined that Article 21 did not include the right to die.

Fifteen years later, a similar case reached the Supreme Court when a young Aruna Shanbaug, owing to a brutal sexual assault, was left in PVS. Pinki Virani, journalist, and human-rights activist, petitioned the Supreme Court as Aruna's friend for withdrawal of her life support. Although under its own circumstances, Virani's plea was rejected, it culminated in the crucial decision of *Aruna R. Shanbaug vs Union of India* (2011). The Supreme Court drew sustenance from foreign legal frameworks and recognised passive euthanasia in cases of patients with terminal illness and undergoing prolonged, but ineffective treatment. Guidelines were framed to bridge the legislative gap, until Parliament promulgated on the subject. Additionally, the Law Commission in 2006 and 2012, entered into an in-depth examination of the above-detailed issues and made extensive observations. It reported that withholding life support from terminally ill patients should not attract criminal liability if done in pursuance of the "best interest of the patient."

The watershed moment on the subject was the 2018 Constitution Bench's decision in *Common Cause vs Union of India*. Armed with developing jurisprudence on the subject, the Supreme Court unequivocally recognised and permitted the withdrawal/ withholding of medical treatment to fall within Article 21. The right of refusal of medical treatment was held to be a manifestation of dignity intersecting with privacy, autonomy, and self-determination. This judgment provided extensive guidelines and underwent certain modifications in a similarly titled 2023 decision. These are now cumulatively referred to as the 'Common Cause guidelines', which rest on two core principles: first, that the intervention in question must qualify as "medical treatment"; and second, that its withdrawal must be strictly in the patient's "best interest."

> The right of refusal of medical treatment was held to be a manifestation of dignity intersecting with privacy, autonomy, and self-determination

The Supreme Court embedded various safeguards to prevent misuse and a detailed procedure involving opinions of primary and secondary Medical Boards prior to undertaking such decisions. The legislative void was once again highlighted by the Court and one Judge expressed the "pious hope" for legislative intervention. This hope still lingers.

Case evaluation

The Harish Rana chronicle has now reached its end with the intervention by the Supreme Court. Speaking through two judges, who authored separate but concurring judgments, the Court allowed the withdrawal of life support from Mr. Rana under the Common Cause guidelines. Since he relied on Clinically Assisted Nutrition and Hydration (CANH), the first question which required consideration was whether CANH qualified as 'medical treatment.' To answer this, the Court noted that the administration of CANH requires careful and experienced medical supervision. Since such skills are only available by drawing upon medical knowledge, and owing to its continuous periodic evaluation, emergency medical management and supervision, it was held to be 'medical treatment.' The second question was whether the withdrawal of CANH from Mr. Rana was in his best interests. It held that 'best interests' must be envisaged from the lens of the stakeholders, who are the next of kin and medical boards. It was rightly opined that a doctor's duty to perform treatment continues till it is capable of "conferring some therapeutic benefit." When recovery is impossible, the continuation of treatment merely prolongs biological existence de-hors any benefits. It led to the sole conclusion – withdrawal of treatment which was noted to be in Mr. Rana's best interests.

A definitive end

"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause." Through his prose, the Bard cautioned that hesitation about death stems from the uncertainty of what comes after. However, what is definitive is that the ones who pass-on tend to live through us. Harish Rana will soon die. Yet, his contributions will forever be etched in history and in our constitutional jurisprudence.

And so, the advancement of constitutional morality is not only circumscribed to legislative actions which reach the country at large. It is also through addressing uncomfortable issues that advance the cause for humanity, even if they concern just an indiscernible minority.

Credit wars escalate as polls approach

Two parallel road inaugurations lay bare Kerala's friction with the Centre

STATE OF PLAY

Tiki Rajwi
tiki.rajwi@thehindu.co.in

A 'boycott row' by Kerala's Left Democratic Front (LDF) government overshadowed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the poll-bound southern State this month. For the political pundit and the general observer alike, it marked the latest episode among the long-running confrontations between Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Union government over Centre-State relations and fiscal federalism.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) and the LDF sought to depict the exclusion of Kerala Public Works Minister Mohammed Riyas from the inauguration ceremony of two National Highways (NH) reaches as yet another attempt by the BJP to monopolise the spotlight and claim credit for development projects in the run-up to the Assembly elections. The Prime Minister was in Kochi on March 11 to inaugurate a clutch of high-profile projects, which included the two stretches of NH-66, the main north-south artery.

Miffed over the fact that Mr. Riyas was not invited, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and the Ministers for Local Self Government and Electricity, M.B. Rajesh and K. Krishnankutty respectively, also gave the event a miss. In battle-mode, the CPI(M) organised a parallel inauguration of the two highway stretches – Thalappady-Chengala and Vengalam-Ramanattukara – with Mr. Riyas taking centre-stage. A furious Mr. Riyas pointed out that while he, the State's

Public Works Minister, was kept out, the Union government had thought it fit to extend an invitation to Rajeev Chandrasekhar, the State president of the BJP.

Mr. Riyas and the CPI(M) stated that had it not been for the LDF government, NH development in Kerala would have been a distant dream.

Price for a road

At the core of the State government's grievance lies the fact that Kerala, in an unprecedented step, had decided to bear 25% of the land acquisition cost for the widening of the NH. According to the LDF government, the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) had withdrawn from the project in 2014, citing a delay in the acquisition of the necessary land. The project was revived after the first LDF government led by Mr. Vijayan, which came to power in 2016, agreed to bear 25% of the land acquisition cost. Kerala had paid ₹5,580.74 crore, making it the first State to do so. Kerala had sourced the amount through the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB), a special purpose vehicle that mobilises resources for large infrastructure projects. Mr. Riyas also recalled instances where the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari had praised Mr. Vijayan's government for having sped up the acquisition of land. Interestingly, Mr. Gadkari was also absent from the event.

Road development has been a perennially contentious issue in Kerala given its large population, geographical peculiarities and high demand for land. To be fair, the higher compensation payouts enabled by the Centre's Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, has also had a hand in the revival of NH development in Kerala.

The debt problem

Beyond the political sabre-rattling, the latest row spun the spotlight back on a related issue: Kerala's objections against the restrictions imposed by the Union government on its borrowing ability, citing off-budget borrowings by the KIIFB and the Kerala Social Security Pension Ltd.

The State has repeatedly urged the Centre to expand its borrowing space by a sum equivalent to its NH spending. It was not that long ago when NH development was caught in the midst of a Centre-State blame-game in Kerala after parts of the newly-constructed highway collapsed, raising questions about quality. Also, this is not the first time where 'credit' for large undertakings or schemes has become a bone of contention. For instance, the Centre's insistence that houses constructed under Kerala's LIFE Mission housing project must display the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana logo had drawn sharp responses from Mr. Vijayan's government. It is to be expected that 'credit wars' would again take centre-stage with Kerala moving into election mode. But while governments come and go, all that matters, ultimately, is whether taxpayers' money is being spent wisely.

Trump's tenure sees highest external attacks in a decade

Contrary to President Donald Trump's promises, U.S. interventions resulted in at least a thousand fatalities in 2025

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis
Sambavi Parthasarathy

When U.S. President Donald Trump came into power for the second time in January last year, he claimed that his proudest legacy would be that of a "peacemaker and unifier". In the initial months after his inauguration, Mr. Trump also openly lobbied for winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet, contrary to his words, the legacy of Mr. Trump during his second tenure has seen an explosion in hostile actions, euphemistically termed 'coercive diplomacy', the 'Donroe Doctrine' etc. besides military operations that have exacerbated conflicts across the world.

Increase in attacks

In fact, data maintained by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) show that Mr. Trump's second tenure has seen the highest number of external interventions by the U.S. forces and resultant casualties in the last 15 years. An analysis of external interventions by the U.S. shows that the first year of Mr. Trump's second term saw at least 663 military intervention events (air strikes, attacks, disruptions by weapons use) in other sovereign nations. In 2025 alone, the U.S.'s external attacks surged by almost 50% compared to 2024.

This is even higher than the number of such interventions recorded during his first presidential term between 2017 and 2021. While the final year of the Joe Biden administration also saw a high number of such interventions with 453 events, the numbers surged further under Mr. Trump, in stark contrast to his promises of ending foreign wars **(Chart 1)**.

Data show that between 2011 and 2014, the highest share of U.S. involvement was seen in South Asia, specifically in Pakistan. However, in the last five years, the U.S.'s involvement increased dramatically in West Asia and eastern Africa, specifically in Yemen and Somalia **(Chart 2)**. Yemen accounted for almost 60% of the U.S.'s external attacks in the last 10 years, resulting in more than 1,400 fatalities. While the U.S. began its attacks on Yemen in 2002, following the 9/11 attacks, the interventions increased after the collapse of the Yemeni government in early 2015.

In 2025, President Donald Trump initiated significant military strikes on the Houthis, marking the largest U.S. operation in the region since he took office. The U.S. vowed to continue these attacks as long as the Houthis conducted attacks on shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

The situation was more dire in Somalia, which accounted for close to 30% of the U.S.'s external attacks. Since 2015, the U.S.'s engagements have resulted in more than 4,000 fatalities.

In 2020, at the time of his first administration, Mr. Trump had ordered the Pentagon to withdraw most U.S. troops from Somalia, where they were deployed in an extended fight against the al-Shabab, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Mr. Biden, who took office after Mr. Trump, reversed this order in 2022. However, the current administration under Mr. Trump has not shown any indication of reverting to the earlier Trump order. The U.S. forces have engaged in more than 150 attacks in Somalia since 2025, almost half the total number of attacks carried out during Mr. Trump's entire first term.

In his inaugural speech last year, Mr Trump said, "We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end and perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into."

Bloody regime

Mr. Trump has only contradicted himself by getting the U.S. involved in Israel's wars on Iran. Even Mr. Trump is unsure of how these hostilities will end.

An analysis by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies pointed out that though the recent U.S. military presence in West Asia is at its highest level since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it is inadequate in the size and capabilities required for major combat or regime change. Last August, claiming credit for settling the India-Pakistan tensions, Mr. Trump said, "I love saving lives...And you know, when you save lives, you really end up having a peaceful world."

Data contradict this too. Mr. Trump's first year of his second term has left the country with more blood on its hands than any other President's term in the past 15 years.

Last year was the most severe in terms of fatalities, with at least a thousand people being killed by U.S.-led forces **(Chart 3)**. This is significantly higher than the death toll due to interventions in each of the preceding four years. The U.S.'s joint attacks with Israel too have come at a severe human cost with reports stating thousands of casualties.

Domestic sensibilities

Mr. Trump's idea of peace is unpopular even among Americans. A *Reuters* poll found that more than 40% of Americans disapproved of Mr. Trump's attack on Iran.

A similar sentiment was observed earlier this year when American forces invaded Venezuela, the most dramatic U.S. intervention in Latin America since the 1989 Panama invasion, in which close to 200 American troops entered Caracas.

Earlier this year, Mr. Trump stated in an interview with *The New York Times* that his morality was the only limit to his power, and only his mind could stop him from exerting it. With data contradicting his many statements, this might be the one that still rings true.

War and turmoil

The data for the charts were sourced from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Data for 2026 is as of March 8, 2026

CHART 1: Year-wise number of attacks engaged by the U.S. beyond its borders

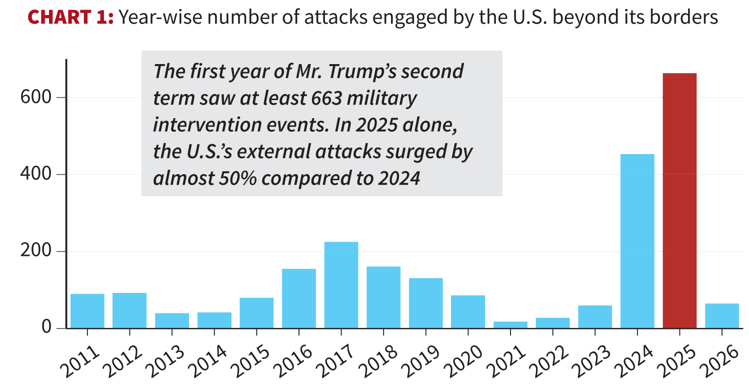


CHART 2: The region-wise number of attacks engaged by the U.S. In the last five years, the U.S.'s involvement increased in West Asia and eastern Africa

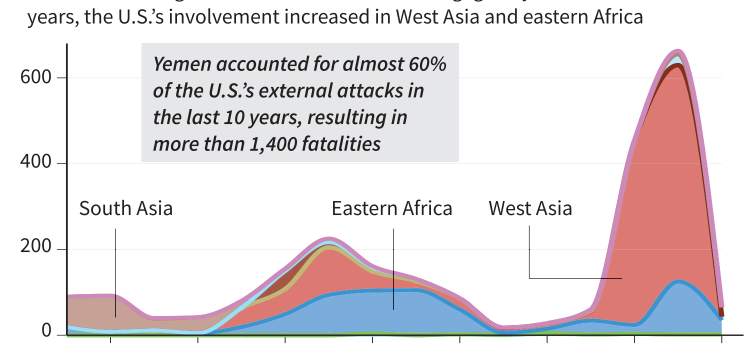
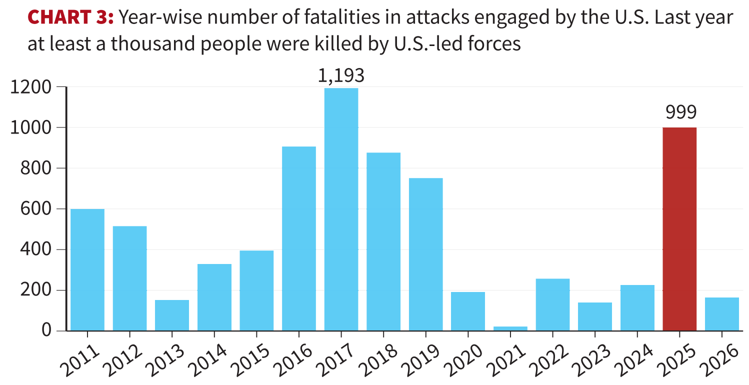


CHART 3: Year-wise number of fatalities in attacks engaged by the U.S. Last year at least a thousand people were killed by U.S.-led forces



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 16, 1976

Vijay Amritraj claims two titles: Smith beaten in final

Memphis, Tennessee, March 15: India's Vijay Amritraj dominated the championship match of the World Championship Tennis $60,000 Memphis Club classic yesterday defeating Stan Smith of the United States 6-2,0-6,6-0.

The 22-year-old right hander picked up $17,000.

Amritraj broke Smith's service in the second, sixth and eighth games of the first set and claimed it at 6-2.

Smith double faulted on his first two points of the second game and had repeated trouble with his serve.

"I thought the key to the match was Stan's inability to serve," said Amritraj who was unseeded in a field that also included B. Borg B. Lutz, J.D. Newcome, A.J. Roche, and R. Tanner. "He was awful to serve, while I seemed to be returning his serves better than I usually do."

Amritraj swept through the first set with a baseline game which provided winners. He was true on his backhand in crucial situations. "My backhand was good to-day," he said.

Amritraj seemed to lose concentration in the second set as the 29-year-old Smith broke service in the first, third and fifth game on the way to set victory.

In the final set, Amritraj however returned to form and swept through the set in no time.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 16, 1926

The imperial library

Calcutta, March 15: Under the presidency of Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasad Sastri, a public meeting was held in Albert Hall yesterday, to protest against the proposal of the Government of India for removing the Imperial Library from Calcutta to Delhi. Messages of sympathy with the objects of the meeting, were read from the National Council of Education, the British Indian Association, the Calcutta University, the University Law College and most of the other educational institutions in Calcutta and the mofussil. A Committee was formed to take the necessary steps for retention of the library in Calcutta.

The President pointed out that the library was a transferred subject and that, under the Library Act, the Government could not remove the Imperial Library from Calcutta.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Israel's emergency Budget allocation for military purchases

827 in $ million. Israel has approved an $827-million emergency Budget allocation for military purchases, Israeli media reported on Sunday. The 2.6-billion-shekel package was approved over the weekend by Cabinet Ministers, the daily *Haaretz* reported. AFP

Number of passenger journeys handled by Delhi Metro in 2025

235.8 crore. Delhi Metro handled a whopping 235.8 crore passenger journeys in 2025 with an average daily ridership of 64.60 lakh passengers daily, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) said in a statement on Sunday. PTI

Persons arrested in Iran over suspected links to Israel

20 Iranian authorities have arrested at least 20 people in the country's northwest on suspicion of cooperating with Israel, local media reported on Sunday. The arrests took place during raids on networks linked to Israel in the West Azerbaijan province, the Fars news agency said. AFP

IS detainees transferred by the U.S. from Syria to Iraq

5,700 Iraq warned that drone attacks near Baghdad airport threatened the security of the nearby prison housing Islamic State group suspects brought from Syria. In February, the U.S. completed the transfer of 5,700 IS detainees from Syria to Iraq. AFP

Amount by which NHAI increased its annual pass fee

75 in ₹. The National Highways Authority of India on Sunday said it has increased the rate of its annual pass by ₹75 to ₹3,075 for the next 2026-27 financial year. The annual pass facility was launched on August 15, 2025. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Why is the U.S. investigating India?

What allegations has the U.S. made on excess capacity and forced labour? How do the two Section 301 investigations relate to the current U.S. tariff regime? What issues are the U.S. investigations examining and why do industry experts see them as a pathway to new tariffs?

EXPLAINER

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

Over the last week, the U.S. government has launched two investigations against India and several other countries in a bid to find some form of actions or policies that "are unreasonable or discriminatory and burden or restrict U.S. commerce". These investigations will likely take a few months, but could eventually result in the return of tariffs.

What is the current situation on tariffs?

The U.S. Supreme Court on February 20 ruled against the validity of U.S. President Donald Trump's use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to levy reciprocal tariffs on America's trade partners. For India, these reciprocal tariffs had been 50% from August 2025 to February 6, 2026, after which Mr. Trump reduced them to 25%.

Following the court's decision, Mr. Trump imposed a 10% tariff on imports from all countries for a period of 150 days under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974. He threatened to increase this to 15%, but has not done so.

However, he said the U.S. would use other sections of the Trade Act to levy additional tariffs.

What was the first investigation?

On March 11, the office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) said it had initiated investigations against 16 economies, including India, to see whether these economies were using excess manufacturing capacity to export to the U.S. in a manner that was hurting American businesses.

The order for investigation under Section 301(b) of the Trade Act included specific allegations against the economies named – China, the European Union, Singapore, Switzerland, Norway, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Mexico, Japan, and India.

GETTY IMAGES

In India's case, the U.S. said the country had a bilateral trade surplus with it of $58 billion in 2025. Indian government data, however, shows that India had a merchandise trade surplus of $42.2 billion with the U.S. over this period.

"India's global goods trade surplus sectors include textiles, health, construction goods, and automotive goods," the U.S. order said. "For example, evidence suggests the solar module sector is plagued by excess capacity, including that India's current module manufacturing is nearly triple annual domestic demand."

It added that India has created "significant excess capacity" in petrochemicals, steel, and other industries.

What is the second investigation about?

A day later, the USTR announced the launch of a fresh investigation, this time on 60 countries, including India. The fresh investigation was to look into whether these countries had taken "sufficient steps" to prohibit the import of goods produced with forced labour and how the "failure to eradicate" these practices impacts U.S. workers and businesses.

This investigation, too, was under Section 301(b) of the Trade Act of 1974.

Why is Section 301(b) significant?

Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 is aimed at addressing unfair foreign practices affecting U.S. businesses. Notably, according to the website of the USTR, "Section 301 may be used to respond to unjustifiable, unreasonable, or discriminatory foreign government practices that burden or restrict U.S. commerce".

According to trade and industry experts, this "response" that has been allowed in the law is the pathway through which the Trump administration could once again levy tariffs on imports from other countries once the 150-day window for his current 10% expires.

"While its [the investigation's] impact on India's exports will be clear only after the investigation concludes, it seems the move is aimed at imposing a new tariff once the 150 days for the 10% global tariff expires," Pankaj Chadha, chairman of the Engineering Exports Promotion Council of India, said.

How did the Indian government respond?

So far, it has not responded publicly. In contrast, the European Union has already spoken strongly about it.

"We will be seeking further clarity from the U.S. on how the opening of this section 301 investigation would interact with" the EU-U.S. agreement signed last year, European Commission spokesman Olof Gill said. "The commission would respond firmly and proportionately to any breach of the joint statement commitments," he added.

How have Indian industries responded?

Mr. Chadha said that this fresh development comes over and above the existing tariffs that the steel, aluminium, auto, and auto components sectors still have to pay. The U.S. has implemented a separate 50% tariff on the import of these goods, including from India, which continues even after the Supreme Court's order.

Similarly, the Confederation of Indian Textile Industry has said that the recent developments add further uncertainty to the textiles and apparel sector, which it said is already under significant stress due to the developments in West Asia and a lack of clarity over how the U.S. tariff situation will unfold.

Ravi Sam, the Vice Chairman of industry body Texprocil, however, said there is no need for panic as these investigations will be long, drawn-out processes and will not have any immediate impact. This sentiment was echoed by trade expert and former Director General of Foreign Trade Ajay Srivastava as well.

THE GIST

The U.S. has launched two investigations under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 against India and other economies to examine practices that may be 'unreasonable or discriminatory and burden or restrict U.S. commerce'.

One probe examines whether countries, including India, are using excess manufacturing capacity to export to the U.S. in a manner that hurts American businesses, while another looks at whether countries have taken 'sufficient steps' to prohibit imports of goods produced with forced labour.

Why is Rajasthan's property Bill drawing scrutiny?

How will the proposed law regulate property transfers in notified areas? What concerns has it triggered?

Saee Pande

The story so far:

The Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property in Disturbed Areas Bill was passed by the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly on March 6 in a voice vote. The Bill seeks to regulate property transactions in areas that the government declares as "disturbed". However, the legislation has sparked debate over its constitutional validity, potential misuse, and its broader social and economic implications.

What does the Bill propose?

Under the proposed law, Section 3(1,2) states that the State government may declare any area within the State as a 'disturbed area' if it considers that communal violence, riots, or public disorder exist or are likely to occur.

According to Section 5(1,2), once a locality is notified, any transfer of immovable property, including land, houses or commercial establishments, would require prior approval from the District Magistrate or Collector. This restriction applies to transfers by sale, gift, exchange, lease, etc. Property transactions carried out without such permission would be treated as legally invalid. Section 7 empowers the District Magistrate or Collector to conduct an inquiry to determine whether the proposed transfer is voluntary and genuine, or whether it involves coercion, intimidation or a distress sale.

Under Section 9, the law also provides penalties for property transfers carried out without the required permission. Section 10 includes provisions aimed at protecting tenants from forced or unlawful eviction in such sensitive areas. Violations of the Act (Section 12) are treated as cognisable and non-bailable offences, punishable with three to five years of imprisonment and a fine.

How does the Gujarat model compare?

The Rajasthan Bill draws comparisons with the Gujarat Disturbed Areas Act, which has its origins in a 1986 ordinance passed after severe communal riots in Ahmedabad. The law was first enacted in 1991. It was later strengthened through amendments in 2020. The law was introduced to prevent distress sales of property by minorities who, after repeated communal riots in cities such as Ahmedabad and Vadodara, felt compelled to leave their neighbourhoods and sell property at low prices.

In Ahmedabad, a large share of the Muslim population is concentrated in Juhapura, often described as the largest Muslim ghetto in western Ahmedabad, limiting the community's geographical spread. In the context of the 2020 amendments, the then Chief Minister Vijay Rupani said publicly that the intent of the law was to ensure that Hindus and Muslims remain within their own areas and do not exchange property."

What are the legal and constitutional implications?

Even though the right to property was removed as a fundamental right by the 44th Amendment to the Constitution in 1978, it remains protected under Article 300A, which states that no person can be deprived of property except by authority of law. The proposed legislation provides such authority by requiring government approval before property in notified "disturbed areas" can be transferred.

The Bill has also drawn attention in relation to Article 14, which guarantees equality before the law. Legal observers note that if the provisions disproportionately affect certain neighbourhoods or communities, the law could face scrutiny on grounds of arbitrary classification or discrimination.

What are the Opposition's concerns?

Congress questioned the Bill's communal bias. Moreover, real estate transactions in notified areas could slow down because each transfer would require administrative approval from district authorities. They also point out that vague terms such as "disturbed area" or "demographic imbalance" may leave room for broad administrative discretion. There are also concerns about the arbitrary classification of disturbed areas, the ghettoisation of communities, potential discrimination in government services, and the distortion of representation. As a result, the policy, though intended to prevent forced displacement, has been criticised for institutionalising residential separation and communal polarisation, while reinforcing existing communal boundaries in housing markets rather than promoting integration.

(Saee Pande is a freelance writer with a focus on politics, current affairs, international relations, and geopolitics)

THE GIST

The Rajasthan Legislative Assembly has passed the Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property in Disturbed Areas Bill to regulate property transactions in areas declared 'disturbed'.

While the government says the law will provide administrative oversight and prevent coercion or distress sales, critics warn it could increase bureaucratic oversight, allow arbitrary classification of disturbed areas, and reinforce communal segregation in housing markets.

CACHE

REUTERS

What makes some locations on Google Maps look blurry or difficult to navigate?

Several countries resist being clearly mapped on Google Maps because they fear that detailed satellite imagery could lead to the targeting of critical infrastructure or planning for potential attacks; better quality satellite and mapping data make navigation easier and safer for users

Sahana Venugopal

The experience of using Google Maps is different in certain locations. While you may get turn-by-turn driving instructions and street-level views with the tap of your finger in several countries, other locations may look blurry and are difficult to navigate by road. A user's Google Maps experience is often linked to regulations in particular countries that curtail the use of satellite imaging and geographic surveys. This raises a set of questions about security and transparency.

Which countries resist being mapped, and why?

Several countries that have hostile relations with their neighbours or militant groups tend to resist being clearly mapped on Google's navigation system. They fear that making detailed satellite imagery of their land easily available to users could lead to the targeting of critical infrastructure or planning for potential attacks.

Countries like India, Israel, and South Korea have, over time, changed their tone on mapping. And these changes date back to a couple of decades earlier.

For instance, in 2007, the BBC reported that India had asked Google to lower the level of detail in some Google Earth images, for security reasons. Nearly a decade later, in 2016, India resisted Google's request for ground-level photographs for its Street View offering. Street View only returned to the country in 2022. But, in late 2025, Google announced that it was boosting its Maps service with Gemini AI, allowing people to get personalised travel advice and ask questions. The company noted then that it had data for about 35 million places in India.

Israel is another country that poses a quandary to Google Maps users. Zoom lightly into multiple parts of Israel and you are likely to be met by extremely blurry houses and out-of-focus manmade structures, or blurred out areas adjoined to far more discernible zones. Near Gaza, however, users can zoom in to clearly see the devastating aftermath of Israel's military action, such as the detailed rubble of the ruined Jabalia refugee camp market.

Israel's blurriness in Google Maps was previously due to a U.S. law known as the Kyl-Bingaman Amendment, which restricted the clarity of satellite images that show Israel and areas surrounding it. Enforced in 1997, it stipulated a resolution limit of two metres in Ground Sampling Distance (GSD), which measures how on-screen pixels translate to actual distances on the ground. In other words, a higher GSD value yields a less detailed and more blurry map, because less data is captured.

In July 2020, however, the U.S. Commerce Department published a Federal Register notice acknowledging that satellite imagery of Israel was available through other sources at a better resolution.

"The Department has therefore changed the existing resolution limit of 2.0 m GSD to 0.4 m GSD for U.S.-licensed satellite imaging of Israel," stated the notice. In essence, this meant more detailed data for satellite imagery–and a clearer look at Israel on the map.

Amnon Harari, who was the head of space programmes at Israel's Defence Ministry, was quoted by Reuters that month as saying that it was "always preferable to be seen blurred, rather than precisely."

Despite the change in regulations, multiple locations in Israel are still blurred on Google Maps, though not necessarily on other mapping/navigation platforms.

Several other countries have blurred out specific areas or particular landmarks on Google Maps, largely for security reasons, such as Interpol in France. On the other hand, entire patches of central Greenland and Antarctica are also difficult to explore in detail on Google Maps, with reasons for this including their climate.

South Korea, meanwhile, has pushed back against Google's requests for better map data. In a translated statement from last year, the company noted that international tourists faced "great inconvenience upon entering the country," claiming that the directions function of Google Maps was not available in Korea. Travellers instead use a local offering like Naver, which is restricted to showing South/North Korea and parts of their neighbouring countries. However, Google claimed that it was only requesting "safe" data, or a "national basic map" on a scale of 1:5000."

Finally, after years of dialogue and negotiations, Google claimed its victory. In late February, it was announced that the internet giant would be allowed to export high-precision map data to servers located overseas.

Google's Vice President Cris Turner said the company looked forward to bringing a "fully functioning Google Maps to Korea," per media statements. However, Korea's government expects Google to fulfil its security conditions, such as blurring sensitive facilities, and not fully revealing the longitude and latitude coordinates for South Korean territory, reported Reuters. This easing of restrictions was a condition that the Trump administration had reportedly pushed for, per media outlets.

How does greater mapping freedom affect Google and its users?

Google has explained that it uses techniques, including photogrammetry, to create its satellite-view of Maps, or a process where it puts together (satellite) imagery sourced from external providers. These include state agencies, geological survey organisations and commercial imagery providers, according to a Google blogpost from 2020.

From the company's perspective, better quality data of popular, frequently visited places – such as South Korea – makes navigation easier and safer for those using Google Maps in such locations. Accurate satellite data also plays a crucial role in journalism and activism; images of Gaza rubble from multiple platforms were used to raise international awareness about Israel's widespread bombing of civilian homes, even as the country insisted that it was targeting Hamas with precision.

Widening access to high-quality, verifiable satellite imagery is also helpful when detecting falsified images. Take the case of a satellite image published by *Tehran Times*, which claimed to show a destroyed U.S. base in Qatar, during the U.S.-Iran war this month. However, researchers soon identified this as an AI-edited fake image.

When Google Maps can obtain better satellite/mapping data, there is a definite benefit for its business as well. Once key cities and international hubs are mapped out in detail, this can ease the way for Google parent Alphabet to potentially deploy its Waymo robotaxis there while using its own navigational data, rather than depending on a third-party navigation company's technology.

However, some South Korean experts have raised antitrust concerns, noting that Google's enhanced access to Korea's map data could make it harder for local companies like Naver to compete and hold their own against an international giant.

As Google continues to juggle the navigational needs of billions of users with the security requests of their governments, the integrity of satellite images on Maps is not just a technology challenge, but an urgent geopolitical issue.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Here is a quiz to mark the birth centenary of Jerry Lewis, one of Hollywood's most famous comedians

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Jerry Lewis was born into a vaudeville family but it was not his christened surname. What was it?

QUESTION 2

Name Lewis' legendary partner from 1946 to 1956 with whom he dominated the entertainment scene and generated a level of fan hysteria that wouldn't be seen again until the Beatles.

QUESTION 3

Lewis is widely credited with developing and pioneering which film-making technology while directing '*The Bellboy*'?

QUESTION 4

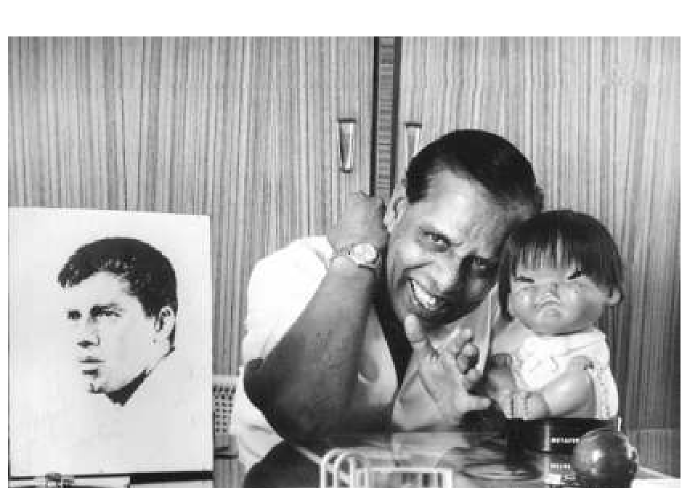
In the 1963 classic '*The Nutty Professor*', what is the name of the title character who transforms into the suave Buddy Love?

QUESTION 5

Which Oscar-winning director helmed the '*The King of Comedy*' which had Lewis delivering an acclaimed performance as a kidnapped late-night talk show host Jerry Langford?

QUESTION 6

What did Jerry Lewis sport to contort his face for his signature 'idiot' persona whom he affectionately called 'The Kid'?



Visual Question:
Identify this legendary Indian actor whose style of comedy was largely inspired by Jerry Lewis. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Which 14th-century historical event is often linked to the superstition surrounding Friday the 13th? **Ans: The mass arrest of the Knights Templar ordered by Philip IV of France on October 13, 1307**
2. What specific term refers to the fear of Friday the 13th itself? **Ans: Paraskevidekatriaphobia**
3. Which calendar condition must occur for a Friday the 13th to appear in a given month? **Ans: The month must begin on a Sunday**
4. What is the maximum number of Friday the 13ths that can occur in a single year? **Ans: Three**
5. In the Gregorian calendar cycle, how many times can Friday the 13th occur in a 400-year period? **Ans: 688 times**
Visual: What is the name of the masked killer who became the central figure of the Friday the 13th horror franchise? **Ans: Jason Voorhees**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Sunil Madhavan | Prodosh Mitra | Shailbala Kumari | Keshav Raturi

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

The normally dour manager finally smiled

When she heard the news, her reaction was anything but happy

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of 'make hay while the sun shines'? (K Sankara, Hyderabad)

This relatively old idiom, which has been part of the English language for several centuries, is mostly used in informal contexts. When you tell someone to 'make hay while the sun shines', what you are suggesting is that the individual should make good use the favourable circumstances that have come his way; he should get to work immediately, and achieve his goal, for such an opportunity may not present itself again. He must make use of the opportunity before it disappears.

Suddenly, there's a great demand for used cars. Our dealership is making hay while the sun shines.

The word 'hay' is mostly used to refer to the grass that is cut and then dried during summer. It is later used to feed cattle during the winter months. To ensure there was enough hay to feed his cattle during the long winter months, a farmer had to dry enough grass during the summer months. The notorious summer weather in England made this rather difficult to do. It rained quite frequently during summer in England, and this often ruined the freshly cut grass left out to dry – making it unusable for livestock. Farmers had to ensure that they made use of the opportunities when the sun was out.

What is the difference between 'all but' and 'anything but'? (Kirtiraj Singh, Rajasthan)

The expression 'all but' has a couple different meanings. One of them is 'almost'. Here are a few examples.

The children had all but given up hope of seeing their puppy again.

The outcome of tonight's game is all but certain.

In the first sentence, you are saying that the kids had nearly or almost given up hope of seeing their puppy again. The second sentence suggests that you are almost certain what the outcome of tonight's match will be.

The expression can also be used to mean 'except for'.

For the meeting, all but Raj and Vani were present.

When you say someone is 'anything but kind', you mean that he is definitely not kind. He may have one or two good qualities, but kindness is not one of them.

What is the meaning of 'dour'? How is the word pronounced? (D Alemelu, Kochi)

Dictionaries list several ways of pronouncing the word; one simple way is to make it rhyme with 'power', 'shower' and 'flower'. The word comes from the Scottish 'duurus' meaning 'hard'. Today, the word is used in formal contexts to mean gloomy and unfriendly. When you say that someone is 'dour', what you are suggesting is that the individual looks rather sad or unhappy. The word is generally used to show disapproval.

Shalini married a dour little man who never saw any good in others.

upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Folly:
the trait of acting stupidly or rashly

Synonyms: absurdity, blunder, foolishness

Usage: *Her folly cost the company a lot of money.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/follypro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /foli/

Correction

The article 'Electrifying industrial heat as a path to India's thermal independence' dated March 13, in Text & Context overstated the extent of adoption of electrified heat by Morbi's and Ludhiana's industries and misprinted India's CST capacity, which should be 6.4 GW.

SCIENCE

Ice patches on melting glaciers greater threat than thought: ISRO scientists

Researchers have found that the presence of exposed ice patches on the Srikanta Glacier immediately before the flood in Uttarakhand on August 5, 2025, was a signal of ongoing deglaciation and a direct indicator in the landscape of the likelihood of such floods

Meena Menon


A screengrab shows houses being swept away after heavy rains triggered by a cloudburst at Dharali, Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand in August 2025. PTI

A new study by scientists from the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), published in *NPJ Natural Hazards*, examines the August 5, 2025 flash flood that destroyed Dharali village in Uttarakhand and killed six people. It sheds light on how warming temperatures affect glaciers, especially exposed ice patches on retreating glaciers, and highlights the need to monitor glaciers using satellite images to provide early warnings of possible disasters.

The study, titled 'Ice-patch collapse and early-warning implications from a Himalayan flash flood: emerging cryo-hydrological hazards under deglaciation', concludes that the collapse of an ice patch on the glacier above Dharali is linked to deglaciation in the Himalaya.

The authors say the findings could help improve understanding of climate risk and disaster preparedness. The study shows that the flash flood was triggered by the collapse of an ice patch in the nivation area of the Srikanta glacier.

Nivation is defined as the erosion of the ground beneath and around a snow bank, primarily as a result of alternate freezing and thawing. This can form a nivation hollow, which gradually becomes deeper when snow repeatedly accumulates in the same place.

History of extreme events

The study area lies in the upper Bhagirathi river basin in Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand. It covers the ridge-to-valley system from the Srikanta glacier to Dharali village, located at a height of 2,650-2,700 m along the Bhagirathi river. The village lies downstream of the glacier-fed Khir Gad stream, which originates from the Srikanta glacier, flows through Dharali, and then joins the Bhagirathi river. The Khir Gad divides Dharali into right- and left-hand bank settlements, increasing its risk of flash floods.

The region has a documented history of extreme events, including the large landslides that brought down massive boulders during the June 2013 Himalayan floods. The researchers used satellite observations, high-resolution topographic analysis, and visual records to reconstruct the sequence of events linking unstable glacier ice to the sudden flood.

The findings expand the range of recognised glacier-related hazards in the Himalaya and identify exposed ice patches as an under-recognised risk from glacier melt.

The Dharali event also shows how instability in the cryosphere can create hazards downstream in high-altitude regions.

The study calls for closer monitoring of glaciers and argues that the focus should extend beyond glacial lake outburst floods (or GLOFs) to include smaller, often overlooked instabilities in the cryosphere. The exposure of ice patches in the Srikanta glacier before the flood represents a transitional state in the snow-ice regime. "Pre-event imagery during the ablation period revealed exposed ice patches on steep north- to northeast-facing slopes, indicating thinning seasonal snow and firn cover consistent with ongoing deglaciation," the authors wrote in the paper.

Such exposure indicates thinning seasonal snow and firn, which is ice that lies between snow and fully formed glacial ice.It usually occurs when warmer conditions reduce the insulating snow layer that stabilises the ice beneath.

Ice patches covered by firn and seasonal snow are relatively resistant to short-term temperature changes whereas exposed ice is more likely to shift or loosen. Because exposed ice responds more quickly to temperature changes or heavy rainfall, it can melt, fragment or collapse more easily, releasing ice, meltwater, and debris that can trigger flash floods.

Therefore, the study finds that the presence of exposed ice patches on the Srikanta Glacier immediately before the floods of August 5 was a signal of ongoing deglaciation and a direct indicator in the landscape that increased the likelihood of such floods.

Satellite observations

Srikanta Glacier is a small- to medium-sized valley glacier with a height of 6,133 m, around 9.8 km upstream of

> **Nivation is defined as the erosion of the ground beneath and around a snow bank, primarily as a result of alternate freezing and thawing. This can form a nivation hollow, which gradually becomes deeper when snow repeatedly accumulates in the same place**

Dharali. The glacier has steep accumulation and ablation zones, seasonal snow cover, and extensive nivation areas. Mountaineering and expedition reports describe unstable ice surfaces, steep slopes, avalanche-prone terrain, and persistent nivation zones beneath the ridge below the Srikanta peak, the paper said.

A key implication of the study is that it shows the value of pre-event satellite observations for early warning. Satellite images showed exposed ice patches persisting in the nivation zone during the ablation period, when the glacier loses ice and snow. This indicated that the seasonal snow and firn cover had thinned.

Studies from other cold regions, including the Canadian Arctic and Greenland, also show that the collapse of ice patches can trigger hazards as glaciers lose more ice and snow due to regional warming.

Identifying nivation hollows

Although rarely reported from the Himalaya, events such as the February 2021 Chamoli rock-ice avalanche demonstrate the growing prominence of cryospheric hazards in deglaciating terrain, the study said. In steep nivation hollows, such instability can suddenly release ice, meltwater, and debris, triggering downslope mass movement and related cryo-hydrological hazards.

The Dharali flash flood illustrates how cryospheric instability can trigger geomorphic changes and create hazards downstream in high-altitude Himalayan regions. The study finds that the rapid disintegration of an exposed ice patch in the nivation zone of the Srikanta glacier was the main cause of the event.

The reconstructed sequence, from the exposure of the ice patch during the ablation period to its disappearance and the resulting downstream impacts, shows how earth-observation data can help identify and reconstruct such extreme events in remote mountain terrain.

"A broader implication of this analysis is the identification of nivation hollows as geomorphologically sensitive zones for cryospheric instability," the authors concluded.

"Persistent snow and ice retention on north- to northeast-facing slopes below the Srikanta ridge created conditions conducive to ice-patch exposure and subsequent failure during the ablation season. Similar settings are widespread across the Himalaya, suggesting that systematic identification and monitoring of such zones should form part of regional hazard assess- ment and disaster-risk reduction strategies in the context of ongoing deglaciation

(Meena Menon is an independent journalist, researcher and author. She has a PhD from the University of Leeds. meenamenon@gmail.com)

THE GIST

- A key implication of the study is that it shows the value of pre-event satellite observations for early warning
- Satellite images showed exposed ice patches persisting in the nivation zone during the ablation period, when the glacier loses ice and snow. This indicated that the seasonal snow and firn cover had thinned
- Studies also show that the collapse of ice patches can trigger hazards as glaciers lose more ice and snow due to regional warming
- The study calls for closer monitoring of glaciers and argues that the focus should extend beyond glacial lake outburst floods to include smaller, often overlooked instabilities in the cryosphere

BIG SHOT


An Amazonian turtle (*Podocnemis expansa*) at Jau National Park, located in the Anavilhanas archipelago in the Amazon rainforest, in Amazonas State of Brazil, on Saturday. Riverine communities and scientists have released around 1,500 turtles into the environment as part of a programme to assist the reproduction of the species. AFP

WHAT IS IT?

Trisulphide metathesis: new avenues

Vasudevan Mukunth


The new trisulphide metathesis reaction can spontaneously make and break sulphur–sulphur bonds at room temperatures GETTY IMAGES

Researchers at Flinders University in Australia and their partners recently reported in *Nature Chemistry* a new way to swap sulphur-sulphur bonds. They found that organic trisulphides, which are molecules containing a chain of three sulphur atoms, undergo a spontaneous reaction called metathesis, where they trade parts with each other almost instantly.

The ability has important applications. The researchers used it to modify a fragile anti-cancer drug called calicheamicin without damaging its complex structure. They also used the reaction to create a new type of plastic. Because the sulphur bonds can be broken as easily as they are formed, the resulting material is chemically fully recyclable. As a result, manufacturers can build long polymer chains to create a solid plastic, then use the same reaction to unmake it back into its original starting materials.

The discovery is important because it happens at room temperature without any extra help. Usually, breaking sulphur-sulphur bonds requires intense heat or light or strong catalysts. But the reaction only needed a specific type of solvent, such as dimethylformamide, which is already widely used in industry, to start the process. The reaction is also fast, often requiring only seconds.

The team also explained how this reaction works. While most sulphur reactions traditionally use unstable radicals or ions, it uses a temporary, high-energy molecular arrangement called a thiosulphoxide. This 'chemical pathway' allows the molecules to swap their parts quickly and precisely, producing only pure trisulphides without any side products or unwanted chemical mixtures.

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

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Tariff war 2.0

'Section 301' to the fore in US tariff offensive

Last week, the US fired two salvos under Section 301 of the Trade Act, 1974 — the first, a trade investigation into excess capacities in 15 countries and the EU, which includes India; and the second, an inquiry into the use of 'forced labour' against 59 countries and the EU, again including India. As the US Congressional Research Service (CRS) report observes, the investigations have been initiated "following a Supreme Court decision on (reciprocal) tariffs imposed under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act".

With reciprocal tariffs being struck down, a new arsenal is being lined up with the same intent — reducing individual trade deficits. Section 301 is likely to replace the existing 10-15 per cent tariffs in operation for five months under Section 122 of the same Act. Section 301 tariffs are reviewed after four years. If a country is indicted under a Section 301 inquiry, the US can impose tariffs or import curbs; suspend trade pact concessions; or force the other country to compensate the US. China has borne the brunt of Section 301 tariff actions. India has been targeted under 'Special 301' on intellectual property rights, and less so under the current provision.

However, there is a growing sense that the ruling on tariffs cannot be easily reversed. The US might have miscalculated by setting off Section 301 inquiries against countries that have entered into trade deals, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Bangladesh. Malaysia has walked out on its deal with the US. Now, it would seem that countries or blocs which signed deals with the US are no better off than those that did not. Post the court order, a 10-15 per cent flat tariff applies to all, for now. In India's case, the reciprocal tariff rate of 18 per cent 'agreed' under the Indo-US 'interim framework' deal, has been nullified.

Now, the possibilities are bewildering. Probes into forced labour and industrial capacity may lead to a return of punitive tariffs. The indictments under Section 301 give the US the power to retaliate in sectors that are not specific to the area of inquiry — and this is actually allowed under Article 22 of the WTO's Dispute Settlement Understanding rules. The US perhaps believes that this may once again set off the old dynamic, of the world rushing back to the negotiation table. But countries are less likely to rush headlong into deals that may be upturned by the US on a whim. India should stick to its red lines on agriculture, data security and intellectual property, while agreeing to open up its goods sector, as it has done for other FTA partners. The joint statement allows for renegotiation if the circumstances change, as they indeed have. Geopolitical equations are fluid in the wake of the war. The Trump administration is under pressure not to destabilise US business and consumers, while the Congress too is keen to consider executive limits to the use of Section 301. India can afford to proceed calmly in its negotiations with US.

The US' global misadventures

The American electorate seems to be remarkably apathetic to the misdeeds of its government across the world

LINE& LENGTH.

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Over the last one year, the world has heard leaders of the American regime behave horribly rudely while saying abominable things about all non-Americans. All restraint has vanished. As the saying goes, the inmates have taken over the asylum and are running amok.

This is not the first time that such an egregious and brutal demonstration of power, money and muscle have been seen. America's Wild West culture — have gun, will travel — has been a constant. You only have to see what America has been doing in South America. It's beyond shameful but accepted as normal because that's what has been happening there since Columbus found it. It's now trying to do it worldwide.

In 1955, the star British novelist Graham Greene wrote a book called *'The Quiet American'*. Three years later, two hitherto unknown Americans, called William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, wrote another novel called the *'The Ugly American'*.

Predating both of them was the 1881 Indian play by Bharatendu Harishchandra called *'Andher Nagari, Chaupat Raja'*. It's about a foolish ruler in whose kingdom there is no value placed on values.

The time has perhaps come for someone to write a novel called *'The Indifferent American'*. America today exemplifies *Andher Nagari, Chaupat Raja*.

I read the first two novels in the late 1960s. That was the time when violent American involvement in South-East Asia — Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand — was at its peak. Those two novels explained why America was so hated. The theme was that American foreign policy was incompetent, arrogant and stupid.

AMERICAN INDIFFERENCE

Perhaps the theme of the third could be the sheer indifference of the American people to these qualities in those who govern them. They simply don't care, it seems, what American regimes do abroad. Out of sight, out of mind. What's truly incomprehensible is that the same people are so energetically innovative in every aspect of human endeavour.

It doesn't seem to bother them that American governments lie a lot in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives. The massive escalation in the Vietnam war was based on a complete lie, namely, the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Since 1945, every war that America has launched has been based on a lie, each and every one. And it has lost all of them.

The American people have gone along each time. Call it resignation or helplessness or apathy, the result is the same. As long as a large number of Americans don't die, they don't care what their government does abroad.

It's no excuse that the enemy state is a brutal one. It may well be, but is it America's duty to bring it down? If it was, why does America exempt so many other similarly brutal ones?

And, of course, as long as American companies make money, they don't care either. This time around it's the oil, gas and fertilizer industries that are benefiting hugely. Just look at how their stocks have performed. The gains run into billions of dollars.

The ruling regime of America always puts out a story that it is killing non-Americans for their own good and that Americans are incidental to the benefits the war brings. This is the essence of the 'just' war lie. But after repeated use, the moral cloak has worn threadbare now and the self-serving intent of various American regimes is plainly visible.

It's no excuse that the enemy state is a brutal one. It may well be, but is it America's duty to bring it down? If it was, why does America exempt so many other similarly brutal ones? Why does it pick on hugely weaker opponents, only to lose? It's an extraordinary pattern of hubris being humiliated.

WHOSE WAR IS IT ANYWAY?

One hundred and twenty five years ago, when the British empire was at its zenith, the brilliant British playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote a play called *'Major Barbara'*. Shaw suggested how the British arms industry always managed to persuade British governments to go to war and how the munitions industry was a moral endeavour because a small bit of the money it made from selling weapons was devoted to charity.

Half a century later, an American president, the war hero Dwight Eisenhower, in his farewell address, would label this as the military-industrial complex which shaped attitudes and policies in the West. Something like the UN, as various American politicians have told us, is totally antithetical to this complex. How can the arms industry make money if there are no wars?

That's also why America has military bases in at least 70 countries. While the rest of the world is acutely aware of all this, Americans themselves hardly ever discuss it. As ignorant electorates go, America's electorate is at the top of the chart, unable to hold its regime to a moral standard. To them, foreigners are fair game.

It's hard to escape the conclusion that the American voter is largely insular and morally delinquent. Unfortunately, the American president is chosen from amongst them.

PN3 was meant as an emergency measure

Press Note 3 amendment was long overdue. Chinese investments in India will create jobs and spur domestic value chains

Aditya Sinha

Gaius Plinius Secundus, aka Pliny the Elder, was not an economist, but he had views on trade deficits. In his *Naturalis Historia*, written around 77 CE, he complained that India, China, and Arabia were draining Rome of 100 million sesterces each year. The mercantilist instinct to block outflows, to restrict commerce with a rival is very old. It is also, as every economist since Adam Smith has noted, usually wrong.

India's trade deficit with China stood at \$99.2 billion in FY25. Imports from China rose 11.52 per cent to \$113.45 billion; exports contracted 14.5 per cent to \$14.25 billion. Pliny would have recognised the anxiety. The policy India chose in April 2020, Press Note 3, restricting Chinese investment under para 3.1.1(a) of the Consolidated FDI Policy, he would have recognised too. He would not have called it wisdom.

On March 10, the Union Cabinet amended PN3. The data make a strong case for why this was overdue. One should acknowledge that geopolitical concerns also drove the original note, but this column is on the economic side.

From April 2000 to June 2025, China ranks 23rd among source countries of FDI equity inflow into India, \$2,506 million, or 0.34 per cent of India's total of \$747,510 million. Chinese FDI via the automatic route was \$190 million in 2019 and \$0.6 million by 2024.

Meanwhile, India absorbed \$113.45 billion of Chinese goods in a single year. Over 25 years, India accumulated \$2,506 million in Chinese capital. In one year, it absorbed Chinese goods at 45 times that amount.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST

Six arguments against PN3's continuation were visible from the data long before March 2026.

First, the emergency rationale expired with the pandemic. PN3's own text frames it as a response to "opportunistic takeovers/acquisitions of Indian companies due to the current COVID-19 pandemic." That pandemic ended. India's equity markets recovered and deepened. Emergency legislation retained after the emergency is not caution. It is bureaucratic sedimentation.

Second, the legal architecture was incoherent from the start. The phrase "beneficial owner" appeared in para 3.1.1(a) without definition, a gift to litigation and a burden to business. Two competing thresholds immediately emerged: 10 per cent under the Companies (Significant Beneficial Owners) Rules, 25 per cent under PMLA. The Foreign Investment Facilitation Portal (FIFP) promised decisions in 8-10 weeks; in practice, approvals took 6-10 months. Investment in consumer electronics, auto ancillaries, and renewables waited in the same queue as genuinely sensitive proposals. As Hayek observed, the curious task of economics is to demonstrate how little men know about what they imagine they can design. The FIFP ran this demonstration for five years.

