



## Hierarchy of roles

The state must not be allowed to normalise prolonged incarceration

**U**sing the terms of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the Supreme Court of India has grouped the accused in the Delhi riots case of 2020 based on their 'hierarchy of participation', denying bail for Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam while granting it under strict conditions to the other five appellants, Gulfisha Fatima, Meera Haider, Shifa-ur-Rehman, Mohd. Saleem Khan, and Shadab Ahmed. The Court emphasised Section 43D(5) of the Act, which only requires courts to assess whether the accusations are *prima facie* true, and thus rejected the defence of prolonged incarceration and narrowed Khalid's and Imam's options. The prosecution has always alleged that the riots were the result of a plan allegedly coordinated in protest networks and WhatsApp groups. People routinely plan protests on messaging apps and that is not inherently suspicious. But the state has persuaded the Court that the articles of organisation are evidence of a terroristic design. However, the Court has treated 'terrorist acts' under Section 15 as being able to cover more than overt violence, including threatening to disrupt services, an interpretation that could have a chilling effect by emboldening governments to use stringent preventive detention under UAPA and, in political cases, to normalise the pursuit of prolonged incarceration without trial.

The Court using its 'hierarchy of participation' as the basis to relieve all but two people is unfair when the evidence to establish it has yet to be tested in court. Khalid and Imam were arrested as young men and have now spent five years in custody. The passage of time weighs more heavily on youth; if the courts find no case later, the damage done by prolonged incarceration cannot be undone. The UAPA's provisions vest the state with an unrelieved power to snare those charged under the Act and prevent easy exits. But the existence of such power should also be weighed against the charges. There is a difference between, say, the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, which informed parts of the UAPA, and Khalid's and Imam's alleged roles in the Delhi riots. The state has often invoked the Act to crush any opposition to its decisions even without an act of terrorism on the ground, revealing its overarching anxiety to quell dissent over entertaining the constitutional right to protest. The trial against Khalid and the others has not begun because, among other reasons, the sessions court has yet to frame charges and there are reportedly around 700 witnesses. That the Court granted bail to the five should be a sign for trial courts to rationalise witness lists and ensure that trials, including that of the Delhi riots, begin without undue delay.

## Off the guard rails

Those abusing an AI model's capabilities with illegal requests must face action

**T**he generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot Grok developed by social media platform X, formerly Twitter, has a sordid but compelling unique service proposition: it avoids the kinds of safeguards, both commonsense and cautious, that other large firms such as OpenAI and Google have instituted in their large language models. This *laissez parler* attitude has resulted in novelties, such as the chatbot freely insulting national politicians and celebrities alike. But a specific behaviour that has come to light in recent days is alarming: Grok has been responding to user requests to non-consensually generate sexually suggestive and explicit images of women. Days after New Year's eve, when such requests crowded Grok's X account, the behaviour continues, in spite of stunned reactions and demands for guard rails from India and France. In response to calls for accountability, X's billionaire owner Elon Musk has responded not with reassurances, but with a joking request for the chatbot to dress him skimpily too, as though doing so to oneself and subjecting strangers to such a crime – for it is a crime to create imagery like this – were in any way comparable. Mr. Musk's other corporate entities have chimed in with jokes of their own, dismissing the gravity of the public-facing capabilities they have put in the hands of users.

The Union government has rightly demanded that X cease image generation of this kind, and pointedly referred to the criminal nature of generating sexually explicit imagery of women in this manner. On top of the viscerally provocative nature of such patently criminal content, Grok has added to the overall hostility of being a gender minority on the Internet. There are aspects of this where neither the government nor social media platforms have inspired much confidence, with sexual violence and death threats to prominent and outspoken women transpiring with impunity in both cyberspace and the real world. X's impunity rests on an assumption that the geopolitical power of the United States, especially under its current government, will protect it from any serious blowback for its cruel handling of such sensitive matters. Even as the government pushes back against the social media platform – which it has not necessarily done with virtuous aims in the past – it must vigorously push for the prosecution of non-consensual intimate imagery. The easy proliferation of these tools must not be coupled with a fearlessness to leverage their worst capabilities, and this must be made clear by making an example of those who do.

# Indian aviation safety, its dangerous credibility deficit

**O**n March 20, 2006, the Chairman of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Assad Kotoko, delivered this message in Montreal while addressing the Directors General of Civil Aviation Conference on Global Aviation Safety Strategy: "It must be a strategy that recognizes that a weakness in one is a weakness in all. And the thread that must run through this strategy is transparency. By being transparent and freely sharing information with each other and the public, you recapture the ability to act as one, to reinforce each others' actions, and to strengthen public confidence."

"You will be better able to stand united against those who compromise aviation safety... For me, one accident was always one too many, and the loss of even one life, was one too many. Like all of you here, I was entrusted with a noble mission, to protect the lives and well-being of the travelling public. We have done and must continue to do everything within our power to make sure they get to their destination safely and unharmed, and that no one on the ground will be killed or injured because of an aircraft accident."

On June 12, 2025, Air India flight 171 crashed at Ahmedabad, Gujarat within a minute of its take-off. Out of the 242 passengers, there was one survivor, while 19 people were killed on the ground.