INDIA. Luring investments /ISTOCKPHOTO

Third, the China Plus One opportunity required Chinese capital, not merely Chinese absence. Xenophon's *Poroi* argued that a city's strength depended on attracting foreign investors; Kautilya's *Arthashastra* made the same point from the other side of the Indus. Vietnam, Mexico, and South Korea attracted Chinese FDI while gaining US export share. India did neither.

Fourth, India's energy transition cannot bypass Chinese capital. China controls over 60 per cent of global battery production and more than 70 per cent of solar supply chains. Brazil and Turkey raised barriers to Chinese EV imports while simultaneously attracting Chinese FDI in the same sector, converting trade dependency into productive domestic investment.

India, with PN3, blocked the investment while import dependency continued unchecked. Bastiat wrote that every policy has effects that are seen and effects that are not. The seen effect of PN3 was a blocked PBOC shareholding. The unseen is, five years without Chinese EV capital anchoring a domestic battery ecosystem, while the trade deficit widened regardless.

Fifth, India's overall FDI trajectory was under sustained pressure throughout. Net FDI fell 62 per cent from \$28 billion in FY23 to \$10.6 billion in FY24. Investment intentions in renewables, AI, data centres, and EVs rose sharply, precisely the sectors where PN3 created procedural uncertainty. Bacon wrote in *Novum Organum* that intellectual failure stems from selective observation. PN3's architects observed the hit. They did not adequately observe the miss.

Sixth, private capital expenditure in India remains constrained because companies lack demand visibility while large-scale Chinese imports persist. Allowing Chinese investment under controlled conditions would internalise parts of the value chain: if Chinese firms manufacture locally, jobs and capabilities are built on Indian soil even if the capital originates across the border.

Perhaps one day it will be good to remember these five years, as evidence of how quickly an emergency measure becomes permanent furniture, and how long it can take to read numbers that were available all along.

Sinha writes on macroeconomics and geopolitics

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

It's worse than a mistake

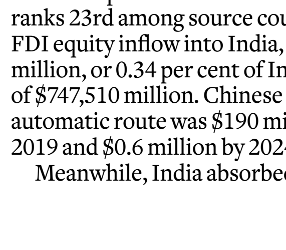
When Russia launched its full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the international condemnation from Europe and elsewhere was loud and clear. Leaders did not expect legal threats to shift Vladimir Putin or end war crimes by his troops. But they understood the importance of naming what had happened as an illegal act of aggression, and of seeking to hold those responsible accountable. The same countries have been strikingly muted since the US and Israel launched their war on Iran. This too was an act of aggression. Spain's Pedro Sánchez has been lonely in his forthright condemnation, though Norway and others also pointed to the breach of international law. Meanwhile, Australia's prime minister, Anthony Albanese, offered unreserved support and Germany's chancellor, Friedrich Merz, declared that it was "not the moment to lecture our partners and allies". LONDON, MARCH 13

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
EUROPE

Viktor Orbán Carries Putin's Water

American aid to Ukraine fell by 99% in 2025, and can Europe muster the will to fill the void? The European Union agreed in December to provide Kyiv with a loan of nearly \$105 billion. But Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is now blocking that money, and without European support Ukraine will soon face a dangerous fiscal crunch. Mr. Orbán's excuse is a disruption to the Druzhba pipeline that transports Russian oil through Ukraine to Hungary and Slovakia. Ukraine says the pipeline was damaged in January during a Russian attack. But Mr. Orbán accuses Ukraine of an "oil blockade" against Hungary, and he's now using a loan blockade to compel Ukraine to reopen the pipeline. Ukraine is reluctant given how Russia uses energy revenue to fund its war. NEW YORK, MARCH 14

BELOW THE LINE



COOKING GAS. Dealing with the crisis PTI

Gas surprises

As the news of the gas shortage began to do the rounds, a senior citizen in Chennai used his Indane app and decided to book a cylinder since he had about 10 days of gas left. To his pleasant surprise, the cylinder arrived the very next day, putting both him and the gas delivery person in a spot.

Finally ,he decided to cancel the booking, in the fervent hope that he receives the cylinder just as quickly, when he books 10 days from now!

Walking on eggshells

The 18-month period between securing RBI's "in-principle" approval for a bank to go to the next stage (transition from a small finance bank/SFB to a universal bank and from a payments bank to a SFB), and obtaining the final approval for the same can be tricky.

The road to the final destination can be paved with challenges. AnSFB, for example, disclosed a suspected fraudulent activity in a State government account with it. The chief of a payments bank was arrested in connection with investigation into alleged GST evasion.

The managements of the two banks, which received the banking regulator's "in-principle" nod, are walking on eggshells to navigate the challenges. And, the banking regulator is keeping a close watch on their every move.

No alarm over oil price

Seems like oil prices hovering around \$100 a barrel are no longer a big shock to consumers. "Whenever there are geopolitical tensions we see spike in prices for both oil and gas. Market has somewhat got used to it," said a trader.

However, oil prices of more than \$100 per barrel will deliver a larger shock to consumers' real incomes and impact spending.

"But, this is not a new normal, per se. The situation will change. When we don't know but it will," an industry player said.

Cues from Thailand

Recently, a piece of international news was noticed in the corridors of power. On March 10 a Reuters report from Bangkok said that the Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul had ordered civil servants to conserve energy amid an energy squeeze brought on by the conflict in the Middle East, with measures including suspending overseas trips and using stairs instead of elevators.

"The prime minister ordered that starting from today civil servants will work from home," spokesperson Lalida Periswiwatana told reporters, adding that exceptions would be made for officials who must serve the public.

"Well, we should do something like this here. Remember, Fit India's flagship mass fitness movement, Sundays on Cycle (SoC). Why not make it a daily routine?," said an enthusiast.

Our Bureaus

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ISSN 0971 - 7528

Children of a lesser God

The tumultuous lives of child actors

BOOK REVIEW.

Naveen Chandra

Title: Behind the Big Screen
Authors: Sunanda Mehta & Suchitra Iyer
Price: ₹599
Publisher: Magic Mouse Publishing

"None of my achievements from *Salaam Bombay!* are of any use," laments Shafiq Sheikh, whose breakthrough performance in that film had won him a National Film Award in 1989.

To make ends meet, he drives an auto rickshaw on the streets of Bengaluru and does small film roles. Shafiq, a street kid, took a ticketless train ride to Mumbai, auditioned by chance, and won a role in the film beating 129 other contestants and turned into a child celebrity overnight. That instant high and the hopeless future that has stared at him since, has broken him and he's attempted to end his life many times.

In *Behind the Big Screen*, journalists Sunanda Mehta and Suchitra Iyer, uncover the journeys of the child actors who once shone at the box office. The tales of their struggles with parental control, their highs, the dramatic falls to ignominy, their heartbreaks, their loss of innocence and the constant pressure to survive in the rough and tumble of the film industry are documented well.

From Daisy Irani's tale of her harrowing past as a child artist to the rise of Junior Mehmood, who used his chutzpah and some help from Mehmood to earn his place in the glitzy world of films, the book highlights the harsh realities of being a child actor.

Meena Kumari and Madhubala lived torturous personal lives even as they gracefully transitioned from child actors to adult superstars.

THE SUCCESS STORIES

A quick chapter details the ones who were fortunate — Sridevi, Urmila Matondkar, Kamal Hassan, Aamir Khan and Hrithik Roshan.

Khushbu, the daughter of a TV mechanic, used to accompany him to Hema Malini's house whenever he went to repair TVs. Eventually, she broke into the film industry as a child artiste in films Hema was starring in and with further patronage from Sunil Dutt and Boney Kapoor, got more films. Protesting her father's control of her life, she shifted base to the south and became an iconic superstar in Tamil cinema with even a temple dedicated to her.

Unlike Khushbu, who walked away, Sarika, fought a bitter battle to get control of her finances from her father, just like MacCauley Culkin, the precocious kid from *Home Alone* who had to fight a case in court to get some of his earnings back.

The book chronicles the fate of the four child actors of Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* as they faded from dizzy spotlights into oblivion. The youngest of them, Rubina,who catapulted from a canvas and tin roofed house in a Dharavi slum to a plush hotel in Los Angeles for a red carpet at the Oscars, with selfies with Brad Pitt and Daniel Craig, realized that life's not fair.

Back home, she had to fight her stepmother who threw her out of her house that had been bought for her by Boyle's initiative. Then she had to go into hiding to avoid media reports that accused her father of attempting to sell her off to a Sheikh in Dubai, and finally using the money given by a trust set up by Boyle, attempted to rebuild her life by launching a salon.

A psychologist shares her perspective on the toll on child actors from the gruelling work schedules, the time spent with adults, the exposure to scenarios beyond their understanding, the lack of education and effects of tasting stardom and rejection at a very young age.

Each of the tales is well researched, without judgement on either the industry or the families that pushed their children into the business.

It's a thought-provoking collection of stories of the emotional cost children pay to grow up on the big screen.

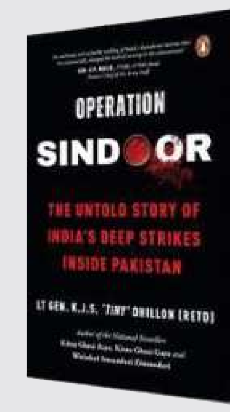
The reviewer runs 91 Film Studios that produces feature films in Indian regional languages

Op Sindoor: An insider's account

The book is an authoritative insider's narrative on how India responds to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism

BOOK REVIEW.

Col. Arun Hariharan



Title: Operation SINDOOR
Author: Lt Gen KJS 'Tiny' Dhillon
Publisher: Penguin Veer
Price: ₹599

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt General KJS Dhillon (retd) is a 1983-commissioned Infantry Officer (Rajputana Rifles). 'Tiny' Dhillon has served extensively in counter-insurgency and counterterrorism operational areas of Kashmir and the North-East

Lt Gen KJS "Tiny" Dhillon's *Operation SINDOOR: The Untold Story of India's Deep Strikes Inside Pakistan* offers a first-person, strategic narrative of India's military response to the Pahalgam terror attack, situating the operation within the larger trajectory of India–Pakistan conflict and counterterrorism policy.

Written by a former Director General Defence Intelligence Agency and Corps Commander of the Chinar Corps, with long experience in counterinsurgency in Kashmir and the North-East, the book combines operational detail, political-strategic framing and an explicit concern with narrative warfare, making it a significant primary source for the study of contemporary South Asian security.

The volume is anchored in the Baisaran Valley attack at Pahalgam. The narrative underscores the attack's symbolic and communal dimension: victims included Hindu tourists, a Christian who died protecting his family, and a local Muslim killed while rescuing others, while a Hindu professor survived by reciting the *kalma* — a pattern the author interprets as a deliberate attempt to rupture India's inter-religious harmony.

India's response, as narrated in the book, is Operation Sindoor, a joint air-dominated campaign designed to strike terror infrastructure at its source. The author's stated objective is not merely to recount events, but to demonstrate how this operation reflects India's military modernisation, technological maturity and evolving doctrine of calibrated yet firm cross-border responses under a nuclear overhang. The analytical core of the narrative lies in three key sections: the "Four-Day War", the battles along the Line of Control, and the chapter on strategic communication.

The book follows what one critic terms a "reaction–counter-reaction" framework, presenting every Indian kinetic action as a measured counter to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism rather than as unilateral escalation. This framing is central to the author's effort to legitimise Operation Sindoor in both domestic and international discourse.

Three major themes emerge.

First, the book foregrounds India's transition towards integrated, network-centric warfare. The author highlights the role of precision weapons, drones, and layered air defence, arguing that Operation Sindoor marks a qualitative departure from the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot air raid in terms of depth, scale and technological sophistication.

Second, he emphasises the notion of "whole-of-state" mobilisation. Unlike earlier episodes that were largely framed as one-off military responses, Operation Sindoor is portrayed as a coordinated enterprise involving the armed forces, intelligence community, diplomatic apparatus and political leadership working in concert to punish, deter and manage escalation.

Third, the author devotes sustained attention to narrative warfare. The text discusses how media, social media and information operations are woven into operational planning, with the author highlighting efforts to control the story of the crisis and counter Pakistan's and its partners' attempts to shape global perceptions.

OPERATIONAL, TECH DETAIL

For students of military operations, one of the book's most valuable contributions lies in its account of the planning and execution of deep strikes in a heavily surveilled, nuclearized environment.

The author describes how air strikes targeted nine terrorist infrastructure sites in Pakistan and PoJK, with Indian sources noting the use of Rafale aircraft employing MBDA SCALP land-attack cruise missiles and Safran AASM Hammer guided bombs to engage high-value targets up to 150 kilometres inside Pakistani territory.

Gen. Dhillon avoids technical obscurity, enabling non-specialist readers with some interest in strategic affairs to follow the narrative.

The juxtaposition of human stories from Pahalgam with higher-level planning discussions generates a dual register of empathy and analytical distance, which enhances the book's effectiveness as both testimony and case study.

At the same time, the work is openly normative and national in orientation. Dhillon is explicit about Pakistan's role as the sponsor of the Pahalgam attack and frames Operation Sindoor as a morally and strategically necessary response to an egregious provocation.

This approach yields clear strengths. The text provides rare, relatively detailed insight into the thinking of senior Indian military leadership regarding escalation dominance, technology integration and jointness in the post-Balakot era.

However, the same stance also generates limitations. The book engages only lightly with the potential costs and risks of the operation, including collateral damage, frictions between agencies and the possibility of miscalculation under conditions of compressed decision-making.

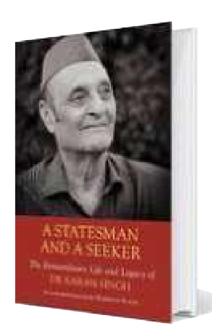
The Pakistani perspective, apart from official denials and predictable counter-narratives, receives minimal exploration beyond being a foil for Indian decision-making.

For academic readers, this means the book must be read alongside independent analyses, Pakistani sources and international strategic assessments.

Despite these caveats, the book is an important addition to the emergent corpus of Indian military and strategic writing.

The New-Delhi based reviewer is an Indian Army veteran and senior Business Continuity professional and also an author and poet

NEW READS.

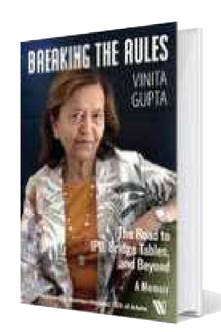


Title: A Statesman and a Seeker

Author: Harbans Singh

Publisher: Speaking Tiger Books

A story of Karan Singh's life and legacy —and his fascinating encounters with Nehru, Patel, Sheikh Abdullah, Shastri, Indira Gandhi, J.R.D. Tata, Atal Bihari Vajpayee

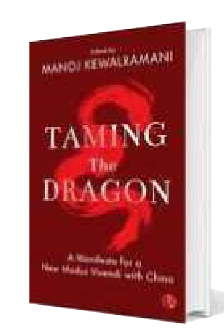


Title: Breaking the Rules

Author: Vinita Gupta

Publisher: Westland Business

Vinita Gupta's life is an inspiration for entrepreneurs, and especially women, who seek to innovate at work and in personal life



Title: Taming the Dragon

Author: Manoj Kewalramani

Publisher: Rupa Publications India

This book offers an action-oriented guide to navigating the challenges and opportunities that China's rise presents

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 16, 2006

Tata Steel eyes 79% in Highveld Steel of SA

Tata Steel is understood to have decided to place a bid for 79 per cent controlling stake in the South African Highveld Steel and Vanadium Corporation, which has been put up for sale in October 2005 by Anglo American, the controlling stakeholder. A company source confirmed that Tata Steel has begun a due diligence for the South African company.

Anil Ambani group to raise stake in RNRL to 55%

The Anil Dhirubhai Ambani group has decided to up its stake in Reliance Natural Resources Ltd to 55 per cent from below 40 per cent at present through a preferential offer of equity shares. The ADA group will be in vesting up to Rs 1,052 crore at Rs 25.65 a share.

Govt not to change norms for petroleum retail business

Companies planning to venture into the retailing business of petroleum products will have to meet the investment criteria of Rs 2,000 crore. The Petroleum Ministry has decided to continue with the existing norms which stipulate that those seeking permission to venture into retail business would have either invested or committed to invest Rs 2,000 crore in the petroleum sector over a 10-year period.

Short take

Turning India's kitchens into energy wells

Ashwin Chari

As the crisis in the Middle East deepens and regional instability threatens critical energy corridors such as the Strait of Hormuz, global oil markets are entering a period of prolonged volatility. For India, the vulnerability isn't just at the petrol pump — it is in the 'Blue Flame' of our kitchens.

While India has made massive strides in solar energy, the nation remains critically tethered to imported LPG. To survive this new era of oil shocks, India must stop treating its organic waste as a municipal burden and start harvesting it as a strategic fuel reserve.

The era of massive, centralized waste-to-energy plants is being superseded by Modular Urban Biogas (MUB). Today's systems are plug-and-play, IoT-enabled, and compact enough to fit in a parking lot. To bypass the historical failure of 'last-mile segregation', India must adopt a Staircase Strategy.

Phase 1: The Bulk Engine — We must begin with Bulk Waste Generators (BWGs) — cloud kitchens, hotel clusters, and corporate canteens. These hubs produce consistent, high-calorie organic "fuel" that can be processed at the source. Under the ₹1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund (UCF), we can de-risk an 'Energy-as-a-Service' model where start-ups/SMEs can install modular units at zero upfront cost, providing businesses with fuel at rates lower than the fluctuating market price of commercial LPG.

Phase 2: The Household Loop — Once the bulk infrastructure is stabilised, the model can scale to household organic waste. Indore has already provided the global textbook for this transition. By achieving 95 per cent + purity in source segregation through digital governance and GPS-tracked collection, Indore proves that household waste can be converted into Bio-CNG for public transport. Our urban pilots should adopt these "Indore Standards".

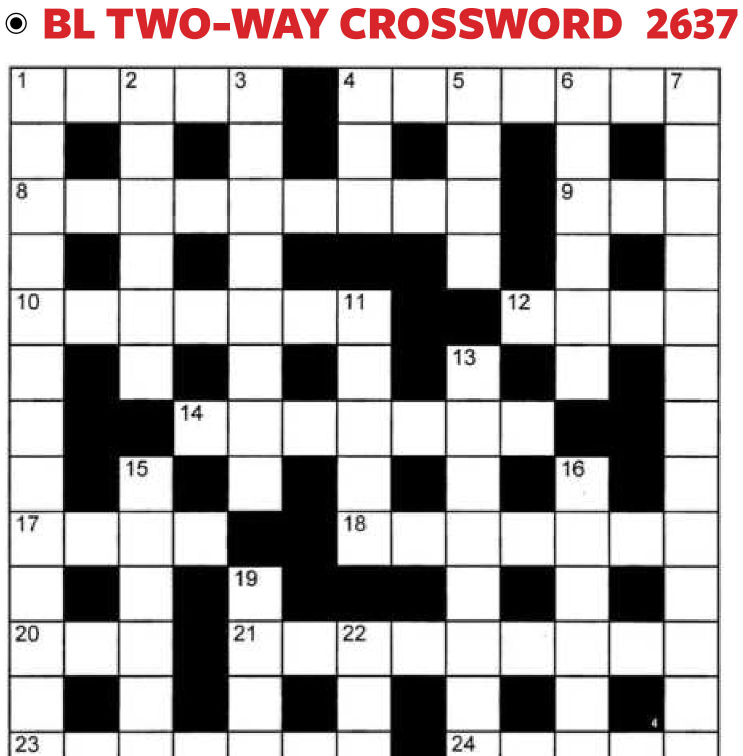
This transition should begin in Vertically Aligned jurisdictions — regions like Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat where administrative goals are synchronised.

- Varanasi: As a spiritual epicentre, its hospitality sector can power pilgrim focused infrastructure using on-site digesters.
- NOIDA: With its dense concentration of corporate canteens and tech parks, it is the ideal laboratory for Phase 1 commercial scalability before transitioning to Phase 2 residential loops.

The transition to modular biogas is no longer just an environmental goal; it is a national security imperative. Turning waste into energy ensures that India's kitchens keep burning even when global oil taps tighten.

The writer is Director of Venture Building, NTUitive (NTU Innovation and Entrepreneurship), Singapore

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2637



EASY

ACROSS
01. Seat (5)
04. Particular, exceptional (7)
08. Treatise on one subject (9)
09. A great deal (3)
10. Went inside (7)
12. As soon as (4)
14. Window-covering (7)
17. Taking unofficial leave (1,1,1,1)
18. Trappings of majesty (7)
20. Unwell (3)
21. Issue a dare (9)
23. Never-ending (7)
24. Go in for exam again (5)

DOWN
01. Preserving the memory of (13)
02. Related on male side (6)
03. Strict, Spartan (8)
04. Health resort (3)
05. Repeat another's words (4)
06. Waterlocked land area (6)
07. Parchment conferring right, privilege (7-6)
11. Discourage from (5)
13. Unique; extraordinary (8)
15. Seethed (6)
16. Sides (6)
19. Land measure (4)
22. Animal; fool (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS
01. In which to sit and preside (5)
04. Plaice's battering is out of the ordinary (7)
08. Systematic account of Morgan to hop around in (9)
09. One's destiny may be put up for auction (3)
10. Went in for the wrong tree, in conclusion (7)
12. At one time the unit contained carbon (4)
14. A drape cut in a right odd fashion (7)
17. Not where one should be serving law-breaker with nothing (1,1,1,1)
18. The insignia of royalty being a large cigar (7)
20. It is not well viewed among millionaires (3)
21. Throw down gauntlet with church and allege North is taken in (9)
23. It never stops at the terminus, the French ship (7)
24. After failing exam try again, but take time off around one (5)

DOWN
01. Serving as a memorial to come : motive, arm-twisting (13)
02. Related by males who get an A in composition (6)
03. Spartan as our orgies may be, but without energy (8)
04. Sere, parched, arid : beginners take waters here (3)
05. Verbal repetition for City district house (4)
06. Is to put ashore where there's water all round (6)
07. Settle ten-part collection and they will confer privilege (7-6)
11. Put one off Tone on quitting in Red revolution (5)
13. Is not more than one, which is peculiar (8)
15. Cooked, using fuel in part of the garden (6)
16. About to start kneading open tarts with the sides (6)
19. Some land, a hundred square metres round top of common (4)
22. Animal featured in The Glass Menagerie (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2636

ACROSS 2. Maker 5. Lime 7. Open 8. Arguable 9. Armorial 11. Harm 12. Conflagration 15. Pair 17. Prophets 19. Astonish 21. Fact 22. Byre 23. Yield

DOWN 1. Esparto 2. Man 3. Khaki 4. Regular 5. Lea 6. Molar 10. Offer 11. Hatch 13. Amplify 14. Optical 16. Assay 18. Ochre 20. Ore 21. Fed

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Polls that will test INDIA bloc

The upcoming assembly elections will see regional parties battle the BJP for political supremacy

It is rare in Indian politics for a set of elections to hold more value for the national Opposition than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Yet, in the upcoming polls in West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Assam, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) has far more to lose than the BJP. Three of these four states and the Union territory of Puducherry represent a final frontier that has consistently resisted the BJP's ideological and political campaign. Five years ago, victories in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Bengal boosted the Opposition and carried it through two subsequent years of electoral drubbing. Retaining control this time will be key for an Opposition struggling with a shrinking national footprint. The stakes for victory, therefore, are both enormous and symbolic.

Three things are noteworthy. One, these elections are crucial for regional parties and issues. West Bengal and Tamil Nadu are governed by regional parties, and the CPM, the incumbent in Kerala, is almost a regional party. Even in the only province where the contest is between national parties, Assam, the issues and campaign will decidedly be regional. Over the past 10 years, regional parties have often had more successes than the Congress in holding off the BJP, using a cocktail of personal charisma, regional dynamics, and welfare handouts. The spotlight is squarely on Mamata Banerjee, MK Stalin and Pinarayi Vijayan.

Two, after a stellar performance in the 2024 general elections, where it slashed the BJP's tally by 60-odd seats and reduced it to a minority for the first time in a decade, the Opposition's performance has been tepid, sabotaging itself in Haryana and losing big in Maharashtra, Delhi and Bihar. These five assembly polls appear to be the best opportunity for it to retrieve some ground.

And finally, these elections are also about the Election Commission of India (ECI). Questions hang over the fate of millions of voters whose franchise is under adjudication in West Bengal. ECI has slashed the number of phases to two — the lowest since 2001. Will Bengal's usually violent grassroots politics be less bloody this time? Will the increased presence of central forces (in 2021, central forces were allegedly involved in firing that led to the deaths of four people in north Bengal) ratchet up tensions? All questions will be answered on May 4.

The urgency to reform the defence forces

The defence ministry has unveiled a new blueprint for transforming the armed forces into an integrated, agile and technologically advanced military capable of deterring enemies and ensuring the strategic interests of the country at a time of geopolitical churn and expanding conflicts in different parts of the world. The "Defence Forces Vision 2047" is also in keeping with the government's plans to change India into a developed nation by 2047, the centenary of Independence. Two central pillars of this new vision are synergy among the three services in developing capabilities, planning and operations, and self-reliance in defence technologies and manufacturing, including the development of indigenous technologies and solutions that mirror India's security challenges.

This is probably the first time since India's nuclear tests of 1998 and the Kargil war the following year that a government has focused on overarching defence and security reforms in a comprehensive manner. There have been other attempts at reforms in fits and starts — such as the development of the "Cold Start" doctrine for greater nimbleness in mobilising joint forces, the planned creation of theatre commands, and the more recent move towards the creation of a multi-layered air and missile defence system in the form of Mission Sudarshan Chakra. There has also been greater emphasis on networking and the use of technologies such as artificial intelligence for surveillance and targeting, and new platforms such as unmanned aerial and submersible vehicles.

The wars in Ukraine and West Asia, as well as the limited India-Pakistan conflict last year, demonstrated how much warfare has changed, making it all the more urgent for India to speedily adopt new technologies and platforms such as drones to protect itself from a wide array of threats in a difficult neighbourhood.

{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob

Mood of the nation and national interest

What history tells us is that a sense of pragmatism has always tempered New Delhi's normative voice — speaking loudly when it cost little and staying quiet when it cost much

There is something almost reassuring about the predictability of India's Iran debate. The moment the US-Israel strikes started two weeks ago, the positions fell into prefabricated moulds with the speed of a well-rehearsed orchestra. The Left and the centre condemned New Delhi's silence as moral abdication. Government sympathisers dismissed the criticism as naïve value-signalling. The broader strategic community too got divided along its usual fault lines. Thus far, however, the debate has generated more heat than light — that, I guess, is a sign that the most important questions are not being asked. Let us ponder over some here.

Many of us want New Delhi to take a clear and firm diplomatic stance on the war against Iran. This assumes that clarity is a virtue in foreign policy. But, is it? Clarity is good when you have the moral, material and diplomatic power to enforce the position you take. For a country that simply is not in a position to shape the outcome of the war — may I add an unjust war — being waged by the US and Israel against Iran, clarity without intent and intent without leverage is essentially posturing, not principle.

The deeper problem with the ongoing value-based critique of India's Iran policy is that it is selectively applied. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, with far clearer violations of the UN Charter, with a UNGA resolution passed by 141 countries condemning the aggressor, the political and intellectual consensus in India was broadly sympathetic to New Delhi's decision to abstain, continue buying Russian oil, and decline to name the aggressor. Why? Are Ukrainians the children of a lesser god?

How are the arguments we made then — that India has a legitimate defence relationship with Moscow, it cannot afford to alienate a longstanding partner, and so India needn't take sides — logically distinguishable from the arguments being made today supporting India's silence on Iran? Those invoking international law on Iran owe an explanation for why those same principles were not invoked vis-à-vis Ukraine. All this is to say that what is actually being argued is often not a principled foreign policy position but a deeply domestic political one. So call it what it is rather than dressing it up as values.

Let's now come to the argument from the point of view of interests. Chabahar has featured prominently in the criticism — that India's silence risked a vital strategic asset. This deserves equally critical scrutiny. The port has been a "geopolitical desirable" for three decades, progressing in fits and starts, hamstrung by US sanctions, Iran's geopolitical calculations, and the inability of successive Indian governments to translate strategic intent into operational infrastructure. Iran has not signalled any intention to close Chabahar to India, and, I guess, they will not since the port serves Iranian interests as much as Indian ones.

Tehran's approach to India's core concerns has been helpful but not decisively straightforward. In the wake of India's Kashmir decision, in 2019, the late Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei stated that "the Muslim people of Kashmir are being oppressed". During the Pahalgam terror attacks, Iran's foreign minister went ahead with his pre-scheduled visit to Islamabad. Iran condemned the Pahalgam terror attacks, but it did not name Pakistan as the sponsor of terrorism in Pahalgam and decided to position itself as a friend to both sides — neutrality!

Let's dig up some history to analyse the current debate, which, to be honest, is less flattering than we might think. New Delhi's record of speaking up against use of force by great powers has never been principled in the "no matter who or what" sense. It has been selective, primarily shaped by the nature of its strategic partnerships at the moment of crisis. New Delhi rightly condemned the UK-France-Israel attack on Egypt in 1956 and called it "dastardly", but chose to be diplomatic weeks later when Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, and voted with the Soviet bloc in opposing demands for Russian withdrawal from Hungary.

Washington will always look after its own interests — the tariff waiver on Russian crude will be renegotiated the moment US interests demand it. AFP

National interest, as determined by the government in power, has always shaped New Delhi's positions. It abstained when the UN General Assembly voted to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980, because the erstwhile USSR was a key partner. During the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the government merely said it "lacked justification" and was "avoidable" because India was deepening its strategic partnership with Washington (India's Parliament deplored the military action, though). In 2011, India voted to impose sanctions on Libya but allowed Parliament to condemn the NATO attacks on the country. What this history tells us is not that India has been hypocritical (at times, it was) but that a sense of pragmatism has always tempered its normative voice, speaking loudly when it cost little and staying quiet when it cost much. The current Iran episode falls in that broad tradition. But I do think the Prime Minister's visit to Israel was ill-timed. New Delhi could also have avoided its initial silence on Khamenei's killing.

Washington will always look after its own interests — the temporary tariff waiver on Russian crude is a tactical concession, far from being a reflection of an honest strategic partnership, and it will be renegotiated the moment American interests demand it. Tehran's relationship with India will similarly be governed not by norms or friendship but by what serves Iranian interests. Call me cynical, but it is how States behave, as has India in the past.

There is, finally, a bipartisan precedent that could have provided a way out. In April 2003, as the Vajpayee government carefully preserved the growing relations with Washington, Parliament unanimously passed a resolution deploring the US-led military action against Iraq. In 2011, the Manmohan Singh government supported UNSC Resolution 1970, which imposed sanctions on the Muammar Gaddafi regime, while simultaneously allowing the Lok Sabha to pass a resolution condemning NATO's military action. In both cases, the government protected its strategic relationships while the nation expressed its mood through Parliament.

While the government may not want to condemn the attack on Iran, it could still allow Parliament to express concern about the violation of a sovereign State's territorial integrity. The world India is navigating in 2026 is too dangerous and too consequential for a foreign policy that settles for knee-jerk reactions, one that prioritises norms over interests.

Happymon Jacob is distinguished visiting professor, Shiv Nadar University, and editor, INDIA'S WORLD magazine. The views expressed are personal

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar

In West Asia, a futile war that serves no ends

Sometimes, hunters end up being the hunted. The adage aptly fits the US and Israel today. US President Donald Trump trumpeting victory in the war on Iran every other day conveniently bypasses queries about why the war is still on if he has "won" it? Evidence suggests that neither did he have any justification to start the war nor does he have a concrete plan to wriggle out of it.

Iran has amply proved the point that 5,000-year-old civilisations don't fold up in a few days of bombing. On the war's opening day, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei, was killed along with 44 of the regime's top leaders. The US and Israel thought that, like Iraq, people would come out on the streets in big numbers to overthrow the regime.

But the reverse happened.

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to mourn his death. Then, Iran retaliated against the US, West Asian nations and Israel with its drones and missiles. It happened because with Khamenei's demise, the administrative command got decentralised. Now, every area commander is free to make independent decisions according to their assessment of the situation on the ground. A visibly irritated US and Israel increased the intensity of their bombing barrage. It was done in such an irresponsible manner that on February 28, two missiles were fired at a girls' school in south Iran, killing 170 students and 14 teachers.

The new Ayatollah, Mojtaba Khamenei, vowed to avenge the deaths of these girls in his first address. He has said that he intends to punish Trump and seek reparation from him. Earlier, Iran named three conditions to end the war. One is free to term it a boast of a rank novice, but it's clear that Washington hasn't encountered such a fierce counterattack in years. This has severely dented the US's aura of invincibility.

Under the US tutelage, rulers of the Gulf States created an oasis of peace and prosperity by filling their own coffers as well as that of the western nations. The hollowness of the arrangement is clearly visible today. The image of the Gulf States is taking a beating, while the US and Israel are bleeding economically. According to a CNN report, $11 billion have been lost in the initial six days of the conflict.

The Iranian attack has severely damaged US bases in West Asia. Till now, they have exhausted one-third of the entire global stockpile of missiles. It would take years to compensate for the loss as reconstruction ability is also limited. Meanwhile, the US's competitor, China, is sitting pretty with its resources and forces intact. The situation is so dire that the US has had to summon its missile batteries stationed in South Korea and Japan. Questions are being raised now: How will the US defend South Korea or Japan against any aggressive move by China? The current conflict has established a fact that became visible during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Today's wars can't be won by heavy weapons and armed units alone. Even the smallest of countries can employ drones and new technologies to deny the powerful a clear-cut victory.

To neutralise a $20,000-Iranian drone, the Pentagon has to employ a $4-million missile. If the war continues, Israel can be devastated and the US can spiral into an economic downturn. Both the countries are facing a diplomatic backlash too. Spain has "permanently closed" its embassy in Tel Aviv. More countries could follow.

This is the reason that, with each passing day of war, global diplomatic and economic temperatures are on the boil. Trump and Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu's ill-conceived act has given a rude jolt to the global economy. On Saturday, global oil prices were hovering around $100 per barrel. Share markets around the world are in a tizzy and energy supplies in many countries are on the brink of collapse. Even within the US, anti-Trump sentiments are on the rise. Close to 70% of the people are unhappy with this unnecessary war.

Some experts look at the war as the beginning of the end of US dominance on the global stage. That may not be far-fetched. Since the 9/11 terror attack, the US has constantly been engaged in costly and detrimental wars. After destroying Iraq, its forces left Afghanistan only to have the Taliban replace the Taliban after two decades of futile military operations. Even in Syria, Somalia, and Libya, the US didn't get desired results. Long wars are not the US's cup of tea. Meanwhile, every protracted US military venture is a blessing in disguise for China. Beijing hasn't fought a war since 1979 and has focussed its energies on trade and commerce.

Now let's talk about India. Close to 50% of our oil imports, 60% of liquified natural gas (LNG) and 90% of liquified petroleum gas (LPG) pass through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran had closed the Strait to all but China. But after PM Narendra Modi's and foreign minister S Jaishankar's diplomatic efforts, vessels with Indian flags have been given special concessions.

This offers confidence, but the situation is still tense. If the Gulf region remains closed for some more days, we would start facing fresh challenges. The government is already moving cautiously. Restriction on the commercial use of gas and delays in LPG bookings are in place.

Many countries in Europe, Asia and Africa are facing similar problems. If the current conflict continues for long, it will be a second shockwave after Covid-19, affecting the vulnerable sections of society the most. The blame lies squarely with Trump and Netanyahu. However, it's not them but the world that's suffering due to their misdeeds.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

{ ABBAS ARAGHCHI } FOREIGN MINISTER, IRAN

The Strait of Hormuz is only closed to US and Israeli ships ... there are still many tankers and ships that are passing through it

Speaking to an American news outlet

HT

Trieste and the new routes of global trade

The conflict in the Middle East has ushered in a period of significant international instability. The foremost priority of the ministry of foreign affairs has been to assist Italian citizens affected by the crisis, ensuring their safe return to Italy. However, every international crisis requires a broader assessment of its consequences. Alongside the tragedy of war, profound effects on global economic balances are emerging.

The tensions affecting the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz clearly highlight the vulnerability of some of the world's main arteries of international trade. The ongoing crisis is already exerting strong inflationary pressure on gas, oil and other strategic goods such as fertilisers, with knock-on effects on global food prices. When these critical hubs are exposed to geopolitical tensions, the urgency of strengthening the security and diversification of trade routes becomes clear.

Antonio Tajani

In recent years, Europe has faced a similar challenge. Russia's aggression against Ukraine necessitated a rapid diversification of energy supply sources. Within a few months, we re-evaluated infrastructure, supply chains and partnerships to ensure security and continuity for our economic systems.

Today, the crisis in the Middle East calls for a comparable reflection regarding trade routes. In this context, the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) takes on particular importance. This is not merely a line on a map, but a potential reorganisation of logistics networks and industrial value chains connecting India, the Gulf and Europe — capable of reshaping trade flows and reinforcing the Mediterranean's role as a strategic hub linking Asia and Europe, with potential benefits for Italy estimated at up to 26 billion euros.

When global trade routes change, economic geographies change as well. New commercial corridors create new logistical and productive hinterlands: Territories that attract investment, host distribution centres and develop industrial activities connected to international value chains. If one of the main European gateways for these routes is the Mediterranean — in particular the Northern Adriatic — its natural reach cannot be limited to Western European markets alone. It will inevitably extend to Central Europe and the Western Balkans, which serve as the geographical and infrastructural bridge between the Mediterranean and the heart of the continent.

Owing to their geographical position, proximity to European markets and progressive alignment with EU standards, the Western Balkans can become an integral part of this new logistics architecture — not merely a transit area, but a genuine economic hinterland for routes connecting Asia and Europe, capable of attracting investment and strengthening regional value chains. The region's infrastructure will also benefit from this evolution, helping to manage and distribute a portion of the commercial flows arriving in Europe via the corridor.

Within this scenario, the Mediterranean once again assumes strategic centrality. Italy, due to its geographical position, naturally serves as a logistics platform connecting Europe, Asia and Africa. Our port system represents one of Europe's major strategic infrastructures — an extensive network linking the Mediterranean to Europe's main economic and industrial corridors.

Within this system, the Northern Adriatic occupies a privileged position in connecting the Mediterranean with Central Europe. Trieste, by virtue of its history, location and infrastructure links, represents one of the most natural hubs within this network. It is, therefore, no coincidence that on March 17, Trieste will host two important events dedicated to regional cooperation and emerging economic routes: The celebrations marking the 30th anniversary of the Central European Initiative (CEI) and a forum on the IMEC.

These occasions will provide an opportunity to discuss the future of connectivity between the Mediterranean, the Balkans and Central Europe, with the participation of ministers from the Balkan countries, senior representatives of States involved in the IMEC and business leaders, highlighting the strategic role of this region in developing new logistics and industrial value chains between Asia and Europe.

Strengthening links between the Mediterranean, Europe and the Indo-Pacific enhances the economic security of our continent. In this new geography of global trade routes, Italy can and must play a leading role.

Antonio Tajani is deputy prime minister of Italy. The views expressed are personal

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Plan B for tariffs

USTR investigations are aimed to restrict imports

It was only a matter of time before the Donald Trump administration resorted to Plan B to impose tariffs. Last week, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) initiated investigations under Section 301 of the Trade Act, 1974. The so-called reciprocal tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump last year under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act were recently set aside by the US Supreme Court. But the administration soon imposed a 10 per cent tariff under Section 122 of the Trade Act, which allows for up to 15 per cent tariffs for 150 days. Thus, it needs a more durable mechanism for tariffs. Tariffs are central to Mr Trump's economic agenda. The basic reasoning is that the US' trading partners, including close allies, have not been "fair" to the US. As a result, the US runs a large trade deficit, and higher tariffs are expected to restrict imports and boost American businesses.

The first investigation initiated by the USTR is against 16 countries or blocs, including India, for "structural excess capacity and production in manufacturing sectors", which are "adversely affecting US businesses". These are sectors in which the US, according to the USTR, seems to have lost substantial capacity or has fallen behind. They include aluminium, automobiles, batteries, chemicals, electronics, machine tools, steel, and transportation equipment. It has been argued that excess capacity in countries that are trading partners may result from intervention that increases domestic capacity and suppresses domestic demand. The second investigation, launched against 60 trading partners, and covering over 99 per cent of US imports (2024), relates to restricting the import of goods produced with forced labour. US laws prohibit the import of goods produced or manufactured by forced labour.

Clearly, the idea behind these investigations is to find ways to impose tariffs, possibly close to the reciprocal rate. However, this law also requires the trade representative to seek consultation with countries whose policies and practices are under investigation. This could lead to another round of negotiations. India did well over the past year by continuously engaging with the US despite a challenging backdrop. Since the trade agreement has not been finalised, India will need to continue the negotiations. In the context of the new investigations, India must convey that it is not using unfair means to boost exports. In fact, it is hard to argue for anyone that India has structural excess manufacturing capacity. Unlike many developing economies, India's growth is not export-driven. India runs a current-account deficit, which means it buys more from the world than it sells, and depends on foreign savings to bridge the savings-investment gap.

To be fair, India has run a trade surplus with the US, but economists have also shown that it is performing well below its potential even in labour-intensive goods. Similarly, given the level of industrial activity and availability of workers, the possibility of using forced labour is low. Besides, India's democracy is a natural safeguard against such practices. However, these investigations seem focused more on US interests than on the practices in other countries. So, it will be critical how the Indian side presents its case and how quickly trade uncertainties are addressed through an agreement. Nonetheless, it would be worth watching how investigation proceeds in the case of China, where the state actually directs capital allocation to build capacity and suppresses domestic demand.

Death and dignity

SC's euthanasia judgment marks significant progress

The Supreme Court's judgment allowing passive euthanasia for 31-year-old Harish Rana, who has been in a vegetative state since 2013, has significantly moved the needle. As the first judgment to permit the withdrawal of life-sustaining medical support since passive euthanasia was legalised, it removed anomalies that took the Rana family three years of distressing legal battles. Despite the progressive nature of this verdict, the lack of state capacity to smoothly enable passive euthanasia or execute living wills remains a significant deterrent for Indians seeking the right to death with dignity.

Laws on passive euthanasia put India on a par with European countries, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. India's apex court recognised the legal concept of passive euthanasia in a landmark 2011 case concerning Aruna Shanbaug, a nurse who had been in a vegetative state for nearly four decades following a brutal rape. Although the court did not permit euthanasia for Shanbaug on the grounds that she did not meet the criteria for being in a permanent vegetative state, the legal recognition of euthanasia under strict medical guidelines opened the door for progress. In 2018, in Common Cause versus the Union of India, a five-judge Bench upheld the right to die with dignity under Article 21. This judgment also set out guidelines for executing living wills so that individuals could make advance medical directives regarding their end-of-life care.

Those guidelines, however, proved so bureaucratic that few citizens chose to exercise the right. The procedures involved a counter-signature by a judicial magistrate (first-class), submission to a designated local government officer, and an evaluation by a medical board if the executor became terminally ill. In 2023, the court simplified the procedure to cut out the judicial magistrate's intervention but required the living will to be signed by two witnesses, attested by a notary or gazetted officer and handed over to a "competent officer" of the government as custodian. The problems begin here since no state barring Maharashtra has appointed a custodian for this purpose. Maharashtra appointed 147 custodians across the state only in 2024 following public interest litigation.

For families seeking euthanasia for a terminally ill relative, the legal guidelines are complex. They require the decision of a two-tier board. A primary board comprising the physicians treating the patient and two experts (with more than five years' experience) would determine the patient's condition. If this board recommends withdrawing medical care, a secondary board of three experts nominated by the district chief medical officer will review the case and make a decision in 48 hours. In Mr Rana's case, the Supreme Court also made an important change to the law. The 2018 guidelines specified the withdrawal of life support via ventilators or mechanical breathing assistance. For Mr Rana, such devices are not required because he has been on a feeding tube. Therefore, the Delhi High Court and, initially, the Supreme Court held that withdrawing the feeding tube would amount to active euthanasia, which is illegal in India. A year later, a different Bench of the Supreme Court held that clinically administered nutrition qualified as medical treatment, paving the way for Mr Rana and his family to finally find release. Beyond this individual case, if this judgment encourages states to set up robust apparatuses to deal with passive euthanasia in a timely and appropriate manner, it would prove impactful.

Automatic stabilisation for India

Inflation targeting plus floating exchange rate plus open capital account

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

In the last two weeks, war in West Asia has delivered a global economic downturn alongside an oil & gas shock. The transmission of this distress to India operates through four distinct channels: A physical gas shortage, elevated oil prices, a reduction in inward remittances, and a contraction in export demand from West Asia. This adds up to an adverse macroeconomic shock for India. How does the economy adjust to this external environment? What forces assist stabilisation? Some kinds of stabilisation require government action, while some happen for free ("automatic stabilisers"): They only require the government to watch from the sidelines.

The single-biggest path to economic adjustment for us, in this global mess, is the depreciation of the exchange rate. A weaker rupee initiates a change in relative prices, which helps the economy. It makes imported goods costlier. Faced with higher prices, the people of India will import less. They will shift their consumption and buy more from Indian firms, which bolsters domestic demand. On the external front, a weaker rupee means Indian exports are more competitive, so foreigners buy more from India. Furthermore, for products that are traded at global prices through goods arbitrage, such as steel, the domestic price is made by the global price times the exchange rate. For these firms, exchange-rate depreciation straightaway gives gains in the top line.

Let us pause to ask: Why does the rupee do all these nice things for India at a time when we need it most? Why does the rupee depreciate when faced with all this global distress? The key insight runs through capital flows. When adverse shocks hit India, global capital flows demand cheaper asset valuations in India. This reassessment of risk generates pressure on the currency market. Investors adjust their portfolios, capital flows respond, and the exchange rate moves downward.

SNAKES & LADDERS
AJAY SHAH

In these bad times, we are seeing the whole machinery of the economy humming. The capital account generates currency depreciation, and currency depreciation bolsters firms and jobs in India. It is a remarkable automatic stabiliser. The elegance of this mechanism is that it requires no movement from the Indian authorities or policymakers. There is no problem of building state capability. There is no problem of policy mistakes. All these good things just happen for free. The only mistakes that can happen are state interference in these natural market processes. It is quite something to behold — the quiet homeostasis of the price system.

Most of us in India, by now, have understood and appreciated this part of the story. There is a broad consensus that a weaker currency aids the economy during a crisis. But we are less willing to support the mirror image of this process: What happens in good times? These exact forces work in reverse in good times. In good times, we get a surge in capital flows, which fuels currency appreciation. Currency appreciation, by altering relative prices in the opposite direction, pulls back the firms and the jobs. Once again, it is an automatic stabiliser, which improves stability — through the spontaneous order of the price system, without requiring actions by government.

Overall, the combination of an open capital account and a flexible exchange rate gives us all this stabilisation for free. It adds up to an automatic stabiliser. In good times, it restrains irrational exuberance; in bad times, it staves off the doom. Many people in India like to oppose openness on the capital account and a market-determined exchange rate. A better understanding of the valuable contribution of these things in building macroeconomic stability for India will help.

Right now, India is doing badly, and we loudly see the gains from exchange-rate depreciation. Consequently, the central bank does not interfere in the market process. But at other times, it interferes in the market process in a discretionary way. This creates all kinds of problems.

The private sector has no idea what will happen when discretionary, unpredictable state action destabilises its expectations and spoils its decision making. When firms cannot model the exchange-rate regime, their choices regarding investment, capacity expansion, and currency hedging are impaired. Further, discretionary action runs into the problems of mistakes and limited state capability. The knowledge required to systematically beat the market and determine the "correct" exchange rate is not available to the state apparatus. While it sounds nice to say "of course, right now exchange-rate depreciation is in India's interests, but we reserve the right to interfere at future dates based on our judgement", at a deeper level, that is a bad regime to operate.

Economists have a grand framework for this landscape: "The impossible trinity". This is the idea that no country can have more than two of three features: Control of its exchange rate, control of its monetary policy, and the benefits of openness on the capital account. Any two of these are attainable; all three are not. If a central bank attempts to manage the exchange rate while capital flows freely, it loses control over domestic interest rates.

We in India have locked down one question. We know that we want control of our own monetary policy with an inflation target. Monetary policy — the short-term interest rate of the economy — will be devoted only to the pursuit of consumer price index stability at 4 per cent. Everyone in India has got this point.

To see the inflation-targeting reform through, we need the other two pieces. The government has to step out of activities on the exchange rate, and it has to step out of interference in the capital account. Both kinds of interference create contradictions, induce mistakes by firms, and hinder Indian economic growth. Embracing the automatic stabiliser of the open economy will give us a long-term, stable, harmonious arrangement that is best-suited to foster Indian success.

The author is a researcher at the XKDR Forum

Powerful challengers to crops

Indian agriculture, in constant transition since the Green Revolution, has gradually, but steadily, been veering towards its high-value, and potentially more remunerative, allied segments like horticulture, animal husbandry, poultry, beekeeping, fisheries, and agro-forestry. This is amply evident from the higher, and faster, growth of these sectors vis-a-vis crop farming. According to this year's Economic Survey, the average annual growth of the crop sector in the decade ended 2024-25, works out to merely 3.5 per cent, while it is as high as 7.1 per cent for the livestock sector, and 8.8 per cent for fisheries. Even historically, since the 1960s, crop farming has clocked only a modest average annual growth rate of between 2.0 and 3.5 per cent despite technological advances. The pace of expansion of the high-value segments of the farm sector, on the other hand, has been far more impressive — more than double this rate.

FARM VIEW
SURINDER SUD

Within crops, too, horticulture, which produces higher-value products like fruit, vegetables, flowers, and herbs, has been doing much better than cereals and other food and non-food crops. In fact, in 2024-25, the output of horticultural products outstripped food grain production by a sizable margin. While food grain output was estimated officially at close to 330 million tonnes, horticultural production exceeded 360 million tonnes. This included 114.51 million tonnes of fruit and 219.67 million tonnes of vegetables. This has made India the world's second-largest producer of fruit and vegetables, accounting for about 13 per cent of global production. In the case of several key horticultural products such as bananas, papayas, mangoes, ginger, and okra, India is the leading producer. Importantly, horticultural produce now comprises nearly 33 per cent of gross value added (GVA) in agriculture.

The record of animal husbandry and fisheries is even more remarkable. The GVA of the livestock sector, for instance, has surged between 2014-15 and 2023-24 by 195 per cent, posting a compound annual growth rate of 12.77 per cent at current prices. Similarly, the fisheries sector's GVA has burgeoned during this period by 140 per cent. The Economic Survey deems it as a sign of "gradual diversification of agricultural output towards high-value crops". It candidly acknowledges that agriculture's allied sectors are increasingly emerging as important growth engines and key contributors to enhancing farm incomes.

Significantly, the livestock and fisheries sectors have managed to outperform the crop sector, and that too without the kind of fiscal and marketing support that some of the key food crops have received from the government. Staple cereals, notably rice and wheat, have virtually been transformed into cash crops, thanks to open-ended procurement by official agencies at remunerative prices, which are routinely increased every year. Yet, milk has overtaken rice and wheat to become the single-largest food commodity in terms of both volume and value. Its production, estimated at 248 million tonnes in 2024-25, is far higher than that of rice, which touched a peak of over 150 million tonnes, and wheat, which set a record of 118 million tonnes, during that year.

Moreover, animal husbandry has virtually replaced crop farming as the mainstay of the livelihood of the vast majority of farm households, especially small and marginal farmers, who constitute over 85 per cent of the Indian peasantry. While income from crops is seasonal in nature, accruing after the harvest and sale of the produce, and depends heavily on climatic factors, earnings from animal husbandry and fisheries are regular and stable. Besides, even when crops fail due to drought or other adversities, livestock remains a reliable source of food and income for rural households. This apart, crop farming and animal husbandry have a unique symbiotic relationship, with the wastes and byproducts of one serving as the inputs for the other. Unsurprisingly, therefore, most farm households in India have a few cattle heads or other livestock like poultry, goats, sheep, or pigs, to supplement their income and family nutrition.

However, the livestock and fisheries sectors are beset with some formidable challenges as well. While the scarcity and high cost of fodder and feed are the most prominent impediments for the livestock sector, the paucity of infrastructure for the post-harvest management of the produce is the chief bane of the fisheries sector. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research has estimated the shortage of green fodder at around 30 per cent and that of dry feed at 40 per cent. Feed and fodder account for nearly 70 per cent of the cost of milk production. In fisheries, a sizable part of the produce gets spoilt due to inappropriate and inadequate facilities for post-harvest handling, preservation, and transportation. These issues need to be addressed holistically, and urgently, to enable these lucrative sectors to flourish to their full potential.

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Ordinary Syrians who fought tyranny

BOOK REVIEW

CHARLES GLASS

"Manbij. May God protect it," the great traveller Ibn Jubayr of Valencia wrote in June 1184. "Its skies are bright, its aspect handsome, its breezes fragrant and perfumed, and while its day gives generous shade, its night is all enchantment." These raptures eluded me when I visited the city 800 years later, in 1988, and wrote, "It was a dull, lifeless place. Either it had lost its glory, or Ibn Jubayr, like many travellers before and since, had exaggerated: Manbij was, simply, a dump."

But *Days of Love and Rage*, the journalist Anand Gopal's epic tribute to Manbij's population during Syria's 14-year civil war, forces me to recant. The heroic beauty of the city's people, as Gopal portrays them, struggling for freedom with its attendant glories and travails more than compensates for the eyesore that is its motley collection of concrete hovels and Baath Party monstrosities.

There have been many books about Syria since the earliest days of unrest in 2011, but the closest kin to *Days of Love and Rage* is "Homage to Catalonia," George Orwell's indelible 1938 portrait of the fractious partisans struggling to save the Spanish republic from dictatorship. Like Orwell's masterpiece, Gopal's account is destined to stand out as the definitive text of the war.

Gopal, a contributing writer for *The New Yorker* laboured on this book for eight years. With the help of a research team that comprised half a dozen locals — "all protagonists of the revolution in Manbij," he writes — Gopal collected 2,000 interviews, watched hundreds of on-scene wartime videos and read thousands of texts to tell the story of six ambitious rebels in a remote provincial town that even many Syrians had not heard of until war and revolution engulfed it.

For many of those who lived there, Manbij was one of the last places they would have expected a break with the regime. Despite being almost entirely Sunni Muslim, the city was seen as a sleepy urban centre in a swath of countryside largely loyal to Bashar al-Assad's secular government. But when demonstrations erupted in March 2011 against the Syrian regime's torture of children in Dara'a, a similar desert town far to the southwest, Manbij's youth were quick to follow.

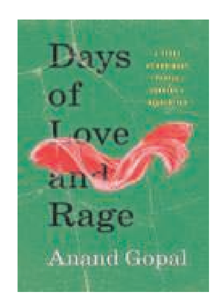
Gopal traces their initial success to the particular mix of leaders and activists who had the discipline to see beyond the early days of revolutionary chaos and imagine the promise of a new order. In July 2012, Gopal writes, when civilians expelled the regime's security forces from Manbij, celebrations included a mob breaking into the hated intelligence headquarters and rummaging through its files.

As Gopal follows his characters around the city streets, he interlaces personal dramas with political conflicts, hopeful gatherings of aspiring democrats with the torture of young idealists, citizens uniting for liberty with families torn apart, the poor fighting for a share of resources against extortionate merchants, of government apparatchiks switching allegiances to join the revolution, of local soccer and karate heroes finding themselves on opposite sides of the barricades, of hope as much as despair.

Gopal plays fair, pointing out that Baathist rule provided the peasants of Manbij with electricity, education, roads, health care and land reform that took them out of feudal bondage. In exchange for security, all they sacrificed was freedom.

After the first waves of revolutionary disruption, a civil society founded on mostly republican principles began to form. Courts made fair decisions and the local government controlled the cost of fuel. A free press sprouted. Manbij held its first-ever arts festival.

Yet coping with freedom turned out to be even more complicated than negotiating survival with corrupt government officials and torturers. By December 2012, two groups of councillors claimed the right to govern the town, one formed from the main group of rebels who had stoked revolution and the other chosen democratically in an open election. Subgroups and factions splintered and coalesced. Women effectively excluded from both councils established Women for Freedom, but that split into a rival movement called Girls of Tomorrow.



DAYS OF LOVE AND RAGE: A Story of Ordinary People Forging a Revolution
by Anand Gopal
Published by Simon & Schuster
582 pages $33

In 2013, one young activist appealed to a small group of foreign jihadists who were eager to bring Manbij to heel and took advantage of its newborn democratic ideals to do so. A new dictatorship under the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) proved worse than their experiment in secular democracy.

As they had fought Assad, the people of Manbij turned against ISIS and, with the assistance of the Free Syrian Army and the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), expelled it in 2016. The largely Kurdish SDF proved as repressive in Manbij as Assad had been.

Despite falling under tyranny again, the city's inhabitants learned from their mistakes and banished the subservience to power inherited over four centuries of Ottoman rule, 26 years of French occupation and, since 1949, local dictatorship.

When Assad fled to Moscow in December 2024, ending the civil war, Gopal and many of the town's exiles returned to Manbij. A new council, Gopal writes, "appointed officials who had been tainted by corruption allegations during the revolution." The people protested, marching and chanting in the streets and squares. "They came out simply because it is who they are," Gopal concludes, "because of what has been awakened, because of the fire that cannot be put out."

The reviewer is a former ABC News chief Middle East correspondent and the author of Syria: Civil War to Holy War?

OUR VIEW

PTI

India must think ahead of its stabilization fund

The government's new fiscal buffer could help cushion households against a near-term war shock but we need a wider policy response to address our longer-range energy vulnerability

The government's ₹57,300 crore economic stabilization fund has come at the right time, allowing its fiscal math to adjust to sudden geopolitical headwinds and supply chain disruptions. This is a textbook policy response, as the fund is designed to act as a shock absorber. It could help diffuse external economic jolts of the Iran war. These are extraordinary times and the Centre should place pain reduction for households over the accuracy of its fiscal arithmetic, even though finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman told Parliament that unplanned expenditure will not unsettle its deficit target for 2025-26. The stabilization fund, introduced on 13 March through a supplementary demand for grants, affords the government headroom to meet the war-driven spike in energy prices while holding down price-lines for families across the country. The Centre also sought Parliamentary approval for a separate fund to neutralize a rise in fertilizer prices and restore supplies for the farm sector. The fund's adequacy is uncertain, like much else right now, but shockwaves from the war and the hardships caused by them hold out some important lessons for India's economic strategy and management.

First, we must undo India's lackadaisical approach to reducing energy import dependence by aggressively exploring and exploiting hydrocarbon reserves in our own backyard. It is nobody's case that this is an environmentally flawed idea, not to mention how anachronistic it might seem in this day and age; but given the economy's reliance on oil and gas for the foreseeable future, the government should draft a new hydrocarbon policy that opens up fresh reserves for exploitation at optimal cost. The entire chain—surveys, exploration, drilling, refining and marketing—needs a close look to weed out inefficiency. While it is true that this will not be enough to meet domestic demand, it would go some way to bolster our energy security. The second must-do for reduced vulnerability is to enhance strategic reserve capacity significantly. Apart from oil marketing companies, whose stockpiles of crude and its products fluctuate, India's special purpose company set up to hold strategic reserves has a total capacity of only 5.33 million tonnes. Or just about 40 million barrels. With daily usage expected to touch 6 million barrels over 2026, that is woefully little. Clearly, we must expand how much can be held for emergency release.

Admittedly, these are medium-term plans. In the long run, India needs to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels, hydrocarbons included, by multiplying its renewable energy infrastructure. The government, to be fair, has been placing policy emphasis on a ramp-up of solar and wind power capacity, the former down to the household level. Yet, multiple glitches and vested interests seem to have held back key aspects of the green transition. Also, patchy charging networks constrain the adoption of electric mobility. The Centre must focus on easing these bottlenecks. Although its green initiatives have attracted global recognition, particularly the International Solar Alliance, New Delhi's geopolitical position needs to be clarified. This is moot in the light of New Delhi's current Brics+ presidency; it must use this to seek peaceful resolutions of all conflicts around the world, not least the one that has set the Gulf aflame. Historically, India's diplomacy and principled stand have won it wide global respect. It's time to reclaim such gains.

GUEST VIEW

Chinese engagement: India has struck an optimal new balance

New Delhi's Press Note 3 revision opens up economic opportunities without compromising security

CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE
is director general, Confederation of Indian Industry

India's recalibration of its approach to Chinese investments marks an important moment in the evolution of India-China economic ties. The revised framework under Press Note 3 (PN3) signals a pragmatic attempt to balance India's strategic and security considerations with the economic opportunities that carefully structured investment from China could bring. PN3 was issued in covid year 2020 to prevent opportunistic takeovers of Indian firms. It was a year marked by high tension after a border conflict with China.

The objective of the revised PN3 framework is clear: to enable Indian companies to gain access to new technologies, deepen domestic value addition, integrate more effectively with global value chains and expand manufacturing capabilities. As India seeks to strengthen its position in emerging sectors and advanced manufacturing, carefully structured partnerships with technologically capable economies can help accelerate this process.

India's economic relationship with China has historically been marked by a sharp imbalance between trade and investment. While China is India's largest source of imports and among its important export destinations, Chinese investment in India is limited.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) equity inflows from China between 2000 and 2020 were just $2.4 billion, or 0.45% of the $522 billion India received from around 160 countries (including NRI inflows). After the introduction of PN3, requiring government approval for investments from land-bordering countries, Chinese FDI fell to $67.35 million or 0.034% of the money India got between 2021 and 2024.

This contrasts sharply with China's outward FDI trends since 2000-01, around the time it joined the World Trade Organization. By the end of the decade, China had emerged as a leading global investor, a position reinforced by its Belt and Road Initiative.

Hong Kong, Singapore, Germany and the UK are major recipients of Chinese FDI, while the UAE and Switzerland are emerging partners. The sectoral focus has also shifted significantly—from raw material acquisition to high-technology manufacturing, R&D, energy systems and infrastructure, including sectors such as mining, metals, consumer products, technology, media and telecommunications.

These trends are relevant as India considers how best to leverage prioritized investment flows to strengthen its industrial ecosystem. The sectors identified in the recent PN3 revision—including electronic capital goods, components, polysilicon and ingot-wafer production—are areas where deeper integration with global supply chains can significantly enhance India's manufacturing competitiveness.

Importantly, the revised framework reflects a calibrated approach. Investor entities with non-controlling beneficial ownership of up to 10% are now permitted through the automatic route, without requiring prior government approval, while being subject to sectoral caps, entry routes and regulatory conditions. The investee entity must report the information to the department for promotion of industry and internal trade.

For investments requiring approval, the government has indicated it will be provided within 60 days. Crucially, the framework also specifies that resident Indian entities or citizens must retain majority shareholding and control of the investee entity at all times. These provisions ensure that while capital, technology and manufacturing expertise may be leveraged, strategic oversight and control stays in India.

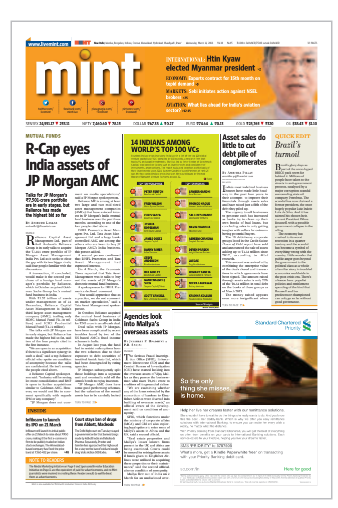
This approach aligns with India's ambition to emerge as a global hub for emerging technologies and Industry 5.0. Technologies such as digital twins, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, big data analytics and collaborative robots are expected to shape the next phase of manufacturing transformation. China's focus on R&D and strong intellectual property output through high-value patent filings can make technology partnerships beneficial to India in select sectors.

At the same time, India's engagement with China inevitably has a strategic dimension. A persistent concern has been India's widening trade deficit, now at over $100 billion. India's dependence on imports from China is particularly pronounced in areas such as industrial machinery, electronics, semiconductors and components required for the country's green and digital transitions.

Addressing this imbalance requires diversification of supply chains and enhanced domestic manufacturing. In this context, well-designed investment partnerships that promote local production, technology transfer and export capacity could help reduce structural dependence while strengthening India's role in global supply chains.

A pragmatic approach balancing economic opportunity with strategic caution is key. Safeguards such as majority Indian ownership, reporting requirements and sectoral approvals enable collaboration without compromising security. The amended PN3 comes at a time when countries are resetting bilateral relationships. New alignments and strategic engagements with restored partners are the need of the hour to catalyse India's development ambitions.

10 YEARS AGO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JUST A THOUGHT

War does not determine who is right—only who is left

BERTRAND RUSSELL

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Why the death of schoolgirls should end the Iran war

MANU JOSEPH

is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

A Tomahawk missile is more than four times the height of an Iranian child. It can carry a 400kg warhead and fly at the speed of a commercial aircraft over 2,000km. It can even fly just 30-50 metres above the ground. It knows precisely where it is going, and its target can be changed mid-flight. On 28 February, an American Tomahawk struck Shajareh Tayyebeh, a girls' elementary school in Minab in southern Iran. This cruise missile, which costs at least $1 million, was probably the most expensive thing ever to enter that school. Some children survived. But then came another Tomahawk, sent precisely to kill survivors and saviours in a tactic that is nattily called 'double-tap.' Then, according to reports, there was a third one. According to Iran, more than 175 died, most of them school children. In a video of the aftermath, scores of adults are seen trying to clear debris on the school's campus, their wails and screams filling the air.

At first, US President Donald Trump said that Iran may have struck its own school, but a preliminary report of the US military suggests that it struck the school by mistake. The school was very close to Iranian military structures that were being struck around the time. It was once a military building, it claimed, and the Tomahawk had old data.

Since the tragedy, the war has continued. The world is not so heartless that it does not care about what happened in the school. In a world that has become more practical than ever, the event does not appear to be pivotal. But even in such a cold rational world, we still need one ideal. If you have mistakenly bombed a school, you cannot say 'oops' and move on. I think 'oops' is the correct word here because America tends to acknowledge its military mistakes but rarely apologizes. Even in a practical world, killing more than 100 children attending school should override any moral case to continue the war.

Why? We must not grant rationality so much privilege that we have to answer why the accidental bombing of a school should be a pivotal event in a war.

Trump has come to represent a defining character of our age—pragmatism. He does not deny the existence of moral values, but insists that he will create his own, not defer to some council of eggheads. One of Trump's closest advisors, Stephen Miller, recently stated the doctrine plainly: "We live in a world governed by strength, by force, by power. These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time."

Such a view makes sense to a large section of the new global middle-class and the rich. Every guy who considers himself 'practical' behaves as though the idea is some great private epiphany and that it somehow makes him modern.

Why? We must not grant the 'rationality' of war so much privilege that we have to answer the question

But then, practicality is, as Miller himself notes, as ancient as us. It is idealism that is new and probably something that an animal could not have thought up—the idea that the strong should care for the weak. Idealism is so tough that most of its proponents only achieve its beta version, widely derided as 'hypocrisy,' which is still a form of decorum and decency.

I do not say that cold rational people who wage wars are mindless. The Iran war is not mindless. We can follow the rational train of thought of its central players. The leaders of America and Israel felt that the degradation of Iran in the 12-day war of June 2025 gave them a rare and extraordinary window of opportunity to ensure Iran never becomes a nuclear power, and they acted. If Iran ever managed to make nuclear weapons, they would be a potent deterrent. This is precisely why Iran seemed intent on building nukes, no matter what its late supreme leader said in his opinion statements. If Iran had such weapons, America and Israel would probably not have attacked it. Partly, Iran was attacked because Hamas, a terrorist group that it was known to have funded, launched a savage terror attack on Israel in October 2023, killing over 1,200, taking nearly 250 hostage and provoking the Gaza war that followed, which left over 70,000 dead, a majority of them women and children.

So, in my view, this is not a mindless war. It had been building up. What has changed is that Israel had had enough trying to win the goodwill of people who don't live there. Once it stopped trying, having suffered vicious terror attacks, it succeeded in Gaza the way it had never before, and then wished to destroy the Iranian regime that it has long considered a sponsor of terror. So it is not very hard to see the point of the war waged by Israel and the US.

Even so, all I say is that no matter how rational a war is, if an expensive mistake is made, the war has to end. A world where over a 100 school children can be blasted by three missiles and it is only called 'collateral damage' is not a world that is worth living in, and this too is a cold rational view.

There can be an argument against this emotional stance. You could say that if a war can end because a school has been struck, there would be sick regimes that would hide behind schools. I don't think it is an accident at all that a former military structure became a school. It may have actually been by design. Even so, civilization demands that human shields should work. If an enemy manages to hide behind children, you do not shoot. Rational warriors should find other ways to win a war.

But for the moment, it appears that we live in a world where over a 100 dead schoolgirls cannot end a war, but the surging price of oil just might.

THEIR VIEW

Are we facing an AI nightmare? Scenario planning should begin

Our best hope is that job losses are minimal and the AI industry doesn't turn oligopolistic but we can't count on this outcome

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is a professor of finance at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, former governor of RBI and co-author of 'Breaking the Mold: India's Untraveled Path to Prosperity'

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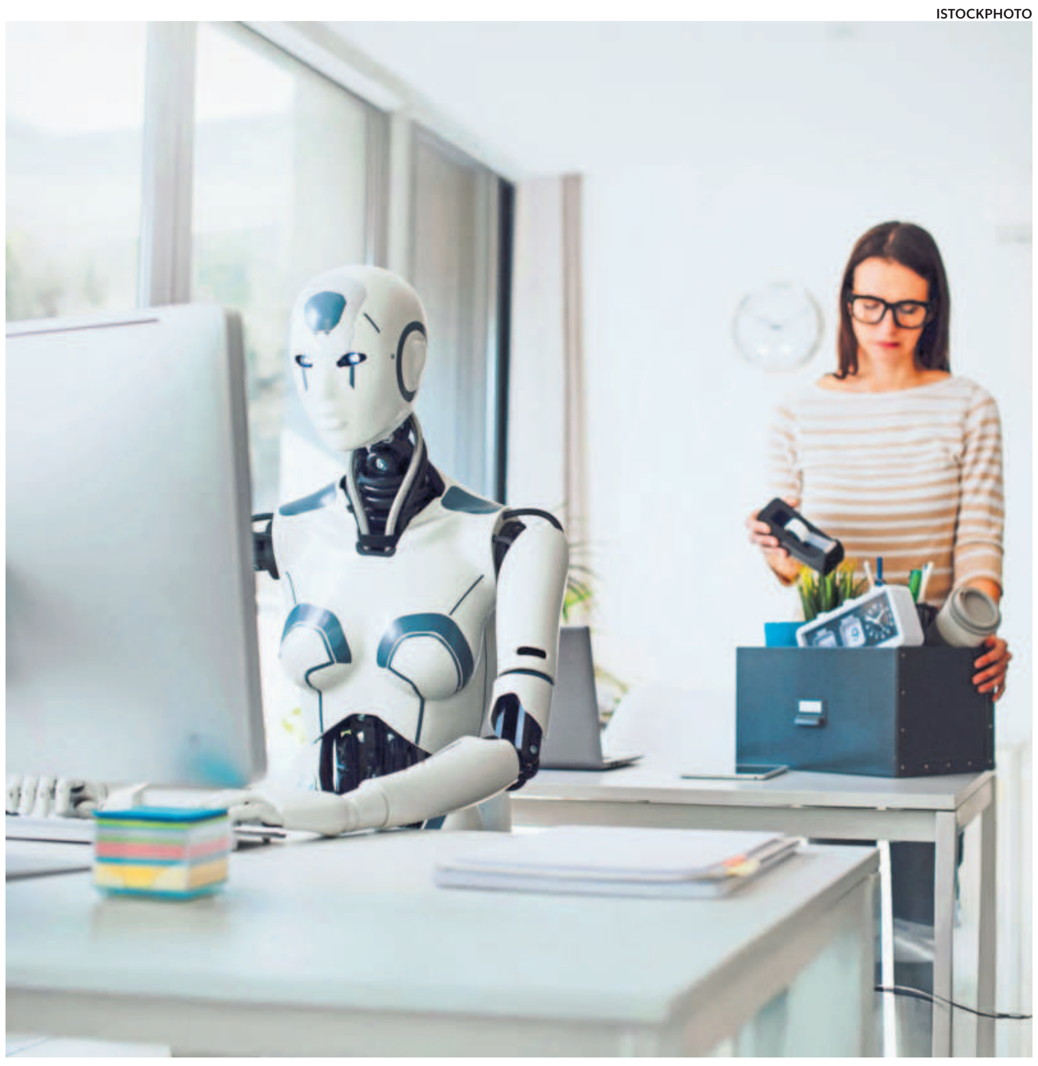

The small equity-research shop Citrini recently sent a panic through financial markets when it outlined a scenario in which AI ends most white-collar employment by 2028, with dire consequences for the broader economy. But this forecast is surely too pessimistic in some respects. Outside a few sectors, like software, frictions to adoption and sheer inertia will probably slow the pace of change. This has always been the case. For example, although automated telephone exchanges were possible in the 1920s, the last human telephone operator in the US was not replaced until the 1980s.

Moreover, the technology itself is always only one variable. There also must be processes and structures around it to assure customers of reliable service. This is where incumbents have an advantage over challengers, even if they do not use the latest technology. And even if incumbents are displaced, the new opportunities created by AI-induced cost reductions and productivity enhancements need not lead only to more AI. They may also require the work of humans—as with the internet and the rise of influencers.

Still, in some ways, the Citrini post is not pessimistic enough. Even setting aside the possibility that we might all become slaves to some AI overlord, the broader economic outcomes depend on how good AI gets and how fast; the pace of adoption by users; who profits from it; and how society reacts. Given all these variables, some extreme scenarios are indeed conceivable.

Consider, for example, a future in which a few differentiated platforms (say, Anthropic or Meta) reach a level of generalized AI that allows them to outpace the competition and steadily charge user firms high prices. These dominant platforms would generate enormous profits, augmenting the incomes of their employees (who will be few, because AI will cull their ranks) and their shareholders. At the same time, the many firms relying on their services would be willing to pay because AI would raise their own productivity, allowing them to shed more white-collar workers.

These unemployed workers would then look for work in adjacent industries where AI has not yet rendered their skills useless. But if those jobs are few, they will join lines for work as gardeners, waiters and shop assistants, further depressing wages for these occupations. Assuming that AI displaces cognitive tasks before skilled physical ones, machinists, plumbers and masons may still have work until robots become sophisticated enough. But over time, competition for those jobs will also increase as white-collar workers retrain. The pain will spread and only the AI platforms and their investors will benefit. Or will they?

Before answering that, consider another 'competitive' scenario in which no platforms 'win' because there is little differentiation between ChatGPT 33.2, Gemini 25 and the rest. Although this scenario may still devastate white-collar jobs, prices for AI will be low and productivity benefits will flow through the economy, as will the profits. Spared from enormous AI bills, user firms could cut prices and expand production to meet rising demand, implying more jobs elsewhere. There would be far less pain than in the first scenario because cheaper goods and services would take worker savings further.

Not only do current trends suggest that this second scenario is more likely than an AI oligopoly, but the government could take steps to ensure that it materializes, for example, through AI price regulations or a refusal to protect AI model builders from those who copy them. Would-be AI oligarchs should not assume that society will defend their enormous profits even as their products cause widespread job losses and hardship.

Of course, AI incumbents will lobby aggressively, corrupting some legislators to block regulation. They will mount public campaigns, using their channels of influence to argue (not entirely incorrectly) that regulation will be ham-handed, harming efficiency and innovation while aiding geopolitical rivals. But if AI-induced pain is indeed widespread, the political impetus for intervention will remain strong.

Even if the state fails to ensure competitive AI prices, it can tax oligopolistic AI providers, their employees and their shareholders to compensate the affected. The difficulty here lies in targeting. How do you identify those with supernormal AI profits? How do you support those harmed, given how hard it's been to assist trade-affected workers in the past? And how do you distinguish between an AI displaced worker and a worker laid off because of adverse business conditions or incompetence?

To avoid some of these questions, there will probably be a push for generous unemployment support regardless of the cause: a step towards an eventual universal basic income. But this poses a problem too. Even if fiscally strapped governments can raise sufficient revenues, there will still be many jobs that require human workers. Overly generous unemployment benefits would push up the wages employers must offer to coax workers out of unemployment, further reducing job creation.

Ultimately, there are no easy public responses to the problem of large-scale but not universal joblessness. Societies will have to experiment creatively, improving the safety net somewhat, while encouraging businesses to create jobs and reskill workers where possible. At the same time, if any of the AI platforms racing to achieve a near-monopoly does reach its goal, policy reactions will almost certainly impair its profits. How, then, will these companies' massive debts be serviced? Will a financial crisis follow?

The best we can hope for is a Goldilocks scenario where the AI rollout is not so fast that workers cannot learn how to augment their jobs with AI, rather than being displaced; and where the AI industry is not too oligopolistic, so that the benefits accrue to society more broadly.

Imaginative commentaries like the Citrini post force us to think about what might happen if the AI story turns out differently. Now is the time to map out the possible scenarios and start preparing for them.

Akhil Rajan also contributed to this commentary.

MINT CURATOR

A Fed that lacks independence may lead the US to fiscal chaos

It would attract bond market vigilantes and drive up interest rates

BILL DUDLEY
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America's federal debt is testing its limit by historical standards. AP

The US fiscal outlook continues to worsen. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projects the country will run annual budget deficits of about 6% of GDP per year over the next 10 years. This would push the total federal debt burden (relative to the size of the economy) to new highs, far exceeding the peak before World War II.

Several factors are at play. *First*, the US population is ageing. The number of retirees will grow quickly as the baby boomer generation retires, increasing the cost of Medicare and Social Security spending. At the same time, America's crackdown on immigration and falling fertility rates will cause the number of workers to stagnant.

Second, last year's One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) reduced corporate and personal income tax revenue considerably more than it cut spending. The CBO projects the OBBBA will boost the US deficit by \$4.7 trillion over 10 years. The CBO estimated this will be partially offset by \$3 trillion in revenue generated by higher tariffs, but the forecast may be too optimistic after the US Supreme Court ruled that tariffs enacted under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) were illegal; the revenue raised under that authority needs to be refunded.

Although the Trump administration has vowed to replace this lost revenue with new tariffs, the legislative authority that is available to do so is limited. For example, the 10% across-the-board tariffs the administration imposed using its Section 122 authority, which allows the president to impose tariffs to address "balance-of-payments deficits," has not been used before. Moreover, this authority is temporary, only lasting for 150 days unless extended by Congress. Similarly, levies imposed under Section 301 authority—sector-specific tariffs against countries engaged in unfair trade practices—are not broad-based and require formal investigations and findings before they can be implemented.

Third, the CBO's defence spending projections are likely to be much too low. Even before the US-Israeli war with Iran commenced, US President Donald Trump was seeking to increase defence spending in fiscal 2026-27 to \$1.5 trillion, up from \$893 billion in fiscal 2024-25. In contrast, the CBO assumes defence spending in fiscal 2026-27 will only be 1% higher than in 2024-25. Moreover, the war will undoubtedly generate additional costs. The Center for Strategic and International Studies estimates the conflict is costing the US about \$1 billion per day.

Fourth, the CBO projects debt service will reach 4.6% of GDP in 2036, up from 3.3% in 2026. Large budget deficits are increasing the amount of federal debt and the interest expense needed to service the shortfall. In addition, the average interest rate on the debt continues to rise as the low-cost debt issued between 2009 and 2022 matures and is refinanced at higher interest rates.

The debt service problem is one reason why the Trump administration seems intent on seizing control of the Federal Reserve and cutting short-term interest rates. Lower rates help the fiscal outlook in three ways: lower debt service costs, faster economic growth that generates more tax revenue and faster inflation that reduces the real debt burden.

Over the next decade, the CBO expects there will be a 2 percentage-point gap between the annual budget deficit (6%) and nominal GDP growth (4%). Consequently, the federal debt-to-GDP ratio will rise by about 2% each year. But if growth and inflation were each a percentage higher, then nominal GDP growth would be 6%.

Wouldn't that solve the fiscal sustainability problem? Unfortunately, not in practice. First, any acceleration in the pace of economic growth would be short-lived as the economy ultimately hits its resource limits. Perhaps AI could relax those constraints, but that is highly speculative at this point. The CBO already includes the impact of AI on productivity growth in its estimates, but it is small. The CBO assumes AI will only boost productivity growth by about 0.1% each year.

Second, if the inflation rate rose and the Fed's independence were compromised, inflation expectations would increase, pushing up yields on longer-dated Treasury securities as well as the government's debt service costs.

As the economist Herb Stein observed, "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop." Markets are ignoring the nation's increasingly unsustainable fiscal path and the absence of political will to tackle it.

If the Fed's independence is compromised, that could be the trigger that brings bond market vigilantes back, and, with them, the sort of market turbulence that would force the US administration and Congress to change course.

GUEST VIEW

Green innovation must drive our next phase of growth

KRIS GOPALAKRISHNAN

is co-founder, Infosys.

The world is at an inflection point. We have entered the age of artificial intelligence (AI), an era in which 'intelligence' is becoming cheap, fast and widely accessible. This will unlock breakthroughs across sectors: from agriculture to healthcare and manufacturing to education. But it also forces us to confront a hard truth: the AI revolution has a real physical footprint.

Training and running large AI models demands significant energy, compute infrastructure and water for cooling. Scaling AI without rethinking efficiency and energy sources risks building tomorrow's digital economy on yesterday's carbon curve. The opportunity—and responsibility—of this moment is clear: the next phase of economic growth must be powered by green innovation and AI must become part of the climate solution, not an accelerant of the problem.

That is why 'green innovation and entrepreneurship' is vital. The most competitive economies will be those that combine four must-dos: build and deploy AI; reduce the energy and resource intensity of digital systems; use AI to decarbonize the economy, including agriculture, industry, mobility and power; and build EcoAI literacy at scale.

AI's energy challenge can become an innovation engine: The energy intensity of AI is not just a constraint; it can be a catalyst for innovation. It pushes entrepreneurs towards 'efficient-by-design' systems: smaller models where possible, smarter inference, better chips, better cooling, better scheduling of workloads and deeper integration with renewables. For instance, the Indian Institute of Science's work on GaN 2D materials such as graphene and memristors is enabling low-power chips and memory that can run AI far more efficiently. Similarly, brain research at IIT Madras is enabling neuromorphic chips that deliver intelligence with a much smaller energy footprint. It pushes us towards new business models where performance is measured not only by accuracy, but by 'outcomes per watt per rupee.'

More importantly, AI can help us solve the very problem it creates. AI can improve grid forecasting and balancing, reduce industrial wastage, optimize logistics, accelerate materials discovery and make agriculture more climate-resilient. Consider IIT Ropar's iHub, AWaDH, its agriculture and water development hub supported by the National Mission on Interdisciplinary Cyber-Physical Systems. Insofar as research is concerned, AWaDH has built solutions such as a 'Digital Entomologist' (with global research institutes), which is a solar-powered AI biodiversity sensor that uses motion-sensing cameras to detect and count insect species. The data it generates feeds into a Biodiversity Index of Farms, which helps measure on-farm biodiversity over time.

The opportunities are equally compelling. A recent report by The Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) estimated that by 2047, India's 'green economy'—which includes our energy transition, circular economy and bio-economy—could generate \$1.1 trillion in market value and 48 million jobs.

Support sustainability startups and inclusive green entrepreneurship: Strong innovation ecosystems are crucial for green entrepreneurship to grow. Today, incubators are increasingly backing early-stage sustainability and climate-tech startups that build infrastructure to make clean energy adoption and resource-efficiency easier to deploy at scale.

At the same time, green innovation is not only about high-tech labs and large balance sheets. Some of the most powerful climate solutions emerge when sustainability is tied to livelihoods and inclusion. Industree Foundation, for example, helps rural women build stable livelihoods by creating women-owned collectives. It also leverages digital platforms to expand markets for climate-positive products by linking these producer collectives to global buyers, so sustainable products can scale beyond local markets. Similarly, the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India has developed a Village Readiness Level framework, building on the traditional technology readiness level (TRL) metric, to evaluate innovations suited for deployment in rural India.

AI could help India harness innovative ideas aimed at a climate-friendly economy of the future

EcoAI literacy: Finally, none of this scales without education. There is increasing emphasis on AI literacy today, but that alone is insufficient. What we need is EcoAI literacy. It would allow students to see how AI changes the choices people face, read AI outputs with a questioning mind (not blindly accept recommendations) and understand real trade-offs across nature, society, technology and the economy. It also means they can take part in shared decision-making, such as community stewardship of water, energy or public services, and reflect on the ethical and ecological consequences of what a group decides to do.

Schools and colleges can weave this into the curriculum across subjects: use real local cases in projects (water use, waste, air quality, energy bills), teach students to critique AI tools and dashboards in assignments, run simulations and debates on policy trade-offs, and assess students on reasoning, impact and responsible action—not just tool usage.

If India gets this right by mobilizing entrepreneurs, investors, researchers and educators, we can drive the next phase of growth in a way that is globally competitive and climate-positive. The age of AI can also be the age of green innovation.

N. Dayasindhu and Krishnan Narayanan, co-founders of Itihaasa Research and Digital, contributed to this article.

Opinion

MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026

IMPROVING PUBLIC HEALTH

Union Health Minister JP Nadda

Focused policy interventions and strengthened health systems have driven significant improvement in India's public health indicators

Risks for seafarers

There are prospects for abandonment if war in West Asia intensifies

BLAZING TANKERS AND stranded vessels in the Persian Gulf highlight the perils faced by seafarers as they navigate the intensifying West Asian conflict. Iran is retaliating against US-Israeli strikes by raising costs to the global economy by targeting oil and natural gas facilities and tankers with missiles and drones, and restricting passage through the Strait of Hormuz. Around 20,000 seafarers remain stranded in the region on board ships "under heightened risk and considerable mental strain", according to Arsenio Dominguez, secretary-general of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). India is significantly affected by all of this as it accounts for 9 to 12% of the global seafaring workforce. Around 22 India-flagged ships carrying about 611 Indian crew members are in operation in the Gulf. 76 Indian seafarers remain in three vessels east of the Strait.

Our seafarers, however, are not restricted to India-flagged ships as three of them lost their lives when their tankers sailing under the flags of Marshall Islands and Palau were hit. Around 18 commercial vessels have been hit since the war began with about 110 tankers stranded in the Gulf. To be sure, the Indian government is concerned about this problem and is in regular touch with Iranian authorities to allow the safe passage of our merchant vessels through the Strait. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken to Iran's President, Masoud Pezeshkian. So, too, has External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar with his Iranian counterpart, Seyed Abbas Araghchi. Last week, two India-flagged LPG tankers were allowed to cross the Strait. Although there are positive signals in this regard from Iran's envoy in India, a different take was provided by the representative of Iran's supreme leader who stated that the world's leaders have to come together to convince the US President to end this unjust war.

Perhaps it is realistic to operate on the basis that the Strait will remain closed as a "tool of pressure" as indicated by the new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei. Although the Directorate General of Shipping has repatriated 253 stranded seafarers, their plight is actually much more complicated as "they have no option not to serve as there are no facilities to relieve them and its unlikely that replacements are willing to travel to the Gulf", according to K Sanjiv, a merchant navy officer with five decades of experience.

The risks for seafarers in the Gulf region thus are considerable. Although there are standard operating procedures and advisories from the DG of Shipping urging vessels entering high–risk areas to undertake comprehensive ship-shore security drills covering multiple threat scenarios, the reality is that when there is a missile or drone alert, the crew have no option but to seek shelter below the main deck and hope there isn't a direct hit. If the West Asia conflict gathers momentum, the biggest risks for Indian seafarers are of abandonment when ship owners cease all support to their crew and ships. India has the dubious distinction of globally topping the list of abandoned seafarers for the third year in a row last year. Most of them are in vessels flying flags of countries with scant respect for protecting labour rights. Sadly, this is also in prospect this year as indicated by the recent episode of 20 Indian seafarers stranded on a vessel near Iran's Bandar Abbas amid active bombings as they posted social media appeals for urgent rescue.

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

POLICYMAKERS NEED TO DIVERSIFY IMPORT OF FERTILISERS BEYOND THE GULF & REFORM THE SECTOR

A trigger for reform

ASHOK GULATI
RITIKA JUNEJA
Respectively Distinguished Professor and Research Fellow at ICRIER

THERE IS A famous saying, "Never let a serious crisis go to waste." India's landmark economic reforms in 1991 were the result of a balance-of-payments crisis. And today, the country sits on comfortable foreign exchange reserves of over USD 728 billion, providing a good cushion to absorb external shocks. But the ongoing war in the Gulf between Iran and Israel plus the USA has sparked new vulnerabilities of energy and fertiliser supplies. This calls for strategic thinking and reforms in the fertiliser sector to ensure food security.

The escalating war is threatening major disruption in energy and fertiliser supplies. The risks extend to vital maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial share of global oil and gas trade passes. Any disruption in this corridor quickly ripples across commodity markets. Oil and gas, and by extension fertilisers, especially urea, have already felt the tremors.

For India, crude oil is the largest import item, with about 88% of its requirement being met through imports. In financial year 2024-25 (FY25), India imported roughly 243 million tonnes (mt) of crude oil worth \$137 billion, nearly half of which is sourced from West Asia via the Strait of Hormuz. Just before tensions escalated in late February, Brent crude averaged \$66 per barrel, but within two weeks prices spiked to around \$120 per barrel before settling near \$100 on Friday. India's exposure extends to cooking gas as well. The country imports about two-thirds of its liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) (31.3 mt in FY25), much of it moving through the same corridor. As supplies tightened and import costs rose, domestic LPG prices were raised by ₹60 per cylinder.

India's liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports have also been hit. In FY25, the country imported about 27 mt of LNG—roughly half of its requirement—worth around \$15 billion, with Qatar accounting for nearly half of these imports. Disruptions across West Asia pushed Asian spot LNG prices from around \$10/metric million British thermal unit (mmBtu) to \$24-25/mmBtu within two weeks. Invoking the Essential Commodities Act, the government has prioritised gas allocation for households and transport, leaving fertiliser producers with only 70% of their usual six-month consumption. This is likely to adversely hit domestic production of urea.

This matters because India's food security hinges heavily on fertiliser security, and urea production is closely tied to global energy markets. India consumes about 40 mt of urea annually, but domestic output has stagnated at around 30 mt, forcing rising imports that could exceed 10 mt in FY26, nearly double the 5.6 mt imported in FY25. Over 60% of these imports come from the Gulf region. Following the escalation in war, global urea prices surged from about \$484/tonne to \$652/tonne within 10 days—a 35% jump—and may rise further as uncertainty persists. The dependence runs deeper: natural gas, the key feedstock for urea, is largely imported, supplying about 85% of the gas used in domestic production. Once both direct urea imports and imported gas feedstock are considered, India's effective import dependence in urea rises to about 55%.

Dependence is similarly high for other fertiliser inputs. Over 80% of ammonia and sulphur imports come from the Gulf, while around 40% of diammonium phosphate imports are sourced from Saudi Arabia. India also relies almost entirely on imports for potassic fertilisers (MOP) and 90-95% for phosphatic raw materials (rock and acid). Once the import content of intermediates and feedstocks is considered, India depends on global fertiliser supply chains for 68-70% of its requirements (as of FY25), leaving the sector—and India's food security—highly vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions, price volatility, and supply shocks.

> **Direct transfer of fertiliser subsidies to farmers and gradual deregulation of macro-nutrient prices would encourage balanced fertiliser use of N, P, and K, while reducing fiscal pressures**

India's also exports agri-products to West Asia (\$11.8 billion in FY25), which are under strain. But the biggest worry is about oil, gas, and fertiliser imports. If this crisis continues beyond a month or so, our fertiliser subsidy bill in FY27 is likely to cross ₹2 lakh crore, against a budgeted figure of ₹1.7 lakh crore. This calls for an immediate action to reform this sector.

How do we do it? First, India must diversify its imports beyond the Gulf countries. Complementing this, India should expand overseas investments in fertiliser minerals and production assets while accelerating domestic exploration of fertiliser resources. Establishing a dedicated fertiliser investment fund of say \$1 billion could enable Indian companies to acquire equity stakes in global mining projects and finance domestic exploration, shifting India from reactive import dependence to investment-led supply security.

Second, policy reforms in fertiliser pricing and subsidies are essential and overdue. Direct transfer of fertiliser subsidies to farmers and gradual deregulation of macro-nutrient prices would encourage balanced fertiliser use of N, P, and K (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium), while reducing fiscal pressures. It will plug leakages too, which are substantial (about 20%). If such reforms appear too ambitious in the short run, an alternative would be to put quantitative restrictions on sales based on farm size, cropping patterns, and recommended nutrient doses issued by state agricultural universities. With the government already developing AgriStack, implementing such targeted allocation mechanisms seems feasible.

Third, if this is also not possible, then at least bring urea under the Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) framework, aligning its price with other fertilisers (P and K) and promoting more balanced nutrient application.

In essence, policymakers need to work on two fronts: first diversify import of fertilisers and their feedstocks from countries other than the Gulf region; and second, reform the fertiliser sector either through Direct Benefit Transfer and decontrolling prices or put quantitative restrictions or bring urea under the NBS scheme. If Prime Minister Narendra Modi can convert this crisis into an opportunity to reform the fertiliser sector, it will bring rich rewards. But will he bite the bullet?

Views are personal

The biggest oil risk is at the bottom of the barrel

IN THE OIL industry, fuel oil is known as the bottom of the barrel. It's typically cheap, unloved, and, crucially, comes from the bottom of a petroleum-distillation tower — the tall piece of refining kit where crude gets heated and cracked into multiple petroleum products. But the Iran war has turned the industry upside down. Fuel oil is now an ultra-expensive commodity — and that's bad news for the global economy.

Until now, the energy market has weathered the war shock reasonably well, with oil hovering at around \$100 a barrel. But the situation with fuel oil is concerning — and it's not receiving enough attention. Overshadowed by the other stuff coming higher up from the distillation process — diesel, jet fuel, and, above all, gasoline — fuel oil plays a huge role in the modern world, powering the workhorses of globalisation: container ships.

The problem isn't just that it's getting crazy expensive; the real worry is that some key ports may run dry, forcing all kinds of ships, from container vessels to bulk carriers, to halt. The shipping industry, which is typically conservative in its public pronouncements, is sounding the alarm. Vincent Clerc, the chief executive officer of shipping giant AP Moller – Maersk A/S, told French newspaper *Le Monde* this week: "If we do nothing, we risk ending with dry supply points in Asia."

Based on my industry soundings, fuel-oil supply is very low in two of the top-three bunkering locations: Singapore, and Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. Problems are starting to emerge in several other places within the top 10, although supply is good in Europe and American ports. The issue is exacerbated because the world has already used its main lines of defense against an oil shock: bypassing refineries, and tapping strategic petroleum reserves. Going forward, only demand destruction via higher prices, can keep consumption in line with available supply.

Wall Street closely monitors the price of crude, particularly a grade called West Texas Intermediate (WTI) that trades in New York and a second called Brent traded in London. It's a benchmark followed by everyone, from bond investors to central bankers. But only oil refiners buy crude — and are therefore exposed to its price. The real world purchases refined petroleum products such as gasoline, diesel, and fuel oil, so it's those post-refinery prices that matter to us.

JAVIER BLAS
Bloomberg

Typically, the price of crude and the price of refined products move in tandem, with the latter a bit higher to take into account refining costs. But times aren't normal. Right now, the traditional relationship between crude and fuel oil is broken. Brent is hovering at \$100 barrel, suggesting that fuel oil prices shouldn't be much higher, even once you add the average refining margin. In reality, they are a lot more expensive.

In Singapore, fuel oil is trading at \$140 a barrel. In Fujairah, a key refuelling port just outside the Strait of Hormuz, it's changing hands at nearly \$160; and some flavours that meet stricter environmental standards fetch as much as \$175. Those are unheard of prices, well above the peaks seen in 2022 and 2008. And good luck getting your hands on a barrel: Traders are quoting prices over the phone valid for just a few minutes: on a take-it-now-or-miss-out basis.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz is to blame. The waterway isn't just a chokepoint for millions of barrels of crude; it's also the conduit for lots of fuel oil that's refined in Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Emirati plants. Together, those refineries produce 20% of the world's fuel oil that's traded internationally, according to the International Energy Agency; the Persian Gulf is far less important for other products like gasoline.

Moreover, Persian Gulf crude yields, on average, more fuel oil than crude from other regions, compounding the problem. Take Arab Light, the flagship Saudi barrel. Put it into a distillation column, and about 50% of what comes out is so-called "residue," the stuff used to make fuel oil, compared with the 33% from a barrel of WTI. Even when refiners in Asia find alternative crude from, say, the US, or even Russia, the result is less fuel oil output than before.

The shipping and oil industries are rushing to alleviate the problem, shuttling fuel oil from ports in Europe (Rotterdam and Gibraltar, for example) and America (Long Beach and Panama) into Asia. But the longer the Strait of Hormuz remains closed, the higher the risk that ships won't have sufficient fuel to keep traveling. It may come from the bottom of the barrel, but fuel oil can still become the world's top problem.

Is the Asian century about to be born?

JAMAL MECKLAI
CEO, Mecklai Financial
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India has tried not to antagonise Trump while building trade bridges with the EU, Canada, Japan, and several others; but, like us, all of these remain hostage to Trump's America

TODAY, INDIA'S FRAILTIES have been laid bare by the US and Israeli attacks on Iran and the fallout on the region (and, indeed, the world)—we have increasing difficulties with energy costs, trade, and, of course, security, all of which will continue to exacerbate our endemic problems with jobs, education, healthcare, and, obviously, environment. The situation is compounded by Donald Trump's almost continuous humiliations trying to paint India as a servile client state.

India has responded sensibly, trying not to antagonise Trump too much, while building trade bridges double quick with the European Union (EU), Canada, Japan, and several other countries; however, like us, all of these remain hostage to the big bad wolf of Trump's America. With oil prices having nearly touched \$120 and trade routes under pressure, there seems to be little doubt that we will suffer lower growth and higher inflation (rather like the rest of the world).

We need to think out of the box, and I called upon ChatGPT to produce a report based on the prompt: "What if India and China became close allies rather than wary rivals". Here is its response:

"If India and China became close strategic allies instead of rivals, it would be one of the most transformative shifts in global geopolitics since the Cold War. Together, India and China would represent:

- ~2.8 billion people (about 35% of humanity)
- Two of the world's fastest-growing large economies
- Two nuclear powers
- Huge manufacturing and technology bases

The alliance would create a new economic centre of gravity. In addition to the fact that the consumer market would be impossible to ignore by any global company, operationally, too, there are great synergies. China dominates manufacturing, while India leads in services and software. Together they could control large portions of global production in electronics, pharmaceuticals, artificial intelligence and tech services, and green energy. The association would also become a technology and innovation powerhouse—China is strong in hardware, electric vehicles, telecommunications, advanced manufacturing, while India excels in software, IT services, startups and digital platforms. Together they could rival Silicon Valley and other Western tech centres.

Of course, the economic balance between the two is not symmetrical. China's economy is currently several times the size of India's and far more industrialised. This means that, in the early stages at least, India would probably be the larger economic beneficiary. Chinese capital, infrastructure expertise, and manufacturing technology could accelerate India's industrial development in ways that would otherwise take decades. Integration into Chinese supply chains alone would represent a significant step up the ladder for Indian industry.

> **Indeed, ChatGPT also suggested that a China-India-Russian alliance would make the game even stronger**

China, however, would gain something equally valuable, though less immediately visible: strategic breathing room. Much of the geopolitical pressure on China today comes from a loose network of countries that are wary of its rise—among them the United States, Japan, Australia, and, not least, India itself. If India were to shift from cautious balancing to genuine partnership, that strategic geometry would change quite dramatically. One of the largest potential counterweights to China would effectively disappear.

Global trade routes could shift. China's infrastructure strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative, combined with India's strategic control of Indian Ocean shipping lanes, would give the alliance enormous leverage over global trade. They could influence routes connecting Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia.

From a military perspective, too, strategic coordination between China, with one of the world's most advanced militaries, and India, with one of the world's largest armed forces, would create an enormous military presence across both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.

Instead of a world dominated by Western alliances, global politics might evolve into a multipolar system with several major power centres—the United States and its allies, a China-India partnership, European Union states, and, possibly, Russia. (Indeed, ChatGPT also suggested that a China-India-Russian alliance would make the game even stronger, bringing Russia's natural resources and, of course, its military strengths to the table.)

Importantly, the very fact that ChatGPT came up with this analysis points to the fact that many people have already been thinking about it—ChatGPT, after all, is merely a tool to collate and present information from existing sources. Indeed, Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, echoing this analysis, said in Beijing recently, "India and China should view each other as partners not rivals."

It feels like the Asian century is, indeed, about to be born.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Climate preparedness

Apropos of "Return of El Niño" (*FE*, March 14), the prospect of an El Niño episode should be seen not merely as a seasonal weather fluctuation but as a signal of the deeper climate volatility increasingly shaping India's agricultural and economic landscape. Even if overall monsoon rainfall remains within the "normal" range, the real challenge now lies in its uneven distribution, prolonged dry spells followed by short bursts of intense rainfall that strain farm productivity, irrigation systems, and water storage infrastructure. Policymaking therefore needs to move beyond aggregate rainfall figures and towards managing spatial and temporal variability through stronger district-level forecasting and real-time digital advisories for farmers. As climate phenomena increasingly interact with long-term global warming, India must weave climate science more closely into agricultural planning and economic policy.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Domino effect

The West Asia turmoil has crept quietly yet deeply into India's kitchen, clouding its cloud ambitions. The crisis exposes India, the most populous nation, as a vulnerable commuter on the global energy path. Every tremor in oil supply shakes inflation, household budgets, and industrial plans alike. More critically, energy uncertainty clouds India's pitch to artificial intelligence hyperscalers scouting for power-hungry data hubs. Stable, affordable electricity is the real magnet for AI infrastructure, not just talent and market size. The need of the hour is to secure resilient energy routes and accelerate local clean power.

—PV Prakash, Mumbai

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New Delhi Gets Real About Leh Concerns

Wangchuk's release sign of a mature state

Some facts first. Sonam Wangchuk had been detained under National Security Act since September 26, 2025, for allegedly acting in a manner prejudicial to the security of the state and public order amid protests that year over demands for 'greater political autonomy' and 'constitutional safeguards' for Ladakh. On Friday, GoI decided to revoke his 6-mth detention — three days before Supreme Court is scheduled to hear a habeas corpus petition. The decision is as welcome as it's a sign that India may be recognising that critique and dissent may not be always the same as being an 'enemy of the state'.

Roots of Ladakh's discontent go back to Article 370 changes in 2019, when the state of J&K was bifurcated into two UTs — Jammu & Kashmir with a legislature, and Ladakh without one. The shift left Ladakh under the thrall of central administration, and intensified anxieties about political representation, jobs and autonomy — things 'political' for Delhi, but quite practical for people on the ground. With over 90% of Ladakhis belonging to STs, demands have grown for safeguards through inclusion in the 6th Schedule that provides autonomous district councils in several NE states with powers over land, forests, local governance and cultural preservation. In 2019, National Commission for Scheduled Tribes recommended that Ladakh be brought under it. Yet, GoI sought to maintain status quo, allowing frustrations to fester. Protests intensified in 2025, with Wangchuk emerging as one of the most voluble voices. Yes, the Constitution envisages 6th Schedule primarily for the NE. But institutional innovation is possible when political will exists.

In border regions like Ladakh, governance must not rely solely on administrative control but also rest on legitimacy and consent. New Delhi risked eroding trust for too long for something that was hardly existential. Wangchuk's release offers an opportunity. But rebuilding confidence will need dialogue, credible institutional assurances and a willingness to revisit the region's constitutional questions.

Stabilisation Fund Can Be a Shock Absorber

India's economic stabilisation fund is a timely initiative, and GoI can take credit for creating it without undue fiscal stress. The extra cushion against external shocks will come in handy while negotiating the crisis in West Asia. It helps to sequester the money when the economy is going through a period of robust growth and low inflation. A fund dedicated to tiding over temporary volatility in commodity markets frees up policy space for longer-term macroeconomic management. The anti-volatility fund will be a worthwhile addition to the counter-cyclical policy toolkit at a time when global shocks are rising to coincide with India's increasing exposure to them.

Since the beginning of the decade, GoI has had to negotiate a pandemic, energy and food shocks, as well as tariff wars. The incidence of external shocks is climbing as structural adjustments relieve domestic economic pressure. Improved welfare delivery and accelerated capex have made the economy more resilient, yet it still depends on imports for food, energy and manufacturing inputs. Rising productivity exposes the economy more to resource inadequacy, whether natural gas or rare earth minerals. A financial backstop is useful as the economy draws up its energy transition pathways.

Stabilisation funds have a successful record across the world, and India's experience is likely to be favourable. Principally, they address the need for risk mitigation without slackening fiscal discipline or threatening macroeconomic stability. They also complement efforts to develop storage infrastructure across commodities that make up a sizeable portion of India's trade with the world. Setting up the fund is, of course, the easy bit. Putting it to the best use takes some effort.

THINK ABOUT IT

Not too 'meh', not too little, and you just may be roused to do great things

Aim for 'Goldilocks Boredom' Sweet Spot

'Goldilocks boredom' is the elusive porridge of the mind — neither scalding with overstimulation, nor icy with nothing to interest you, but just warm enough to make you wonder if you should invent a new alphabet, or knit a hat out of pure coding. Too much boredom, and you're trapped in a doom-scrolling rut, thumbing through cat memes until your paws wear off. Too little, and in today's over-saturated content-splashing world, you're binge-watching streaming shows about people binge-watching streaming shows.

But the sweet spot is where the magic happens. It's that zone when you've stared at the ceiling long enough to notice it could be the Sistine Chapel. But not so long that you start naming the cracks after *gotras*. In this liminal zone, creativity blossoms. 'Goldilocks boredom' is the fertile soil where innovation germinates. It's the perfect-temp — both temperature and temperament — at which you're restless enough to doodle, but not restless enough to Google 'how to become a professional doodler'. It's the 'meh' that nudges you to write absurdist editorials in a business paper about boredom itself, instead of refreshing your inbox for the 47th time. So raise your glass to this delicate equilibrium. Not too much, not too little — just enough to make you eccentric enough to become the inventor of, say, the world's first self-ironing sock.

While war is 'taken seriously', questioning its trumped-up narrative is made to feel naïve

Takes Guts to Wage Peace

Amit Kapoor & Meenakshi Ajith

In 1971, John Lennon asked the world to imagine something simple: no countries, nothing to kill or die for. The lines are often dismissed as sentimental optimism of a musician who didn't have to manage borders or armies. Yet, its power lies in the discomfort it produces.

The modern world can imagine almost anything. But what it struggles to imagine is peace. We organise our politics around armies, deterrence and enemies with such practised seriousness that questioning the arrangement feels naïve. Violence becomes almost respectable and a kind of guiltless carnality of nations, where power pursues its instincts without the burden of moral embarrassment.

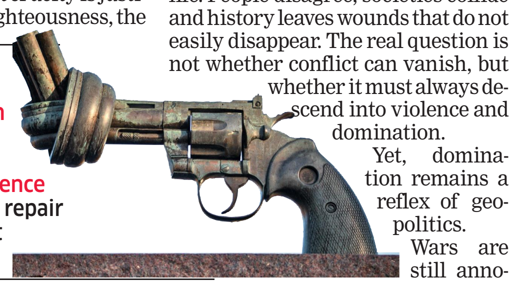
There is even grim humour in how confidently the language of geopolitics sanitises this reality. Wars are described as 'operations,' invasions as 'stabilisation' and human suffering as 'collateral damage.' This shrinking of language has also quietly shrunk the way we think about peace itself.

Gandhi, Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr lived in different centuries and confronted different crises. But they arrived at a similar instinctive truth: peace cannot grow out of humiliation. Gandhi saw violence not merely as a tactic, but also as something that corrupts the moral fabric of a society. The moment cruelty is justified in the name of righteousness, the cause begins to change shape.

There is a Plan B

Lincoln came to a similar realisation. Leading a nation through its bloodiest conflict during its civil war, he understood that military victory might end the fighting while leaving the deeper war alive in memory, resentment and wounded pride. King Jr, perhaps, exposed the most subtle illusion of all: order and peace are the same thing. A society can look calm on the surface while injustice sits quietly at its centre. That calm, King Jr warned, is not peace. It's oppression that has learned good manners.

Their ideas point toward a much deeper understanding. Conflict is unavoidable and is woven into human life. People disagree, societies collide and history leaves wounds that do not easily disappear. The real question is not whether conflict can vanish, but whether it must always descend into violence and domination.



Peace does not emerge automatically when violence pauses. It requires dignity, legitimacy and patience to allow societies to repair themselves without humiliation

Yet, domination remains a reflex of geopolitics.

Wars are still announced with a familiar promise of making the world safer. The Iraq war was justified in those terms: removing Saddam Hussein, eliminating the threat of WMDs and stabilising the region. Two decades later, we wonder: safer for whom, and in what sense?

As per the 2025 Global Peace Index, there are now 59 active state-based conflicts worldwide, the highest number since WW2, with 78 countries involved in conflicts beyond their borders. Military spending has climbed to roughly \$2.7 tn while peacekeeping and peacebuilding account for 0.52% of that sum.

What follows from this is a more difficult question: by what authority does one country decide that another people's ruler must be removed? However flawed or dangerous a leader may be, the political bond between a society and its government is not incidental. It's not only a matter of sovereignty in the legal sense, but also a matter of historical agency. A population must live with the consequences of its rulers. But it must also retain the right to alter that fate from within.

Once external power assumes the right to dismantle regimes, it does not merely remove a leader, it unsettles the political life beneath. Institutions hollow out, legitimacy fractures, grievance deepens. These are not temporary costs. These are costs that children inherit as mistrust, humiliation and disorder. That is why imposed solutions often fail: they mistake submission for consent.

In Iraq and Syria, the war launched in the name of stability has left between 5.5 lakh and 5.8 lakh people dead, with more than 7 mn refugees and nearly 8 mn internally displaced. This is a society broken not only in its present, but in its continuity. Even the aggressor does not emerge intact.

Brown University's 'Costs of War' project estimates that the US's post-9/11 wars have cost about \$8 tn. More than 7,053 US service members have died in those wars and at least 4x service members and veterans have died by suicide as in combat while the long tail of caring for those veterans is expected to cost another \$2.2 to \$2.5 tn by 2050.

That is the fraud at the heart of war's promise. The invaded country inherits ruins, the invading country inherits debt, damaged veterans and the moral habit of calling devastation strategy.

If anything unites arguments of Gandhi, Lincoln and King Jr, it's a difficult truth: peace does not emerge automatically when violence pauses. Nor does it grow out of domination. It requires dignity, legitimacy and patience to allow societies to repair themselves without humiliation.

Yet, modern geopolitics knows how to organise force, remove regimes, redraw alignments and call the aftermath stability. What it struggles with is the quieter work that sustains peace: trust strong enough to outlive victory and institutions strong enough to outlive resentment. That may be the real paradox of our time. Humanity has become sophisticated at preparing for war while peace remains something we speak about in abstractions. Perhaps the most unsettling thought is this: we may not lack the means to achieve peace, but we may lack the imagination to take it seriously.

Kapoor and Ajith are chair and development policy lead, respectively, Institute for Competitiveness

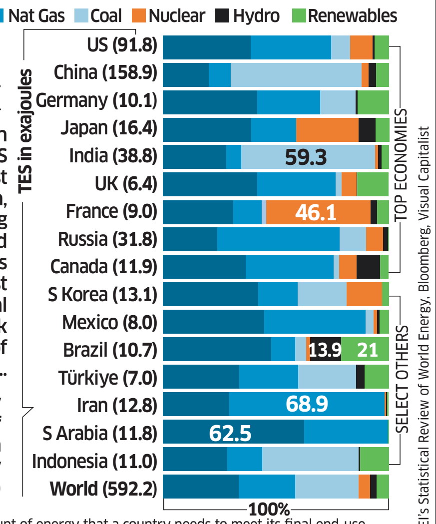
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There was the poet Eliot TS,
Who had said that April's the cruellest.
Five states go to polls,
With chaos in rolls—
Making next month the most BS!
...

Global Energy Mix

The oil market has been pitched into turmoil by US and Israeli attacks against Iran at the end of last month, a conflict that is hitting energy production and exports. Oil and natural gas together contribute almost 60% of the world's total energy supply. Here's a look at the energy mix in most of the major economies...

Total energy supply (TES) by fuel (Share of energy in a country from all sources before electricity of fuel conversions)



TES (figs for 2024) is the total amount of energy that a country needs to meet its final end-use demand; reflects energy that is either produced domestically or imported, minus what is exported or stored. One exajoule (239 trillion kcal in heat units) equals approximately: 278 terawatt-hours of electricity or 40mt of hard coal

Source: EI's Statistical Review of World Energy, Bloomberg, Visual Capitalist

MEME'S THE WORD

Fertilise a Bio Pathway

Jagjeet S Sareen

The closing of the Hormuz Strait has again brought into sharp focus India's need to curb its fertiliser imports. Perhaps, as a timely reminder, the closing comes just as India is getting ready for the kharif sowing season.

In 2025, Rabobank ranked India among the most-exposed countries to a sustained Hormuz closure. Unlike crude oil, it doesn't have strategic reserves for nitrogen fertiliser. So, whatever is in the pipeline is what Indian farmers have to work with.

Add to this, about three-fifths of urea imports come from Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the Gulf's share rises when the UAE is included. Consequently, India's fertiliser subsidy bill stood at a revised estimate of ₹1.86 lakh cr in 2025-26, over 40% of GoI's subsidy spending. The figure will only grow as the Hormuz closure reroutes supply chains and raises shipping costs.

Decades of intensive chemical fertiliser use have depleted India's soil to the extent that import dependency is structural. The country's NPK (nitrogen-phosphorus-potassium) application ratio has deteriorated to 10.9:4.4:1 against an agronomic benchmark of 4:2:1. Even so, only a small portion is absorbed by crops. The rest is lost through volatilisation, denitrification, runoff and leaching, posing a problem for soil emissions and groundwater.

ICRIER estimates return on fertiliser subsidy spending to be roughly 88 paise per rupee, against more than ₹per rupee spent on agricultural R&D. India is spending ₹1.86 lakh cr on the former and ₹2,481 cr on National Mission on Natural Farming.

Biofertilisers are living microbial inputs, including bacteria and fungi that fix nitrogen, solubilise phosphate and support soil biology. They are made domestically and, in most cases, cost less than their chemical equivalents. Provided quality is consistent and farmers receive guidance on application, they can work.

Sikkim has gone 100% organic for its 76,000 ha of farmland. Equally encouraging is Andhra Pradesh's community-managed natural farming programme, which has reached more than 1 mn farmers through linked accounts, and input costs have fallen within a few seasons.

India's biofertiliser sector has grown since 2015. But the bigger obstacle is not whether biological inputs work, but how the market around them is organised. The sector is fragmented: mostly small regional producers, uneven enforcement of quality standards and little last-mile advisory. Also, commercial biofertilisers receive no subsidy while chemical fertilisers receive nearly ₹1.86 lakh cr a year.


Spray of hope

Three decisions on biofertilisers are needed:

1. Include them in the nutrient-based subsidy framework. Agriculture minister Shivraj Chouhan has proposed moving fertiliser subsidies toward DBT and letting farmers choose inputs based on agronomic needs, rather than subsidy prices. If the shift happens, biofertilisers will become a realistic option. Redirecting even a portion of subsidy toward biological alternatives would reduce import exposure and improve soil health over time.
2. Bio-Input Resource Centre (BRC) network under NMNF needs quality control. About 10,000 BRCs are being set up to expand distribution. But their inputs must be reliable and properly formulated for farmers to implement them. Private companies with genuine technical depth in biological inputs are obvious implementation partners here, accountable for product outcomes rather than the volumes supplied.
3. Approval timelines for new microbial strains under Schedule VI also need attention. Biofertiliser products have short shelf lives, and the market moves on quickly. So, faster approvals with stronger post-market surveillance would foster both innovation and consistent quality.

A transition toward biofertilisers and natural farming will be slower and more uneven. They are not full replacements for chemical inputs, but rather a new system that will coexist for some time. Their near-term utility is to lower India's import bills, ease pressure on soils and reduce costs for farmers who have no affordable alternative.

It's not a perfect solution. But it's much needed. And the Hormuz closure shows why.

The writer is co-host, Bharat Climate Forum

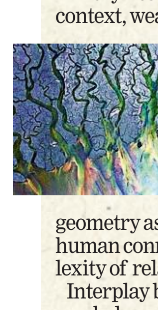
MELODY FOR MONDAY

Tessellate

Alt-J

Alt-J's 'Tessellate' is a hypnotic piece of music that fuses minimalism with sensuality, creating a soundscape that's intimate and architectural. Built on sparse beats and angular rhythms, the track unfolds like a geometric pattern — precise, yet fluid, mathematical yet deeply human. The beauty of the song lies in its restraint: every note, every pause, every layered harmony is deliberate, giving the listener space to sink into its atmosphere.

The lyrics add a provocative context, weaving imagery of desire, secrecy and forbidden encounters. Lines such as 'Triangles are my favourite shape' set the tone, using geometry as metaphor for human connection and complexity of relationships.



Interplay between abstract symbols and physical longing creates a tension both cerebral and visceral. It's not just a love song, but also a meditation on the structures we build around passion, the patterns we repeat and the hidden architecture of desire.

Joe Newman's distinctive vocals, fragile yet commanding, guide the listener through this labyrinth of imagery. The hushed delivery contrasts with the sharpness of beats, amplifying the sense of secrecy and allure.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Construct & Deconstruct

NARAYANI GANESH

Every one of us engages in building ourselves into what we are, or what we think we are.

We have constructed ourselves for so long — possibly over lifetimes. We have built our castles and our mansions. We have even built our shacks and hovels. Gradually and carefully, (or not-so-carefully) we have created the person we think we are and then placed ourselves into that person, points out the online Australian portal Sacred Earth. The process is painstaking, and it relies upon the ego for motivation. You become the one that you think you are, whether that be a super-hero or a miserably weak individual; a highly intelligent genius or an ignoramus; a loving parent or friend, or a cold loner. Whatever you feel you are, you have constructed that first in the mind, then you have placed yourself into that construction. Soon, it becomes your own reality.

What you have created for yourself may not be what you aspire to be, so how can you change? You have to engage in deconstructing all that has been constructed in order to reinvent yourself. Once you recognise that there is something beyond that which you believe you are, you realise that you need to surrender to that. "It is not an external surrendering, but an inner deconstruction of our own perception of ourselves," says Kia Ora Whanau. By overcoming ego and pride, you can come to grips with who you really are. The deconstruction will happen spontaneously, and a new individual might emerge, readying for positive transformation.

Chat Room

Please, No Shortcuts

Apropos the Edit 'India, Get a Foot into FIFA World Cup? (Mar 14). Speculation around the West Asian conflict has raised doubts about whether already-qualified nations like Iran will take part in global tournaments. Yet history shows FIFA doesn't hand out free passes — vacancies are filled through established qualification routes, not by inviting teams that failed to qualify. For India, the dream of playing in the World Cup cannot depend on chance or geopolitical upheavals. If India aspires to stand among football's elite, the journey must begin at home with long-term commitment and vision. Only then can the Tricolour one day fly proudly at the World Cup — not as a beneficiary of circumstance, but as a rightful participant earned through merit.

Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

First Fix the Plumbing

Apropos 'Car Cos Set to Reach 4.7 m Sales in FY26 on a Bumpy Road' by Lijee Philip (Mar 15). Domestic demand clearly remains resilient. However, supply constraints are causing dealers to miss sales opportunities. Manufacturers must accelerate localisation (many are already at 70-80%) and work with logistics providers to build more reliable supply chains. India's fundamentals are strong; the industry just needs to fix its plumbing.

SM Jeeva, Chennai

When Talk Is Strength

Apropos 'Govt Revokes Detention of Activist Sonam Wangchuk' (Mar 15). Preventive detention laws are meant for exceptional situations, and when used against individuals associated with public movements, it raises legitimate concerns about the balance between security and democratic freedoms. Maintaining law and order is undoubtedly the government's responsibility; it is equally important that the government does not perceive dissent and peaceful advocacy as threats to national stability.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
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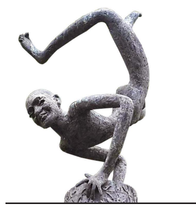


CONTRAPUNTO

The people who cast the votes don't decide an election, the people who count the votes do

– STALIN, per memoirs of his ex-secy Boris Bazhanov

Indian Poll League

EC's made the voting schedule tight this time, can parties be tight-fisted with freebies?

Dates are out for 2026's Indian Poll League. Four large states and a UT will vote between April 9-29, and results will be out on May 4. This round will be especially interesting because it's the first after SIR. So, usual assumptions about vote shares, etc, do not apply. Regardless, there will be punditry. Can Congress reclaim Assam, can BJP wrest Bengal? Reams will be written on these, and the state of play in Tamil Nadu and Kerala also. And going by data, anything's possible. In 2024 LS polls, Congress and BJP were neck-and-neck in Assam, in terms of vote share. BJP had closed the gap with Trinamool in Bengal. Tamil Nadu seems unlikely to turn, but BJP will be looking to grow there. Also in Kerala, where the fight is between LDF and Congress-led UDF.

In three of the four states, these polls are a test of incumbency. Assam and Kerala have had the same party/grouping in office for 10 years – while Mamata in Bengal is finishing 15. Even if voter fatigue isn't a factor, incumbents aren't taking chances. That means more displays of prodigality. Hours before EC's presser, Bengal govt hiked honorarium for purohits and muezzins. More promises of unconditional cash transfers will follow as manifestos are rolled out. Such transfers are likely to cost India ₹1.7L cr this fiscal. RBI and Economic Survey have flagged "fiscal populism" as a risk for state finances, and even India's sovereign borrowing costs, but who's listening?

In terms of stakes, BJP has least to lose in this round as it governs only one of four poll-bound states. But it will be fighting zealously to expand. Pressure is on Congress, though, as it has solo govts in only three states now. Iran war and the resultant gas crisis have added a new variable to these contests. If shortages persist through March, voters will blame somebody. Although the political cost can't be estimated beforehand. But since oil marketing firms are absorbing the higher cost of crude, BJP's shielded on that side. Another unknown that EC must watch out for is political violence. It's good that Bengal will poll in just two phases this time, down from six each in 2011 and 2016, eight in 2021, and seven in 2024 LS polls. While that signals confidence in security arrangements, there shouldn't be a repeat of last time's post-poll violence in Bengal, and elsewhere. Voters deserve a safe and fair poll season.

Dissent & Democracy

Wangchuk's release highlights the key problem of arbitrary use of harsh laws

GOI dropping the most serious allegation, against climate and statehood activist Sonam Wangchuk, raises even more questions for authorities, than his detention did six months ago. From time he was picked up, last Sept, and lodged in Jodhpur jail, it was clear the draconian National Security Act had been invoked without much thought. Wangchuk was accused of inciting a Gen Z protest in Ladakh, supposedly along the lines of Bangladesh and Nepal, and even Arab Spring was referenced. His actions were termed "prejudicial to the security of the state". He was on his fifth protest fast (Delhi Chalo Padyatra) for statehood, and inclusion of Ladakh in Sixth Schedule. Yet, instead of letting a peaceful protest carry on, authorities jailed him for six months – half the maximum period of detention without charges, allowed under NSA. And linked him to the deaths of protesters, on Sept 24, in police action.

Wangchuk's release comes after govt concluded that "Ladakh's problems" must be resolved through "engagement and dialogue". Are we to conclude that fundamental freedoms are vulnerable to this extent to a govt's shifting frameworks for governance? Surely not. Of course, it is welcome that govt finally recognises that crackdowns and heavy-handed responses foment trouble, while peaceful protests form the beating heart of a healthy democracy. Dialogue is everything.

But the real question remains: how fickle are fundamental freedoms? It is good that govt realised jailing Wangchuk hurt its own cause for peace in the new UT. Crackdowns on protests, arrests, and routine invocation of toughest laws, have long been knee-jerk reactive policing of Indian cops, blessed by their political masters. Dialogue *after* detention is really an admission of excess. And it is a fact that a law like NSA, which must be used judiciously and sparingly, loses its legitimacy, when it is used to police dissent.

Fortune's vine

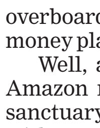
A money plant parent has his ups and downs

Jairam N Menon

Of all the get-rich-quick schemes sprouting around the land, money plant has the best PR. *Epipremnum aureum* is an honourable plant. It doesn't trap you like a Ponzi scheme, or hound you to tears on social media, and it never gets crass with details of how much you will make, and how long will it take. Yet, everyone says it delivers results.

If you walk to the neighbourhood nursery, and buy a potted specimen, you will be adding to your green quotient, but will make little progress towards becoming rich and successful. For best results, experts tell us, you need to snitch. I snitched as advised, and 'borrowed' a cutting from Dr Vaidyanath next door. And no, it's not a crime. Helping yourself to a sprig is not just socially acceptable, it's encouraged as a gesture of communal goodwill.

Since the plant is fast-growing, early signs of new life become visible in a couple of weeks. But that was an anxious fortnight I spent plant parenting. I kept asking myself if the light was bright, and the water right. I also had to walk a tightrope. Showing undue interest in the green shoots, would put pressure on the tender things. On the other hand, pretending to be indifferent, may make the fledgling feel unwanted. Would talking to it help, as the gardening gurus advise? Or should I go overboard, and burst into a stirring anthem? My friends vetoed the last option – money plants, they said, have feelings.



Well, all that was months ago. The plant has since awakened its inner Amazon rainforest and taken off in all directions. It scaled walls, sought sanctuary on windowsills, and ran along balcony railings, to begin a dalliance with my neighbour's chrysanthemums and dahlia. In a display of inclusivity that HR would have approved, it even embraced his drainpipe. Unfortunately, I have not seen similar action in my bank account, occasioning some doubt about when my game plan would see results.

Meanwhile, Dr Vaidyanath's son, an avid vlogger, has been looking appreciatively at my glossy, green track record. This morning, he asked me to consider a series of podcasts on terrace gardening, titled 'Taking Horticulture to the Next Level'. He said I could become a star in the indoor gardening circuit. Perhaps the money plant is doing its job, after all.

States And The Nation

If oppn parties win in Bengal, TN, Kerala, national politics will be likely less anarchic

R Jagannathan

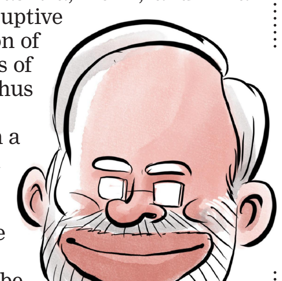
From a purely strategic viewpoint, it should make little difference to BJP whether the party wins or loses, in the four states and one UT, going to polls in April. Barring perhaps Assam, which it would be loath to lose, as its most important beachhead in Northeast. But it can lose in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, and Puducherry, and yet remain content – with a mere increase in vote share.

Political mavens will be focused on a different, specific set of questions. Will SIR of electoral rolls impact Bengal results in any way, especially in constituencies where deletions were larger than usual? Will Vijay hurt the DMK or ADMK fronts? How will Kerala results be impacted by BJP's rise, and anti-incumbency against LDF after two terms in office? In Assam, will Himanta's aggressive rhetoric and actions against "Miya" Muslims deliver votes, from his own core constituency of Assamese and Bengali Hindus?

POLLS 2026 Bengal, TN, Assam, Kerala

From the POV of national stability, if regional parties and Congress manage to retain their strongholds, they may be less inclined to encourage street-level confrontations and anarchy. A healthy democracy needs many parties to believe that they have a decent shot at office, if they do the right things.

Unfortunately, after a brief return to optimism post 2024 Lok Sabha elections, consistent and decisive defeats in Haryana, Maharashtra, Delhi, and Bihar assembly elections have made opposition prone to disruptive actions. We have not had one really productive session of Parliament for months on end. Most important pieces of legislation are being passed amidst dins and walkouts, thus posing moral questions over their legitimacy.



In fact, it looks unlikely that anything will pass in a bipartisan way in 18th Lok Sabha, whose term ends in June 2029. Just in the ongoing session, Congress, aided by other opposition parties, has brought a no-confidence motion against Speaker, and TMC has initiated a move to impeach Chief Election Commissioner.

A key point of contention is SIR. But it cannot be anybody's case that periodic cleansing of the electoral rolls is unnecessary, in a healthy democracy. Plus, these revisions did not cause any major problems in Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. This suggests that the issue is largely a Trinamool preoccupation, possibly because the probability of non-citizens getting into the voters' list is greatest in this porous border state.

EC can be faulted for not holding detailed dialogues with political parties, but that cannot be a reason for Mamata Banerjee to take the matter to the streets repeatedly and intimidate EC officials. EC, which does not have permanent staff on its own, has to depend on state officials to do its work, and here Banerjee must be held accountable for the disruptions. That Supreme Court is now using judicial officers, to hear appeals against the potential exclusions in the Bengal voter list, is a verdict against not just TMC, but also EC, which could have done more to sell the SIR idea to political parties.

The real import of these elections will not lie in their outcomes, but in setting the political stage for more contentious issues, which the polity will face in 2027 and beyond. In the first half of 2027, elections are due in the all-important state of UP. Losses here, and in Maharashtra, led to BJP losing its parliamentary majority in 2024. Uttarakhand, Goa, Punjab, and Manipur are also due in the first half, followed by Himachal and Gujarat towards the end of the year.

2027 is also the year in which we will get early glimpses of Census numbers, and thus delimitation. The actual reallocation of Lok Sabha seats is something that will need to be negotiated with southern regional parties. Decisions on implementing the women's quota, and also whether the overall numbers of Lok Sabha MPs must be raised to accommodate the additional number of women MPs, will also need a political consensus.

The political temperature of 2027 will be set by what happens in 2026, where BJP may not have much to lose, but still has the ability to send a message, on whether or not to expect reasonable bipartisanship in national issues.

Illustrations: Uday Deb

The Young Women Vote

Median voter in all states, they are aspirational. And the swing factor keeping parties guessing

Uday Chandra

With the election schedule announced, attention now turns to the median voter, who will shape the Bengal, Assam, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu outcomes. This median voter is young, female, and aspires to a secure middle-class life. She is also open to joining shifting social coalitions, cutting across caste and religious divides.

In most states, women now vote at rates comparable to, or higher than, men. Studies find that female voters across India respond more to institutionalised welfare delivery, than ideological rhetoric. Incumbents now offer material benefits to households (subsidised food, cooking fuel, housing, income and health support), bypassing older patronage structures and ideological frames, to reach women across caste and creed.

In Tamil Nadu, successive Dravidian govts have invested in women-centric welfare schemes, from marriage assistance to free bus travel. Communist Kerala, too, has welfare initiatives such as Kudumbashree, plus healthcare and pension schemes for women. In West Bengal, TMC invests in Lokkhir Bhandaar (monthly cash transfers), Kanyashree (girls' education), and Rupashree (marriage stipends), to forge direct relationships between women voters and the country's only female CM. Similar initiatives exist in Assam.

Women-centric welfare, especially direct cash transfers, undoubtedly favours political incumbents. Yet, state govts cannot presume electoral loyalty. Opposition parties in these states, too, recognise women as a competitive electoral constituency, and propose expansive welfare arrangements. Competitive welfarism shifts electoral politics away from (male) political brokers, who stitch together caste or religious coalitions. Women across castes and religions may vote similarly, even as they depart from men in their households.

This is an important shift in Indian politics. Accountability via universal welfare delivery, not empty promises of identity-based sloganeering, is the new game in town. Women are key swing voters who keep parties and pundits guessing.

Young aspirational voters matter a lot. But their concerns differ across poll-bound states. Inside West Bengal and Kerala, educated youth lack high-quality jobs. Out-migration is common. Incumbents emphasise state-directed development, while opposition promises private investment and job creation. Assam, too, faces similar challenges. Its govt offers regional infra and connectivity to the Indian mainland, and Southeast Asia, while opposition focuses on unemployment, inequality, and a composite regional identity. Lastly, Tamil Nadu's ecosystem of engineering colleges and industrial corridors, allows governing DMK to combine a twin focus on economic growth and social justice. This pushes opposition politics to focus on governance efficiency and national integration.

Across poll-bound states, young voters evaluate govts less through ideological narratives, than through perceived performance. Education and job opportunities matter disproportionately, for those seeking to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Economic growth matters less to the median voter than distribution of prosperity. It is not that *jaati* and *dharm* have lost their appeal, but we are in a hybrid political system in which old caste blocs have fragmented, civilisational cohesion remains elusive, and a new welfarism cuts across vote banks. Social identities continue to be salient for aspirational youth, but aspirations are reframed, with a new emphasis on governance performance.

Minority citizens in these poll-bound states exceed those in the rest of India. From an eighth in Tamil Nadu to two-fifths or higher in Assam and Kerala, religious minorities matter electorally in these states in ways unfamiliar to northerners. Muslims and Christians in these states are diverse. Assamese- and Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, for instance, overlap, yet remain distinct in their voting behaviour.

Minority youth also vote differently from their parents and grandparents, favouring economic opportunities over empty slogans. Minority concerns may thus be folded into a wider phenomenon of youth and gender politics, rooted in aspirations and effective governance.

In sum, young, female, and aspirational voters are likely to swing the upcoming elections in favour of those perceived to be doing more for their households and futures. Parties that speak to the concerns of these median voters are likely to build broad electoral coalitions, in an era of democratic flux.

In 4 States, These 5 Key Factors Aren't Making Headlines

Nandita.Sengupta@timesofindia.com

● First, governing parties of three states (TMC, DMK, CPM) back impeachment of Chief Election Commissioner, under whose guidance, state election commissions will conduct assembly polls. This will frame campaigning.

● Second, Muslim votes. Same old? Not quite. Muslim votes in Assam, Bengal and Kerala, all three have high proportions of Muslims in state population. Muslim blocs are, mostly, lined up behind TMC in Bengal, UDF in Kerala, and opposition parties in Assam, including Owaisi's AIMIM, and Ajmal's AIUDF.

It's for Pinarayi to block Kerala BJP's inroads into LDF's 'Hindu' base – UCs/Ezhava vote. BJP winning Thiruvananthapuram corporation polls, weeks before assembly elections, triggered insta-speak of a "definite shift" in Kerala's politics.

As for Bengal, oh, what a web we weave…Bengali Muslim "infiltrator" from Bangladesh is in focus. Logical way of ensuring electoral rolls are spick 'n span would be to allow the exercise time. Instead, judicial officers from other states have been hauled in to decide on "logical discrepancies".

Census officials were, last week, tasked, spitspot, to decide on CAA applications – a sudden deluge from Matuas, a namasudra (read Dalit) Bangladesh-origin community, whom SIR documentation trumped. This, when Census houselisting kicks off in April. That's a lot of work for a handful of men and women.

Bengal will have not just final rolls, but a final final, with SC allowing supplementary lists, once logical discrepancies and citizenship issues, of undocumented refugee-origin people, are settled. That's very unusual.

● Third, the play for women's vote is more complicated – about 30L women (*https://tinyurl.com/yt76yrfm*) are no longer eligible. As of now. TMC's challenge in Bengal is to retain Mamata's strength: women, across castes. BJP has marched on, taking to mission mode, self-help groups – a UPA-era central scheme mechanism, and lately BJP's mainstay in several states.

POLLS 2026 Bengal, TN, Assam, Kerala

Per LS response (*https://tinyurl.com/ykre543z*), last year, Bengal had 11.9L SHGs, second only to Bihar, under the central scheme mandating at least one rural woman per household in SHG activity, and had mobilised 1.2cr households in Bengal, country's highest. Alongside its 'sindoor' plank, and protection talk, Bengali women are BJP's focus.

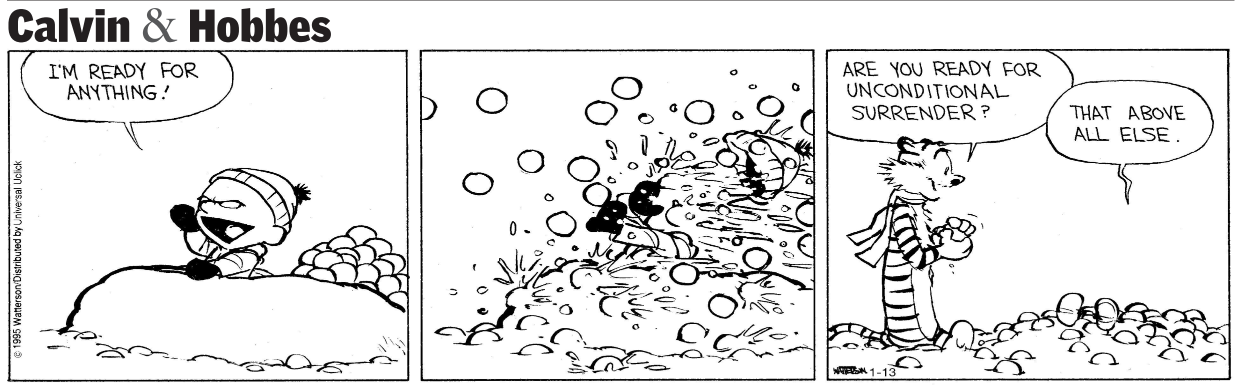
● Fourth, women, Muslims, SIR – TN's poll politics goes around all of these. Stalin, instead, is rallying together all TN political parties over delimitation. Unique, that a state-level election should centre stage national politics, Centre-state relations. As Stalin leads the southern charge, he is also moving into spaces Left has ceded. Evident in the seat-share wrangles between DMK and Left, and Stalin's new statue for Marx.

A West Asia at war, means political mini-missiles darting hither and thither in Kerala – who is backing whom, who's appeasing, who's rescuing Indians from the Gulf. Here, global hurts the local.

● Fifth, this'll also be Assam's first election after delimitation, which retained the number of constituencies, and reduced the number of seats with significant Muslim population to 25, from 35. Some of these are now SC/ST seats. This makes it a challenge for Muslim Dalits to contest. Because, the issue is grey, a legal-political wrangle – can Dalits who're Muslim or Christian claim SC status? Meanwhile, some Assamese Muslim groups are now tagged ST. CM Sarma has to show he can return to office with a majority – BJP won 60 in 2021, less than halfway mark to the 126-seat legislature.

Govt, via CAA, welcomes Bangladeshi Hindu immigrants. Yet, in Assam, only one such applicant has now become an Indian citizen – of over 5L Bengali Hindus left out of NRC. Ground reality is it's still NRC, results of which BJP contests, that's the political tinderbox. The project to replace the language/sub-nationalism divide with religious/hyper-nationalist politics remains, as yet, incomplete.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred*space*

In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep to the simple.
In conflict, be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.

Lao Tzu

Lasting Peace Begins With Calm Minds

The XIV Dalai Lama

Compassion lies at the heart of the spiritual path. It is not a luxury, or something reserved for saints – it is the very essence of our humanity. Without compassion, peace within remains out of reach, and without inner peace, peace in the world cannot take root. Compassion is not just a feeling. It is a deep and enduring concern for the suffering of others, paired with a wish to relieve it. Unlike pity, which looks down on others. Compassion arises from recognising our shared experience. Others, like us, wish to be happy and free from pain. This simple truth forms the basis of a compassionate life.

From the moment we are born, we rely on care. As infants, we survive only through kindness and protection. These early experiences leave a deep imprint. Even as adults, we seek love and connection. This tells us that compassion is not foreign to us; it is part of our nature. But like a seed, it must be nurtured through intention and awareness.

Compassion is sometimes confused with attachment or emotional dependence. But true compassion is not biased or limited. It is not just for our family or friends, but for all beings, even those who oppose or harm us. When compassion extends beyond preference, it becomes a source of great strength. It allows us to meet even difficult people with understanding rather than hostility.

Compassion alone is not enough. It must be guided by wisdom. Without understanding, our efforts may be misplaced. Wisdom allows us to see the roots of suffering and respond effectively. In Buddhism, compassion and wisdom are inseparable. Wisdom sees the emptiness of fixed identity; compassion responds to suffering with care. Together, they form a force for transformation.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Compassion begins with ourselves. Many people are unkind to themselves, thinking this will make them stronger. But harshness blocks growth. By learning to treat ourselves with patience and acceptance, we become better able to care for others. A useful method is loving-kindness meditation. Begin by wishing happiness to someone close, then expand this wish to neutral people, to those you find difficult, and finally to all beings: May they be happy. May they be free from suffering. Another practice is tonglen – giving and taking. Breathe in the suffering of others and breathe out healing. This helps reduce self-centred habits and open the heart.

Meditation is helpful, but compassion must also be lived. It is expressed through kind speech, patience, and small everyday acts. Sometimes it means saying no or setting boundaries, but always with care, not anger. Compassion also means taking action to protect the vulnerable, care for the environment, and serve others without seeking reward.

Obstacles to compassion include anger, fear, pride, and especially indifference. In today's world, we are flooded with suffering and bad news. It is easy to become numb. But compassion does not require solving every problem. Sometimes it is enough to stay open, to care sincerely, and to not turn away.

In a world of conflict and division, compassion offers a different way. Lasting peace does not come only from laws or govts. It begins with individuals who develop calm minds and kind hearts. This is why i often say: If you want others to be happy, practise compassion. If you want to be happy, practise compassion.

As told to Rajiv Mehrotra

Editor's TAKE

The lessons from Ladakh

Sonam Wangchuk, the environmentalist and activist from Ladakh walks free as Govt revokes NSA but larger questions about his arrest remain

After six months of detention, the activist and environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk has been released. The Government revoked the NSA slapped on him even as the Supreme Court continued to hear the Habeas Corpus writ filed by his wife, and the next hearing was slated for March 17. Sonam Wangchuk is much revered and a respected public figure known for his work on education, sustainability, and Himalayan ecology. He is also known for the Gandhian way of life and protesting for the just cause in a peaceful manner. Wangchuk is also a recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award, given to distinguish individuals with an incredible track record in public service. He was detained in September under the stringent provisions of the National Security Act after protests in Ladakh turned violent.

The charges against him were rather harsh, and he was accused of making provocative speeches that allegedly contributed to unrest in the region. Wangchuk, however, had been on a hunger strike and was demanding full statehood for Ladakh and constitutional protections for the region's tribal communities, land, and fragile ecosystem. Nowhere did he mention a secession from India or anything to suggest that he was fighting the Indian State. His demands were well within the constitutional framework of the country.

The Government's decision to invoke the National Security Act, which allows detention without formal charges for up to a year, was widely criticised. It was uncalled for to say the least. Wangchuk is not a militant. He is best known for pioneering ice stupa water conservation projects in the Himalayas and for transforming education in Ladakh. His life even inspired a character in the popular film '3 Idiots'. Though he is a free man now, the damage has been done. Detaining him under a national security law sent a wrong message to the people that peaceful dissent was being crushed. A more nuanced approach could be to talk and engage with him and consider his genuine demands.

Ladakh is a sensitive border state and needs a very cautious approach; a little misstep can plunge the valley into chaos, which can be taken advantage of by regimes across the border. The roots of the controversy lie in Ladakh's political transition after 2019, when the Central government reorganised the former state of Jammu and Kashmir and created Ladakh as a separate Union Territory directly governed by New Delhi. The absence of a local legislature and concerns about land rights soon sparked anxiety among Ladakh's tribal communities. The Leh Apex Body began demanding constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule, which would grant tribal councils greater control over land, culture, and local governance. Wangchuk became the voice of Ladakh, articulating these demands. His arguments were not merely political but also ecological: Ladakh's is one of the most fragile ecosystems in the Himalayas, and rapid development could irreversibly damage its environment. If Ladakh's voice is heard and its concerns addressed, the region can become a model of sustainable development in the Himalayas.

Billions for climate, but where is the justice?

As debates intensify around the adequacy, accountability and structure of climate funding, the performance of the GCF offers an important lens through which to examine whether global climate finance is meeting its moral and political promises.

PRACHI MALIK

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) was created in 2010 during the 16th Conference of Parties (CoP) of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to operationalise climate finance under the UNFCCC and now serves the Paris Agreement under Article 9. As the largest dedicated multilateral climate fund, it sits at the centre of global efforts to translate the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities into practice. However, the real question is not whether the GCF exists, but whether it is delivering climate justice. When assessed against criteria such as additionality, adequacy, balance between adaptation and mitigation, predictability, and broader climate justice dimensions, the record appears mixed.

Several justice pillars shape climate finance. Distributive justice concerns fair allocation of climate costs based on equity, need, capacity, and responsibility. Procedural justice emphasises inclusive decision-making. Reparative justice addresses who should bear climate-related losses. Recognition justice values diverse affected communities. Intergenerational justice holds present generations accountable to future ones.

There have been several contestations with respect to how much climate finance has already been mobilised. This is where the controversy surrounding the $100 billion target becomes relevant. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that the annual $100 billion climate finance target was met in 2022. However, this claim has been widely contested. A substantial share of reported finance consists of loans. Loan-heavy finance shifts financial risk onto developing countries, burdening them further.

Starting with Additionality. Climate finance was never meant to be a rebranded form of development assistance. It is grounded in historical responsibility and ecological debts. From a reparative justice perspective, climate finance should be new, in addition to existing aid commitments. If it simply replaces development assistance or is provided primarily through loans, its moral foundation weakens.

The Green Climate Fund performs better than many bilateral channels by providing a mix of grants and concessional finance, with a strong grant component for vulnerable countries. It maintains a balance between adaptation and mitigation funding, prioritises Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States, and strengthens country ownership through readiness support and direct access for national institutions. However, it does not operate in isolation from the broader political economy of climate finance. Ambiguities surrounding what constitutes additional finance persist. If climate finance is indistinguishable from development assistance, accountability for historical emissions becomes blurred. In principle, the GCF supports additionality. In practice, however, its ability to fully realise reparative justice is constrained by the contribution patterns of donor states and systemic limitations in global finance.

THE GCF REPRESENTS A SERIOUS INSTITUTIONAL ATTEMPT TO EMBED JUSTICE PRINCIPLES WITHIN CLIMATE FINANCE GOVERNANCE

The scale of climate needs far exceeds available finance. with estimates suggesting that around USD 1.3 trillion per year may be required by 2035 to adequately support mitigation and adaptation in developing countries. GCF prioritises least developed countries, small island developing states, and African states, directing a substantial share of resources toward Africa and the Asia-Pacific. This reflects an effort to address differentiated vulnerability and advance distributive and recognition justice. However, justice is not only about distribution; it is also about volume. The GCF relies on voluntary contributions and periodic replenishments. Even the most carefully designed allocation framework cannot compensate for insufficient total finance. The inadequacy of the $100 billion goal became evident in negotiations leading to the New Quantified Goal (NQG) agreed at COP29 of UNFCCC. It calls for mobilising at least $300 billion annually, within a broader ambition of scaling finance to $1.3 trillion per year by 2035. This shift recognises that the previous target was materially inadequate. Yet it remains politically negotiated rather than legally binding. Without stronger accountability, transparent reporting, and a greater emphasis on grant-based finance, the structural weaknesses exposed under the $100 billion regime may simply be carried forward. The balance between adaptation and mitigation is one area where the GCF is trying to promote a clearer justice orientation. The Fund is mandated to allocate 50 per cent of its resources to adaptation and 50 per cent to mitigation, with half of adaptation finance directed to particularly vulnerable countries. This structure acknowledges both present vulnerability and future risk.

Adaptation finance advances distributive and recognition justice by supporting communities already facing climate impacts. Mitigation finance advances intergenerational justice by limiting harm to future generations. Further, there has been limited participation by local communities in the decision making or if it is , its mere tokenism. However, proportional balance alone does not guarantee justice. Adaptation needs in vulnerable regions often exceed available funding, and projects may remain incremental rather than transformative. According to scholars working in the domain of climate finance the funds disbursed are mostly generic in nature and are not tailor made for specific country realities. They are also not in proportion to the scale of vulnerability and are concentrated in few countries. If adaptation finance fails to match vulnerability levels, distributive justice is weakened. Similarly, global mitigation ambition remains insufficient, threatening intergenerational equity regardless of the GCF's internal allocation ratios. The justice implications of balance, therefore, depend on adequacy and effectiveness.

Developing countries require reliable and stable financial flows to plan long-term climate strategies and have stable climate investment planning. Predictable finance strengthens procedural justice by enabling sustained participation and country-driven planning. Although the GCF has expanded its portfolio, reliance on voluntary replenishments introduces uncertainty. Delays in pledges and disbursements affect implementation timelines and strategic planning. When finance is unpredictable, national climate programs fragment and long term adaptation planning suffers. This also weakens recognition and distributive justice by failing to respond consistently to urgent needs. The GCF represents a serious institutional attempt to embed justice principles within climate finance governance. Its country-driven model and adaptation-mitigation mandate reflect deliberate normative commitments. However, institutional design cannot compensate for structural political constraints. Ambiguities around additionality, insufficient overall finance, reliance on voluntary contributions, governance dominance by donors and limited predictability restrict its capacity to operationalise reparative, distributive, recognition, and intergenerational justice. Further limited participation of local communities continues to limit its effectiveness. The move toward a New Quantified Goal signals the acknowledgement that climate finance must be scaled up. Whether this acknowledgement translates into substantial implementation is something to be observed. The GCF advances climate justice in principle and partial practice. Whether it can fulfil that promise ultimately depends on political will and whether historical responsibility is treated not as rhetoric, but as a binding obligation within the global climate finance regime.

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PIC TALK

Indian artistes perform at Vasant Mela organised by the Indian Embassy, in Beijing
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The Harishchandra of Odisha

C K NAYAK

2ND OPINION

It is difficult to define Badri Mishra in a single phrase. In the temple town of Puri he is known as many things—social worker, actor, writer, and community volunteer. Yet the role that has earned him recognition across Odisha and beyond is far more unusual. For decades, Mishra has been known as the "corpse bearer of the masses," a man who has dedicated his life to ensuring that even the poorest and most abandoned receive a dignified final farewell.

Now 67, Mishra has personally assisted in the cremation of more than 1,385 bodies at Swargadwar, Puri's famed cremation ground located on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, about two kilometres from the Jagannath Temple. For millions of Hindus, Swargadwar—literally meaning "Gateway to Heaven"—is one of the most sacred places for last rites. It is believed that those cremated here attain moksha, or ultimate salvation. As a result, families from across the country bring the bodies of their loved ones to Puri for their final journey. However, the journey is not always easy, particularly for families from remote villages who arrive without money, local contacts, or knowledge of the procedures required for cremation. This is where Badri Mishra steps in. He helps grieving families with everything—from arranging paperwork and rituals to organising the cremation itself—often at his own expense."I have never charged any money for the work I do," Mishra says simply. "My only aim is to ensure that even the abandoned are given a dignified farewell. In my life, I have carried more bodies than some people have carried responsibilities." His dedication has earned him the title 'Harishchandra of Odisha.'

Mishra's life, echoes that spirit of sacrifice and service. His journey into this unusual calling began early. Mishra was just three years old when he witnessed the cremation of his sister at Swargadwar. The memory stayed with him. Years later, in 1974, when a close friend died and no one stepped forward to perform the final rites, Mishra took responsibility. That moment marked the beginning of a lifelong mission. Over the years, Mishra balanced his service with a government job. Eventually, however he devoted himself fully to social work. Armed with little more than a motorcycle, a sacred thread, a towel, and a bottle of Ganga water, he has spent decades rushing to cremation grounds whenever he receives a call. His routine is relentless. He often returns home at 2 A.M. only to leave again before dawn. The family, which includes a son and daughter, has faced financial hardships after he left his government job.

Mishra's service extends far beyond Swargadwar. He has performed last rites for unidentified accident victims, suicide cases, and disaster casualties whose bodies would otherwise remain unattended. He assisted during the cremation of victims of the devastating 1999 Odisha super cyclone, the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, and the 2015 earthquake in Kathmandu. During the COVID-19 pandemic—when fear kept many indoors—Mishra continued his work without hesitation, helping cremate victims at crematoriums in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack. His extraordinary service has earned him numerous honours, including the Dadhichi Award, the Utkal Ratna, and recognition from the Governor of Odisha. His name has also been recommended for the prestigious Padma awards. In recognition of his humanitarian work, he was invited to the Rashtrapati Bhavan by the President of India, Droupadi Murmu.Even in death, Mishra hopes to continue serving others. He has signed an agreement with SCB Medical College in Cuttack to donate his body for medical research. Inspired by him, more than a hundred people have pledged to donate their bodies as well.

The writer is a veteran journalist and President Press Association

SONAM WANGCHUK'S DETENTION RAISES DEMOCRATIC QUESTIONS

Apropos the news report 'Sonam Wangchuk walks free as Govt revokes detention' (March 15). The release of Sonam Wangchuk after the government revoked his detention under the NSA deserves careful reflection. Preventive detention laws are meant for exceptional circumstances where national security faces an immediate and serious threat.

Their use against individuals associated with public movements often raises legitimate concerns about the balance between security and democratic freedoms.

Wangchuk, known internationally for his work on sustainable development and education in Ladakh, has become a prominent voice in discussions about the region's political and environmental future.

While maintaining law and order is undoubtedly the government's responsibility, it is equally important that dissent and peaceful advocacy are not viewed as threats to national stability.

The decision to revoke his detention, especially with a court hearing approaching, indicates that dialogue may be a more constructive path than prolonged incarceration.

Ladakh's aspirations for safeguards and greater political representation cannot be addressed through administrative measures alone.

A democratic society grows stronger when differences are resolved through dialogue, transparency and trust rather than through extraordinary legal action.

SANJAY | MOHALI

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In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Debate over mercy killing

Recently, the Supreme Court delivered a significant verdict allowing the removal of the ventilator of Harish Rana, a young man who has been in a coma for 13 years. Harish, now 32, suffered a fall from the fourth floor of a building and has remained in a medically defined irreversible permanent vegetative state ever since. Euthanasia, often described as mercy killing or the right to die, refers to intentionally ending the life of a patient to relieve them from unbearable suffering caused by severe illness. When a person suffers from an incurable condition, and all available medical treatments have failed, euthanasia is sometimes considered as a means to end prolonged pain and distress. For many years, activists across the world have advocated legal recognition of euthanasia. Yet, ethical concerns and humanitarian considerations have made the issue deeply controversial.

The Supreme Court's decision to permit removal of the ventilator relied on the fundamental principle of the right to die with dignity. Nevertheless, debates over whether mercy killing is morally right or wrong will likely continue. This judgment may redefine how euthanasia is interpreted in the future, especially in relation to patient rights and humane medical care.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR | MUMBAI

Menstrual leave policy debate

The Supreme Court was pragmatic in dismissing the PIL seeking mandatory menstrual leave for working women (March 14). Undeniably, women in India perform multiple roles simultaneously-as professionals, mothers, spouses and caregivers-constantly adapting to diverse responsibilities. Menstruation is a natural biological process that many women experience regularly, and it can indeed take a physical and emotional toll.

However, making menstrual leave mandatory may unintentionally harm women's employment prospects. In an era where automation and artificial intelligence are already reducing job opportunities across sectors, employers may perceive women employees as less dependable or more costly. Some organisations might prefer hiring men, particularly for senior roles, fearing disruption if key responsibilities are affected by mandatory leave. Such perceptions could undermine women's professional advancement. Moreover, after decades of struggle to overcome stereotypes of being the "weaker sex", mandatory menstrual leave could unintentionally create another form of stigma. A more balanced approach would be introducing gender-neutral flexible leave policies that employees can use when required. Allowing work-from-home may also provide support without creating workplace bias.

V JAYARAMAN | CHENNAI

Inauguration ceremonies by Chief Minister

This refers to the report, "CM Rekha launches amphibious excavators for city drain cleaning" (Mar 14). Over the past year, the Chief Minister has inaugurated a wide range of civic and welfare projects, including buses, canteens, health camps, and several schemes aimed at improving public services. While these initiatives are important, the frequency of such ceremonial launches may give the impression that the CM is more engaged in appearances than in effective governance.The office of a Chief Minister carries immense responsibility, requiring focus on policymaking, long-term development, and addressing challenges such as economic growth, healthcare, education, and law and order. Routine inaugurations could be delegated to municipal or departmental officials, allowing the CM to devote time to matters that demand leadership at the highest level.Public perception plays a crucial role in politics. If a leader is associated with many ribbon-cutting events, it can diminish the stature of the office and can shift attention away from the broader responsibilities of governance. Ensuring that the CM provides leadership on broader policy while delegating routine functions locally can maintain both the effectiveness of governance and the dignity of the role.

DR O PRASADA RAO | HYDRABAD

HPV Vaccination: A policy imperative or global lobbying at work?

India's vaccination campaign against Human papillomavirus (HPV), aims to prevent cervical cancer. The programme — implemented through a procurement partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — has reignited debate over the role of global philanthropic institutions in national policy

FIRST Column

ASHWANI MAHAJAN

From 28 February 2026, the Government of India launched a single-shot HPV vaccination programme for girls aged 14 years, with a target of 1.15 crore vaccinations each year. The vaccine has been approved by India's drug regulator, and its supply is being procured through a mechanism in partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which is primarily promoted and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

This decision has been widely criticised in several quarters for various reasons. Critics argue that it represents a case of interference by a foreign organisation in India's health policymaking. Secondly, the programme is being promoted with the support of the Gates Foundation, whose activities have long been viewed with suspicion by some observers.

In fact, the Gates Foundation (earlier BMGF) is not being criticised without reason, according to its detractors. In the past, several objections and allegations have been levelled against its co-founder, Bill Gates, regarding controversial experiments allegedly carried out under his direction in different parts of the world. One recent example cited by critics occurred during the India AI Impact Summit 2026, when Bill Gates faced opposition at multiple levels. The controversy stemmed from allegations connected to the so-called "Epstein Files," which reportedly mentioned extramarital affairs and related issues. As a result, critics say his public image was further damaged and his scheduled programme was ultimately cancelled.

Critics also argue that Bill Gates views India as a laboratory for clinical trials. In 2024, he reportedly stated that India functions as a kind of experimental environment where new initiatives are tested before being expanded elsewhere. The Gates Foundation, however, maintains that his remarks were meant as praise for India's capacity for innovation and implementation. Nevertheless, based on past experiences with the foundation, critics claim that trials are being conducted in India at his behest, treating Indians as "guinea pigs" for vaccine development.

CRITICS POINT OUT THAT WHILE INDIA IS LAUNCHING A UNIVERSAL HPV VACCINATION PROGRAMME, THE UPTAKE OF HPV VACCINATION IN THE UNITED STATES HAS REPORTEDLY DECLINED IN RECENT YEARS

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They argue that such practices would be both unethical and legally questionable.

Trials related to the Human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine were indeed conducted in parts of India in 2009. At the time, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare criticised the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), an organisation associated with the Gates Foundation, for allegedly conducting unethical and illegal trials. According to the committee's report, several girls reportedly fell ill and some died after being included in HPV vaccine trials without proper informed consent from their parents. The committee recommended strict action against both PATH and the Gates Foundation.

Following protests, the Government of India withdrew the proposal to include the HPV vaccine in the Universal Immunisation Programme in 2018. However, critics claim that intense lobbying by the Gates Foundation later led several state governments to introduce the vaccine in their own vaccination programmes, and that similar efforts continue in other states.

According to these critics, the foundation has been able to influence key policymakers in both central and state governments. They further allege that the foundation attracts former health ministry officials by offering lucrative positions after retirement and maintains influence over some current officials as well.

Supporters of the HPV vaccine argue that cervical cancer primarily results from persistent infection with high-risk strains of HPV, especially types 16 and 18. The risk increases with early sexual activity, multiple sexual partners, weakened immunity (such as in HIV/AIDS), smoking, poor genital hygiene, and multiple pregnancies. Long-term HPV infection can lead to abnormal changes in cervical cells that may eventually develop into cancer if not detected and treated early through screening.

Although the government has presented the vaccination programme as a measure to protect women from cervical cancer, critics point out that the disease-while significant- is the fourth most common cancer globally and the second most common cancer among women in India after breast cancer.

Even so, it currently accounts for only about 10 percent of all female cancers, and its incidence has been declining over time. Another concern raised is the lack of reliable national screening data to accurately determine the number of affected women and their geographical distribution.

Available reports suggest that only a few states-particularly some in North-East India-have relatively higher rates of cervical cancer.

Critics therefore argue that the government should first have launched a comprehensive national screening programme to determine the intensity and regional distribution of the disease before initiating a nationwide vaccination campaign.

Research based on the Global Burden of Disease Study (1990-2019) indicates that the age-standardised incidence rate of cervical cancer in India has been declining, with an average annual reduction of about 0.82 percent between 1990 and 2019. Mortality from cervical cancer declined even faster, at roughly 1.35 percent per year during the same period. This suggests that the overall risk per woman in the population has been gradually decreasing.

Researchers attribute this decline mainly to social changes such as later age at marriage and first childbirth, fewer pregnancies, improved hygiene and living standards, and increased awareness and screening in urban areas. These factors have collectively reduced cervical cancer risk in many parts of India.

By contrast, the incidence of breast cancer has been rising steadily. It has now become the most common cancer among women in India. In 2023, the age-standardised incidence rate of breast cancer was about 29.4 cases per 100,000 women per year, with approximately 2.0-2.03 lakh new cases annually.

The rate has increased significantly-from about 13 per 100,000 women in 1990 to 29.4 per 100,000 in 2023, more than doubling over three decades.

Critics therefore argue that while overall cancer incidence is rising-particularly in the case of breast cancer-the government has not implemented equally strong measures such as large-scale early screening programmes for breast cancer. Instead, they say, it has chosen to prioritise the vaccination of young girls against HPV.

The debate surrounding HPV vaccine advocacy is also complicated by potential conflicts of interest. Some independent researchers have pointed out that a substantial proportion of published research on vaccine safety and efficacy has been funded by, or conducted in collaboration with, pharmaceutical companies.

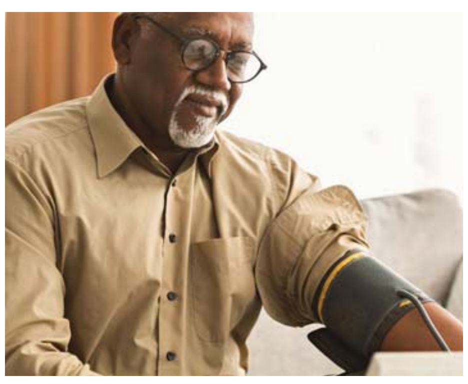
Given these concerns-along with the earlier controversy surrounding HPV trials, questions about long-term effectiveness in low-screening environments, and the role of pharmaceutical lobbying-critics argue that the Government of India's decision to launch a nationwide HPV vaccination programme may have been taken too hastily.

They also note that even after vaccination, regular cervical screening remains necessary, and that broader public-health interventions-such as improved sanitation, nutrition, awareness programmes, and affordable screening facilities-may deliver wider health benefits.Finally, critics point out that while India is launching a universal HPV vaccination programme, the uptake of HPV vaccination in the United States has reportedly declined in recent years.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that among adolescents eligible for free vaccines through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) programme, the proportion who were up to date on HPV vaccination by age 13 fell by about 10 percentage points for those born in 2010 compared with those born in 2007. Some observers therefore fear that surplus vaccines from other countries may eventually be redirected to markets such as India.

The role of mindset in healing the body

PRATIKSHA VATS



The lab report confirms Type 2 diabetes. The monitor flashes a stubborn 150/95 blood pressure reading. The weighing scale refuses to budge despite weeks of meticulously weighed salads and daily sweat. In an instant, the body-once a silent partner-feels like a battlefield. During my practice, I have witnessed this silence countless times: the heavy pause after a diagnosis, the fear masked by "forced discipline," and the crushing frustration when biological progress seems invisible. Naturally, we sprint toward the tangible; we obsess over food charts, calorie counts, glycemic indices, and step goals. These are the bricks and mortar of health, but there is a silent architect governing whether those bricks actually hold a structure together: mindset. There is a profound piece of wisdom that suggests: "When it is not possible to change the situation, change the state of mind; everything else will follow." In the realm of health, this is not just philosophy; it is physiology. When changing a medical situation is not immediately possible, changing the state of mind becomes the most critical intervention available. A diagnosis cannot always be erased overnight, hormonal imbalances do not stabilise in a week, and a fatty liver does not vanish because we panicked. In fact, panic is biochemically counterproductive.

The way we respond mentally can either act as a catalyst for cellular repair or a silent handbrake on our own recovery. Cultivating a mindset of calm awareness, patience, and curiosity can set the stage for recovery even before the first prescription is taken or the first step is walked.

The Tale of Two Narratives

Consider two patients, Rajesh and Imran, both diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes within the same month. Their clinical starting points were almost identical, yet their trajectories could not have been more different. Rajesh reacted with a cocktail of anger and defeat, viewing the diagnosis as a personal betrayal. To him, the diet was a "sentence" and the exercise was a "punishment." When sugar readings did not drop dramatically by the fourteenth day, he interpreted the data as a failure. His stress increased, triggering the liver to release more glucose, effectively undoing his hard work. Imran, on the other hand, chose a different internal dialogue, seeing the diagnosis as a long-overdue conversation with his body. He approached his daily walks as a gift of movement and his mindful eating as a form of self-respect. He celebrated small wins, observed patterns rather than judgment, and adjusted without self-blame. Three months later, Rajesh's readings fluctuated wildly under the weight of his own mental tension, while Imran's improved steadily. The difference was not just the medication; it was the mental environment in which that medication was expected to work.

The Weight of Self-Criticism

Weight management reflects this same principle with even more intensity. Neha insisted, "My metabolism is broken," because even though her food log showed improvement and her exercise was consistent, the scale was stuck. The culprit was not a slow metabolism but a high-stress internal narrative. Every minor indulgence-a cookie, a missed workout-triggered guilt, which led to "all-or-nothing" thinking and kept her nervous system in a state of defense.

We shifted focus from the meal plan to her internal dialogue. Instead of "I failed," she practiced saying, "I am learning." She also learned to observe sensations like hunger and satiety without judgment. Within weeks, sleep improved, stress-induced cravings vanished, and the scale began to move. Her body wasn't blocked by calories alone; it was blocked by the way she spoke to herself. This underscores a vital truth: mindset is not an abstract concept; it is the very operating system of recovery.

From Failure to Feedback

A weight-loss plateau or a temporary spike in blood sugar can feel catastrophic. If interpreted as failure, motivation dies, sleep suffers, and consistency weakens. But if seen as feedback, the entire trajectory changes. In a feedback mindset, a sugar spike isn't a reason to quit; it signals that the previous meal needed more fiber or less refined starch.

A plateau isn't proof the body is "broken"; it's a sign that adaptation has occurred and a new challenge is needed. Even a missed day at the gym or an unplanned indulgence becomes data rather than doom. The event remains the same; the interpretation determines whether we move forward or spiral backward.

The Circle of Recovery

Healing is never an isolated event, and families and caregivers play a crucial, often underestimated role. Patients often feel frustrated with slow progress, while well-meaning caregivers can unintentionally amplify stress through constant worry or subtle criticism. Families that approach recovery with patience, empathy, and calm awareness see better emotional and physical outcomes. A pause before reacting, a softer tone, or a willingness to listen can transform the environment-even if the medical reality remains unchanged. Small gestures, like celebrating tiny improvements, offering reassurance, or creating consistent routines, make recovery less intimidating and more motivating. A supportive environment literally reduces stress hormones, reinforcing the mind-body connection in measurable ways.

The Biology of Perspective

Changing mindset does not replace diet or medicine; it strengthens them. Modern research in psychoneuroimmunology confirms the link between mental state and physical health. Chronic stress elevates cortisol, disrupts insulin sensitivity, hampers digestion, and increases inflammation. Conversely, a resilient, positive mindset improves immune response and treatment adherence. A calm mind allows the body to remain in "rest and digest"-the only state in which true recovery occurs. Understanding this gives patients agency; they realise they are not merely passive recipients of prescriptions, but active participants in their healing journey.

The Decision to Heal

In a world searching for the next superfood or fastest bio-hack, we often overlook the most potent tool we already possess: our thoughts. Direction begins in the mind. While food nourishes cells, exercise strengthens muscles, and medication regulates chemistry, it is mindset that sustains the consistency. Consistency is what transforms temporary change into lifelong transformation.

Sometimes, the most powerful medicine is found in a quiet, internal decision to respond with patience instead of panic, and commitment instead of complaint. Healing does not begin with a pill or a plan; it begins the moment we choose to think differently. By aligning our thoughts, emotions, and actions, we move out of internal conflict and into a state of flow. Only then do the body, the habits, and the results follow. By treating the body as a partner rather than a battleground, we find that once we change the state of our mind, the health of the body begins to change on its own.

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India can beat non-communicable diseases with yoga and naturopathy

RAJESH KUMAR SINGH

The world today is confronting a silent but devastating epidemic: the relentless rise of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). Chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer and respiratory disorders now account for nearly three-quarters of global deaths, according to the World Health Organisation. In India, the situation is even more concerning. NCDs are responsible for nearly two-thirds of all deaths, affecting millions of families and placing enormous pressure on the country's healthcare system.

What makes this crisis particularly troubling is that most of these illnesses are largely preventable. Their primary drivers are not unknown pathogens but the way modern societies live. Sedentary lifestyles, chronic stress, ultra-processed food consumption, disrupted sleep cycles, tobacco and alcohol use, environmental pollution, and weakening social support systems have collectively created a perfect storm for chronic illness. As human lifestyles have drifted further away from biological balance, diseases linked to metabolism, stress and inflammation have surged in parallel.

For decades, medical systems around the world have focused largely on treatment—intervening after disease has already developed. Hospitals, drugs and advanced procedures remain essential, but they are increasingly proving insufficient to tackle a crisis. What the present moment demands is a shift toward prevention and management.

A new consensus is gradually emerging around the importance of integrative medicine. This approach combines conventional clinical care with scientifically validated lifestyle interventions. The goal is not merely to treat disease but to address its underlying causes. Within this evolving framework, Yoga and Naturopathy occupy a particularly important space. Far from being fringe or "alternative" therapies, these disciplines increasingly align with the principles of modern lifestyle medicine. They directly address many of the most significant risk factors associated with NCDs—physical inactivity, stress, obesity, hypertension, poor diet, respiratory dysfunction, metabolic inflammation, sleep disturbances and emotional disorders.A growing body of clinical research supports the effectiveness of lifestyle-based interventions. Studies consistently demonstrate that structured yoga practices, natural therapies, dietary correction, hydrotherapy, and stress-management techniques can significantly reduce blood pressure, improve blood sugar control, lower cholesterol levels, enhance lung function, and alleviate chronic pain. In several cases, early markers of heart disease and metabolic dysfunction have even shown signs of reversal when lifestyle interventions are applied consistently. India, interestingly, already possesses a major but under-recognised strength in this field. Across the country, more than 100 medical colleges are currently training physicians in Bachelor of Naturopathy and Yogic Sciences (BNYS), along with postgraduate specialists.

If present trends continue, these institutions are expected to produce nearly 50,000 qualified professionals by 2035. BNYS physicians undergo structured medical education that includes anatomy, physiology, pathology, diagnostics, clinical medicine, nutrition, rehabilitation and advanced yoga-based therapeutics. Their training enables them to function as primary-care lifestyle medicine practitioners who can help patients prevent disease progression, manage chronic conditions, and reduce dependence on hospital care. However, despite this potential, the Yoga and Naturopathy sector still faces important challenges. Standards of practice remain uneven in some areas, and the absence of comprehensive statutory regulation limits the system's ability to fully integrate into mainstream healthcare. Establishing clear regulatory frameworks is therefore essential. Proper oversight would help standardise education, licensing and clinical guidelines while protecting patients from unqualified practitioners. It would also strengthen the credibility of Yoga and Naturopathy in research collaborations, international partnerships and public health programmes.

At a time when India is confronting a rapidly expanding burden of lifestyle diseases, failing to harness a trained preventive-medicine workforce would be a missed opportunity.There is also a larger global dimension to this discussion. Yoga and naturopathy are not borrowed concepts—they originate from India's own civilisational knowledge systems. Today, as healthcare systems worldwide search for sustainable ways to manage chronic disease, these traditions are attracting renewed international interest.With appropriate regulation, academic strengthening and integration into national health programmes, India has a unique opportunity to position itself as a global leader in evidence-based lifestyle medicine. The need of the hour is clear: recognise the scale of the NCD crisis, strengthen preventive healthcare, integrate lifestyle medicine into national policy, and empower the growing BNYS workforce to play a meaningful role in public health. The choices made today will determine the health of the next generation. The moment to act is now.

Dr Rajesh Kumar Singh is the Executive Director of Indian Naturopathy & Yoga Graduates' Medical Association (INYGMA)

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Going solo

BJP's Punjab decision an ambitious gamble

AMIT Shah's announcement that the BJP will contest the 2027 Punjab Assembly elections on its own marks a decisive break with one of the state's longest-running political alliances. For nearly a quarter century, the BJP and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) complemented each other — the Akalis drawing strength from rural Sikh constituencies and the BJP consolidating the urban Hindu vote. The coalition delivered stable governments in the past and provided a rare example of durable coalition politics in a state otherwise prone to volatility. That equation has steadily weakened since the farm laws controversy of 2020, when the SAD walked out of the NDA. With the Akalis struggling to regain credibility and the BJP keen to shed the "*chhota bhai*" tag, going solo was perhaps inevitable.

But Punjab's political terrain remains difficult for the BJP. Its organisational presence in rural areas is limited and the legacy of the farmers' agitation continues to shape perceptions among sections of the electorate. Building an independent base will require a credible local leadership. In recent months, Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini has emerged as an active face of the BJP's outreach in Punjab. His frequent visits to the state and references to Haryana's governance initiatives — particularly farmer welfare measures and development schemes — appear aimed at projecting an alternative governance model to the AAP-led government in Punjab. For the SAD also, the split presents a challenge. Without the BJP's support, the party risks losing the broad coalition. It must also confront internal erosion and declining influence among younger voters.

Ironically, the immediate beneficiaries of this rupture may be their rivals. A fragmented contest involving the BJP, SAD, Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party could split votes and produce unexpected outcomes when Punjab heads to the polls in 2027.

Air crash probe

Investigation bureau must allay doubts

DAYS after the Union government informed Parliament that the probe report of the Ahmedabad Air India crash would be out "very soon", the country's Aircraft Accidents Investigation Bureau (AAIB) has itself come under scrutiny. The US-based Foundation for Aviation Safety (FAS) has alleged that the bureau ignored key evidence pertaining to the June 2025 crash which claimed 260 lives in one of India's biggest air disasters. The global aviation industry and the victims' families deserve an investigation that is not only thorough but also transparent. The perception of opacity raises doubts that must be addressed urgently.

The FAS, a premier non-profit organisation that monitors the aviation industry as well as government regulators, has claimed that it possesses documentary proof suggesting a troubling pattern of electrical and electronic failure in the Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft that was involved in the crash. This reportedly includes incidents of burnt wires and repeated replacement of a major power distribution component. If authentic, such evidence could potentially point toward systemic aircraft issues rather than human error. The foundation has alleged that its repeated offers to share this sensitive information with the investigators have received no response.

These accusations are serious because any air mishap probe must consider every credible lead. International aviation safety norms stress openness, cooperation and the free exchange of safety-related data. Ignoring or delaying the review of relevant evidence risks undermining the credibility of the probe. The foundation has argued that by failing to acknowledge these technical concerns, the preliminary report has indirectly reinforced speculation that the pilots were responsible for the disaster. It's worrisome for India, whose civil aviation sector is expanding rapidly, that premature assumptions and conclusions are gaining traction. The final probe report must not only be comprehensive but also beyond reproach.

Ladakh direly needs clarity, stability

The UT's leaders need to move beyond symbolic politics towards pragmatic governance

P STOBDAN
SENIOR FELLOW, DELHI POLICY GROUP

WELCOME : The Union government has revoked the detention of Ladakhi climate activist Sonam Wangchuk. PTI

THE Union government reiterated its commitment to a constructive dialogue with stakeholders regarding safeguards for Ladakh, shortly after Vinai Kumar Saxena assumed charge as the Lt Governor on Friday.

The government also revoked the detention of climate activist Sonam Wangchuk, who had been held under the National Security Act following violent protests in Ladakh last year. He was released after his wife, Gitanjali Angmo, stated that he had no political ambitions and would not pursue the path of agitation.

Yet activism and politics are not defined by ambition alone; influence and mobilisation often take subtler forms. The government argued that the prolonged period of bandhs and agitations had harmed Ladakh's peace-loving society and affected students, job aspirants, businesses, tour operators and the tourism-driven local economy.

An uneasy calm has prevailed since the protests of September 24, 2025, which left four persons dead and around 90 injured. Public agitation has subsided, but beneath the quiet lies a deeper political drift — marked by confusion, miscalculation and a widening gap between expectations and political reality.

When Ladakh was separated from Jammu and Kashmir and granted Union Territory (UT) status in October 2019, the Buddhist-majority district of Leh celebrated. For decades, its leaders had demanded precisely this outcome. In contrast, Shia-majority Kargil observed the day as a "black day."

The separation seemed to resolve a long-standing grievance — but only briefly. Within a year, the initial euphoria in Leh faded. The abrogation of Article 35A triggered anxieties over land ownership, employment and demographic vulnerability. Celebrations quickly gave way to demands for constitutional safeguards. What began as a narrative of liberation soon turned into a search for protection.

This shift exposed a fundamental contradiction. Ladakh, which opposed the special constitutional framework associated with Article 370, now seeks similar — if not stronger — protections through inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The Ministry of Home Affairs has posed a pointed question: why abandon one form of constitutional exceptionalism only to demand another?

The Sixth Schedule was crafted primarily for parts of the North-East, where distinctive historical trajectories, insurgencies and tribal autonomy movements shaped its evolution. Ladakh's demographic, anthropological and political realities do not neatly align with those circumstances. To project the Sixth Schedule as constitutional "*nirvana*" oversimplifies a complex institutional arrangement.

Yet the demand carries emotional weight. Much of the anxiety stems from perceived political disempowerment under the UT model, which lacks an elected legislature. Decision-making is seen as concentrated in administrators appointed from outside the region. This perception persists despite the dramatic rise in Central funding — from roughly Rs 57 crore annually before 2019 to nearly Rs 6,000 crore today. Economic packages, however, cannot substitute for political voices.

Developments in Kargil reveal further complexity. Shia mobilisation has grown more assertive, subtly reshaping Ladakh's internal political balance. Public expression of solidarity with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (who was assassinated recently) has underscored the transnational dimensions of Shia identity. These developments have impacted Leh and sections of Sunni-majority Kashmir alike, reflecting broader shifts within Muslim politics over the past decade.

> Much of the anxiety stems from perceived disempowerment under the UT model, which lacks an elected legislature.

Ladakh's instability, therefore, is not merely administrative; it is also sociological. Buddhist monastic networks in Leh and the Shia clerical leadership in Kargil continue to shape public sentiment. Political demands increasingly transcend technical constitutional debates.

The Indian State, however, has yet to articulate a coherent political narrative of its own. At the heart of the drift lies a leadership crisis. Many of the figures who shaped Ladakh's politics in the 1980s and 1990s remain influential today. Their legitimacy is not in question, but their policy frameworks often reflect an earlier era. They continue to operate within paradigms formed during the agitation against Srinagar's dominance, rather than adapting to the realities of a UT administered directly by Delhi. The political vocabulary has changed; leadership styles have not.

The Ladakh Buddhist Association, for long the most visible voice in Leh's politics, has struggled to recalibrate. At times, it has relied on intellectual narratives that insufficiently reflect Ladakh's complex historical traditions and demographic realities.

Ironically, the Ladakhis who once resented neglect by Srinagar now question their distance from Delhi. Some even argue that institutional safeguards felt stronger under the earlier arrangement. The result is a political discourse heavy on symbolism but light on institutional realism.

Even the local unit of the BJP finds itself ideologically adrift. Having championed UT status, it now faces a population dissatisfied with the outcome. The Centre, meanwhile, has engaged only intermittently — often responding to agitation rather than proactively shaping dialogue with informed local stakeholders.

This reactive posture has deepened mistrust and policy paralysis, but a return to the past is neither feasible nor desirable.

The central dilemma is whether Ladakh's future lies in deeper integration with India's institutional framework or in layered forms of protectionism. Advocates of the Sixth Schedule argue that it offers safeguards for land and tribal autonomy. Critics warn that it could entrench exclusion, discourage investment and replicate governance structures ill-suited to Ladakh's unique socio-economic conditions.

If inclusion in the Sixth Schedule proves impractical, alternative constitutional mechanisms — such as protections under the Fifth Schedule or tailored provisions under Article 371 — deserve careful consideration. But such pathways must emerge from informed debate rather than emotional mobilisation.

Ladakh's challenge today is less about constitutional engineering than about political maturity. Encouragingly, a younger and more educated generation — including emerging voices such as Kunzes Dolma and Namdrak — is beginning to question inherited narratives. They recognise Ladakh's structural vulnerabilities: a fragile ecology, limited industry and heavy dependence on state subsidies. Yet they also understand that isolationist frameworks may not offer durable solutions.

For Delhi, the lesson is equally clear. Increased budgets alone are insufficient. Sustained engagement, institutional innovation and a willingness to rethink aspects of the UT model will be necessary. An expert committee drawing on constitutional, anthropological and economic expertise could help depoliticise the debate and produce grounded recommendations.

Ladakh stands at a crossroads. The dream of separation from J&K has given way to the complexities of self-definition. Protectionism and integration are not binary choices but points along a continuum. The region's future will depend on whether its leaders — old and new — can move beyond symbolic politics towards pragmatic governance.

As a small and fragile society, Ladakh can absorb only limited pressures from political currents unfolding elsewhere. It would do well to avoid becoming a battlefield for external agendas or succumbing to forces of internal fragmentation. If such tendencies go unchecked, the region risks drifting towards disorder and instability.

There is reason for cautious optimism. With a new Lt Governor and administrative leadership in place, Ladakh may yet find the clarity needed to spur stability and balanced development.

Views are personal

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"Let Ladakh change the world rather than the world change Ladakh. — Sonam Wangchuk"

When money made music

SURESH CHANDER KUMAR

I never spent an *anna* in my life, nor clutched a *chavanni*. By the time I arrived, the *annas* had already slipped into history — phased out in 1957, when India adopted the decimal system and the rupee was divided into 100 paise instead of 16 *annas*. Yet their echoes filled my childhood evenings, wrapped in the voices of my parents and grandparents. Around the dining table, under the slow sweep of a ceiling fan, I grew up listening to their laughter-laced anecdotes of a rupee that once stretched like elastic.

"*Do athani ka samosa khaya hai kabhi*?" my father would tease, eyes twinkling. Of course, I hadn't. My grandmother would sigh, "*Chaar anne mein poore haath bhar jalebi milti thi*!" and I could almost smell the syrupy delicacy.

What sweetened these stories was how music mingled with money. My parents often broke into that evergreen song sung by Kishore Kumar — "*Paanch rupaiya barah anna*..." My mother would nudge my father with mock annoyance: "*Dekho, tum bhi waise hi udaar thhe na*?" He would laugh, confessing how he once spent a princely *chavanni* on bangles to impress her. For me, it was theatre — part history lesson, part love story.

Numbers were never dry digits in those recollections. They jingled, jangled and jived. Elders recalled vendors calling out in the bazaar — "*Aath anne ki chaat, do anne ki imli goli*!" Their cries sounded more like folk songs than sales pitches. I would imagine lanterns glowing, bangles clinking, coins changing hands and the fragrance of roasted groundnuts. Money wasn't mathematics then; it was melody.

Damdi, chavanni, athanni — these were characters on the silver screen, not mere coins. The elders sang along, their memories flickering brighter than black-and-white reels. I wondered what it meant to inhabit that world where currency carried cadence.

Today, our money feels clinical — decimalised and digitised. Back then, as my elders described, it was a jester and a storyteller. One *anna* was not just one-sixteenth of a rupee; it was the measure of *jalebis*, the ticket to a matinee show, the price of shared *chaat*. Its value lay not merely in metal but in memory.

Listening to those tales, I long for that economy of enchantment. Even mild rebukes must have sounded musical: "*Tu to sirf athanni ka dost nikla*!" carries more rhythm than any modern complaint. My children, of course, roll their eyes when I begin these stories. For them, money arrives with a notification tone. Once, even money made music. Today, our phones merely buzz.

The writer is a Yamunanagar-based industrialist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BJP faces uphill task in Punjab

Refer to 'The way forward for Punjab' (*The Great Game*); AAP had got a pleasant surprise in the last Punjab Assembly elections. The Congress had expected to win that election comfortably, as the Shiromani Akali Dal was in a shambles. But then, that is what Punjab does for itself. Never in consonance with Delhi Darbar, Punjabi voters have a mind of their own. The BJP has a knack for springing surprises, especially in states where it is expected not to. However, Punjab may not be as easy as it was in Delhi, where AAP was overthrown after a tactful campaign.

DEEPAK TAAK, PANCHKULA

AAP must shoulder responsibility

Apropos of 'The way forward for Punjab'; the state stands today at a critical crossroads. A state once celebrated for its enterprise, resilience and agricultural prosperity, now faces a crisis of direction. What Punjab needs today is not symbolic politics, but a long-term vision for renewal. With Congress presence declining in the state and no SAD-BJP alliance, the responsibility of governance and development rests heavily on the shoulders of AAP. Welfare schemes may provide temporary relief, but Punjab's revival will depend on deeper structural reforms.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Students must be sensitised

With reference to 'Teaching children to question war and power'; students today are growing up in a world that is confronted with complex challenges — climate change, environmental degradation, democratic decline, technological-capitalistic disruptions, political instability and cultural conflicts. Autocratic and arrogant political leaders brazenly stifle legitimate dissenting voices, justify their unethical behaviour and avoid accountability. In the evolving chaotic scenario, it is imperative to go beyond traditional syllabus and textbooks, make students aware of global issues; they must be sensitised towards universal challenges.

DS KANG, HOSHIARPUR

Be crisis-ready at all times

Refer to 'Geopolitics & India's fragile energy dependence'; the rising tensions across the globe to dominate resources has become the order of the day. The world is oblivious to the aftermath of imperialistic ambitions, which could result in further deterioration of economic framework. The constant exploitation and misuse of renewable sources is the root cause of problems India is facing today. To have sufficient funds exclusively for procurement, production and advancement of energy should be the aim.

RUPINDER KAUR, AMBALA

Wasting Parliament's time

Valuable time of the Lok Sabha has been wasted by the Opposition discussing the no-confidence motion against the Lok Sabha Speaker. It was decidedly a non-serious move when it was clear that the motion was sure to be defeated due to lack of support. The Congress is attacking every constitutional post — CBI, ED, Election Commission, judiciary. The valuable time of the Parliament must not be frittered away. No time is left for discussions on burning issues, for which the august institution has been created. Discussions should be people-centric and not for self-aggrandizement. People are watching.

KARNAIL SINGH, KHARAR

Harassing ordinary citizens

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk's release from jail after six months is a big relief for his family. If innocent people spend months or years in jail with their families fighting cases that don't stand in court, who will return their lost time, damaged reputation, mental agony and sufferings faced by their families? It is high time the courts realise that justice is not setting someone free from judicial custody, but ensuring that misuse of power never becomes a tool to harass ordinary citizens.

GURPREET S MALHOTRA, MOHALI

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 1926

Raja Narendranath's address

IT was an interesting address which Raja Narendranath delivered as President of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha in Delhi on Saturday. If there was nothing very striking in it, nothing that could be described as original, it was full of good and useful thoughts well expressed. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is its sobriety, restraint and sweet reasonableness. In this respect, it presents a striking contrast to the speech delivered not long ago from the presidential chair of another communal organisation, of which extravagance and offensive aggressiveness was the dominating note. This must not be taken to mean that Raja Narendranath does not hold strong views on social or political questions or does not express them with vigour. The exact reverse of this is the case. On almost every subject dealt with by him, his view is sufficiently pronounced, and his expression pointed and precise. The sanction to untouchability and to the treatment meted out to the depressed classes he characterises as "a negation of democracy and of democratic principles" and "the duty of removing this stigma", in his opinion, "falls heavily upon the shoulders of the Hindus generally and of such an organised body of the Hindus as the Mahasabha in particular." Equally strongly does he condemn enforced widowhood, enforced seclusion of Hindu women and their prevailing ignorance and illiteracy. As for *Shudhi*, not only does he see nothing wrong in it, but it entirely passes his comprehension why the right of conversion enjoyed and exercised by all other communities should be denied to the Hindus.

A mandate to deliver in Nepal

JAYANT PRASAD
EX-AMBASSADOR TO NEPAL

THE democratic transition in Nepal bodes well for the country and for India-Nepal relations. Army Chief Ashok Raj Sigdel, President Ram Chandra Paudel and caretaker Prime Minister and former Chief Justice Sushila Karki were the key players. Notably, Sushila Karki's leadership ensured that the election was free, fair and uncontroversial. India supported this process.

This is Nepal's first election in recent memory to present a prime-ministerial candidate. It was not just a victory for the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). It also served as a referendum on the charismatic Balendra Shah, former Kathmandu mayor, hip-hop rapper, structural engineer and MTech graduate from Visvesvaraya Technological University in Belgaum, Karnataka. He is an icon to Nepal's youth.

No past Nepali leader has commanded such popularity — not even those who fought for democracy and revolution. As Prime Minister, the 35-year-old Balendra Shah will be the world's youngest current PM.

With this change, the old guard is out. Nepal's new *Pratinidhi Sabha* will be dominated by young representatives, averaging 43-45 years old. As a result, Nepali politics will change.

This generational renewal is strengthened by Nepal's new constitution, validated by these elections. The electoral system establishes a 275-member parliament, divided between 165 first-past-the-post (FPTP) seats and 110 party-list proportional representation seats. It was believed this setup would prevent majorities. But the RSP defied expectations, securing a large majority, falling just two seats short of the two-thirds majority.

The election results focussed on internal issues rather than external ones, unlike in the past. Voters rejected bad governance, corruption, impunity, nepotism, VIP culture and wealthy leaders in a poor country, and instead, favoured accountability.

The path to the RSP's electoral victory was paved by the Gen Z uprising. While Balendra Shah's premiership bid galvanised RSP support, the voter turnout — just under 60% — was lower than young Nepalese election since 1991.

Since 2015, Nepal's premiership has rotated nine times among three major parties: the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (UML), the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Maoist Centre. Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli of the UML served as Prime Minister four times.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS: A lack of results could quickly lead to frustration. PTI

Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) of the Maoist Centre and Sher Bahadur Deuba of the NC served twice each. The NC's Sushil Koirala, since deceased, served once. The musical chairs game never had any ideological or programmatic beat. Sheer opportunism determined alliances.

The present verdict decimated the UML, the NC and the Communist Party of Nepal, which includes the Maoist Centre. The vote share for communist parties dropped from about 40% in recent elections to 21%. Furthermore, the decline in seats was even steeper. Only Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) secured a win, as he was aided by the RSP's subterranean support.

The NC's struggles underscore these shifts. Its President Gagan Thapa suffered a rare defeat — something that has happened only once before, in 1991, when KP Bhattarai lost. Besides Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli of the UML, the other prominent leaders who lost are Janata Samajbadi Party's Upendra Yadav, Janamat Party's Chandra Kant Raut and NC's Shekhar Koirala, who even forfeited his deposit.

> Voters rejected bad governance, corruption, impunity, nepotism and VIP culture.

The RSP's victory was overwhelming: 125 seats under the FPTP alone. In proportional voting, it won more votes than the next three national parties combined. It has taught a lesson to the once-dominant parties, still clinging to aging leaders and outmoded ideas.

One reason for this sweeping transformation was the mobilisation on social media, which drove the RSP's success. Another was the sentiment among the Nepalese diaspora, which influenced their relatives' voting in Nepal.

Balendra Shah is among the first to unite Nepal's *pahad* and *terai*. He is not a polarising regional or ethnic figure. His Maithili-speaking, Madhesi background has not hurt him — on the contrary, it has helped. The RSP swept the *terai*, winning 31 of 32 seats.

As the Mayor of Kathmandu, he maintained a clean image. His direct and action-driven style set him apart. Voters have high expectations, having given him a mandate for radical, transformational change. A lack of results could quickly lead to frustration.

Given this mandate, Shah's immediate priority will be to maintain a spotless government and rebuild Nepal. In line with this transition, his first steps are clear: address corruption and restore the many government structures damaged or destroyed during the September 2025 uprising.

Many of the RSP's elected representatives are well-educated. Some have PhD degrees. Leaders like Balendra Shah, Swarnim Wagle and others have their task cut out for them. The expected 18-member governing team is being cast to be clean, competent and talented. They must reform a rigid system weighed down by slow, traditional processes.

To achieve their goals, RSP Chairman Rabi Lamichhane and PM-designate Balendra Shah must forge a productive working relationship. This will require careful and dexterous bridging.

Balendra Shah will pursue a development-focussed, non-aligned, pro-Nepal policy. Such a policy would help further the projects that India and Nepal have jointly conceived and take into account the historic and ongoing equities between Nepal and India.

The RSP's ambitious agenda includes a seven per cent GDP growth target. It aims to raise nominal GDP from $45.5 to $100 billion over five years. Its goals include encouraging business and industry, easing regulation, freeing entrepreneurship, promoting investment and creating jobs. The RSP also seeks to drive development and achieve 30,000 MW of hydropower over the next decade.

In this spirit of renewal, Nepal's new government will be intent on delivering on its agenda. Against this backdrop, India can be a valuable partner. In addition to hydropower, both countries can expand cooperation in areas such as environment.

This includes preserving the Himalaya and Churia Hills and developing alternative energy sources such as solar and biomass. Cooperation can also extend to tourism, infrastructure, arts, culture, education, biotechnology and connectivity.

RSP leaders and Narendra Modi have exchanged positive messages. However, some persistent issues may need delicate handling. For these, mutual restraint and patience will be essential. As Nepal transforms, both nations have a chance to reset relations.

Four years on, AAP faces questions

JAGRUP SINGH SEKHON
FORMER PROFESSOR, GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

THE Bhagwant Singh Mann-led AAP government in Punjab completes its four years in office on March 16, 2026. It recently presented its last Budget with a focus on social welfare and development schemes, particularly fulfilling the promise to pay Rs 1,000 and Rs 1,500, respectively, to the eligible general and SC category women.

The government's other schemes include the Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana covering every household, an investment summit in Mohali and free electricity. Together, these initiatives signal a strategy aimed at retaining power in 2027. However, there is no roadmap for reviving the lost glory of Punjab. Though the government's performance can be termed mixed, it has fallen short of the electorate's expectations.

The 2022 Assembly election was a watershed in the history of post-Independence Punjab as the AAP got an unprecedented victory, winning 92 of the 117 seats, with 42.3% of the total votes polled. The voters rejected all shades of powerful and traditional leaders and political parties. The general perception was that these leaders were responsible for pushing Punjab to the brink.

During the poll campaign, the AAP leadership promised that if voted to power, the party would resolve the structural problems created by the previous governments. The major issues of the people were lack of development, drug abuse, gangsterism, unemployment, *goondagardi*, corruption, law and order, agrarian distress, education, health etc. Religious and other parochial issues did not figure at the top.

However, even after four years in office, the desired improvement remains elusive, particularly in law and order and drugs in spite of efforts made by the government. Punjab is still grappling with most of the problems it has been facing since terrorism ended.

Notably, most of the problems are byproducts of the Green Revolution, followed by the one and a half decades of terrorism and the misrule of successive governments since 1992. No government, including the present one, has given a serious thought to fixing them.

Several other factors have contributed to Punjab's decline. They point to tougher times ahead. These factors are: the longstanding political, economic and cultural unrest in the state, migration of youth, killing

REPORT CARD: The performance of the AAP government can be termed mixed. @BHAGWANTMANN X/ANI

of targeted persons, extortion, gang warfare, violation of law and order, declining trust of people in institutions, increasing religious fanaticism, radicalism, tension in Centre-state relations, agrarian crisis, questionable behaviour of many leaders and frequent changes in their loyalties and rising frustrations of the common masses.

The AAP government's failure to effectively tackle these problems has raised many questions about its performance in the last four years. Its decline in popularity manifested in the 2024 parliamentary elections as also the urban body elections held in 2025. The party could win only three seats of the Lok Sabha with a vote share of 26%.

In the urban body elections, AAP failed to get a mandate in many cities, particularly the big ones. The outcome has raised many questions over Mann's leadership and the style of working of his government.

> Growth without development has defined Punjab's politics.

Issues like endemic factionalism, organisational weaknesses, centralised role of high command, dominance of the Delhi Darbar, ideological bankruptcy, defections and entry of leaders of other parties with questionable integrity have seemingly put the AAP on the path of declining popularity.

On the other hand, the verdict in favour of the Congress, which won seven seats in the 2024 elections against the national trend, is not a new phenomenon. It had also won eight seats in the 2019 elections when the Modi wave had swept the country.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Punjab was the only state in North India where the BJP could not open its account despite the state having over 45% Hindu population. The presence of many prominent Sikh and Hindu faces in the BJP also did not help, though it got over 18% of the vote share.

Punjab is the only state where the BJP, despite having a long-term alliance with a winnable state-level party (the SAD) till recently, has neither succeeded in broadening its traditional urban upper caste support base nor been able to raise a state-level leader.

It was not considered a winnable party on its own despite presence of the RSS and Bharatiya Jana Sangh in the state for a long time. The BJP's alliance with the SAD has remained three seats and 23 seats in the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha, respectively, since 1997. The Akali leadership has never allowed the state unit of the BJP to increase its seats.

On the other hand, the electoral rout of the SAD in the 2022 Assembly and 2024 parliamentary elections was glaring: it won only three seats and one seat, respectively. The party is yet to recover from its mistakes, including the initial support to the NDA on the three black, pro-corporate farm laws. The SAD leadership crisis and its 10-year regime in the state (2007-17) also caused it to lose its core support groups of urban Sikhs and the rural Jat peasantry.

Punjab once again stands at a political crossroads as the 2027 elections loom. The major issues staring the electorate are the performance of the AAP government, factional fights within the Congress, structural and existential crisis in the SAD, the BJP's solo attempts at wooing the voters, hopelessness, rising radicalism and religious fanaticism, problems of the agrarian and working classes, declining faith in the institutional framework and debt.

While the people had last time voted a new party to power in the hope of getting "alternative politics", there is a growing feeling that the AAP government is becoming more like the previous governments.

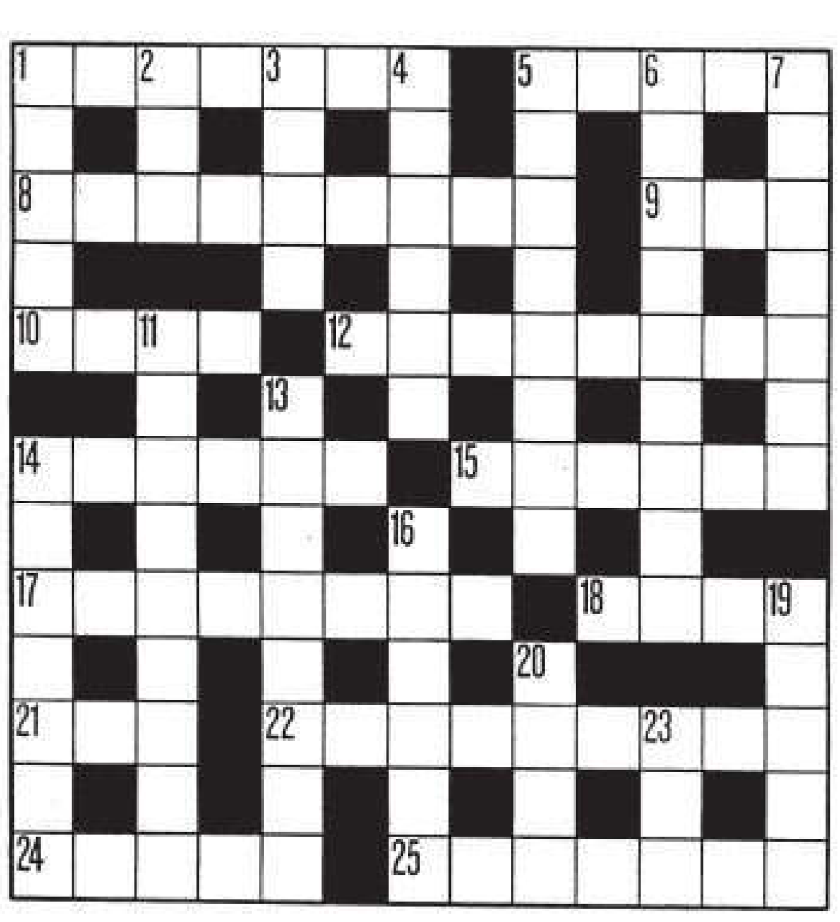
The big question is : will the AAP ride to victory again on the basis of its performance and populist and welfare policies? Or will the electorate throw up another new experiment or return to the traditional parties?

Unfortunately, the post-Green Revolution politics in Punjab has proved to be 'growth without development'. It has produced an army of leaders, but without statesman-like qualities.

The leaders and their parties are only hankering after power, with no commitment to resolving the structural problems of the state, bringing back its old glory and strengthening the democratic processes at the grassroots level. Factional and vendetta politics, along with the mushrooming of political groups without ideological commitment have also contributed to the degeneration of the political process in the state.

Will Punjab move towards the developmental and participatory political process?

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 A root vegetable (7)
5 To show in (5)
8 Divert (9)
9 Large container for liquids (3)
10 Way out (4)
12 Count for nothing (3,2,3)
14 Exactly (2,1,3)
15 An edible nut (6)
17 Professional critic (8)
18 Wound with a dagger (4)
21 Acknowledge (3)
22 Involve (9)
24 Spirited (5)
25 Consider meditatively (7)

DOWN
1 Body of lawmen (5)
2 Disencumber (3)
3 Observe (4)
4 Afflict (6)
5 Unsympathetic (8)
6 Seek to settle contentious issue (4,2,3)
7 Walk over one's steps again (7)
11 Beforehand (2,7)
13 Tranquillity (8)
14 Leave one road for another (4,3)
16 Fit of ill-humour (6)
19 Cry of a sheep (5)
20 Whack (4)
23 Chimpanzee for example (3)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Backward, 5 Able, 9 Skein, 10 Vitiate, 11 Fit as a fiddle, 13 Untidy, 14 Escort, 17 Field glasses, 20 Gateway, 21 Gorge, 22 Thaw, 23 Cretonne.

Down: 1 Base, 2 Coexist, 3 Win hands down, 4 Reveal, 6 Bland, 7 Elements, 8 At first sight, 12 Gunfight, 15 Overrun, 16 Player, 18 Extra, 19 Mere.

SU DO KU

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

V.EASY

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MARCH 16, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 25
- Chaitra Parvishte 3
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 12, up to 9:41 am
- Shiva Yoga up to 9:37 am
- Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 6:22 am
- Moon enters Aquarius sign 6:14 pm
- Panchak start 6:14 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET: MONDAY 18:31 HRS
SUNRISE: TUESDAY 06:30 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	29	14
New Delhi	32	15
Amritsar	23	13
Bathinda	28	14
Jalandhar	23	13
Ludhiana	27	16
Bhiwani	31	12
Hisar	30	17
Sirsa	29	14
Dharamsala	20	10
Manali	14	03
Shimla	15	05
Srinagar	15	07
Jammu	27	16
Kargil	13	0
Leh	13	03
Dehradun	28	14
Mussoorie	19	09

TEMPERATURE IN °C

The Statesman
Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India -founded 1818

Tariff Leverage

The return of aggressive tariff politics in Washington signals that global trade is once again entering a period of uncertainty. The decision by the administration of President Donald Trump to launch fresh investigations under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 against a group of major trading partners ~ including India, China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union - reflects a familiar strategy: using the threat of tariffs as negotiating leverage. Section 301 is not merely a bureaucratic exercise. It is one of the US government's most powerful trade enforcement tools. It allows the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to investigate whether foreign countries maintain policies that harm American commerce. If the investigation concludes that such practices exist, Washington can impose tariffs or other restrictions unilaterally.

For India, the implications go beyond the immediate risk of higher tariffs. New Delhi has spent several years trying to deepen economic ties with the United States, positioning itself as a key manufacturing alternative to China in global supply chains. The strategic logic behind this partnership has been reinforced by geopolitical convergence between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Washington across issues ranging from the Indo-Pacific to technology cooperation. Yet trade has remained the most complicated part of the relationship.

The United States continues to view India's tariff structure, industrial policies, and regulatory barriers with scepticism. From medical devices and digital services to agriculture and manufacturing, disagreements persist over market access and subsidies. The new investigations revive those long-standing concerns, placing them inside a legal framework that could justify punitive measures.

India is not alone in facing this pressure. Economies across Asia and Europe are also under scrutiny, particularly those that run persistent trade surpluses with the United States or maintain large manufacturing capacity. But the inclusion of India underscores an uncomfortable reality: strategic alignment does not automatically translate into trade leniency.

For Washington, the objective is straightforward. By initiating investigations and setting timelines for potential remedies, the US creates a credible threat that keeps trading partners engaged in negotiations. Tariffs, in this sense, function less as an end in themselves and more as a bargaining instrument.

For India, the challenge is balancing economic ambition with defensive trade diplomacy. The country wants to expand exports and attract global manufacturers relocating supply chains. At the same time, it remains cautious about opening domestic markets too quickly. This tension has defined India's trade policy for decades, from its negotiations at the World Trade Organization to bilateral discussions with partners such as the United States. The Section 301 probes therefore represent more than a procedural step in American trade law. They are a reminder that the global trading system is shifting toward a harder, more transactional phase. If India wishes to secure a durable economic partnership with Washington, it will have to navigate that reality with greater strategic clarity ~ and perhaps with a willingness to rethink parts of its trade regime.

Strangers Within

India likes to celebrate its diversity, but the everyday experience of many citizens from the Northeast tells a more uncomfortable story. In cities such as Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai ~ places that pride themselves on cosmopolitanism ~ people from states such as Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura often find themselves treated not as fellow citizens but as outsiders.

The problem is not new. In 2014, the killing of 19-year-old Nido Tania from Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi shocked the country. More recently, another violent attack in the capital ~ this time involving a woman from Manipur assaulted by teenagers in a public park ~ has again exposed how easily prejudice can escalate into brutality. The details differ, but the pattern is painfully familiar. What begins as casual stereotyping often becomes something more serious. Northeastern Indians routinely report being called "Chinese" or "Nepali," mocked for their appearance, or questioned about their food habits. These remarks are sometimes dismissed as harmless jokes. Yet they reveal a deeper problem: many people still see citizens from the Northeast as culturally foreign.

The prejudice extends into everyday transactions. Young professionals and students arriving in metropolitan cities frequently struggle to find housing because landlords assume they are unreliable tenants or morally suspect. Women from the region often face an additional burden of sexualised stereotypes. Even those in positions of authority have spoken publicly about encountering such biases.

Part of the problem lies in ignorance. For decades, the Northeast has remained geographically and psychologically distant from India's political and cultural centres. School textbooks devote little attention to its history and societies. Popular culture rarely represents its people with nuance. The result is a vacuum filled by crude assumptions. But ignorance alone does not explain the hostility. There is also a deeper failure of civic responsibility. When acts of harassment or violence occur in public spaces, bystanders frequently choose silence.

This indifference allows prejudice to flourish unchecked. Governments have occasionally responded after high-profile incidents. Committees have recommended stronger legal protections against racial discrimination, and police units in cities such as Delhi have been tasked with addressing crimes against Northeastern residents. Yet laws and official advisories cannot by themselves change social attitudes.

The real challenge is cultural. India's idea of nationhood cannot remain confined to a narrow image shaped largely by the mainland. The country stretches from the Brahmaputra valley to the hills of Mizoram and the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh. Its citizens speak dozens of languages, follow different customs, and look different from one another. That diversity is not a threat to national unity; it is its foundation. Recognising this requires more than slogans about "unity in diversity". It demands everyday respect ~ in neighbourhoods, workplaces and classrooms. Until Indians learn to see people from the Northeast as fellow citizens rather than curiosities or outsiders, the promise of a truly inclusive republic will remain unfinished.

Religion is One

Eternal Religion annihilates one's sufferings forever and makes one blissful permanently. It is directly perceptible, independent of any priestly intervention. This fact was dismissed by the priests, so that they could establish themselves as religious agents of God falsely. Swamiji gave utterances against priestly manoeuvres and tried to rescue the world from its detrimental grip. He spoke to show how religions of the world were made 'lifeless' by it

"The world is in the chains of superstition," said Swami Vivekananda in 1896. He had also said then, "Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries." He was genuinely religious and studied religions of the world keenly. He knew how clean and inspiring all religions were at the outset, before they went under the leadership of people greedy for pelf and power. Observing their downfall due to corrupt practices in them, he was deeply hurt.

Religions of the world originated out of an urgency in man. They were for earning peace and perfection. They grew in an atmosphere of sovereignty. They developed on different faiths suited to different ethos. They were pragmatic and progressive, for they recognized diversity and individual needs as obvious and offered means for their practices. They were compatible with various tastes and temperaments. There was neither disrespect nor discrimination among them. They co-existed in search of Truth and God. Amidst them, there was a healthy connection. In order to describe it he said, "Every religion is an expression, a language to express the same truth, and we must speak to each in his own language." Therefore, faiths were the primary means, and spiritual realizations the invariable end to them. Superstition had no room in them. Pure and simple belief in God and Truth only mattered in them.

But, with the intrusion of priestcraft, they began to socially decline and degenerate into "mockeries". Priests forged "chains of superstition" craftily and rapaciously sapped the world to their own authority and profit. Priests reduced them to mere conglomerates of rites and rituals, cunningly keeping their essentials at bay in the dense shrouds of mystery. Faiths in the hands of priests imperatively became misplaced and had eventually remained no more as means for God-realization and emancipation from afflictions, but became ends in themselves, giving rise to sturdy sectarianism.

In their wake, religions, which were once liberal, inclusive, and shorn of prejudice had now become abysses of ignorance and fanaticism with the aggressive parochial preaching by the priests. The fellow feeling between religions and the idea that they are transmogrifications of the one irreducible Eternal Religion thus petered out of the world. Swamiji said, "One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways." God is the embodiment of that Eternal Religion. Realizing God, one becomes its living example. One such would say with a firm conviction: "Only he who constantly thinks of God can know His real nature. He alone knows that God reveals Himself in different forms and different ways, that He has attributes and, again, has none." Eternal Religion annihilates one's sufferings forever and makes one blissful permanently. It is directly perceptible, independent of any priestly intervention. This fact was dismissed by the priests, so that they could establish themselves as religious agents of God falsely. Swamiji gave utterances against priestly manoeuvres and tried to rescue the world from its detrimental grip. He spoke to show how religions of the world were made "lifeless" by it. He said, "When principles are entirely lost sight of and emotions prevail, religions degenerate into fanaticism and sectarianism."

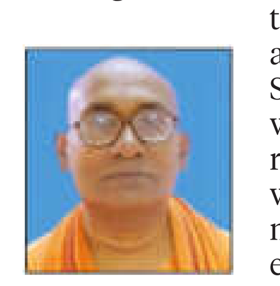
However, even in the midst of unbridled priestly activities and indoctrinations banking on gratuitous non-essentials of religions, there have always been mystics and seekers of the highest order who believed as before that religion was one and infinite but faiths were many as various means to realize it. So, they chose suitable faiths to carry out their spiritual practices, in order to realize that religion as their goal of life. Hence, their faiths served as their paths to reach it. That is why, Swamiji's conclusion was: "If there were not different religions, no religion would survive." Along with it, he had also logically shown: "In essentials, all religions are one."

Swamiji and his Master were of the same ilk. They realized the Eternal Religion and had its supreme knowledge. Both being armed with the invincible spiritual wisdom as well as expertise, fought a benign battle against religious bigotry and fundamentalism perpetuated by the priesthood. In his first speech at Chicago, Swamiji famously recited from ancient texts containing the realization of such souls of yore and buttressed his view of oneness of the purposes of all faiths.

His Master Sri Ramakrishna described faiths as paths, each capable of taking aspirants to the goal which is the one endowed by the Eternal Religion. He exhorted: "Never get into your head that your faith alone is true and every other is false." One of the verses Swamiji recited at Chicago was: "As the different streams, having their sources at different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." Our religion was called "Vaidika Dharma" before it came to be known as "Hindu Dharma" or Hinduism which was being ascribed because it happened to be the religion of the "Hindu people". Persians gave us the name "Hindu". Swamiji said, "The religion of the Vedas is the religion of the Hindus, and the foundation of all Oriental religions."

The essentials or the eternal values embedded in the Vedas constitute the scriptures or Shastras of the Hindus. Smritis do not come under their category since they are of periodical relevance and changeable vis-à-vis the changing social conditions. To consider and pass them as scriptures is wrong and harmful. Accordingly, any Smriti (social norms) of antiquity could not be deemed right for application in modern India. Swamiji used to say that there was a need for a new Smriti in the present age for the Hindus. He was badly disturbed to see how hideously the upper caste and the rich discriminated against the lower caste and poor in Hindu society sticking to the laws of obsolete Smritis. He raised his voice against the heinous repression of the Sudras by the priestly Brahmins and spoke of "Sudra Jagaran" or awakening of the masses comprising the downtrodden whom centuries of coercion and oppression made forgetful of their human identity. Giving a call, he said to them, "Let new India arise in your place. Let her arise ~ out of the peasants' cottage, grasping the plough; out of the huts of the fisherman, the cobbler, and the sweeper. Let her spring from the grocer's shop, from beside the oven of the fritter-seller. Let her emanate from the factory, from marts and from markets.

Let her emerge from groves and forests, from hills and mountains. The common people have suffered oppression for thousands of years ~ suffered it without murmur, and as a result have got wonderful fortitude. They have suffered eternal misery, which has given them unflinching vitality." Indeed, it was painful to him that, in spite of the highly egalitarian spiritual teachings of Hinduism in essence, Sudras had to unnecessarily suffer untold miseries at the hands of Hindu priests and pundits. He said, "No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism." Swamiji taught Vedanta, which is the essence of our religion. Vedanta has survived with its pristine purity through millennia for its exceptional essential impersonal spiritual aspect of harmony with other religions. He said, "In essentials, all religions are one." We honoured and respected all religions unequivocally, until we gave ourselves into the hands of power-crazy priests who injected hatred for other religions in our hearts and minds. Our civilization grew up on the virtues of unfettered resilience, relationship, and acceptance, taking resort to the basic principle of our religion which says Truth is one but its interpretations are many. Swamiji said to the world that we accept all religions as true. With due love and respect for world religions, he spoke about their founders, namely, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad, publicly in the West, upholding the real spirit of our religion. It was because of the proud priests that our society became caste ridden and rife with untouchability. Swamiji said the downfall of our nation commenced the moment the word "untouchable" was introduced in our society by them. We never knew communalism so long as its poison was infused in our psyche in an organized manner by evil forces comprising narrow-minded priests and politicians in the modern times. They cunningly legitimized it as "Shatsra Vachan", which it was not, as its mention is nowhere to be found in Vedanta. The vitals of our collective life were unobtrusively eaten up by its menace.



SWAMI SANDARSHANANANDA

The writer is associated with the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur

Swamiji saw an imminent danger of our nation being in deep trouble ahead due to its wild scourge. He, therefore, set out the responsibility of the Ramakrishna Mission to forward the work of religious harmony initiated by his Master. He had pointedly said in the resolutions of its first meeting: "The duty of the Mission is to conduct in the right spirit the activities inaugurated by Sri Ramakrishna for the establishment of fellowship among the followers of different religions, knowing them all to be so many forms only of one undying Eternal Religion."

Usurpation of politics in the realm of Hinduism has made our country extremely weak now. Politicians have been using it for their dirty gains, removing the essential format. In order to weaponise it, they have made it fake, falsely inserting all sorts of nonsensical division, discrimination, and segregation among our people. Their tyranny over the Dalits, Adivasis and other religious communities has crossed all limits. They have washed our brains with floods of lies about historical and religious facts and made us believe them to hate and punish those with the worst miseries, such as the snatching of their rights. To oppose a similar situation, Swamiji declared distinctly: "We preach neither social equality nor inequality but every being has the equal rights, and insist upon freedom of thought and action in every way." This sinister activity of politicians dwelling on a redundant Smriti, which complies with their ominous agenda, is a direct assault on Hinduism. Politicians in connivance with questionable organizations assisted by ferocious hoodlums have made a "mockery" of Hinduism, putting the Hindus in "chains" of distortions and deceptions.

It is not the fault of Hinduism but of politicians who deserve to be condemned and ostracised. Swamiji said: "Religion (Hinduism) is not in fault. On the other hand, your religion teaches you that every being is only your own self multiplied. But it was the want of practical application, the want of sympathy ~ the want of heart." Indomitably reckoning with opposing forces 130 years ago, Swamiji placed true Hinduism at the pinnacle of glory before the world outside our country and attracted numerous people from far and wide to love and respect it. Unfortunately, its ill treatment with ulterior motives relentlessly for a century after his departure has pulled it down to dust, converting it into a communal and fundamental religion. The world looks at it now scornfully for the way Dalits, Adivasis, and the people of other religious faiths are being humiliated and tortured by so-called Hindus in our country mercilessly in the name of religion. This is the consequence of the fact that politics has spoiled our simple and ignorant Hindus, by and large, making them behave like beasts with fellow beings if they belong to the communities they hate. Lest politics destroy our country, Swamiji reminded us: "Religion is of deeper importance than politics, since it goes to the root, and deals with the essential of conduct."

Swamiji was a well-recognized world teacher. He taught for the good of all in the world, giving the lesson of the oneness of religion and humanity. He spoke about religion and society of the East as well as of the West. He said to his Western audience significantly: "We, in India, allowed liberty in spiritual matters, and we have a tremendous spiritual power in religious thought even today. You grant the same liberty in social matters, and so have a splendid social organisation. We have not given any freedom to the expansion of social matters, and ours is a cramped society. You have never given any freedom in religious matters but, with fire and sword, have enforced your beliefs, and the result is that religion is a stunted, degenerated growth in the European mind. In India, we have to take off the shackles from society; in Europe, the chains must be taken from the feet of spiritual progress." Irrespective of his or her individual religious faith, an underlying Eternal Religion eternally links every one with each other on earth and forms a global family. Ramakrishna and Vivekananda discovered this truth scientifically by dint of their rigorous spiritual experiments and proclaimed it to the world at large. We will have to realise it ourselves at any price for the sake of our peaceful co-existence.

The Jakarta Post

Mideast oil shock signals supply crunch

The sudden and acute disruption to Middle East oil supplies caused by the United States-Israeli war with Iran is forcing buyers to tap every available barrel, rapidly dismantling forecasts of an oil glut this year.

In February, the International Energy Agency (IEA) forecast that global oil supply would exceed demand by around 3.7 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2026, with the surplus extending into the following year.

A month later, that projection appears redundant. Nearly 15 million bpd of crude production, plus another 4.5 million bpd of refined fuels, remain effectively stranded in the Persian Gulf after the near-complete closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

A Member Of The ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

The loss of such a vast volume of supply, equivalent to almost a fifth of global daily consumption, has sent shockwaves through oil markets and the wider economy.

Asia, which sources around 60 percent of its crude imports from the Middle East, is bearing the brunt. In the Gulf, producers are running out of options. With exports blocked, crude is being pushed into onshore storage tanks and offshore tankers.

Iraq, which has limited storage options, has already shut off at least a quarter of its 4.3 million bpd of production.

Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, the world's largest exporter, have some remaining storage capacity available, but it's measured in days, not weeks.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Tasks for Shah

Sir, This refers to the editorial, "Nepal's Youthquake" published today. Nepal's transition from monarchical rule to a modern democracy reached a historic turning point with the March 2026 general election results. Following the Gen Z uprisings that shook Nepal last year, Nepali voters have achieved a true revolution by rejecting the traditional political establishment outright.

Unlike Bangladesh, where the old guard returned to power, Nepal has embraced Balendra Shah, who is seen as a symbol of defiance against systematic corruption and nepotism.

The defeat of the four-time Prime Minister, K.P.Sharma Oli, in his stronghold to the former mayor of Kathmandu, Shah, has shown the depth of public frustration with a political system that saw 14 governments in 17 years.

However, Shah's inexperience and perceived authoritarian style may hinder his ability to navigate the complexities of crime, corruption, and unemployment. His most urgent priority remains the safety of nearly two million Nepali workers caught in the escalating conflict in the Persian Gulf region.

Nepal's economy is currently stifled by low wages and trade deficits, while climate vulnerability continues to deepen inequality and drive youth migration.

Addressing these hurdles will require pragmatic, forward-looking policies. New Delhi has historically engaged with Nepal's traditional leadership; it must now pivot to build ties with this new generation of leaders to strengthen bilateral relations.

Yours, etc., S S Paul,
Nadia, 12 March.

Who is impure?

Sir, The Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), which in 2019 supported the 2018 Supreme Court ruling permitting women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala temple, has now reversed its position, arguing that it is mandated to protect the traditional customs and rituals of the shrine, and passed a resolution accordingly. No rule, statutory or otherwise prescribes any condition that women relating to a particular point of time can be prohibited from entering a temple and worshiping the god.

Our Vedas never state that a woman's body is impure, and therefore she cannot pray to God and perform puja during menstruation. Hence, prohibiting women from entering temples and chastising them as "impure" is definitely against the teachings of Vedas. There should not be any intermediary between God and devotee.

And let us not forget that the Almighty who is latent in every bit of the universe, lives in the heart of a menstruating woman too. Those who are impure from within are the truly impure ones.

Yours, etc., Ranganathan Sivakumar,
Chennai, 10 March.

Salt March and the birth of mass disobedience

RAJDEEP PATHAK

In the early morning of 6 April 1930, on the quiet shores of the Arabian Sea at Dandi in Gujarat, Mahatma Gandhi bent down, picked up a handful of salt, and quietly defied the law of the British Empire. The act was disarmingly simple, yet its consequences were profound. That small gesture symbolised the beginning of one of the most remarkable movements in modern political history – the 'Salt Satyagraha'. What began as a 241-mile march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi soon became a nationwide wave of civil disobedience that shook the foundations of colonial rule and transformed the grammar of political protest. The Dandi March did not merely challenge a tax. It redefined power itself and offered the world a lasting lesson in protest without violence.

Gandhi launched the Salt Satyagraha against the oppressive British salt tax, which burdened India's poorest by taxing an essential commodity. On 2 March 1930, he wrote to Viceroy Lord Irwin, calling the tax "the most iniquitous of all from the poor man's standpoint" and vowing to break it symbolically. This act targeted economic exploitation, as Mahatma Gandhi noted that "There is no article like salt, outside water, by taxing which the state can reach the starving millions." The Indian National Congress had declared "purna swaraj" in 1929, setting the stage for this civil disobedience.

When Gandhi announced his intention to break the British salt laws, many observers – both in India and abroad – were initially skeptical. Salt, initially, seemed an unlikely issue, around which a national movement could be mobilized. Yet Gandhi understood its deeper symbolic and moral significance. Salt was an essential commodity used by every household, rich or poor. The British monopoly over its production and the tax imposed on it were deeply resented, especially by the poorest sections of society. By focusing on salt, Gandhi transformed an everyday necessity into a universal symbol of economic injustice.

On April 6, Gandhi bathed in the sea and picked up a lump of natural salt, defying the law in front of thousands. Sarojini Naidu hailed him as a 'law-breaker,' proclaiming Gandhi's body might be jailed but his soul free. This simple act invited all Indians to make salt, sparking nationwide defiance. Gandhi declared – "Now that the technical or ceremonial breach... has been committed, it is now open to anyone... to manufacture salt." The protest symbolized self-reliance, turning passive subjects into active resisters.

Historians have often described the march as a masterstroke of political strategy. The British authorities were placed in a dilemma – suppress the march and risk international criticism, or ignore it and watch its influence grow. American journalist Webb Miller, who reported on the movement, observed that Gandhi had "captured the imagination of the world by the simplicity of his challenge." Through a single symbolic act, he exposed the moral contradictions of imperial rule.

The Salt March also represented the practical application of Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha, often translated as "truth-force." For Mahatma Gandhi, non-violence was not merely a moral principle but a powerful political method, which he believed was the most powerful weapon at the disposal of mankind. Participants in the movement were carefully trained to endure repression without retaliation. They were instructed to maintain discipline even in the face of arrest or physical assault. This discipline turned suffering into a moral weapon against injustice.

American historian and political theorist Hannah Arendt later reflected on the distinction between violence and power, noting that true power arises from collective consent rather than coercion. In many ways, the Dandi March illustrated this principle decades earlier. By mobilising ordinary people in a peaceful movement, Gandhi demonstrated that the legitimacy of imperial authority depended ultimately on the obedience of those it governed. When masses withdrew that obedience, the foundations of empire began to crumble.

Long, Roger D. in his article "Gandhi Leads The Salt March" writes that "The Salt March and the noncooperation movement that followed coincided with the commencement of a worldwide depression. Importers could not sell their stocks, tenant farmers could not earn enough from their crops to pay their rents, landlords and cultivating owners could not cover their land revenue, and even the government had to cut back staff and reduce salaries. The Salt March inspired a civil disobedience movement that was joined by large numbers of these disaffected people."

Millions broke salt laws, raided depots, and picketed liquor shops and foreign cloth stores, leading to over 60,000 arrests, including of Pt. Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi on May 5. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu led the Dharasana raid on May 21, where 2,500 marched into lathi blows without retaliation. American journalist Webb Miller reported that "Not one... raised an arm... They went down like ninepins." Khadi production surged, foreign cloth imports plummeted, and officials resigned en masse. This mass participation birthed modern civil disobedience on an unprecedented scale.

The Salt Satyagraha (Dandi March) carried a significance that transcended India's borders and inspired movements worldwide. It demonstrated that disciplined nonviolence could be an effective method of political resistance. This insight later inspired movements across the world. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States and Nelson Mandela in South Africa drew inspiration from Gandhi's methods in their struggles for justice and equality.

Nearly a century later, the world continues to grapple with conflicts, inequality, and social unrest. In many societies, protests often descend into violence, deepening divisions rather than resolving them. In such a climate, the lessons of the Dandi March remain profoundly relevant.

The power of Mahatma Gandhi's approach lay in its ability to transform protest into a moral dialogue. By refusing to demonise opponents or resort to violence, Satyagraha sought to appeal to the conscience of both the oppressor and the broader public. For him, the aim of protest was not the destruction of the adversary but the transformation of unjust systems.

The legacy of the Salt Satyagraha therefore lies not only in its role in India's struggle for independence but also in its enduring message for humanity. It teaches that courage need not be violent, that protest can be rooted in conscience, and that the quiet strength of moral conviction can reshape history.

In a troubled world often marked by anger and division, the story of Dandi stands as a powerful reminder that the path to justice may begin with something as humble as a handful of salt, but when guided by truth, nonviolence and courage, it can transform the destiny of nations.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti.)

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

A memorable lapse

MANISH NANDY

The flight was brief but bleak. In the suavest of tones, the captain had explained before our takeoff that a tornado was on the way, but we would reach our destination ahead of it. Midflight, he had to announce that the tornado had changed its timetable and he would have to change course. We arrived late, very late, but we did arrive.

The airport was flooded with people from other delayed fights. Hundreds more were waiting for outgoing flights, all canceled or uncertain. There were barely enough seats for waiting passengers. No hope for a drink. All the restaurants and coffee shops had long lines, even the restrooms.

The best I could do for myself was to secure two stand-by seats on forthcoming flights. The second flight was many hours off; I rushed to the second concourse, a long off, to try my luck for the first flight. That is when I slipped and fell.

It was a hard fall. I saw dark and my ears rang. A large crowd gathered. In a minute emerged three airport officials. "Keep lying down," they commanded. "Rest a bit," they stuck a rubber pillow under my head.

"We can move you to a hospital," they added. Three men with a stretcher turned up.

"I'd rather take my flight and go home," I replied.

"No, you must be all right first. Did you hurt your head? We need to check your vitals."

They took my blood pressure, a sample of my blood and stuck patches all over my body.

It looked like they didn't find anything grievously wrong, "Is your memory all right?"

Then the first question, "Do you remember your name? Say it."

I should have said a familiar name like John or David. Instinctively, I said my correct name. That sounded like gibberish to my interviewers. They frowned.

"What day is today?"

"I have been traveling. I remember the date but not the day."

The frown deepened.

"Tell us the name of this airport."

The airport – as is often in the US – is named after two nobodies, two inconsequential mayors. I didn't remember their names. I had failed three memory tests, but I didn't want to end up in a hospital. I thought desperately of offering to quote a passage from Cymbeline, but decided my interrogators were unlikely to know of Shakespeare's last work.

I said frantically, "I was a diplomat. Why don't you ask me something from politics?"

"Who is the president of the United States?"

Thank Heavens! Knowing it was the deep South, I said, "I know it should be Donald Trump, but it is Joe Biden."

My tormentors had stopped frowning. They looked at each other, still skeptically, then slowly muttered, "Okay, you can get up." The stretcher men left with a dejected look.

I jumped up, probably with a graceless and imprudent spring, and the onlookers clapped. I quickly made my getaway to the other concourse.

The tide in my affairs had turned. Half an hour later, I could lay my hand on a warm, enlivening cup of café cortado. An hour later I was sitting next to a charming doctor hoping for the promised flight to materialize.

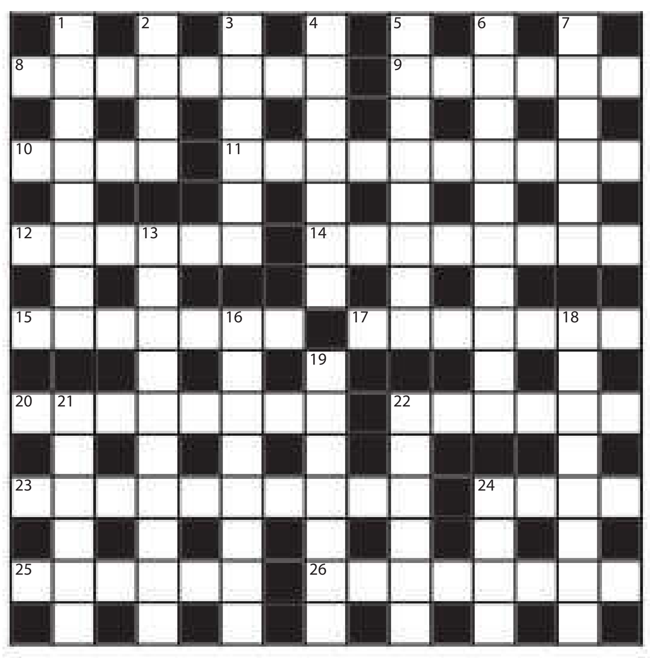
Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

Another hour later, my stand-by ticket became, miraculously, a confirmed seat and I was on my way home.

From now on I will always remember the day along with the date and never travel without memorizing the name of the airport however unwieldy it is.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

Crossword | No. 293405



Last Saturday's Solution

ACROSS

8 Rugged comedian swallowing favourite drug (8)
9 In recession the Parisian rents increase continually (6)
10 Brahms not having to defect? (4)
11 Aura surrounds Conservative, one showing foreknowledge (10)
12 Famous horse corrected evil in small rook (6)
14 Daughter leaving waterside in distress, so to speak (2,2,4)
15 Suggestion husband ignored: discourteous to butt in (7)
17 Sound asleep, embracing Kelvin, having left dive? (7)
20 Policeman, not soft, retrained for pit (4,4)
22 One after another mentioned trainee (6)
23 Toilets unfortunately blocked with animal body part (10)
24 Penny leaving store to tour old London area (4)
25 Fish tails in horse meat for dog (6)
26 Recorded fragment about tailless bird (8)

DOWN

1 Air Force One for example key in visits (4,4)
2 Dispute on chairs around piano (4)
3 Proust reinterpreted produces mental dullness (6)
4 American doctor on course read up about certain glands (7)
5 Delivery option from Carson's top department (1-7)
6 Sausage not entirely uniform sounded most unsatisfactory (10)
7 First person ousted by more cheeky supporter taking cup (6)
13 Disease expert treated visitor stuffed with Christmas cake? (10)
16 Country crowd at last sail from shore to island (8)
18 Those from around these parts, and alien near them? (8)
19 Warm, feathery layer for barbarian (7)
21 Lonely type behind upwardly mobile Chinese people (6)
22 Popular monarch stopping street advertising (6)
24 Pieces for one not completely secure (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with **The Independent, London**)

100 Years Ago

Front page of The Statesman dated 16 March 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Two resolutions of prime importance came up in the Council of State yesterday. The first of these reversed the unfortunate decision by which India was made to refuse any adequate recompense for its two representatives in the supreme court of the Privy Council. India makes the heaviest claim on the Privy Council, and it is not right that it should depend upon the self-sacrifice of the men who are appointed in its interests to that body. That is what it is doing at present, but opinion in the Council has changed since the last vote and the resolution of yesterday was not made the subject of a division.

News Items

LADY WILSON

LEFT FOR HOME ON RAWALPINDI

Bombay, Mar.

Lady Wilson sailed for England this afternoon by the P. and O. Mail steamer Rawalpindi accompanied by His Excellency the Governor as far Aden. Lady Wilson was conveyed to the steamer on a stretcher.

ALLOWED TO PREACH

PASTOR SUPPORTED BY CHURCH COUNCIL

Amsterdam, Mar.

The Church Council of Amsterdam South, has decided by a large majority to allow Pastor Geelkeren to preach to-day, and continue to support him. The church was crowded but there was no incident.—Reuter's Special Service.

TAKU BOMBARDMENT

COMBINED ACTION TO STOP INTERFERENCE

Tientsin, Mar.

In connexion with the blockade of Tientsin a conference on board H.M.S. Foxglove between British, American, French, and Italian ccmmanders decided to require the commands of Chang Tso-lin's fleet and Taku Fort to afford a complete cessation of military interference by March 16. No Japanese attended the conference owing to the absence of Japanese ships.—Reuter.

ASSASSINS PENSIONED

SOVIET REWARDS MURDERERS OF TSAR ALEXANDER

Riga, Mar.

A message from Moscow says that in connexion with the celebration of the forty-fifth anniversary of the assassination of Alexander II the Soviet has given life pensions to all the surviving participants in the murder, numbering about fifteen, all of whom were serving life sentences in Siberia until the revolution.—Reuter.

BRITISH COAL CRISIS

GERMANS & INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

("Times" Special Service.)

London, Mar.

The Berlin correspondent of the Times says the greatest interest is being taken in the British coal report which is regarded as proving that the crisis is due to continued world-wide overproduction and the only solvable basis is an international understanding. It is considered that if the Committee's recommendations, particularly with regard to the subsidy, are carried out, Germany need not immediately fear a strong increase in British competition, which on the contrary is expected to decrease under other means of reducing prices are effective.

Prudent fiscal situation gives govt headroom to tackle crisis

Fiscal prudence is like a healthy lifestyle. If you don't have any comorbidities, your doctor gets more headroom to cure or take up treatment. Similarly, if the government's coffers are not strained by profligacy, it can respond vigorously to major challenges. So, thanks to the government's commitment to stick to the fiscal glide path, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has been able to earmark Rs 57,381 crore for the Economic Stabilisation Fund (ESF) thereby making it worth Rs one lakh crore. "The Rs one lakh crore fund will give fiscal headroom to allow India to respond to global headwinds," she said in her reply to the debate on the second batch of supplementary demands for grants in the Lok Sabha. The fund, she added, will act as a buffer to absorb shocks arising due to unforeseen global challenges like the current one in West Asia. The Centre's emphasis on sound public finance management has ensured that the fiscal deficit for 2025-26 will be within the Revised Estimates (RE), which is at par with the 4.4 per cent Budgetary Estimates. While the overall expenditure remains within BE, fertiliser subsidies tend to soar because of the war in Iran.

The Strait of Hormuz is the main corridor for global fertiliser shipments. Sitharaman has proposed additional fertiliser subsidies of around Rs 19,230 crore to meet higher spending under the nutrient-based subsidy policy and urea subsidy payments. The ESF will most certainly help the government to tide over the current Middle East crisis, but fertiliser subsidies are a big drag on prudent fiscal management. The government must formulate and execute a middle and long-term plan to curb, if not eliminate, these subsidies. Towards this, it must begin the process to shift from product-based subsidies directly to farmers. Under the current system, the Union Government subsidises fertiliser manufacturers and distributors to keep retail prices artificially low. This mechanism often leads to leakages, inefficiencies, and overuse of certain fertilisers such as urea. A direct benefit transfer (DBT) model could ensure that subsidies reach farmers directly while allowing fertiliser prices to reflect market realities more accurately. This model will also be in tune with other welfare measures. Another important reform area is the promotion of balanced fertiliser use and sustainable agricultural practices. The heavy subsidy on urea has historically skewed fertiliser consumption patterns in India, leading to excessive nitrogen usage and declining soil health.

Encouraging the use of alternative nutrients, biofertilizers, and organic farming methods could reduce the long-term dependence on chemical fertiliser subsidies while improving agricultural sustainability. In addition, improving domestic fertiliser production capacity and diversifying import sources can reduce vulnerability to global supply disruptions. Investments in research, technology, and infrastructure can enhance efficiency in fertiliser manufacturing and distribution, thereby lowering the overall subsidy burden. Ultimately, fiscal prudence is not only about managing short-term crises but also about addressing structural inefficiencies in public expenditure. The ESF is a good step, but the long-term success of fiscal consolidation will depend on the government's willingness to tackle politically sensitive but economically necessary reforms, particularly in areas like fertiliser subsidies. And last, but not the least, the government should ensure that fiscal consolidation is accompanied by efficient governance and that its response to any crisis is well thought-out and not knee-jerk, as was in the LPG case. Efficiency in governance should be comprehensive.

Boosting border security with community participation

Col (Dr) RAJIV TEWARI

The Vibrant Village Programme (VVP), launched by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, represents an innovative and strategic initiative aimed at strengthening the development of border villages while simultaneously enhancing national security. The core philosophy underpinning this programme is the belief that "populated borders are safe borders."

India shares extensive and sensitive land borders with several countries, including China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. These borders often pass through remote, mountainous, and sparsely populated regions that face significant development deficits. In such areas, the absence of basic infrastructure, livelihood opportunities and public services, has historically led to migration of residents to urban centres, leaving many villages partially inhabited or even abandoned. These so-called "ghost villages" create vulnerabilities in border management and weaken the state's presence in strategically sensitive areas. VVP seeks to address these challenges by combining developmental initiatives with security objectives, thereby reinforcing the nation's border management strategy. Life in border villages is often characterised by difficult terrain, harsh climatic conditions, and limited connectivity. Residents of these areas face severe constraints in accessing essential services such as healthcare, education, transportation, and communication infrastructure.

Uninhabited or sparsely populated border regions can become susceptible to illegal infiltration, smuggling, and other anti-national activities, as the absence of a vigilant local population makes surveillance difficult.

Recognizing these risks, the programme seeks to transform border settlements into thriving and sustainable communities that contribute both to local development and national security.

A key component of the programme is the recognition that local villagers are an integral part of the border surveillance ecosystem. Those living in border villages possess intimate knowledge of the terrain, movement patterns in the region, and the prevalent cultural dynamics. By strengthening their livelihoods and integrating them into development initiatives, the programme encourages villagers to act as the "eyes and ears" of law-enforcement and security agencies. This community-based surveillance mechanism enhances the capacity of security forces to monitor suspicious activities and detect potential threats at an early stage. Moreover, the participation of local communities in border management reinforces the presence and legitimacy of the state in frontier regions, ensuring that governance and public administration extend to the country's geographical boundaries.

Development of infrastructure is another central pillar of VVP. The initiative focuses on improving road connectivity, telecommunications, renewable energy access, drinking water supply, housing, and social infrastructure in border villages. Enhanced connectivity not only facilitates economic development and mobility but also strengthens the operational capabilities of security forces deployed in these regions. Better roads and communication networks enable quicker response to emergencies, improved logistics support, and enhanced coordination among different security agencies. Initiatives such as eco-tourism, promotion of local handicrafts, agro-based enterprises, and skill development programmes are intended to generate sustainable income sources for villagers. By integrating border regions into the broader national development process, the programme seeks to reduce economic disparities and create inclusive growth in remote areas. Economic empowerment of local communities not only improves their living standards but also strengthens their stake in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

An innovative dimension of VVP is the incorporation of advanced technologies, including AI, to enhance surveillance and monitoring systems. The programme envisions the creation of a comprehensive database of residents in border villages and neighbouring areas.

Through AI-enabled monitoring systems, authorities can track unusual movement patterns and detect the presence of unknown individuals in sensitive zones. Any unauthorised intrusion or suspicious activity can trigger alerts for security forces, enabling them to take immediate action to verify identities and prevent potential security threats.

The Vibrant Village Programme emphasises the importance of building strong relationships between security forces and local communities, fostering what may be termed as a "soldier-village partnership." Security personnel stationed in border areas often interact closely with residents and play an important role in supporting developmental activities, including medical camps, educational initiatives, and community welfare programmes. These efforts help build trust between citizens and security agencies, contributing to the broader goal of winning the "hearts and minds" of people living in border regions.

A significant outcome of the programme is strengthening of psychological security and national integration in border regions. Development activities on the Indian side of the border are visible to communities across the boundary, which can reinforce confidence among Indian citizens living in frontier areas. Improved infrastructure, economic opportunities, and public services contribute to a sense of dignity and self-esteem among residents, reducing the influence of divisive forces.

At present, VVP is being implemented in the border states of Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and the Union Territory of Ladakh, which share sensitive borders with China and Nepal. These regions have historically faced developmental challenges due to their geographical isolation and harsh environmental conditions. The programme focuses on identifying strategic villages near the international border and prioritising them for infrastructure development, livelihood generation, and improved service delivery.

The Vibrant Village Programme represents a holistic approach to border management, combining development, security, technology, and community participation. By transforming border villages into vibrant and self-sustaining communities, the programme not only improves the quality of life for residents but also strengthens the country's security architecture. Populated and prosperous border regions act as a natural deterrent against infiltration, smuggling, and other anti-national activities.

The initiative has the potential to become a game changer in India's border management strategy, ensuring that development and security reinforce each other in protecting the nation's frontiers. Expanding the programme to other border regions across the country could further strengthen India's ability to maintain peace, stability, and prosperity along its borders.

(The writer is a PhD from Institute for Social and Economic Change and writes on national security issues. The views expressed are personal)

Rethinking the Maoist path in a changing India

JEEVAN

Recent reports of Maoist cadres laying down arms and returning to civilian life mark an important moment in the long history of left-wing extremism in India. The decision by individuals associated with the Maoist movement to disengage from armed struggle and re-enter democratic society reflects broader shifts in political realities, both within India and globally.

In contemporary political systems, prolonged armed insurgencies rarely achieve their stated objectives, and many movements across the world have eventually transitioned toward political participation rather than violent confrontation.

The Maoist insurgency in India traces its origins to the late 1960s, emerging from agrarian discontent and socio-economic inequalities in certain regions. Over the decades, the movement spread across forested and tribal belts in central and eastern India. For nearly five decades, the conflict between Maoist groups and state security forces has had significant consequences for communities, governance, and development in all the affected areas. The human cost of this prolonged conflict has been quite considerable.

Thousands of civilians, security personnel and members of insurgent groups lost their lives. The insurgency has also affected the pace of development in several districts across states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, and parts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Infrastructure projects, public services, and administrative outreach have often faced challenges in areas where armed groups maintained influence. The result has been a cycle in which underdevelopment and insecurity reinforce each other.

In recent years, however, there have been signs of change. Several Maoist leaders and cadres have surrendered or disengaged from armed activities, citing fatigue with prolonged conflict or disillusionment with its outcomes. At the same time, the state intensified both security operations and development initiatives in regions historically affected by left-wing extremism. This dual approach—combining law enforcement with welfare and infrastructure measures—has gradually reduced the operational space for insurgent groups in many areas.

Beyond the security dimension, changing socio-economic conditions have also influenced the trajectory of the conflict. Improved connectivity, expansion of communication networks, and the growth of local governance institutions have increased interaction between remote regions and the wider economy. Access to roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and markets has slowly expanded in several previously isolated areas.

These developments do not eliminate the structural issues that initially contributed to the emergence of insurgency. Questions pertaining to land rights, forest access, tribal welfare, and economic inequality remain important public policy concerns. In many tribal regions, communities continue to face challenges related to displacement, livelihood insecurity, and limited access to quality public services. Addressing these concerns in a transparent and inclusive manner remains essential to ensuring lasting stability.

The ideological appeal of Maoism has also evolved over time. Originally framed as a revolutionary response to exploitation and inequality, the movement drew support among segments of marginalised communities and youth, who perceived limited opportunities within the existing political and economic structure. However, the changing aspirations of younger generations, combined with the expansion of democratic participation, have altered the political landscape in which such ideologies operate.

The country's democratic framework offers several avenues for political expression, social activism, and policy engagement. Civil society organisations, grassroots movements, and electoral politics continue to serve as platforms through which citizens can raise concerns and advocate reforms. In this context, the continued reliance on armed struggle appears increasingly disconnected from contemporary political realities.

Globally, many insurgent movements have eventually transitioned toward negotiation, political participation, or peaceful activism. The experiences of several countries illustrate that durable solutions to internal conflicts often involve dialogue, institutional reform, and economic inclusion rather than purely military approaches.

India's experience similarly suggests that development, governance, and community engagement are crucial elements in reducing the appeal of violent movements.

In regions once heavily affected by Maoist activity, improvements in infrastructure and service delivery have gradually reshaped everyday life. Mobile connectivity, better road networks, expanded schooling, and public health initiatives have helped integrate remote communities more closely with regional and national systems. These developments have created new opportunities for education, employment, and mobility, particularly for younger generations.

Changed perceptions of former insurgents:

At the same time, public policy must continue to prioritise the rights and welfare of tribal communities who inhabit many of these regions. Sustainable development, protection of cultural identities, and fair access to natural resources remain critical aspects of long-term stability.

The decision by former insurgents to embrace mainstream society also highlights the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration policies. Programs that provide vocational training, education, and livelihood opportunities can play a crucial role in helping individuals transition away from conflict and rebuild their lives. Successful reintegration benefits not only the individuals involved but also their families and communities.

India today stands at a stage where economic growth, technological expansion, and democratic participation are reshaping social expectations. As the country continues to develop, the challenge lies in ensuring that progress reaches historically marginalised regions and communities. Equitable growth, along with governance that is accountable, and responsive institutions remain central to sustaining long-term peace in areas once affected by insurgency.

Ultimately, the gradual decline of Maoist violence in several parts of the country due to the measures, initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, reflects a combination of factors: sustained security operations, expanded development efforts, evolving social aspirations, and the resilience of democratic institutions. The path ahead requires continued attention to both security and justice, ensuring that grievances are addressed while violence remains firmly rejected.

The transition away from armed conflict toward democratic engagement is neither immediate nor uniform, but each step in that direction represents an opportunity to consolidate peace. The future of regions once associated with Maoist conflict will depend not only on the absence of violence but also on the presence of meaningful opportunities, responsive governance, and social trust. Strengthening these foundations may prove more decisive than any single security measure in shaping a stable and inclusive future.

(The writer is a member of ABVP National Executive)

LETTERS

The definition of death may change

Recently, the Supreme Court delivered a historic verdict allowing the removal of the ventilator of Harish Rana, a 32-year-old man who was in coma for 13 years. His condition is medically described as an 'Irreversible Permanent Vegetative' state. Euthanasia refers to mercy killing or the right to die. It means intentionally ending the life of a patient to relieve the individual from unbearable pain and suffering caused by severe illnesses. For many years, activists from around the world have been advocating for legal recognition of euthanasia. However, due to concerns related to medical ethics and humanitarian values, this remains a controversial issue in society. This is the first such verdict by the Supreme Court, which permitted removal of a patient's ventilator. While delivering the judgment, the Court relied on the fundamental right to die with dignity. Even so, debates about whether mercy killing is right or wrong, ethical or unethical, are likely to continue in society. It seems like the court's latest ruling may redefine the concept and interpretation of euthanasia in the future.

Dattaprasad Shirodkar, Mumbai

States must rethink on expenditure priorities

This refers to the news report "India's State Finances: A Tale of Prudence and Peril"(THI, March 15). The analysis lays out with clarity what policymakers have often been reluctant to say plainly — that fiscal discipline among Indian states is deeply uneven, and the gap between prudent and profligate states is widening. It shows that populism is a choice, not an inevitability. Punjab, Kerala, and Rajasthan, carrying high debt and sluggish development spending, need to seriously reconsider their expenditure priorities. The 16th Finance Commission presents a timely opportunity to build in stronger incentives for fiscal consolidation and penalise chronic overspending. Central grants must increasingly be linked to measurable fiscal behaviour, not just political considerations. At the same time, states with genuine developmental deficits need nuanced support, not blanket cuts. The solution lies in accountability, not austerity alone.

M Barathi, Bengaluru-560076

Shed lavish weddings, build a secure future

Of late in India, everything—from a child's birth and birthdays to weddings, death rituals, and even political roadshows—is measured by size and extravagance. Weddings have crossed all limits. Parents themselves often fail to set an example, while society looks down upon simple ceremonies. Sadly, many youngsters do not resist this culture of showmanship. Pre-wedding shoots, bachelor parties, and celebrations running into days have become the norm, whether families can afford them or not. Couples often begin married life burdened with loans taken merely to fund these displays. The irony is that the money spent on needless extravagance could have helped build a more secure future. Marriage may be a once-in-a-lifetime event, but so is buying a house.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad-103

Nothing political in Jnanpith for Vairamuthu

The 2025 Jnanpith award, which is regarded as the Nobel Prize of Indian literature, has been conferred on Tamil poet-lyricist R Vairamuthu. He becomes the third Tamil literary figure to receive the award in over 24 years. Call it a coincidence or something else, the news of Vairamuthu's selection was aired while he was in a meeting with Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin on Saturday. Vairamuthu shot to fame with the popular film Nilgal that was helmed by legendary director Bharathi Raja in 1980. Decorated with innumerable national awards and the Padma Bhushan, the profound lyricist and author, he ends a jinx that has been haunting the Tamil literary fraternity for years together. Social media is agog with whispers that he was selected for the honour as Tamil Nadu is headed for Assembly polls. One should note that the Assembly election schedule has been declared a day after the Jnanpith announcement. Thus, the selection should not be linked to political influences as such assumptions dilute the stature of the awardees.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramala, Tiruvuru (AP)

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BENGALURU ONLINE

K'taka clears Rs 4,824-cr industrial investments

BENGALURU: The 158th meeting of the State Level Single Window Clearance Committee has approved investment proposals worth Rs. 4,824.31 crore for 37 new industrial projects and two additional expansion projects across 13 districts in the state.

Announcing the approvals on Friday, Karnataka's Minister for Large and Medium Industries and Infrastructure Development M B Patil said the projects are expected to generate around 14,525 employment opportunities in different sectors.

The approved proposals span a wide range of industries including IT infrastructure, sugar manufacturing, technical textiles, compressed biogas production, aerospace components, jewellery manufacturing, electronics, software services and hospitality infrastructure such as five-star hotels.

According to the minister, the projects will be implemented in districts including Vijayapura, Bagalkot, Chitradurga, Kolar and Ramanagara among others, contributing to balanced regional industrial development.

Among the major proposals cleared by the committee is a Rs. 494.65-crore IT infrastructure project by Bagmane Constructions Private Limited.

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

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The Hans India
Business

AI is different in the sense that it will impact every area, you name it, medical, law, everything. Everything will change through AI. It's not just the IT sector. I think we need to be prepared

-Won-Joon Choi, COO, Samsung Electronics

Investors shift focus to US Fed's policy meet as geopolitical conflicts weigh

Markets were far too confident the war would be short and are slowly adjusting to a slightly longer conflict

C Kutumba Rao

ESCALATING US-Iran tensions, which pushed crude oil prices above $100 per barrel coupled with persistent FII selling led to stocks slipping for a third straight week, with investors weighing the risk of a prolonged Middle East conflict on energy prices and economic stability.

The Sensex plunged 5.51 per cent, or 4,354.98 points, to close at 74,563.92, while the Nifty declined 1,299.35 points, or 5.31 per cent, to end at 23,151.10. The Nifty marked its biggest drop since June 2022, while Sensex had worst week since May 2020.

Among broader indices, BSE Midcap and Smallcap indices shed 4.5 per cent and 3.6 per cent, respectively. All the sectoral indices ended in the red, led by sharp losses in auto and banking stocks. Nifty Auto plunged 10.6 per cent, Nifty PSU Bank fell 7.2 per cent, Nifty Defence and Nifty Private Bank dropped 7 per cent each, while Nifty Metal declined 6 per cent.

FIIs extended their selling for the fourth consecutive week, offloading equities worth Rs 35,052.03 crore, while DIIs remained net buyers with purchases worth Rs 37,739.78 crore. The Indian rupee fell to a record low to 92.4750 per dollar amid concerns that the Iran war-driven surge in oil prices could disrupt India's growth-inflation dynamics and dent capital flows.

A prolonged Middle East conflict could worsen the rupee's outlook significantly, with persistently high energy prices potentially pushing the currency below 95 per dollar. Higher crude prices typically weigh on Indian equities as the country imports a large share of its oil requirements. Rising oil costs increase the import bill, widen the current account deficit and add to inflationary pressures.

The conflict in the Middle East is not going to be easily resolved. Even if crude oil falls to $70 or $80 a barrel through the first half of 2026, that impact is still going to continue to reverberate in the economy.

According to some global market watchers the widening distress, combined with the spike in oil prices, is starting to resemble the market conditions in the lead-up to the 2008 global financial crisis when oil doubled from $70 to $140, and "subprime tremors" toppled firms such as Bear Stearns.

The US Federal Reserve's policy meeting will be closely watched this week amid concerns that the ongoing conflict could disrupt inflation dynamics if it drags on. The central bank is widely expected to hold rates steady as US inflation remains above the Fed's 2 per cent target.

War Chatter: Market confidence of a short US-Iran war was misplaced. This isn't a time to be confident about the outcome. The International Energy Agency calls it "the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market." The Israeli-U.S. attack on Iran has led to the near-complete closure and partial mining of the Strait of Hormuz, the world's busiest oil-tanker route. Countries reliant on Middle East oil are already intervening to cap prices.

Yet, the oil price remains only around $100 a barrel, compared with an inflation-adjusted Brent crude price that hit $179 after the Iranian revolution in 1979, $155 when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, $180 amid the Arab Spring of 2011 and $130 after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

First, it started low, because there's a lot of oil around. Oil in storage was the highest in five years before what we can call Gulf War III began, and the price was just $72, below the inflation-adjusted average since 1970.

Second, markets have been slow to accept that disruption will last. Investors initially thought this was likely to be over in a couple of weeks. When concern set in over the weekend that it might last longer, President Trump's suggestion on Monday that the war was "very complete, pretty much" reassured traders.

Third, the IEA and its members are releasing 400 million barrels of reserves. Assuming the loss of about 15 million of the 20 million or so barrels a day that went through Hormuz (some is taken by Saudi Arabia's pipeline), and some higher production elsewhere, that's less than a month of supply, but it dampens price rises.

The widespread assumption of a short war rests on history, Trump's past willingness to back down when times get tough, the US elections later this year and a guess that Iran won't be willing to keep taking so much damage from the air. Logic and game theory may not be enough, though. It's easy for Trump to declare victory given the conflicting goals the administration has laid out for the war.

But it takes two to end a war. Israel killed the new Iranian leader's father, wife and son in an airstrike, according to Iranian state media. There's no way to be sure how this will go.

Markets were far too confident the war would be short and are slowly adjusting to a slightly longer conflict. It would only take a couple of sinking oil tankers, a downed civilian jet or a direct hit on the critical Saudi oil pipeline to change this assessment again. This isn't a time to be confident about the outcome.

> Quote of the week:
> The four most dangerous words in investing are, it's different this time
> — Sir John Templeton

Follow market trends and history. Don't speculate that this particular time will be any different. For example, a major key to investing in a specific stock is its performance over five years.

FUTURES & OPTIONS / SECTOR WATCH

Adversely impacted by heightened tensions in the Middle East and continued selling by FIIs kept the market firmly under "bear" grip last week. The Nifty fell more than 5 per cent while Bank Nifty underperformed with a decline of around 7 per cent. Over the last 27 trading sessions, Nifty has corrected more than 12 per cent, making it one of the sharpest declines in the recent past. From its recent peak of 61,678, Bank Nifty has corrected by nearly 13 per cent within just 15 trading sessions, highlighting the intensity and speed of the ongoing decline. Such a sharp fall over a short span typically indicates aggressive unwinding of positions and heightened risk aversion within the banking space. In the options segment, the significant Call open interest for Nifty was observed at the 23,500 strike level whereas notable Put open interest was concentrated at the 23,000 strike. For Bank Nifty, significant Call open interest was seen at the 54,500 strike with substantial Put open interest at the 53,000 strike. Implied volatility (IV) for Nifty's Call options settled at 21.92 per cent while Put options concluded at 23.74 per cent. The India VIX, a key indicator of market volatility concluded the week at 21.51 per cent. The Put-Call Ratio Open Interest (PCR OI) stood at 1.14 for the week. The weekly RSI has slipped to 30.43, its lowest level since the COVID-19 market fall. Momentum indicators are also reflecting strong bearish momentum. Every pullback is witnessing selling pressure suggesting that market participants are using every rise as an opportunity to exit positions. Nifty is currently trading below its long-term average the 200-day Exponential Moving Average (200 EMA) on the daily chart which signals a weak market trend. The outlook may remain negative as long as the index stays below this level. Market participants should keep a close watch on geopolitical developments as recent movements are largely driven by news flow. In the near term, Nifty may face resistance in the 23,600–23,800 range while support is placed around 22,600–22,500. Investors are advised to remain cautious and adopt strict risk management while trading.

Stocks looking good are Aurobindo Pharma, CG Power, Coal India, Siemens, Tata Power and Wipro. Stocks looking weak are Axis Bank, CDSL, D Mart, Federal Bank, KPIT Tech and OIL.

(The author is a senior market analyst and former vice-chairman, Andhra Pradesh State Planning Board)

NLC India Limited

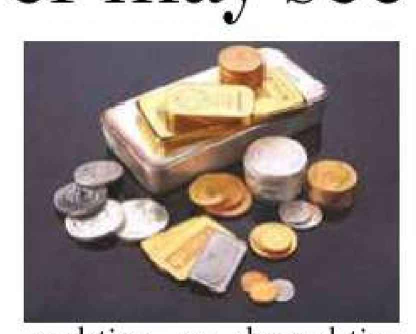
THE Navratna public sector enterprise, is a leader in lignite mining and power generation with operations across India. Over the years, it has pioneered advancements in brown coal mining and diversified into coal mining and renewable energy, while exploring global opportunities. Its segments include Mining and Power generation. The Mining segment includes mining of lignite and coal. The Power generation segment includes generation of power and sale to power utilities across the country. It operates three opencast Lignite Mines at Neyveli in Tamil Nadu and one opencast Lignite Mine at Barsingsar in Rajasthan, with a combined mining capacity of 30.10 million Tons Per Annum (MTPA). It also operates Talabira Open Cast Mine in Odisha, with a mining capacity of 20.00 MTPA. It is operating five lignite based thermal power stations, four at Neyveli, in Tamil Nadu and one at Barsingsar, in Rajasthan with capacity of over 3,640 megawatts. The total combined mining capacity of lignite and coal for the Company is 50.10 MTPA. NLCIL was declared as preferred bidder for "Semhardih Phosphorite and Limestone Block" and "Raipura Phosphorite and Limestone Block of Balod, Chhattisgarh" in the Tranche–V auction of Critical and Strategic Mineral Blocks by Ministry of Mines. Strong visibility of earnings and possibility of demerger of Renewables division unlocking vaue make the stock good medium term bet for target price of Rs400.

INDUSTRY-WIDE EROSION

Mcap of top-10 firms plunge by ₹4.48L-cr

NEW DELHI: The combined market valuation of the top-10 domestic firms eroded sharply by Rs 4.48 lakh crore last week, in tandem with a steep decline in equities, with banking majors State Bank of India and HDFC Bank taking the biggest hit. Surging crude prices raised concerns over inflationary pressures and global economic stability amid the widening conflict in West Asia. "The primary driver behind the market weakness was the sustained rise in crude oil prices following the escalating conflict between Iran, the United States and Israel. Brent crude surged past $101 per barrel, raising concerns over India's fiscal position and inflation outlook," Ajit Mishra " SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said. The market valuation of State Bank of India tumbled Rs 89,306.22 crore to Rs 9,66,261.05 crore. HDFC Bank faced an erosion of Rs 61,715.32 crore to Rs 12,57,391.76 crore. The valuation of Bajaj Finance dived Rs 59,082.49 crore to Rs 5,32,053.54 crore and that of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) tanked Rs 53,312.52 crore to Rs 8,72,067.63 crore. The market capitalisation (mcap) of ICICI Bank dropped by Rs 42,205.04 crore to Rs 8,97,844.78 crore and that of Bharti Airtel plunged Rs 38,688.78 crore to Rs 10,28,431.72 crore. Reliance Industries' valuation fell by Rs 33,289.88 crore to Rs 18,68,293.17 crore. The mcap of LIC diminished by Rs 31,245.49 crore to Rs 4,88,985.57 crore and that of Infosys declined by Rs 24,230.96 crore to Rs 5,06,315.58 crore. Hindustan Unilever's mcap dipped by Rs 15,401.57 crore to Rs 5,07,640.94 crore.

Gold, silver may see correction this week



NEW DELHI: Gold and silver prices are expected to see more corrective moves for the coming week as investors closely track geopolitical developments in West Asia and key central bank meetings that could affect the trajectory of the global monetary policy, analysts said. Traders will remain focused on the evolving conflict in West Asia as any signs of escalation or de-escalation could trigger sharp swings across financial markets, they added.

"In the week ahead, focus will remain in the Middle East region as any signs of further escalation or de-escalation may led to increased volatility in the financial markets," Pranav Mer, Vice President, EBG - Commodity & Currency Research, JM Financial Services Ltd, said. On the macroeconomic front, investors will monitor a raft of key central bank meetings scheduled during the week. The US Federal Reserve will announce its policy decision on Wednesday, followed by the European Central Bank and the Bank of England on Thursday and the People's Bank of China on Friday.

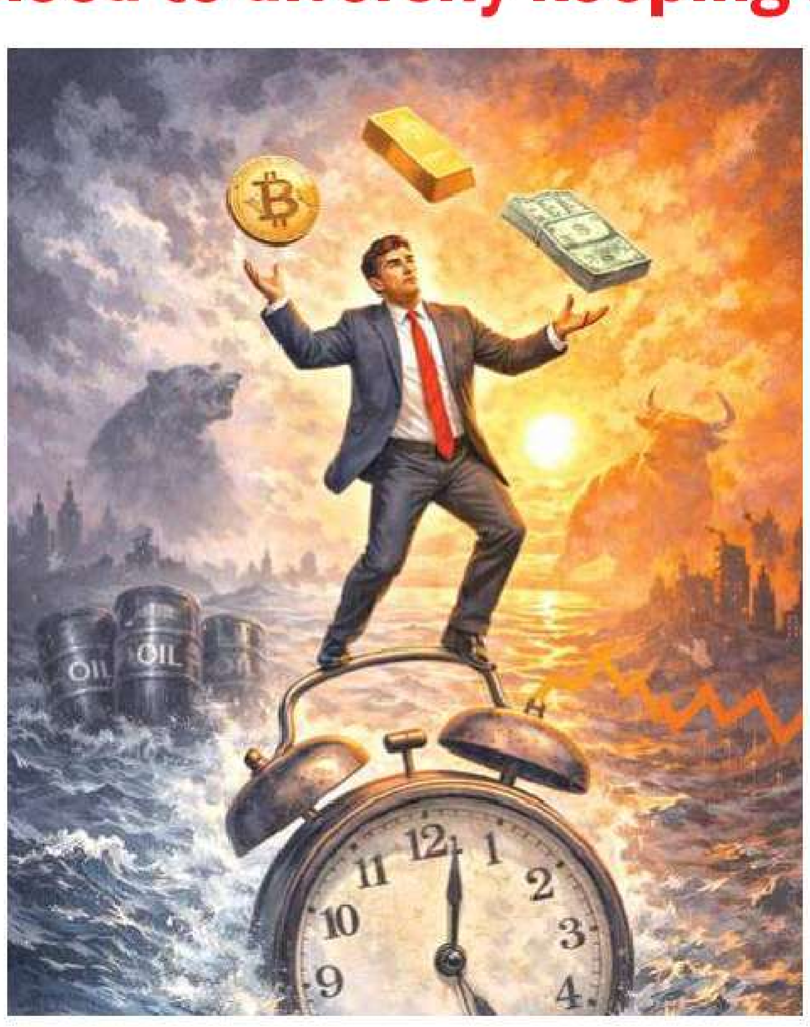
These central banks are widely expected to keep the interest rates unchanged, and market participants will closely analyse their forward guidance for fresh insights on the trajectory of the global monetary policy, Mer added. Bullion prices in the domestic markets remained under pressure during the past week.

On the Multi Commodity Exchange, silver plunged Rs 8,850, or 3.3 per cent, while gold depreciated by Rs 3,168, or 2 per cent. According to Mer, gold prices broke down from a consolidation range on Friday and ended the week down by nearly 2 per cent, weighed by a stronger US dollar and rising bets that global central banks may delay interest rate cuts amid surging crude oil prices. He added that the yellow metal prices were down despite a broad sell-off in risk assets like equities, as traders/ investors look to cash in at higher prices or possibly need-based selling like for margin calls, etc.

Diversification pivotal for building a robust portfolio

Investors need to diversify keeping in mind the goals and their timelines

K Naresh Kumar



A prolonged period of nil or negligible returns like the equity returns in the last 18 months and/or a sudden dip due to the recent conflict could not only jeopardise the investor's returns but hugely expose this asset-liability mismatch. It means that the portfolio doesn't have enough security in the portfolio to withstand the volatility, due to this mismatched asset allocations

ASSET allocation could simply refer to the process of dividing a financial or investment portfolio between different asset classes. It's done to balance risk and reward by apportioning a portfolio's assets according to an investor's goals. Technically, the allocation is pooling together assets with limited or no correlation. Why this matters? It charts out different risk profile and returns journey for each of these assets. This helps in not only reducing the risk but respond to market vagaries differently by each asset.

The very exercise of portfolio creation begins with diversification of various asset classes. Diversification is usually done keeping in mind the goals and their timelines - thus for shorter time horizons, a higher or all the proportion of allocation moves to a risk averse investment and vice versa. However, another important consideration that can't be discounted is the risk appetite of the investor. It defines whether an investment avenue must be considered at the first place, as this drives the investor behavior. It allows for the preference of investments to be done in an investor's portfolio. Interestingly Cullen Roche, the author of "your perfect portfolio', argues that asset allocation is a temporal conundrum. We all navigate our ability to consume across time, and we need our portfolios to accrue value accordingly, he says, makes us difficult to manage it. The central theme of his argument arises from the fact that we've money today, but our needs are spread across different points in the future and matching these two is harder than it looks. Hence, time is the crucial problem for any financial planning to solve.

Most of our liabilities tend to have fixed temporal constraints. For instance, a fixed monthly EMI or a periodic credit card due, etc. We've all these liabilities that we must meet across specific time horizons. Good financial planning means matching across time with these liabilities to meet the desired goals. So, the asset-liability mismatch happens as the assets are flexible and could be fixed in time while the liabilities (goals, expenses) are often time-bound. A prolonged period of nil or negligible returns like the equity returns in the last 18 months and/or a sudden dip due to the recent conflict could not only jeopardise the investor's returns but hugely expose this asset-liability mismatch. It means that the portfolio doesn't have enough security in the portfolio to withstand the volatility, due to this mismatched asset allocations.

This is particularly true when planning for long-term goals like retirement. The sequence of return risk is the danger that the market downturns occur early in retirement while making withdrawals, causing permanent depletion of the portfolio. This could be countered by asset allocation and partly through bucket strategy. So, Roche argues in his book that true diversification should be understood not just as asset allocation but as temporal diversification as well. It means that benefiting from being diversified across assets with different time horizons.

So, he turns the head on diversification stating that the allocation shouldn't be done only through the traditional understanding of correlation amongst the assets alone but across time horizons. When working, your income acts like a fixed-income asset as it generates predictable money over time. This gives the young investors more 'implicit' safe allocation letting them take more risk with stocks. The allocation that works when young doesn't work to the aged, as the time horizons and liabilities change in retirement. At retirement. the need for short term certainty is high and thus the limited exposure to stock volatility. Revoking Ken French's definition, risk equals uncertainty of future consumption i.e., risk isn't just volatility but the chance you can't meet your spending goals when they happen.

It's easy to comprehend bonds as they generate predictable cashflows. Roche also suggests that thinking stocks as a 30-yr bond, where the odds of losing money over a 30-yr period is low but it wouldn't be appropriate to fit this allocation into a 3-yr liability bucket. Most investors are behaviorally biased and short term oriented. This behavioral danger of short-termism leads us to act on every news or info, increasing the costs to spike adding to the underperformance.

Roche opines that the asset-liability mismatch could be addressed by structuring the portfolio so that each layer of the assets corresponds to a specific future need or time horizons. It's important also to stop thinking returns in the abstract and instead match each block of savings to the time horizon of the need it's meant to help. In conclusion,the asset allocation isn't just about spreading money across bonds, equity, etc. but it'd fundamentally about matching assets to the time.

(The author is a partner with "Wealocity Analytics", a SEBI registered Research Analyst and could be reached at info@wealocityanalytics.com)

FPI exodus: Equities worth ₹52,704-cr sold during March

The latest sell-off comes after foreign investors infused Rs 22,615-cr last month

NEW DELHI: Foreign investors withdrew Rs 52,704 crore (approximately $5.73 billion) from domestic equities in the first fortnight of March amid escalating tensions in West Asia, the depreciation of the rupee, and concerns over the impact of high crude oil prices on India's growth and corporate earnings. The latest sell-off comes after foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) infused Rs 22,615 crore into Indian equities in February, the highest monthly inflow in 17 months. Prior to that, FPIs were net sellers for three consecutive months, withdrawing Rs 35,962 crore in January, Rs 22,611 crore in December and Rs 3,765 crore in November, according to depository data.

So far in March (until March 13), FPIs have sold equities worth about Rs 52,704 crore in the cash market and remained net sellers on all trading days during the month. Market experts attributed the pullout mainly to rising geopolitical tensions in West Asia. Vaqarjaved Khan, Senior Fundamental Analyst at Angel One, said escalating tensions in the region and fears of prolonged conflict disrupting the Strait of Hormuz pushed Brent crude above $100 a barrel, triggering a risk-off move. This was compounded by persistent rupee weakness near the Rs 92 level, elevated US bond yields and profit-booking after earlier inflows.

Echoing similar views, VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist at Geojit Investments, said weakness in global equities following the conflict in West Asia, the depreciating rupee and concerns over high crude prices affecting India's growth and corporate earnings have weighed on FPI sentiment. He added that weaker returns from India compared to developed and emerging markets over the past 18 months have also led to FPI indifference.

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The Free Press Journal

Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Centre saving face in Ladakh

The Centre's decision to revoke the detention of Ladakhi climate activist Sonam Wangchuk under the National Security Act (NSA) is a tacit admission that the case against him would not stand judicial scrutiny. After nearly six months in detention, the government suddenly discovered the virtue of restraint. In reality, it appears to have acted out of compulsion rather than conviction. Reports suggest that the government feared an adverse verdict in the Supreme Court where a habeas corpus petition challenging Wangchuk's detention was being heard. Had the court declared the detention illegal, it would have exposed the misuse of one of the country's harshest preventive detention laws. By withdrawing the order, the government has attempted to make a virtue out of necessity.

Wangchuk had been arrested following protests in Ladakh linked to his hunger strike demanding statehood for the Union Territory and its inclusion under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to safeguard the fragile Himalayan ecology and the rights of tribal communities. The agitation also sought constitutional guarantees for Ladakh's people after the region was separated from Jammu and Kashmir and brought under direct Central rule in 2019. There is no denying that the protests witnessed violence at one stage. But the critical question is whether Wangchuk himself incited it. Throughout his agitation, he repeatedly described his protest as a peaceful, Gandhian fast and appealed to supporters to maintain non-violence even when tempers flared. No convincing evidence was produced to establish that he had instigated violence. That did not prevent the authorities from invoking the NSA—a law meant for grave threats to national security—against a climate activist whose principal weapon was moral persuasion. Once detained, he was shifted from the cold mountains of Ladakh to a jail in Rajasthan, a move widely interpreted as an attempt to break his spirit. The strategy did not work. Wangchuk remained defiant, and his family mounted a determined legal challenge. As the court proceedings progressed, it increasingly became evident that the government was on a weak wicket.

> *Genuine reconciliation will require something more difficult: listening to the people of Ladakh.*

His release, therefore, raises an important question: what next? The Centre should treat this episode as an opportunity for course correction. The people of Ladakh, including influential Tibetan Buddhist groups, have long been among the staunchest supporters of India's national position vis-à-vis China. Alienating them through heavy-handed measures would be strategically unwise. Instead of viewing dissent as defiance, New Delhi should initiate sincere dialogue with representatives of the region. The demands for statehood, constitutional safeguards, and environmental protection are neither unreasonable nor anti-national. On the contrary, they reflect a desire to preserve a fragile border region and its unique culture. The Centre's about-turn may have averted embarrassment in court. But genuine reconciliation will require something more difficult: listening to the people of Ladakh and addressing their concerns with honesty and urgency.

A colossus amid controversies

Bharatiya Jnanpith's choice of Tamil poet-lyricist Vairamuthu for its highest literary award has been welcomed with elation in Tamil Nadu as an honour for a stalwart whose work blends tradition with contemporaneity. The 72-year-old awardee, who has earlier won the Sahitya Akademi and two Padma awards, is the third Tamil litterateur to be conferred the honour, after Jayakanthan and Akilan. It must come as a disappointment to many in Tamil Nadu that the Jnanpith chose to publish its award announcement on its website only in Hindi, at a time when there is an active campaign against Hindi imposition by many groups in the state. The selection committee chose Vairamuthu based on his literary excellence that straddles poetry, lyrics and prose and, significantly, took note of the sparse representation that a major language such as Tamil received in the award's history. Just ahead of assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, the optics surrounding the award are bound to be particularly interesting. Vairamuthu is one of Tamil filmdom's larger-than-life figures with a big fan following, but he has, on occasion, fuelled controversy with radical views. Some years ago, a remark he made on the Vaishnavite saint Andal based on an American academic's work pitted him against the BJP in Tamil Nadu, forcing him to apologise. Later came a fresh controversy on his views about the god Ram becoming unbalanced after losing Sita, based on the Kamba Ramayanam. Free literary interpretation of mythology should, no doubt, be welcomed and encouraged, but that space has shrunk.

What makes Vairamuthu's choice for the Jnanpith more acutely noticeable is the MeToo controversy that has dogged him far longer. Singer Chinmayi created a sensation with her accusations of sexual harassment by the poet, although several other women remained anonymous. Nothing much came out of the episode, which resurfaces periodically as it has now with the announcement of the Jnanpith. More protest voices have joined her, such as singer TM Krishna and some feminist writers, but the commanding heights of the film industry, led by Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth, and Chief Minister MK Stalin, felicitated the awardee. Controversy is often just background music to the entertainment industry, and many people keep the art and conflicts apart unless something egregious has taken place. Loyalty to Donald Trump produced a schism in Hollywood, drawing some talented people to a dark corner of the tent, but the show goes on. In the MeToo wave, there was a closing of ranks by Kollywood in favour of a code of silence and tacit penalties for disrupters. It would seem that Vairamuthu has weathered the controversies and cemented his place as a literary icon. But the era of forever media and outspoken women's rights activists will keep the embers hot. High talent cannot escape coming to terms with the rights of small individuals.

Spectrum

MADAN SABNAVIS

Will the new series of GDP accomplish anything?

With digital processes becoming more comprehensive in the country, there is advantage of linking all the data and relying less on imputation

For years it has been argued that we need to have more contemporary base years to capture adequately the changes taking place in the economy. That has been accomplished with the new series for the GDP that has 2022-23 as the base year. It has a revamped basket of goods and services, relevant data sources, and uses the double-deflation approach. The last is important because normally all output is reckoned in nominal terms and then deflated to capture the price effect to arrive at the real numbers, which is what we look at when talking of growth. The double deflation process is one which does a similar process for inputs, too, thus giving a better picture of real output.

First, in terms of the economic outlook for the year, there has not been much change, with the 7.4% growth number for the year being revised to 7.6%. But as would be the case when new series are introduced, there are sharp changes in the growth rates for the earlier years, as they come down for FY24 from 9.2% to 7.2% and increase from 6.5% to 7.1% for FY25. But the story that we are on the 7% growth path is retained, and it does look like that the rate will be between 7 and 7.5% in FY27 too, notwithstanding the Iran-USA imbroglio.

The second interesting feature is the revaluation of nominal and real GDP in absolute terms. Whenever a new base year is taken, the absolute numbers are the same for nominal and real GDP, which is Rs 261.2 lakh crore. This is lower than that in the old series by almost Rs 7.8 lakh crore, as several items have been moved out of the series which are no longer relevant and others added that may not have compensated for the lower value.

From here on, the nominal GDP numbers have been lower than in the previous series, while the real GDP (which is adjusted for inflation) is higher. This is but natural when the base year is advanced to 2022-23. For the real GDP, it may not matter, as what is important is growth rate. But for the nominal GDP, the number becomes important when reckoning ratios, which are used in policies like the fiscal deficit ratio. With the GDP number being lower, the fiscal deficit ratio becomes higher. A similar issue will be faced when reckoning the current account deficit, which is always expressed as a percentage of the GDP.

The third feature of the new series which stands out is the rather lower share of consumption in the nominal GDP. The earlier series had a ratio in the range of 60% plus. However, in this revised series, it comes down to 56.7%. The difference may not appear to be significant but is indicative of consumption being marginally less important. This is more due to the post-Covid period, which was associated with higher inflation, which kept demand down. The same for gross fixed capital formation increases from around 30% to 31.7%, though it came down from 32.4% in FY23. This does change the narrative of the investment story, as the ratio is high.

Lastly, the most enigmatic difference, however, is in the sectoral performance. Compared with the earlier series, agriculture has underperformed, as have electricity, gas, and water. The big change is the component of public administration, defence, and other services, which has grown by 5.8% against 9.9% earlier. This is more due to the methodology being adopted and the signal given that there could have been over-estimation in the past.

Construction and finance, real estate, etc. groups have maintained their growth rates, while the over-performers are mining (turns positive at 4.1% from negative), manufacturing and trade, transport, hotels, etc. Manufacturing is probably the positive outlier with the average growth of 11.2% in the last 3 years, with two being double digits. It was 7.9% earlier. Clearly, better capture of data from advanced sources has provided the right picture, as this is one sector dominated by the unorganised segment where data challenges existed. The anomaly here, however, is that the index of industrial production, which is still on the old base, has shown weakness in the first 10 months with a growth of just 4%.

The same has been seen for trade, transport, etc., which is also biased towards the unorganised segment where the average growth is up from 7% to 8.9%. This can be attributed more to the formalisation of the economy, where a large number of MSMEs, which were outside the system, have not gotten themselves enrolled to draw benefits, which in turn helps to capture their performance.

The new series doesn't alter the growth story but adds value in terms of coverage and is rich in approach. The clue is to keep revising the basket periodically, after every five years. This has to be done for all the data series so that they are synchronised. The world is changing and so is the structure of the economy, which has to be captured appropriately. Digitisation has enabled a lot of data to be captured, which can be used in this process.

With the digital processes becoming more comprehensive in the country, there is the advantage of linking all the data and relying less on imputation.

This is probably the biggest success of the revamped series on the GDP and the CPI, which will also be witnessed once the IIP and the WPI series are out in the course of the year. Therefore, the thrust given by the government relentlessly on digitisation has helped to strengthen the data systems in the country, giving better signals on the working of the economy. This will, in turn, help in sharper policy responses.

The author is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda and author of 'Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun'. Views are personal.

Through The Prism

ADITYA MUKHERJEE

Anatomy of Rahul Gandhi's resilience in Indian politics

In refusing to temper his rhetoric, LoP Rahul Gandhi has embraced a role that is less about consensus and more about challenge

Rahul Gandhi has increasingly shown a willingness to go where politicians traditionally fear to tread—speaking his mind even at the risk of controversy. He does not unravel in the face of criticism; he retains his sangfroid and frames his response with reasoned conviction. His decision to back Indian Youth Congress members, who staged a protest at a high-profile AI venue in New Delhi last month against India's deal with the United States, may have angered many leaders even in the Opposition, but by describing the young protesters as "babbar shers", he did not merely endorse their dissent; he validated it.

For the ruling establishment led by Narendra Modi, this posture is more than routine opposition politics. It is an irritant that refuses to fade. The BJP has long sought to pigeonhole Rahul Gandhi through reductive stereotyping, portraying him as inconsistent and politically immature. Yet, what once appeared as hesitation now looks increasingly like stubborn conviction. In publicly accusing the Prime Minister of being "compromised" over the tariff deal with the United States, Rahul signalled that he would not dilute his critique for the sake of diplomatic politeness or political convenience.

The significance of his stance lies not merely in the content of his criticism but in the manner of its delivery. Indian politics has long favoured measured speech over impulsive candour. Leaders often leave themselves room to retreat, recalibrate, or reinterpret. Rahul Gandhi, by contrast, has shown a growing tendency to dig in his heels. The more the BJP pushes back, the more emphatically he appears to restate his position. This refusal to yield under pressure has begun to redefine him—not as an accidental Leader of the Opposition, but as one prepared to shoulder dissent like a cross.

Critics argue that this confrontational approach has contributed to the decline of India's grand old party. Electoral setbacks over the past decade have frequently been laid at Rahul's doorstep. Within political circles, he has been accused of failing to provide strategic clarity or organisational revival. Yet, adversity often reshapes leaders. The Rahul Gandhi of today appears less burdened by the weight of expectations and more willing to articulate ideological differences sharply and without apology.

His endorsement of protests at an elite AI venue is symbolically important. Technology summits and international platforms are typically insulated from street politics. By defending the Youth Congress's decision to register protest at such a venue, Rahul underscored a broader principle—that democratic expression cannot be confined to designated spaces. To supporters, this signals courage. To detractors, it suggests recklessness.

Confrontation Over Caution: Despite the many defeats and personal attacks he has faced, Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi refuses to be written off.

For the BJP, this presents a dilemma. A predictable opposition can be managed through rebuttal and narrative control. An opposition leader who refuses to play by established scripts is harder to contain. Senior BJP leaders' responses to Rahul often serve to elevate his prominence. Even when his statements are dismissed as irresponsible, they achieve visibility. In a political ecosystem driven by perception, staying visible is itself a form of power.

There is also a generational undercurrent to his politics. By hailing young protesters as "babbar shers", Rahul aligns himself with a vocabulary of defiance that resonates with youth activism. In an era when younger voters often value authenticity over polish, his bluntness may carry greater appeal than carefully hedged statements. He appears increasingly comfortable embracing the role of combative challenger.

Yet, the question remains whether rhetoric alone can alter political arithmetic. Electoral politics demands organisation, alliances, and a persuasive economic narrative. On these fronts, the Congress continues to face formidable challenges. However, leadership tone shapes morale. By refusing to be politically correct when he believes larger principles are at stake, Rahul Gandhi offers party workers a sense of ideological clarity. He projects the message that defeat need not mean silence.

Has he, then, come of age? In many ways, yes. Maturity in politics is not always about moderation; sometimes it is about steadiness under fire. Rahul's critics may question his methods, but few can deny that, despite repeated electoral defeats and sustained personal attacks, he has remained in the arena, persistently raising issues he considers vital.

Ultimately, Rahul Gandhi's evolution reflects a broader truth about democratic politics: dissent is rarely comfortable, and those who practise it are considered a burr under the saddle.

By choosing confrontation over caution, Rahul ensures that he keeps the government under constant scrutiny. In refusing to temper his rhetoric, he has embraced a role that is less about consensus and more about challenge.

The writer is a Delhi-based journalist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear reader, We are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to letters@fpj.co.in with the title of the letter in the subject line. Using snail mail? Send your letters to The Free Press Journal, Free Press House, 215 Free Press Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai 400021.

US in a fix

Iran appears to have emerged victorious in the conflict, while the US and Israel have suffered comprehensive defeat on all fronts. Despite targeting civilians, schools, and natural resources, the US's and Israel's actions indicate their inability to engage militarily, revealing their desperation. All nations have the right to defend their sovereignty and security.

However, powerful countries seek to exploit natural resources globally, often resorting to violence and occupation.

When challenged, they label opponents as terrorists, tarnishing their reputation.

Javed Rehman Khan, Mumbai

LPG shortage

Liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation propelled India's LPG access, yet today, an LPG cylinder shortage has sparked strife in homes amid disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. Prioritise domestic straight-to-home deliveries to restore flames of hope and avert further crisis.

T.S. Karthik, Chennai

Happy Gudi Padwa

Gudi Padwa and Ugadi, which will be celebrated on March 19, mark the traditional New Year for many people in India, especially in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. These festivals symbolise new beginnings, prosperity, and hope for the coming year. Ugadi is also celebrated with prayers and the preparation of Ugadi Pachadi, representing the different flavours of life. Such festivals remind us to value our traditions and promote unity and harmony in society.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

Punjab moves ahead

At last, Punjab is set for long-awaited rapid economic transformation with nearly ₹10,000 crore in fresh investment from the UK, Japan and Korea, apart from the Indian bigwigs. Major firms like ArcelorMittal and Tata Steel will expand projects at the Guru Gobind Singh Refinery and establish green steel manufacturing in Ludhiana. The initiatives may generate about 10,000 jobs, half for women, easing youth unemployment and giving Punjab's single-engine government a major boost toward rapid industrial growth.

R.S. Narula, Patiala

A valuable lesson

It is noteworthy that Sri Lanka's Parliament on February 17 voted 154-2 to repeal the 1977 law granting lifetime pensions to members of parliament. The decision followed strong public demand to curb political privileges, and it applies even to former legislators who were already receiving or eligible for the benefit. India too may consider such a step, as ending these pensions would not only reduce the burden on the public exchequer but also help ensure that people do not enter politics merely for the sake of lifelong perks and privileges.

V. Nagarajan, Chennai

Price of fame

The sudden viral fame of Monalisa from the Kumbh Mela shows how quickly social media can change someone's life. One moment a person is living a simple and ordinary life, and the next moment he or she becomes the centre of national attention. While many people admire the beauty and uniqueness that made her viral, it's also important to remember that behind that viral image is a real person with emotions, struggles, and personal choices. Monalisa's story also reflects how public attention can sometimes bring unexpected challenges, including pressure from society and family.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Mumbai short on sleep

Apropos the news 'Many Mumbaikars struggle for eight hours' sleep', the survey is correct, as most of the people spend more than 4 hours commuting from home to the workplace and back; they reach home late. Essentially, the city that never sleeps allows very little sleep to Mumbaikars. The stress of journey, work, and family matters makes it very difficult for one to get sound sleep, which leads to many health issues.

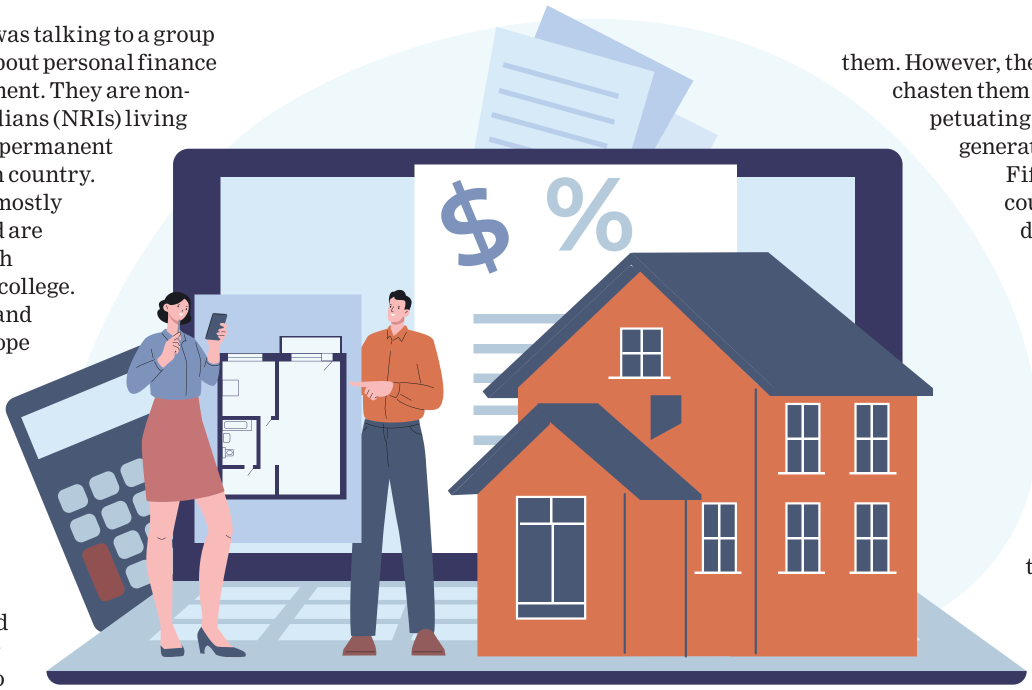
Maya Hemant Bhatkar, Pune

Homing in on NRI property trap

Buying a property in India may feel like a safety net, but it often turns into a white elephant for NRIs.

UMA SHASHIKANT
CHAIRPERSON,
CENTRE FOR INVESTMENT
EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Losses from unoccupied properties repaired remotely at a steep cost; distress from unscrupulous renters; unfamiliarity with local laws and sale procedures; inability to make frequent trips to sell property; and the possibility of dealing with underhand practices are real risks for NRI property investors.



Last week, I was talking to a group of women about personal finance and investment. They are non-resident Indians (NRIs) living on a visa or permanent residency in a foreign country. Their children have mostly been born abroad and are in the middle and high school, ready to go to college. Typically, both husband and wife work, and hope to continue to do so at least till they are 65, in a country that doesn't have a formal retirement age.

They have been aggressive savers as most Indians tend to be culturally oriented to set aside money for a rainy day. They also remain wary of debt, prefer to pay off home loans early, and avoid credit card debt. However, their investment options have remained firmly stuck in buying property in India. They have their retirement savings and children's education funds, but the rest of their wealth is in land and property. Why is this a problem?

Why is it a bad idea?

First, many NRIs buy a house in India with the intention of returning to live there some day. The housing markets in India have been free to source modern materials, fixtures and fittings only in the years after the economic liberalisation. Housing projects have become incrementally modern, better designed and well-equipped as the market has evolved with growing demand. The houses bought for occupation after serveral years run the risk of obsolescence. Many of them admitted they were unhappy with the flats they had purchased just a few years ago. Hence, that 1,500 sq ft flat in a crowded complex could run the risk of becoming unattractive over the years.

Second, some of them have families living in these properties that they have purchased or upgraded. They see it as an act of benevolence to provide for a comfortable upgrade in living conditions of their close relatives, especially parents. These properties tend to remain in the parents' names if upgraded and modernised, creating a share for other siblings who may inherit or begin to live in these properties when one of the parents passes away. Many find it awkward to stake a claim to the houses they have funded. It turns out to be an investment that yields no rent or return, but further commitments for upgradation and possible loss of ownership of the asset.

Third, many of these properties are funded by foreign currency converted to rupees.

The next generation is unlikely to care for a flat in a city they don't identify with and may never visit after their parents have passed.

This results in a further loss in value as the rupee has depreciated against the dollar over the years. These investments are made mostly due to pressure from families and parents to invest in property back home as a safety net or hook for possible return. As years roll by, the NRIs seldom return, more so as their children grow older and begin to work and study abroad. They now stare at a chunky asset that has lost value in dollar terms. The typical reaction to an asset in loss is to let it lie.

Pain points for NRIs

Fourth, these assets are seldom used by their owners in their lifetimes, nor are they worthwhile passing on to the next generation. I asked for instances where the property was sold for the college education of children. There was no such instance. Selling amounts to signalling distress, and they would like to hold up the image of doing well abroad. The next generation is unlikely to care for a flat in a city they don't identify with, or plan to visit or live in after their parents have passed. Many of them narrate stories of their own difficulty trying to liquidate land and property their parents have left behind for them. However, these experiences do not chasten them enough to stop perpetuating the pain to the next generation.

Fifth, living in a foreign country leaves them at a disadvantage when it comes to dealing with the properties in India. Not many engage property management services to rent, maintain and help dispose of their properties. They don't see their holdings as big enough to incur this cost. The losses from unoccupied properties that are remotely repaired at a steep cost; the distress from unscrupulous renters (one of them reported that the tenant took away all the fixtures, including air conditioners); unfamiliarity with local laws and procedures with respect to sale; inability to make frequent or long trips to sell property; and the possibility of black money and underhand dealings are real risks for an NRI investor in property.

What about the appreciation in value, they ask. My question is whether this appreciation is available to them as wealth to use in their lifetime, or to pass it on to their children. The property lies underutilised despite a sizeable sum invested in it. There is a significant prestige value to boast about multiple properties in India, but these assets do not help the household finances of the one investing in them. Sadly, no one questions it because the cultural tuning makes one believe there is something to fall back on if there is a crisis. This over-funded emergency fund earns too little, and whatever it does, is seldom realised and used.

Domestic property logic

If the NRIs want a diversified portfolio and have a property as another source of income, they should buy it in the country they live in. They will benefit from laws and processes that they understand; proximity and better level of control; ease of sale without the fear of black money; availability to children as a bequest; and no loss from currency depreciation. It will still be a chunky asset unavailable for smaller needs, but will be better than remotely holding a chunk of property elsewhere and fooling oneself that it is an act of patriotism, benevolence to family, or an asset for the next generation. Sadly, it's none of these.

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Small actions shape your career

GETTYIMAGES

Everyday behaviour builds trust and visibility at work, says **Devashish Chakravarty**.

You delivered the best sales numbers, but your colleague got the promotion. The person who rescued a project did not get picked for the next big assignment. Why? Because careers are not built on a few big wins. They are built on your labels, your reputation, and how others repeatedly judge you on ordinary days. Yes, your standout moments do help, like that new client you brought in, or the fantastic presentation you made, or the crisis you solved. However, your office does not run on fireworks alone. It runs on who responds, who helps, and who shows up for the thankless tasks. Here's how these small actions shape your career.

Availability bias

It is not the evidence, but the 'available' evidence, that matters. People do not remember all the work you did. They remember the work they can most easily recall. This is availability bias. Your manager may not remember every late evening you stayed back at work, but will remember how you missed an important update or handled a difficult client call calmly. That is how you slowly become known as careless or mature, risky or dependable.

Thin slices

People judge on fragments, not the full story. Similarly, colleagues at work judge you on the thin slices of action they see. They do not run a full audit of your intentions before deciding whether you are trustworthy or not. That is why small visible behaviours matter so much. Did you come prepared? Did you reduce confusion? Did you give the update on time? These tiny actions build your micro-reputation.

Responsiveness

A quick, clear response is often the first daily signal of professional respect. Silence gets noticed, too, and is often read as indifference. When your manager asks for numbers for the next day's client meeting, the right answer is, "Got it. I'll send the final numbers by 4 pm as one input is still pending." This reply confirms you are aware, you are taking full ownership and you are respecting your manager's time.

Relaxation test

Here is a simple test. When someone gives you a task, can they relax and forget about it? Or do they have to set up a calendar reminder, chase you and worry endlessly? When you are a reliable professional, you reduce the mental load for others. You start enthusiastically, spot what is missing, remember dependencies and update everyone before you are chased. You do not wait for others to catch the error or clean up the mess. This is when people learn they can trust you without hovering. When you need reminders, you are tagged as 'good but unreliable', or 'needs hand-holding'. That's when you lose opportunities.

Back the safer horse

People hate losses more than they like gains. Much like everyone else, managers hate uncertainty, delays and surprises. So while everyone thinks that the most talented person in the room will get promoted, the manager is judging risk. Instead of picking the superstar who performs only when he is in the right mood, your manager picks the person who is safer to trust. If one person is capable, but erratic, while the other is consistently reliable, and avoids emotional drama and last-minute firefighting, imagine who will get the client-facing role? Brilliance attracts attention, but reliability gets the delegated power.

Emotions travel faster

Communication transfers not just information, but mood too. Consider two colleagues reporting the same problem. One says, "This is a total mess and the vendor has let us down." The other says, "The vendor is late by two days and I have escalated it. I have proposed two options, and if we decide today, we can still meet the deadline." Same problem. Very different impact. People remember how it feels to work with you. Do you bring calmness and clarity? When you are under pressure, your tone becomes your reputation.

When tiny becomes big

Careers rarely sink because of one dramatic mistake alone. More careers are damaged by repeated, small behaviours that compound over time. Slightly underprepared, casual on deadlines, reactive to feedback, quick to blame others, and over-explaining errors are small actions that add up. Your manager hesitates to give you high visibility work, while your colleagues start copying others on your e-mails as back-ups. By then, your daily behaviour has already made the decision for them. It is the repeated actions that matter, not individual ones. Repetition becomes identity.

Three label audit

Want to know your real career reputation? It is not what you think of yourself or what your honest intentions are. It is what others experience because of you. If your colleagues had to describe in three words what it is like to work with you, what would they say? Reliable, calm, supportive? Defensive, late, toxic? Next, audit your calendar and e-mails of the past two weeks. How many times did people follow up with you? How many miscommunications occurred? How many times did someone ask you for a progress report? That audit is your real reputation.

Fix it in 30 days

The good news is that you can fix your micro-reputation. Since it was built through small moments, you can change it through small actions. Pick three behaviours that matter most in your role. Maybe it is attention to detail, ownership and follow through. Work on these deliberately for the next 30 days. Acknowledge messages, update immediately when you make a mistake, finish properly and take feedback without drama. In every interaction, ask a simple question, "Am I increasing trust or losing it?" Your career moves ahead on the quiet confidence others have in you. One small behaviour at a time.

Five e-mail habits to help your image

1 REPLY BEFORE YOU RESOLVE

When you are silent on e-mails, you cause more anxiety than the problem itself. Reply within 24 hours whether you have solved the problem or not. For important e-mails, reply faster. A quick acknowledgement with a clear timeline reassures people and signals control.

2 STATE THE NEXT MOVE CLEARLY

Most e-mails at work are vague and add no value to the discussion. The ambiguity triggers more e-mails asking for clarity. On the other hand, a useful e-mail from you reduces friction by telling the reader what happens next, who owns it, and by when.

3 CLOSE THE LOOP

Close the e-mail thread as fast as you can. If an update was expected from you, send it. If you finished the job, say it. If you are delayed, speak up before you are asked, and share a fresh deadline. Closure is a small habit, but a big boost to your reputation.

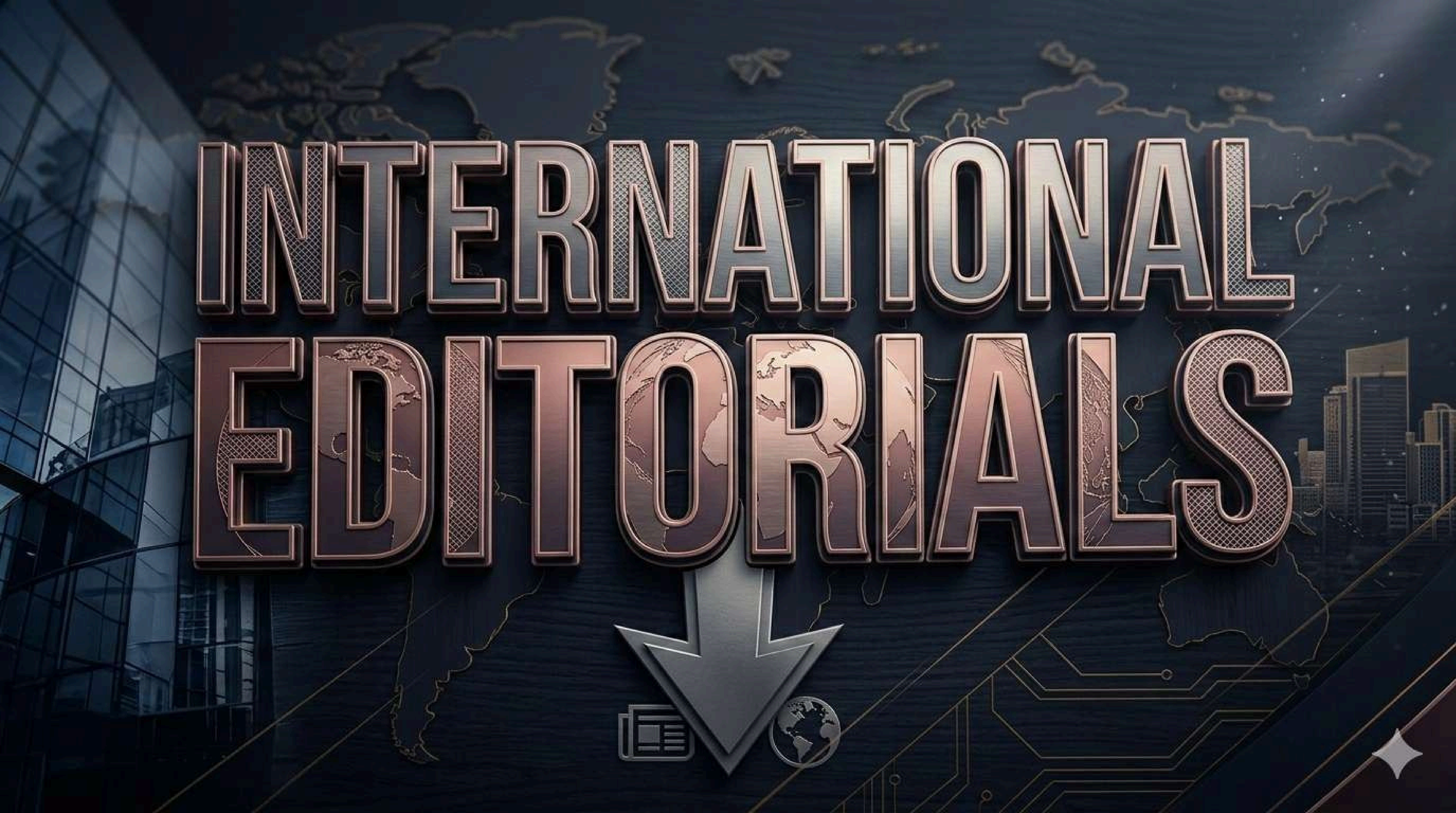
4 MIND YOUR TONE

Never export stress through your mailbox. Do not 'send' when you are agitated, angry or pushed. Save your reply in drafts and walk away to the next task. Reread it later and send only if it is clear, respectful and proportionate.

5 KEEP IT EASY

A great e-mail reduces work. Can you give a useful subject line? Keep it under five sentences? If there are three points, put them in a list. Make your e-mail super-easy to understand and act on. People reply faster because you are clear and structured.

THE WRITER IS FOUNDER OF QVERIFY.COM, AN EMPLOYEE BACKGROUND VERIFICATION FIRM, AND AUTHOR OF *GET HIRED IN 30 DAYS*.


INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

OPINION

Trump and Netanyahu Are No Longer on the Same Page

W.J. Hennigan
A writer in Opinion who covers national security.

THE towering flames and black smoke that filled the skies above Tehran last week after Israel bombarded oil depots there looked apocalyptic.

As soot and black rain fell on the more than 10 million Iranians living in the city, the tremors from those airstrikes vibrated all the way to Washington, where officials felt the unequivocal impact of divergent ambitions in this war.

It seems that President Trump's aims in joining the air war against Iran are beginning to rub against the long-term objectives of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. While Mr. Trump has said in recent days that America's military goals are nearly complete — even though the ayatollahs remain in power — Israel seeks an end to the regime and to crush its regional influence.

In short, Mr. Trump wants to bend Iran. Mr. Netanyahu seeks to break it.

Images of oil going up in smoke — regardless of whose oil it is — could not have been a welcome sight for the Trump administration as prices skyrocketed at America's gas pumps. The war in Iran has wreaked havoc on world energy markets, prompting countries to prepare for protracted economic blowback caused by rising fuel costs. Several ships were hit last week in and around the Strait of Hormuz, as the fighting chokes off one of the most vital routes for the world's oil trade. All of this creates political headwinds for Mr. Trump as a war-weary public remains unpersuaded by the arguments for conflict.

At the moment, the leaders' interests mostly align. As the air campaign enters its third week, the Israeli and American militaries continue to coordinate to hit thousands of targets across Iran. The U.S. and Israeli objectives overlap in their short-term goals: destroying Iran's missiles, nuclear program, navy, weapons production and military command-and-control. Both sides agree that the Iranian regime is intent on inflicting as much harm as it can on the United States and Israel while destabilizing the broader Middle East.

But their opposing visions of long-term victory — a more compliant government in Tehran versus a new one altogether — must be resolved if the United States is to avoid another extended war.

Sustained attacks on multiple rungs of leadership and infrastructure are the surest way to bring about the kind of protracted nation-building exercise Mr. Trump has railed against for years. White House officials were reportedly dismayed by the burning oil fields in Tehran and not just because of oil prices: The scene conjured the uncontrolled chaos of Iraq and Afghanistan.


MAJID SAEEDI/GETTY IMAGES

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth sought last week to differentiate those examples of military adventurism from the administration's mission in Iran. "This is not 2003. This is not endless nation-building under those types of quagmires we saw under Bush or Obama," he said Tuesday at a Pentagon briefing.

Mr. Hegseth said the American military campaign is "not even close" to that point today — but that may not be the case one, three or six months from now. After all, the U.S. military bombarded Iran's nuclear facilities in June, but when subsequent diplomatic negotiations dragged on, Mr. Trump ordered another complex military mission over the country just eight months later. At least 13 American service members have already been killed, and more than 100 have been wounded since the renewal of operations. No fewer than 11 bases and installations hosting U.S. forces in the region have been damaged.

They started a war together, but are drifting apart.

Mr. Trump has suggested in recent days that the U.S. role in the war could be nearing an end because much of Iran's military capacity has been destroyed. But that's not what initially provoked him to threaten Iran with military force. The president first cited the Iranian government's deadly crackdown on protesters in January as a justification for action. Since then, he and administration officials have provided a long list of shifting reasons for the campaign: the nuclear program, missile production, naval ships and — the most curious of them all — pre-empting Iranian retaliation for Israeli military action.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio made that claim earlier this month when he suggested the United States acted because it knew an Israeli strike would prompt Iran to strike U.S. forces in the region. Americans aren't used to hearing that their president was escorted into war by an allied leader. Whether or not it's true, the sentiment has likely contributed to the record-low support for the conflict: Just 41 percent of Americans support the conflict with Iran, compared with a large majority of Americans who supported intervention in Iraq in 2003.

This is another reason Mr. Netanyahu's and Mr. Trump's interests deviate. Most Israelis back the war, making it a political strength for Mr. Netanyahu, who faces a tough re-election bid expected this year. Mr. Trump, on the other hand, doesn't want an unpopular war roiling as the midterms draw near in November.

It's no surprise then that Mr. Trump has started to indicate that he may be looking for the exits, said Javed Ali, a former senior U.S. counterterrorism official. "His patience was always going to run thin with this war fairly quickly," he said. "The message he wants to convey is: Iran has been defanged militarily. Now it's time for a deal."

Mr. Trump has said contradictory things about his plans for Iran's future. He's talked about regime change, negotiations, unconditional surrender and the need for him to personally handpick a new leader. Mr. Trump saw his dream scenario play out in Venezuela when U.S. forces captured Nicolás Maduro and removed him from power and a more pliable insider, Delcy Rodríguez, took over. He told Axios on March 5 that he'd like to see a replay of that in Tehran. "I have to be involved in the appointment, like with Delcy in Venezuela," Mr. Trump said.

Iran has other plans. It has since named Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of the recently killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as supreme leader. There are no immediate indications he's willing to acquiesce to the United States.

So, the bombing continues. Two nations started this war together. It's hard to see how they can join forces to end it.

This Is the Moment Adam Smith Has Been Waiting For

Jason Furman
A contributing Opinion writer who was the chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers from 2013 to 2017.

The most provocative argument about our economy was written in 1776.

FOR many Americans, the present economic circumstances feel uneasy, and the future feels worse. They direct their anxiety at other countries, which are supposedly taking advantage of us through trade, or at artificial intelligence, with its potential to upend jobs and concentrate power. Lawmakers respond by offering antitrust, industrial and trade policies. It is striking, then, that some of the clearest guidance for this moment comes from a book published 250 years ago last Monday: "The Wealth of Nations," by Adam Smith, who put optimism about people at the center of his economic philosophy.

Smith's ideas are widely quoted but almost as widely misunderstood. Conservatives too often reduce them to a demand for laissez-faire above all, a warning to let the "invisible hand" of the market be the economy's only guiding force. Liberals too often dismiss him as a highbrow spokesman for naked, antisocial greed. The truth in both cases is more interesting and more relevant to the complex issues we are navigating in the world today.

Smith's radical idea was to show how ordinary people, pursuing ordinary lives, could steadily make societies richer, fairer and freer — if powerful institutions like governments, guilds or large businesses got out of their way.

Smith urged us to judge a nation not by the fortunes of its kings or nobility (today we might say our titans of technology and finance) but instead by whether it supplied people "with all the necessaries and conveniencies of life." He insisted that prosperity had to be broadly shared: "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable."

Smith, who was born in 1723, in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, drew on the work of various continental European philosophers. Unlike those thinkers, however, he derived his ideas less by deduction from first principles than by empirical observation of history and his contemporary world.

His most famous observation was about the elaborate division of labor at a pin factory. Workers were separated into 18 tasks, including straightening the wire, making the pinhead and packaging the finished product in paper. Output per worker increased by a factor of 240 relative to what a worker doing all those different jobs himself could accomplish. And productivity growth, Smith saw, was the moral core of economic progress, because it was what made higher living standards possible.

It is tempting to think that the right way to respond to technological change is to try to control it, through rules and regulation. Smith, however, understood that no single mind could design or direct this intricate web of specialization. The division of labor extended far beyond any one factory, linking farms to towns, nations to one another.

Today, a product as simple as canned soup is possible only because of the inputs of thousands or even millions of people around the world: grain farmers and truck drivers, steelworkers who make the can, engineers who design the processing equipment and retailers who place the can on the shelf — none of whom may know one another, yet whose coordinated efforts deliver dinner at a price that countless working people can earn in just a few minutes. The division of labor that brings us A.I. is even harder to imagine, understand or control.

This coordination did not require benevolent planners or farsighted leaders. It emerged from individuals pursuing their own interests.

Despite the many ways Smith's ideas have been misappropriated of late, however, this was not a simplistic celebration of greed. Before "The Wealth of Nations," Smith wrote "The Theory of Moral Sentiments," emphasizing sympathy, moral judgment and our desire for the approval of others. He was also, however, a realist. In the commercial sphere, he argued, policy had to be grounded in how people actually behave, not how we wish they would behave. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner," he wrote in "The Wealth of Nations," "but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."

Smith was therefore distrustful of structures that keep individuals from freely pursuing their own interests — including government favoritism, the efforts of large employers to suppress wages and restrictive institutions that limit competition. That criticism feels uncomfortably current. From occupational licensing rules that block entry into trades to regulatory barriers that limit new hospitals or housing, modern economies still shelter incumbents at the expense of consumers and workers. Today we also recognize — more clearly than Smith could — that companies can generate durable monopoly power, requiring active antitrust enforcement to preserve competition because we shouldn't simply assume it will emerge on its own.


MORTEN KANTSØ

Smith directed his strongest ire against the dominant economic philosophy of his day: mercantilism, which measured success by hoarded gold and trade surpluses, not by human well-being. It benefited special interests at the expense of the public, favoring tariffs to block imports and subsidies to promote exports.

As I watch economic policymaking these days, I find myself repeating over and over again the arguments that Smith first made 250 years ago: Trade deficits are not inherently bad, imports are the source of real benefits to consumers, and trade expands the division of labor, raising productivity and living standards. The fixation on bilateral balances and industrial micromanagement, so visible again in today's tariffs, would have struck Smith as a profound error. The result is fewer choices, higher prices and slower growth — precisely the opposite of the economic security these policies promise.

Perhaps the most neglected Smithian virtue in our current discourse is optimism. "The Wealth of Nations" cataloged policy failures and abuses, but it also marveled at the living standard of people in the Britain of his day. Even though the richest person at the time would seem impoverished by today's standards — lacking even indoor plumbing, to say nothing of flat-screen TVs — Smith was still effusive about the "liberal reward of labor" that narrowed the gap between a prince and "an industrious and frugal peasant."

Since Smith's day, progress has accelerated significantly: Increases in per capita income that once took a century now occur within a generation. Remembering that achievement does not mean ignoring today's problems. It means approaching them with the confidence — and humility — that comes from knowing how much human ingenuity, properly channeled, can accomplish. If we are lucky and wise and if we heed the lessons of "The Wealth of Nations," progress may be even faster for the coming generations, a prospect that is both exciting and scary.

At a moment when faith in markets is fraying and faith in governments is strained, Smith's message is neither to worship the invisible hand nor to wish it away. It is to discipline power, defend competition and keep the focus where he always insisted it belonged: on improving the lives of ordinary people.

OPINION

‘America First’ and American Debt Don’t Add Up

Kyla Scanlon

A contributing Opinion writer and the author of “In This Economy? How Money & Markets Really Work.”

AMERICA is drowning in debt. It has expanded over years and even decades, but President Trump and his allies in Congress have piled on a giant new load.

In fiscal year 2025, the United States spent roughly $7 trillion and collected about $5.2 trillion in tax revenue. That leaves a $1.8 trillion gap that has to be closed.

This creates an enormous tension for an administration that now claims greatness as isolationism and regularly alienates and insults (or worse) global peers, but that cannot finance itself without the support of other countries. These two opposing facts operate at the center of the American debt story.

They are why “America first” does not make sense financially. The United States will no doubt, for the time being, find buyers of its debt — but the cost and terms of those exchanges are shifting as the rest of the world reconsiders its arrangements with President Trump’s way of doing business.

“America first” is inviting the world to use our debt as a weapon against us.

The government borrows the amount of our deficit by selling Treasury securities, I.O.U.s that promise to pay investors back with interest over time. The United States carried over $30 trillion in publicly held debt in fiscal year 2025, and a significant chunk of that debt matures every year and has to be refinanced at whatever interest rates exist at that moment. So if rates rise, the annual cost of servicing the debt climbs, too — and keeps climbing as more debt turns over. The system holds together as long as the world keeps buying.

And that’s how U.S. capital markets work. Historically, everyone has wanted to own a little bit of the United States. Foreign investors held a record high of over $9.3 trillion in U.S. Treasuries in November 2025. Japan remains the largest holder. Britain is second, and mainland China is third, even after reducing its holdings over the past decade.

This foreign participation in U.S. Treasury markets is really important for two main reasons: It lowers what the United States pays to borrow, and it expands how much the United States can borrow in the first place.

Foreign buyers functionally lower U.S. borrowing costs because they provide more demand, resulting in lower rates. If only U.S. investors were buying Treasuries, interest rates would have to rise to attract domestic buyers, and borrowing prices would rise for America. Foreign investors act as a shock absorber, taking in U.S. debt and allowing the country to spend money on health care and Social Security.

This also allows the United States to run deficits that would be impossible for us to finance alone. The Treasury has to sell trillions in new securities each year just to cover the deficit, before accounting for the trillions in existing debt that mature and must be refinanced. Without foreign buyers competing for that paper, domestic investors would need to absorb it all, and they would demand significantly higher interest rates to do so, which would ripple into all consumer loans.

So the United States has to find buyers elsewhere through foreign governments, sovereign wealth funds and private institutions. This is largely a feature, not a bug. But it means that when you borrow from the world, your borrowing costs depend partly on the world.

Also, the United States is the absorber of last resort. Surplus economies like China produce more than they consume and export the difference as savings. Those savings have to go somewhere, and for decades, the answer was U.S. Treasuries. Capital flowed in, the dollar stayed strong, and the United States absorbed much of what the rest of the world couldn’t spend at home. That is the price of running the world’s reserve currency.

All of this — the United States as a sponge, borrower and spender — has worked remarkably well for decades. The United States benefited from something economists call “exorbitant privilege” — the dollar’s dominance meant global investors had few viable alternatives to U.S. Treasuries. When uncertainty hit anywhere in the world, money flowed toward America, not away from it. Foreign demand didn’t require the United States to be perfectly managed, just reliably open and stable.

But that assumption is now being tested from multiple directions. The rest of the world is developing better options and better reasons to keep capital at home.

Japan is a good example. It is the largest foreign investor in the United States. Japanese investors hold more than $1 trillion in Treasuries. But Japan is at a turning point in its own economy. The Bank of Japan has been raising interest rates to keep inflation under control. The yen has shown signs of rebounding over the past year or so. When that happens, Japanese investors will have better reason to keep capital at home, and global investors who borrowed in yen to buy U.S. assets will start unwinding those positions. The result will be upward pressure on U.S. borrowing costs — not because of any political decision but because the math changed.

It’s a similar story with Europe. European investors have been steady buyers of U.S. debt for years. But Europe is now increasing its own borrowing to fund defense spending and going through a period of deregulation. As Europe builds out a deeper bond market, global investors will have more choices about where to put their money. That means there will be more competition for global savings outside the United States.

So there are significant alternatives to U.S. capital markets, which threaten the status of Treasuries, and there are also threats of exit. Europeans are talking of selling their U.S. Treasuries. Europe holds over $3 trillion in Treasuries, and there has been increasing talk of “weaponization of capital” in the face of U.S. volatility. If Europe does choose to sell, that would raise the cost of capital for the U.S. government. (The president has already threatened to retaliate.)

> **Our inability to live within our means makes the U.S. vulnerable.**

The rest of the world is choosing to deal with one another rather than the United States. The enormous trade pact between India and the European Union, the strategic partnership between China and Canada — the rest of the world is showing that the United States isn’t the first stop anymore.

We now have a live example: the Iran war. With the Strait of Hormuz effectively closed, oil prices surged (and then fell and then surged again). No one knew which way was up or down — it all seemed reckless.

The bond market made the same point in a different language. Historically, geopolitical crises send investors rushing into U.S. Treasuries as a safe haven, so yields fall as prices rise. That didn’t happen this time. Instead, yields rose on inflation fears: more oil disruption, more inflation, more deficit spending on defense, more Treasury issuance. Yields spiked when the war escalated and pulled back only when de-escalation looked possible. The safe-haven response that investors have relied on for decades failed to materialize.

And what does that mean for the boatload of U.S. debt that has to be financed?

It will likely continue to be financed — but at what cost and on whose terms? Our “exorbitant privilege” depends on trust in U.S. institutions, stable policy, consistent messaging and confidence that America remains a safe place to invest money. This is currently being threatened by the rest of the world generating better returns and by domestic U.S. rhetoric that America does not need the rest of the world.

When there are policy miscommunications — like the commerce secretary saying a weaker dollar is “more natural” while the Treasury secretary insists on a strong dollar policy — when Federal Reserve independence becomes a real point of concern and when foreign policy becomes chaotic and unplanned, that signals to the global investors America depends on that something important may be shifting.

There is a lot of talk about reducing reliance on foreign capital. But the United States cannot get there through rhetoric alone.

What is more important — and controllable — is trust. Trust is the actual asset underlying America’s ability to borrow cheaply. It was what made foreign capital want to come here. Every signal that America no longer considers itself bound by the rules it wrote chips away at that asset. When it goes, the costs will hit at home, landing in higher mortgage, car loan and credit card rates, and a government that can no longer afford its own ambitions.

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Europe Is in Great Danger. It Has Itself to Blame.

Anton Jäger

A contributing Opinion writer and the author of “Hyperpolitics: Extreme Politicization Without Political Consequences.”

LUCAS BURTIN

BRUSSELS

“IT IS worse than a crime; it is a blunder.” Thus was the response of a prominent French politician to the news that Napoleon had executed an enemy duke in 1804.

An adage of 19th-century power politics, it has regained painful relevance today. Neither the United States nor Israel can proffer a coherent plan for their war on Iran. Something like the Syrian scenario is the best planners can come up with: disintegration of the polity from the skies, without the presence of foreign troops, domestic propaganda campaigns or long-term security planning. Old-style regime change is out. Regime wrecking, at great global cost, is all that is on offer.

The apothegm easily applies to Europe’s leaders, too. Despite being blindsided by the Israeli-American operation in Iran, they have largely declared support for it — if somewhat cagily — and lent military assistance in the form of bases, warships and planes. More structurally, Europeans have foundered in letting themselves be so dependent on the whims of an America commanded by a rogue president. Almost by default, they have colluded in the conditions of their own endangerment.

The consequences are potentially calamitous. Energy prices are already rising precipitously, an effect of a snarled-up Strait of Hormuz, as leaders face pressure to contribute more to President Trump’s blitzkrieg. Today, there are risks of the war spreading to Europe, and it could soon bring a refugee crisis as people flee a ravaged Middle East. Yet to counteract such dangers, and the dependencies underpinning them, most European leaders are doing precious little.

Instead, they have opted for passive bystandership or active coalescence. After initially refusing, Prime Minister Keir Starmer of Britain allowed the United States to use British bases, and Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany backed the effort “to get rid of this terrible terrorist regime.” President Emmanuel Macron of France has been more circumspect in words but clearer in action, deploying several warships to the region. Not to be outdone, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy offered the country’s bases to America and dispatched air defense weapons to the Persian Gulf.

What explains such complaisance? Energy is one potential answer. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 effectively cut off gas supplies to the continent, Europe was forced to find alternative sources of energy. It partly turned to liquefied natural gas, much of it imported from America. (A smaller amount, now stanched by the war, came from Qatar .) One dependence on a politically unreliable provider has been replaced with another. In their subordinate state, European politicians may prefer to toe the White House line rather than cross it.

> **Leaders are doing little to counteract the threats of the war in Iran.**

Security is another candidate. Europe has significantly increased military spending and is now the dominant backer of the Ukrainian war effort. But pending the rollout of a truly domestic military industry, Europeans remain dependent on American supplies and intelligence to keep further Russian incursions at bay. Antagonizing the Trump administration could leave them at Moscow’s mercy — a particular worry for the continent’s eastern flank. It hardly helps that Mr. Trump recently threatened to invade Greenland.

Along with these material constraints, there are those imposed by ideology. The current crop of European leaders grew up in a world underpinned by total American power and remains invested in it as the linchpin of any global order. Genuflection to the United States is a natural reflex for a generation that has never been taught to think or rule on its feet. The sycophancy of Mark Rutte — now the NATO secretary general, formerly the Dutch prime minister — presents an extreme case of a general affliction.

Alternatives to this vassalage exist. Indeed, Spain offers clues as to what a more independent course would look like. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez — a lonely critic of the military spending target adopted last year by European governments at Mr. Trump’s behest — refused to offer up Spanish bases for American use. He is no pacifist: Full-throated in his support for Ukraine, he has called for the consolidation of a European army, which would join the continent’s populous but fragmented armies into a cohesive whole.

On the energy front, Mr. Sánchez is pursuing an ambitious decarbonization push. Alongside slowing climate change, this would also reduce dependence on oil and gas imports. To that end, he has sought partnership with China — against European consensus — to facilitate cooperation on green projects. The component parts of his program should prove complementary: Decarbonization aids energy independence, which in turn relieves American military pressure. Needless to say, it also puts Europe on sounder economic footing.

That recipe would require a break with policy orthodoxy. To date, many European politicians have pitted greening efforts against attempts to revive the continent’s economy.

For such revitalization, the preferred approach tends to be cuts in wages and social spending, alongside remilitarization. But large-scale public investment in green technology could kill two birds with one stone, providing a major economic jolt and reducing America’s leverage over Europe.

Despite some scattered statements of support, few of the continent’s leaders have joined Mr. Sánchez’s broader bid for autonomy. Compliance, after all, is more instinctual than declarations of independence for a generation that grew up in the age of American unipolarity. Crimes certainly abound in the year 2026. Yet, as Napoleon’s statesman knew, one can commit only so many blunders before one stumbles to defeat.

OPINION

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

EDITORIAL

The death of Bay Area public transportation

MASSIVE SERVICE CUTS LOOM DESPITE A SURGE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING.

BEN MARGOT/AP

A BART train in Oakland.

IT LOOKS LIKE the Bay Area Rapid Transit system is headed for a financial death spiral. High costs and low ridership have pushed the transit authority to threaten major service cuts – unless wary voters approve a regressive tax hike in November. This farce was predictable but not inevitable.

BART has served greater San Francisco for more than half a century, and there was a time when it was mostly self-sustaining. As recently as 2019, a fare covered about three-quarters of the operating expense of a trip. The system has hiked fares, but the cost of any given trip has soared because ridership has collapsed. That's why BART's leaders want to raise the sales tax across all five counties that it serves by at least half a percentage point.

Few signs suggest that riders are coming back. Public transit use is down across the country, but most other systems are closer to pre-pandemic levels. The Bay Area, however, is filled with technology firms that offer generous work-from-home policies.

About three-quarters of BART's operating expenses come from labor, and those costs have soared as ridership fell. BART had total operating expenses of $883 million in 2024. That's over $150 million more on labor that year than it did in 2019, despite passengers completing 73 million fewer trips.

This destructive inefficiency is not entirely BART's fault. Longstanding federal law makes it difficult for any public transit agency that receives federal money to cut its workforce. Nationwide since the 1960s, the total number of transit trips is approximately the same, but operating costs have quintupled, largely driven by labor costs.

BART now has an annual structural deficit of about $400 million. That's a lot, but it pales in comparison to overall spending by governments in counties served by BART.

The City and County of San Francisco had a balanced budget in 2012. Government spending has grown by 54 percent since then. That is adjusted for inflation. It is not adjusted for population growth, because the population is basically the same.

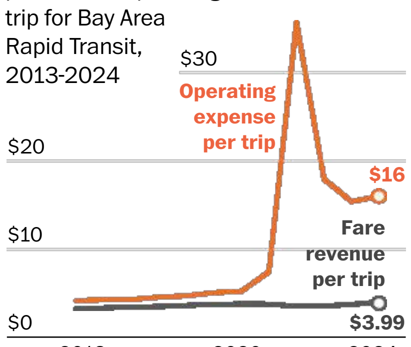
Despite having a similar population, the city-county government had 27 percent more workers in 2025 than it had in 2012. Their average compensation is $205,000. They aren't helping the transit situation, as one-quarter of them work from home two or more days of the week.

Meanwhile, San Francisco is asking residents to approve a full percentage point increase to their sales tax rates so that they can also bail out the Muni, which operates buses, street cars and subway trains.

Just comparing budgets from immediately before the pandemic in 2019 to 2024, the five counties BART serves were collectively spending over $9 billion per year more, adjusted for inflation. They achieved this despite the region having a stagnant population. Politicians should be asking themselves whether all that new spending was more important than BART before trying to saddle their residents with higher taxes.

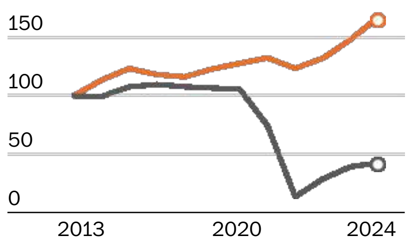
Fares used to cover most of BART's operating costs

Fare revenue and operating costs per unlinked passenger trip for Bay Area Rapid Transit, 2013-2024



BART labor costs have risen as ridership has fallen

Index of Bay Area Rapid Transit's labor costs and average weekday ridership, 2013-2024



2013 is set to 100 for each series. Each number shows how much higher or lower the value is compared to 2013.

Bay Area counties' budgets are rising despite stagnant or shrinking populations

Inflation-adjusted change in county government's budget between FY2019-2020 and FY2024-2025 and estimated population change between 2019 and 2024

	POPULATION CHANGE	GOVERNMENT BUDGET INCREASE
San Mateo	−2.9%	+42.6%
Santa Clara	+0.2	+27.1
Contra Costa	+1.7	+18.4
San Francisco	−5.8	+11.3
Alameda	−1.1	+10.6

Spending growth is adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index for the San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward MSA.

Sources: Federal Transit Administration, county government budget websites, Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau

Voters in Oakland already approved a sales tax increase last year, taking the combined rate in the city to 10.75 percent. That's one of the highest rates in the country, and it's 1.5 percentage points above the maximum rate allowed by California law. Local governments routinely ask for exemptions from that cap, however, and the state has been too happy to oblige.

Technologically, there's a solution to transit costs. A 2023 study funded by the federal government concluded that "automation is a proven transit technology that not only reduces operations costs but can also improve service quality." Automated trains aren't some kind of AI innovation. They're already normal in other parts of the world. Automation reduces operation costs by 46 percent, the study found, based on the financials of successful systems in Vancouver and Copenhagen.

Politicians would need to stand up to transit unions, repeal the federal law hindering labor cuts and set aside money for the one-time costs of transitioning to automated service. Maybe when the alternative is closing down transit systems altogether, they'll see the light.

For the amount of taxes Bay Area residents already pay, they should have a well-run public transit system. Yet BART has been treated more like a jobs program for transit workers than a way for people to get around. That culture of contempt for the public is why bureaucrats treat never-ending tax hikes like the mob does protection payments.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Guess who's asking for DEI now

In his March 8 op-ed, "The key group missing from the halls of power," Aaron M. Renn argued for "increasing the evangelical presence in boardrooms, elite universities and high courts." Hmm, Mr. Renn, that sounds a lot like DEI to me.

Dotty Williams, *Gregory, Michigan*

Aaron M. Renn wrote that "evangelicals are 23 percent of U.S. adults." That number comes from the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, which reports that 29 percent of U.S. adults identify as "religiously unaffiliated." Even setting aside the dubious proposition that religion should be one of the characteristics used to determine the representativeness of our important institutions, would Renn argue for more of the country's self-described "religiously unaffiliated" in the seats of power? I figure he shies away from that as much as those of us who prefer competence to dogma shy away from the suggestion of more evangelicals at the controls.

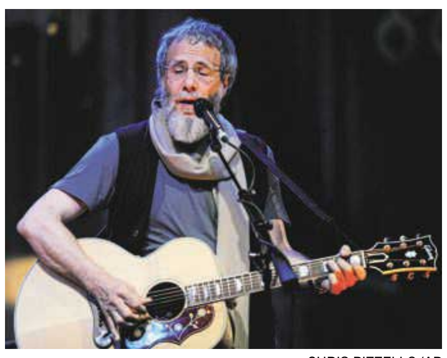
Barbara Meierhoefer, *Arlington*

Would Mike Huckabee, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, really extend the territorial boundaries of that nation to the gerrymander carved out by the God of the Old Testament? If this is what evangelical governance looks like, no thanks.

Bruce Mathews, *Catonsville, Maryland*

The Feb. 21 online news article "Tucker Carlson, Mike Huckabee debate Israel's right to land in Middle East," examining Mike Huckabee's suggestion that the Bible gives the Jewish state the right to much of the Middle East, noted that "Abraham is considered the father of the Jewish people." Not noted was that he is considered the father of the Arab people as well. This fact might have aided readers trying to determine how much weight they should give an ancient religious covenant at odds with modern geopolitics. A question raised for this reader is to what extent the world would be required to accommodate the wishes of a religious leader from today's Iraq, Abraham's ancestral homeland, who believed God gave Israel to him and his descendants.

Gregory Adams, *Washington*



CHRIS PIZZELLO/AP

Yusuf Islam, a.k.a. Cat Stevens, in Los Angeles in 2009.

Interfaith connection in a wild world

As Easter approaches, I want to say thanks to Zeyneb Sayilgan for her Feb. 17 online op-ed, "Cat Stevens in my house means one thing," about her Ramadan playlist. I read and reread Shadi Hamid's March 24, 2025, op-ed, "What is the point of Ramadan?," as I prepared myself for Easter last year, and I'm doing the same now.

It is always good for me to hear that those of us who spend time thinking about our own faith ask many of the same questions as those with different faith cultures — but a shared faith in knowing we are part of a larger knowing. Thank you for articulating your thoughts.

Mary Carol Dragoo, *Silver Spring*

I hate being a hater

What surprised me in reading the March 7 Politics & The Nation article "U.S. is lone nation in worldwide poll to say most of its fellow citizens are bad" was that it contained no mention of the main person responsible for the phenomenon. Donald Trump has created a climate of us against them. He spews vitriol about women, African Americans, immigrants, transgender people, Gold Star mothers, the list goes on.

It's no secret that Trump is nasty, but, upon reflection, how often have I personally said of him, "I hate him"? How often have I said of relatives who have voted for him, "You just can't talk to those people"? Many of us have fallen prey to this climate of hate, thinking we are on the good side of it.

Hate has no good side. And, as we can see from the survey reported in the article, hate hurts us all.

Diane B. Norton, *Fairfax*

Regulate the algorithm

Regarding Brett Guthrie's March 9 online op-ed, "Congress is done waiting for Big Tech to protect kids online":

Guthrie, a Republican U.S. House member from Kentucky, is right that Congress cannot keep outsourcing children's safety to the same platforms that profit from their attention. If Congress really wants to fix the problem, it should not force families into invasive identity checks or biometric data collection. Instead, it should govern the algorithms that govern us.

I study how online platforms assemble personalized content, and I have watched the same invisible mechanics play out again and again. Today's platforms no longer simply host speech. They amplify it through hyper-personalized feeds powered by artificial intelligence. When a user lingers on something provocative, the system learns. It finds similar content and serves more of it, narrowing the range of voices, tones and ideas that are shown. Over time, people are nudged from curiosity to fixation, from disagreement to disgust. As a result, each user experiences a slightly different internet — a slightly different reality — tailored to maximize their attention.

Yet Guthrie's proposed fixes would require families to hand over even more personal data to systems powered by personal data in the first place. Instead, algorithms should be required to serve groups large enough so that variety itself becomes a safeguard. The same logic that once made television and radio broadly centrist (because programs had to appeal to millions, not individuals) could restore balance to digital media.

There is precedent for this kind of approach. The European Union's Digital Services Act already requires large platforms to give users non-personalized feed options and explain how their recommender systems work. The answer is not more data collection from children, but less power for algorithms to exploit it.

Tim Weninger, *South Bend, Indiana*

The writer is an associate professor of computer science and engineering at the University of Notre Dame.

I have an advantage: I grew up before computers. Not literally before computers, but when I was growing up, the only one in the house was our father's work computer, which was difficult to use and had little attraction for me or my sister. We did our schoolwork by reading books, completing assignments with pen and paper, and visiting the library when we needed information or inspiration. I loved to wander in the stacks of Harvard's libraries before universities began to lock knowledge away.

Knowing what the world was like before computers is a gift, like seeing behind the curtain of the wayang, the Indonesian shadow play. Without computers, it is easier, not harder, to learn. Without computers, it is easier, not harder, to find human connection. I enjoyed Dana Milbank's Jan. 12 Health column, "Team of tech titans makes bet that AI can be good for the soul," about a social media company "for people who hate social media." If apps like this can help society, more power to them, but we really do not need these computer programs. All we need is to turn to those around us, and they will show us what to do.

Stuart Gallant, *Belmont, Massachusetts*

Post Opinions wants to know

How soon do you bring up politics when getting to know someone? Is a first date too soon? Share your response, and it might be published as a letter to the editor: **wapo.st/discuss_politics**

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Send letters to **letters@washpost.com**. Submissions must be exclusive to The Post and should include the writer's address and day and evening telephone numbers. Letters are subject to editing and abridgment. Please do not send letters as attachments. Because of the volume of material we receive, we are unable to acknowledge submissions; writers whose letters are under consideration for publication will be contacted.

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OPINION

HEATHER DIEHL/GETTY IMAGES

Reps. Thomas Massie (R-Kentucky) and Ro Khanna (D-California) speak about the Epstein files outside the Justice Department on Feb. 9.

How Ro Khanna turned a sex trafficking scandal into a campaign stunt

BY JAMES KIRCHICK

Last month, Reps. Ro Khanna (D-California) and Thomas Massie (R-Kentucky) held a news conference outside the Justice Department. Co-sponsors of the Epstein Files Transparency Act, they had just reviewed a collection of unredacted documents from the FBI's investigation into the deceased sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and were assailing the government for withholding the names of six men who appeared in a collection of mugshot-style photographs. "There is no reason in our legislation that allows them to redact the names of those men," Massie declared. If the department would not release the names, the pair said, they would do it themselves.

The following day on the House floor, Khanna made good on that threat, reading the names of "six wealthy, powerful men" into the congressional record "to hold the Epstein class accountable."

It took the Guardian three days to discover that four of the men Khanna named had "no ties to Epstein." A car mechanic from the nation of Georgia, an information technology specialist, the owner of a home improvement store in Queens and a man Massie later admitted to misidentifying who shares a name with an Italian former member of the European Parliament — none of them are "wealthy" and "powerful." A more accurate description was provided by Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche, who referred to them as "completely random."

Rather than apologize to the public he deceived and to the men he smeared, Khanna blamed the Justice Department. Acknowledging that the innocent men "were just part of a photo line up and are not connected to Epstein's crimes," Khanna said that the department nonetheless "failed to protect survivors." Less than two weeks later, having evidently learned nothing, he claimed that the files showed that Epstein had visited CIA headquarters. A Washington Free Beacon report demonstrated that Khanna was likely referencing a photo of Epstein at a Hermès design studio. (When asked for comment, Khanna acknowledged that "the photograph which had online buzz about being at CIA headquarters was apparently at Hermes.")

Ever since appointing himself chief congressional inquisitor in the Epstein investigation, Khanna has been deceiving the American people with conspiracy theories. Last summer, the FBI released a memo debunking the two primary components of what independent journalist Michael Tracey, who has done more than anyone to expose the mainstream media's sensationalist coverage of this story, refers to as the "Epstein mythology." According to the bureau, there's no evidence that Epstein possessed a "client list" of people he subjected to sexual blackmail, nor is there any information "that could predicate an investigation against uncharged third parties." Nothing in the 3.5 million files that the department released in January at the urging of Khanna and others changes that assessment.

Khanna clearly would like people to believe that his ubiquity concerning the Epstein case stems from a sincere interest in human trafficking, a very real problem in which he showed little prior interest. Not once did Khanna tweet about Epstein during Joe Biden's presidency. He isn't even a member of the Congressional Human Trafficking Caucus, a nominal affiliation requiring zero commitment.

Khanna has opportunistically commandeered the Epstein spectacle as a vehicle to advance his career. The California Democrat has been laying the groundwork to run for president in 2028 and, as part of that highly dubious undertaking, he has placed himself front and center on all things Epstein. According to New York magazine, Khanna has spent so much time in New Hampshire that he's referred to as the state's "fifth delegate" to Congress. "I get texts from him," one local Democrat said, "and I barely know him." In the words of New York writer Ben Terris, "being barely known is probably the thing Khanna is best known for."

Khanna has apparently decided that exploiting the Epstein scandal, facts and propriety be damned, is the way to remedy that obscurity. Some correspondence shared with me from early in his political career provides a window into the mind of a man whose lust for power is unseemly even by Washington standards.

On Jan. 21, 2009, the day after President Barack Obama's first inauguration, Khanna emailed an aide to Bill Clinton asking the 42nd president to help him get a job working for his wife, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. "I would be honored to serve Secretary Clinton and the country in the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Business, Energy, and Economic Affairs," he wrote. "Most importantly, I want to be part of her team, and deeply believe she will be President one day." Khanna boasted of "working with the AJC and AIPAC" — the American Jewish Committee and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — "to build ties between the Indo American and pro-Israel communities." Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor to serve in Congress, whom Khanna challenged in 2004, was "a close mentor."

After a series of emails and phone calls, the aide forwarded Khanna's job request to his superior, who himself had clearly been on the receiving end of multiple messages from Khanna. "Guy is killing us," the superior wrote back. "Not happening."

Two weeks after the 2014 election — his second failed campaign for Congress — Khanna sent a handwritten letter to Bill Clinton. "You inspired my passion for public service, and I have always believed you are the greatest political leader of our times," he gushed, praising the 42nd president's "third way" philosophy and promotion of the "pragmatic center." Khanna told Clinton that "it would mean a lot to me to have the chance to meet and to have your counsel and mentorship" and pledged, "You will have, of course, my complete and unconditional support in 2016," a reference to Hillary Clinton's highly anticipated presidential campaign. Bill Clinton didn't respond.

Perhaps he should have. The following December, running for Congress again in the district that includes Silicon Valley, Khanna abruptly switched his support from Clinton to Bernie Sanders. In a campaign during which he took money from venture capitalist and left-wing bogeyman Peter Thiel, Khanna, one of the richest members of Congress, discarded his neoliberal centrist costume and changed into that of a progressive populist. Positioning for the left-wing lane in the 2028 Democratic primary, the man who once waxed sentimentally about the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship, boasted of working closely with AIPAC, and described a Holocaust survivor as his "mentor," now speaks at a convention where panelists joke about the Oct. 7, 2023, massacre, trolls the pro-Israel group on Twitter, and libels the Jewish State as perpetrating a "genocide."

Confronted with these radically shifting views, Khanna is dismissive. "By 2016, I was very concerned about economic inequality and supported Medicare for All and a living $15 wage," he says about abandoning his "complete and unconditional support" for Hillary Clinton's presidential bid. As for his about-face on Israel, Khanna says that "the Gaza war changed my view. I have been horrified by the Israeli government's war crimes in Gaza." Perhaps these sudden reversals of long-held and strongly-expressed beliefs are sincere. Either way, they boosted his career prospects.

It was once easy to dismiss Khanna as just another overly ambitious politician. But his recklessness concerning the Epstein affair — fomenting a moral panic the likes of which this country hasn't seen since the 1980s child sexual abuse hysteria — crosses a line. Desperate for attention and willing to engage in the lowest forms of demagoguery to achieve it, Khanna once might have been deemed unfit for public office, but these days, there's no telling how far he could go.

James Kirchick is the author of "Secret City: The Hidden History of Gay Washington."

KATHLEEN PARKER

The GOP is having an epiphany: This is a bad look

Throughout his second term as president, Donald Trump has enjoyed a bounty of forgiveness from his MAGA constituents and Republicans generally. No bad turn has gone unappreciated. Until now.

Suddenly, the White House and Republicans in Congress seem compelled to change the party's tune to de-emphasize some prized aspirations such as mass deportation and vaccine pullbacks ahead of the midterm elections. They must have noticed that many voters, not just Democrats, have been turned off by the administration's deportation and health policies as well as the killings of innocent Americans by out-of-control immigration agents.

Even if many Americans support a secure southern border, they're having a hard time swallowing the mass removal of people who were not criminals but law-abiding folks with homes, families and jobs. They may be here without permission, but this isn't what we mean by "criminal," and MAGA knows it. Arguing that entering the country illegally ipso facto makes people "criminals" stretches beyond even what Trump means when he talks about getting rid of the worst of the worst.

More than half of the people deported by midsummer 2025 had no criminal conviction, according to a Washington Post

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHELLE KONDRICH/THE WASHINGTON POST

analysis. Nearly 60 percent of Americans say Trump has gone too far with his immigration policies, according to a Washington Post-ABC News-Ipsos poll. And 62 percent oppose aggressive tactics by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Although one might wish for higher numbers, these figures show accountability and voting remain important. When asked by The Post last month what range of deportations he supports, Trump said: "I want to see everybody" deported, "but we're focusing on the criminals. We're focusing on killers."

By this, one might assume he's including the immigration agents who fatally shot two civilians in Minneapolis. I wouldn't mind seeing the guys who killed Renée Good and Alex Pretti perp walked into Alligator Alcatraz for some time out with other criminals. Maybe dog-killing cowgirl Kristi L. Noem, whom Trump recently removed as homeland security secretary, could join them. Now that would be good TV.

It's refreshing to hear a Republican senator, Thom Tillis of North Carolina, speak up against a Trump appointee, demanding her exit. Tillis excoriated Noem at a March 3 Senate hearing for killing her 14-month-old dog. Tillis called Noem's leadership a "disaster" and slammed her book's framing of the dog killing as a "leadership lesson." Please make me dictator for one day.

What matters, of course, isn't Trump's policies, or the people — and puppy — who suffered under Noem. It's the midterms. And that means Republicans largely have to reinvent themselves to win. It's hard to win when you're awful. Thus, congressional leaders meeting in Florida for a retreat Tuesday were instructed by party and White House officials to avoid talking about mass deportation and focus instead on removing violent criminals from the United States. Even Trump has begun walking back his campaign promise of deporting up to 20 million undocumented immigrants (more than are actually here) and instead is calling for protections for undocumented workers in hospitality and agriculture jobs.

If it's not too much to ask, could we keep some construction workers, too? And house painters? Presumably, "agriculture" covers the armies of gardeners who keep Palm Beach's manicured hedges trimmed to within an inch of their lives.

In a related matter, Republicans are also retreating from attacking the covid-19 mRNA vaccines, fearing that changes to vaccine policy could hurt them in the midterms. Members of a federal vaccine advisory board handpicked by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had been weighing a plan to no longer recommend the shots because of debunked claims that DNA contaminants in the vaccines were harmful.

Rationally, if I may so speak, picking a policy or altering a plan for such transparently political reasons should only undermine confidence in HHS and Republicans, rather than inspire voters to race to the polls and secure more of the same. The vaccines either are or aren't good for people. Which is it? The answer, of course, is whichever position is best for Republicans trying to hold their Senate and House majorities. So much for public health.

Such cynical messaging is hardly revolutionary strategizing. The goal is always to maintain power, and messaging is the means. On that score, Democrats need only not screw up. Their messages have already been told by Republicans: the two dead Americans in Minneapolis, the 5-year-old boy detained by ICE agents in the freezing cold, mass deportations of noncriminals and now rising gas prices that probably will worsen for weeks if not months.

It is pleasantly ironic that Trump, who has been attacking democratic institutions for years, is having to adjust to the most basic institution, one that he can't get around: voting.

GEORGE F. WILL

These immigrants will be missed

Two dissimilar government agencies have inadvertently combined to clarify the immigration debate. Stomach-turning excesses by Immigration and Customs Enforcement have turned many Americans' abstract political preference into something uncomfortably concrete. And the Census Bureau has demonstrated that the nation needs immigrants as much as they need the blessings of American liberty.

Given a clear binary choice — for or against deporting immigrants who are here illegally — most Americans favor deportation. However:

One Sunday, a moderately pro-deportation American goes, as usual, for brunch at the neighborhood diner. Jose, who has put waffles in front of this American for 20 years, and who regularly exchanges pleasantries with him about their families, is gone. He has been deported for America's improvement. Suddenly, the immigration issue has a face, and complexity.

President Joe Biden's *choice* not to enforce immigration laws poisoned the immigration debate, and led to government behavior today that is deepening distrust of government. The influx during Biden's four years (8.3 million, more than in the preceding 12 years), torrential and dispersed, has clouded the picture. This, however, seems true:

The foreign-born portion of the U.S. population (15.8 percent) is higher than at any time since at least 1850. But as of 2023, only 27 percent were not authorized to be here. More than half of all immigrants (52 percent) have become U.S. citizens. Prior to the Biden inundation, most undocumented immigrants had arrived before 2010, 43 percent as of 2020 had been here at least 20 years, about one-third were homeowners, and their 5 million children born here were citizens. Talk of sending them "home" is nonsensical.

They are home. For which, give thanks:

The Census Bureau reports that between July 2024 and July 2025, the U.S. population grew by just 0.5 percent, 1.4 million less than in the previous 12 months, primarily because of less immigration. According to the Pew Research Center, during the first six months of this administration, the foreign-born population shrank by more than a million, the first decline since the 1960s. According to the Migration Policy Institute, between 2022 and 2023, for the first time since relevant census data began being collected in 1850, immigration accounted for the *entire* U.S. population growth.

As the U.S. population ages, those leaving the workforce enter Social Security and Medicare. The nation's birth rate is below the replacement rate, so immigration must replenish the workforce whose tax contributions fund the entitlements.

Immigrants are 23.6 percent of STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) workers. Nurses (15.9 percent foreign-born) and health aides (28.4 percent foreign-born) are crucial to an aging America.

A recent Cato Institute report ("Immigrants' Recent Effects on Government Budgets: 1994-2023") says: Immigrants "generated more in taxes than they received in benefits from all levels of government." They "created a cumulative fiscal surplus of $14.5 trillion *in real 2024 US dollars*," including $3.9 trillion in savings on interest that did not need to be paid on debt that was not added.

Immigrants were, on average, more than 12 percent more likely to be employed than the U.S.-born population. Cato: "In 1994, the immigrant share of government expenditures was 18 percent below their share of the population; in 2023, it was 25 percent below."

In 2023, immigrants constituted almost 18 percent of the civilian labor force, and more than a third of them were in management, professional and related occupations, almost double the 21 percent in service occupations (e.g., hospitality). In 2023, immigrant median household income ($78,700) was slightly above that of U.S.-born households ($77,600).

The Cato data comes from static, not dynamic, accounting: It does not, for example, gauge immigration's dynamism injection: Immigration — risk-taking for improved opportunity — is an entrepreneurial act. Unsurprisingly, immigrants' workforce participation rate (66.5 percent) is higher than that of the U.S.-born population (61.7 percent), and immigrants' portions of U.S. patents and startups exceeds immigrants' portion of the population.

As Cato notes, many illegal immigrants who are employed under borrowed or stolen identities have taxes withheld by employers but are ineligible for many government benefits. And they are less likely than others to file returns in order to claim refunds. This is another reason why Cato says:

"Immigrants have created an enormous fiscal surplus for the US government. ... The $14.5 trillion in savings from immigrants is the equivalent of 33 percent of the total inflation-adjusted combined deficits from 1994 to 2023 without immigrants."

That fellow having brunch at the diner will still get his waffles. But he will miss Jose, and millions like him, in more ways than he can easily imagine.

إذا سَألتَ فَسَلْ مَن فيهِ مَكرُمَةٌ
لا تَطلُبِ الماءَ إلّا مِن مَجاريهِ
(البهاء زهير)

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If you want to ask for something, ask only the virtuous; do not seek water except from its source.

Al-Bahaa Zuhayr

(13th-century Arab poet and calligrapher)

Opinion

False narratives of war and Gulf states' strategic patience

DR. ISHTIAQ AHMAD

The first casualty in war is truth, the Greek dramatist Aeschylus observed more than two millennia ago. The ongoing US-Israeli war with Iran once again proves the enduring pertinence of his observation.

As missiles continue to strike across the Gulf and tensions ripple through global energy markets, another battle has unfolded: in the information sphere. Selective reporting, speculation, and outright fabrication attempt to frame the conflict as a widening regional war. Yet despite sustained narrative pressure, the Gulf — the region most exposed to the war's consequences — has refused to be drawn into an escalation.

Propaganda has always accompanied warfare. During the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, "embedded journalism" often ensured the reporting reflected the military's preferred framing of events.

What distinguishes the current conflict with Iran is the speed of narrative construction in the digital age, as selective reports spread instantly online and spill over into television coverage, from Fox News and CNN to the BBC and Sky News, thereby shaping perceptions in real time. Some influential US and Israeli media outlets appear to frame developments in ways that mirror the strategic preferences of actors seeking to widen the conflict.

The pattern began even before hostilities started. Days before the first strikes, The Washington Post, citing unnamed sources, reported that Saudi leaders had privately urged US President Donald Trump to confront Iran more aggressively. Riyadh rejected this claim, noting that its diplomacy focused on negotiations and deescalation. Yet the allegation circulated widely, while the denial received far less attention.

These developments quickly translated into political tensions in Washington. Sen. Lindsey Graham, one of the war's most vocal advocates, took to social media platform X to put pressure on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to join the conflict, warning that continued neutrality could carry "consequences" for the Kingdom, and accusing Gulf leaders of "having their heads in the sand."

His remarks reflected growing frustration within Republican ranks over the faltering war effort, and drew widespread criticism from across the Gulf. Commentators noted that the Gulf states were already absorbing Iranian missile attacks despite having played no part in initiating the conflict. Criticism has also grown that Washington had failed to protect its regional allies while appearing to serve Israel's expansionist agenda.

Saudi Arabia continues to emphasize the role of diplomacy, while Qatar and the UAE firmly reject claims suggesting their involvement in the conflict. Across the region, political and business leaders are increasingly questioning why Gulf states should bear the costs of a war they neither initiated nor desired. Public opinion has also sharpened, with growing awareness of Israeli expansionist ambitions and American complicity in them.

The Gulf also hosts some of the Arab world's most vibrant media platforms. Channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya reflect regional public sentiment and offer alternative perspectives on the war, including its legality, morality, and implications, that contrast sharply with narratives circulating in Western media.

Gulf leaders appear determined not to allow either military provocations or narrative manipulation to dictate their actions. The information war surrounding this conflict will continue, but the response of the region suggests that its greatest strategic success might lie not in joining the war but in refusing to be drawn into it.

If the Gulf region maintains this course — resisting both escalation and the narratives designed to provoke it — it might yet prevent a war that was imposed upon it from becoming a catastrophe for the entire region.

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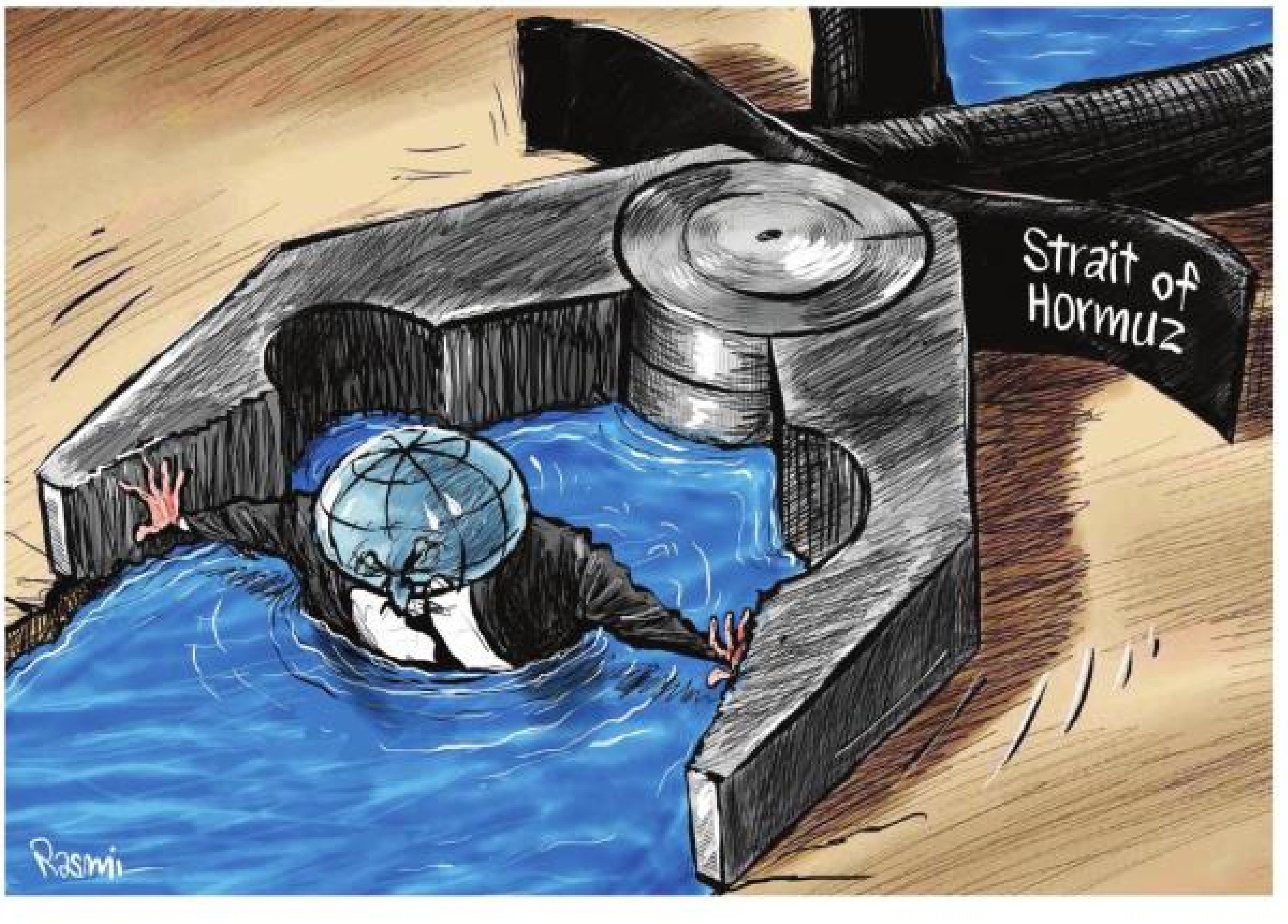
> **Gulf leaders appear determined not to allow either military provocations or narrative manipulation to dictate their actions**



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> **Gas prices in Europe have already surged since the war began. European countries are in a tight spot**

Middle East shockwaves for Europe and Asia

ANDREW HAMMOND

The economic and political shock waves from the war on Iran will be felt the most in the Middle East. Outside that region, however, key parts of Europe and Asia are also being significantly affected.

Both Europe and Asia have high degrees of vulnerability, and not only because of their geographical proximity to the Middle East; both regions are also dependent on large amounts of energy imports. The list of nations with economies in which energy imports help fuel a large share of gross domestic product includes France, Germany, the UK, South Korea, India, Taiwan, Japan and China.

To be sure, there could be some winners, too. They include large net-exporters of energy outside of the Middle East, including Norway, whose freedom to sell overseas is largely unaffected by the conflict.

However, the overall impact will be negative in the short-to-medium term, with the shocks in Europe easily the largest since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a war that has just entered its fifth year.

The shock waves from the conflict with Iran will affect Europe's weak economic recovery in 2026, fueling inflation, especially if the US and Israeli military campaign is prolonged and the Strait of Hormuz continues to be blocked.

Gas prices in Europe have already surged since the war began. European countries are in a tight spot because although summer is approaching, they need to build up gas reserves for next winter and imports of Russian gas are being phased out as a result of the war in Ukraine. The region is on track for its lowest storage levels in years, creating vulnerability.

Geopolitically, too, the war on Iran is diverting significant US attention and resources from Ukraine. This might leave it up to Europe to step up to the plate to fill the resulting gap.

In this context, probably the key question now for Europe and Asia is how long the Iran war will last. At the start of the US and Israeli military campaign on Feb. 28, it was widely expected that the bombing might last only days. Those initial assumptions by many people about duration have changed to at least several weeks, with all that means for the tragic loss of life that has ensued for increasing numbers of people.

While many people have been focused on sometimes conflicting public declarations by US President Donald Trump, the military action is being conducted jointly with Israel, which is a significant, sometimes independent operator with vast military assets of its own.

At the time of writing, perhaps the most likely scenario is a "regime in ruins." This predicts a war that continues to be largely contained in Iran and ends within weeks, perhaps even before the end of this month, and a regime in Tehran that remains in place, albeit in a much weakened form that continues to decay over time. Its grip on power might be precarious, with limited military capabilities, and without widespread domestic public legitimacy it might ultimately gradually collapse from the inside.

If a scenario of this kind does prevail, it is likely the shock to Europe would not be as great as the one it suffered in 2022, when Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to an abrupt, dramatic disruption to its energy supplies.

An alternative scenario of "regime change" in Iran, which has been espoused by Trump and Netanyahu, foresees a longer war lasting several months. Even then, though, it is unclear whether US and Israeli air power alone would be sufficient to realize this vision of removing the clerics in Tehran from power.

Taking all of this together, the shock waves and wider uncertainty caused by the conflict are therefore creating a massive headache not only for the Middle East, but for Europe and Asia as well.

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Opinion

France chooses the nuclear option

YOSSI MEKELBERG

With the eyes of the world fixed on the Middle East, the recent announcement by President Emmanuel Macron, made with much pomp and circumstance, of his government's decision to strengthen French, and European, deterrence capabilities by expanding its nuclear posture received far less attention than it deserved.

Macron declared that France would not only modernize but also increase its nuclear capabilities, and would be willing to deploy nuclear-armed fighter jets to other parts of the continent. For all intents and purposes, France is assuming the mantle of providing a nuclear umbrella for Europeans, taking a calculated risk at one of the most volatile moments since the end of the Cold War.

Since at least the 1980s, the general trajectory among the nuclear powers has been toward the reduction of nuclear stockpiles and the modernization of existing arsenals, rather than expansion. The notable exception to this in recent years has been China, which has been increasing its stockpile of nuclear warheads by about 100 devices a year, faster than any other country, bringing its total number of warheads to an estimated 600 or more.

However, Russia and the US still possess the overwhelming majority of the world's nuclear weapons. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the US has about 5,277 warheads, while Russia possesses approximately 5,459. By comparison, France has a much smaller arsenal of about 290 warheads, while the UK has about 225 — modest numbers in comparison but still representing a formidable nuclear capability.

> Macron's initiative is designed to encourage European partners to develop a coherent strategic posture

The decision by France raises an obvious question: Is this primarily a symbolic gesture, in particular since no specific figures were provided regarding the planned increase to its arsenal? Or is it a clear signal to potential adversaries that nuclear capability is becoming a central element of Europe's evolving security paradigm?

The answer is probably a bit of both. Europe increasingly fears that it cannot rely entirely on its major NATO ally, the US, in the event of a direct, existential military threat. The French move reflects growing skepticism about whether NATO, in its current political configuration, can provide the same level of security guarantees on which Europe has relied since 1949. Macron's announcement therefore signals Europe's entry into what might be described as the "post-post-Cold War" era.

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There is little doubt that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, now in its fifth year, has been a defining moment in the return of high-intensity warfare to the European continent. Although Europe, like the rest of the world, had eight years to prepare after the initial Russian invasion of parts of Ukraine in 2014, many European states, as well as the EU as a whole, failed to act decisively.

Worse still, as Moscow has grown increasingly frustrated with the present stalemate in Ukraine, it has resorted to implicit and explicit nuclear threats in an attempt to pressure the West over its military and diplomatic support for Kyiv. These signals have included placing nuclear forces on heightened alert, testing and deploying new nuclear systems, and suspending participation in key arms-control arrangements with the US.

> France's announcement signals Europe's entry into what is being described as 'post-post-Cold War' era

This pattern of signaling from Moscow suggests that if President Vladimir Putin were to find himself strategically cornered, the nuclear option, however unlikely, cannot be entirely dismissed. Is he bluffing? Probably. Can the rest of the world afford to ignore such threats? Certainly not.

At the same time, pressure from Washington has played a role. President Donald Trump has repeatedly demanded that NATO members increase their defense spending to better confront future threats. Europe has now internalized both the threat from Russia and the American demand for greater burden-sharing by developing a more autonomous military strategy for its own survival.

As Macron put it in his speech: "To be free, one must be feared. To be feared, one must be powerful." His initiative is designed not only to position France as a leader in Europe's emerging security doctrine, one with a clear nuclear dimension, but also to encourage European partners to develop a united, resilient and coherent strategic posture. At the same time, Macron emphasized that this shift does not imply the exclusion of the US from its central role in European security.

Tunisia and the loss of hope

HAFED AL-GHWELL

An ancient Roman poet wrote that rulers could placate the public by providing them with "bread and circuses." Food satisfies material needs while spectacle diverts political attention. Modern Tunisia, however, presents its people with the opposite conditions: Economic relief is scarce, public entertainment offers little in the way of distraction, and the avenues of political life grow narrower by the month.

A republic once celebrated as the sole (relative) success of the Arab Spring is increasingly drifting toward a place where neither prosperity nor political participation exists to cushion public frustrations.

Tunisia's post-2011 experiment with pluralism produced genuine achievements: competitive elections took place; civil society thrived; a widely praised constitution emerged in 2014; political compromise between secular and Islamist movements defied expectations across a region where democratic transitions often collapsed quickly.

Economic grievances, however, never eased. Youth unemployment has hovered above 30 percent for most of the past decade. Inequality persists between the coastal north and the neglected interior. Public debt doubled from about 40 percent of gross domestic product in 2010 to more than 80 percent by the early 2020s. Many citizens gradually concluded that democracy had delivered debate but not opportunity.

As the level of political fatigue grew, it created the conditions that ultimately elevated Kais Saied to power as president in 2019. Contrary to much conventional reporting, he did not manufacture Tunisia's frustrations; he inherited them. His electoral victory reflected a protest vote against an entire political class widely viewed as corrupt and ineffective.

> Public patience might endure for a time but history offers few examples in which societies were prepared to accept both scarcity and silence indefinitely

At the core of those frustrations was intense parliamentary fragmentation that only managed to produce short-lived governments and constant policy paralysis. To some, political parties became the ultimate symbol of stagnation rather than the vehicles for reform promised by the aspirational fervor in the immediate aftermath of the toppling in 2011 of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali's 24-year rule.

Saied's promise of institutional reset easily appealed to voters who believed the system itself had failed. However, the "reset" quickly evolved into a restructuring of the entire Tunisian political order. The suspension of the country's parliament in 2021 marked the beginning of an extended period of rule by decree.

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A new constitution, approved in 2022, concentrated authority in the hands of the presidency and extensively reduced the checks on executive power. Parliamentary elections held under the revised framework produced a turnout below 12 percent in the first round, an extraordinary figure that suggested widespread public disengagement rather than enthusiasm for the new political arrangement.

Tunisia's once vibrant, multiparty arena now operates under significant pressure, with opposition figures, journalists, and civil society activists constantly facing dubious legal scrutiny and arbitrary detention.

> A republic without bread tests economic endurance. A republic without circuses tests political patience. Tunisia now lives with the absence of both

Some would argue that political contraction might have been "tolerable" if economic recovery had followed. However, the Tunisian economy remains weak and growth extremely uneven despite positive indicators. Real GDP grew by about 2.4 percent in the first three quarters of 2025, driven largely by strong agricultural output and a rebound in tourism. Unfortunately, a "recovery" of that scale offers little comfort to a population experiencing persistent job insecurity in an economy buffeted by external shocks.

Tunisia was once a symbol of possibility across the Arab world. Political reform, constitutional compromise, and civil society engagement suggested the prospect of a different regional path. Fifteen years later, the optimism surrounding that model has largely evaporated. Economic stagnation eroded public faith in democratic institutions long before political centralization accelerated.

Roman emperors understood the stabilizing power of "bread and circuses": food eased material anxieties while spectacle redirected public attention. Tunisia now confronts a more precarious equation in which economic relief remains limited and the avenues for political participation grow ever narrower.

Public patience might endure for a time but history offers few examples in which societies were prepared to accept both scarcity and silence indefinitely. A republic without bread tests economic endurance. A republic without circuses tests political patience. Tunisia now lives with the absence of both.

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