India is a signatory of ICAO and has to comply with ICAO Annex 13 Standards for Aircraft Accident and Incident Investigation. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) of the United States and the Air Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) of the United Kingdom were participants in the investigation. The Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) and the Digital Flight Data Recorder (DFDR) were recovered by June 16 and the NTSB's help was taken in downloading and decoding the contents of the two recorders as the Indian authorities did not have the expertise to retrieve all the data. The NTSB and AAIB were aware of the contents. The Indian government must also be aware of the contents as it ordered commando protection for the chief investigator of AAIB India. This was a clear pointer that it was a serious issue.

### A vague report, the facts

The vague Preliminary report that was released a month after the crash, clearly mentioned two points. First, the fuel control switches of both engines had moved to cut off from three to four seconds after lift-off. Second, one pilot asked the other pilot 'why did you do that?' And the other responded 'I did not do that.' It has been clearly established that the fuel control switches can only be moved mechanically by lifting the spring loaded switches from run and moving and



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dropping them into the cut off gate. These switches do not move due an electrical failure or software glitch. The DFDR and CVR would have clearly indicated what had happened in those critical 15 seconds – what was being spoken in the cockpit, who was handling the flight controls and all the ambient sounds in the cockpit area. The NTSB has the best expertise to identify the exact data.

If one were to go by details leaked by The Wall Street Journal in July 2025 – and also in November 2025 – it appears that there was friction between the U.S. and Indian authorities that mushroomed into serious differences on the findings. The NTSB will only support technical investigation in an accident. The transparency and the truthful report that India's Minister of Civil Aviation promised on the day of the crash, appears to be a dream. Political massaging of the report will not find favour with the NTSB. From what this writer hears from former top safety officials in the U.S., the breakdown of trust and Indian authorities is the worst he has witnessed and the worst he has seen in an international accident investigation.

### The state of aviation

India has had three fatal accidents in the past 15 years. In 2010, Praful Patel, then Minister of Civil Aviation, declared that Mangalore airport conforms to all standards of ICAO. The Court of Inquiry committee, under his Ministry, conveniently drafted a report with a litany of lies. Blatant violations such as a rigid concrete structure holding the Instrument Landing System Localiser, that a rescue and fire fighting truck got stuck outside a gate and never reached the burning aircraft, were covered up. The only positive aspect of the report was the identification of the dangers of flying in hours during the Window of Circadian Low and the lack of rest for crew.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation's Civil Aviation Requirements have been undergoing modifications over 15 years, with extensions due to pressure from airline owners. An example is the way Indigo, a leading private airline, disrupted air travel for thousands of passengers across India and the Minister and the DGCA to their knees.

In 2020, there was the air crash in Kozhikode. There again, there was scant action by Aviation Minister, Hardeep Singh Puri, and later, Jyotiraditya Scindia on safety measures addressing the dangerous operations at the airport. The deadline set for safe operation has long passed. We are now in 2026 and there are no restrictions in operations. The DGCA, as is the norm, dances to political pressure and is failing in its duty to ensure passenger safety.

Immediately after the AI 171 crash, the site was not sanitised. Television crew and cameramen were seen moving all over the site, trampling on and shifting through crash debris even before investigations began, and wiping out important clues. The airport was opened in three hours, with the zero availability of rescue and fire fighting services. Every flight that operated in this phase did not have rescue and fire fighting services on standby, endangering the lives of every air passenger and even those on the ground.

By delaying the findings and couching the facts with misleading statements, the AAIB is playing into the hands of YouTubers and social media narratives. ACARS and Inmarsat data are being quoted as proof of the flight having operated in dangerous conditions. The data is accessible only between the company that operated the system and an authorised person in the subscribing company. The entire chain of messages will be in an encrypted format. A simple example is how users of WhatsApp are confident about their messages being secure. The refusal of Apple to comply with the Indian Government order to pre-load a cyber-safety app citing privacy, security, and consent issues that go against its global policies is another example. It is to the credit of the airline, Air India, that it has not commented or responded to many of these strange narratives.

### A lesson to learn

The Ministry of Civil Aviation and the AAIB should note how the FAA and NTSB act after a crash. When a UPS cargo MD-11 aircraft crashed on November 4, 2025, the NTSB had press briefings on November 5, 6 and 7, with its findings after the CVR and the DFDR had been downloaded and analysed. By November 9, the FAA issued an Emergency Airworthiness Directive grounding the aircraft type.

The NTSB and the FAA were aware of the CVR and DFDR data within a week of the AI 171 crash. If there was an indication of serious system failures there was an indication by the Boeing 787, as being projected by 'aviation illiterates' (as a former NTSB investigator describes them), the FAA would have grounded all Boeing 787s. The very fact that no such action has been done is a clear indication that they know the reason behind the crash.

India's standing is dropping everyday on the diplomatic front. It is the same as far as India's credibility in aviation safety investigation is concerned.

The crash of AI 171 has drawn worldwide attention. For India to isolate itself with a self-centred ego, is going to take it down a dangerous path. Isolating foreign experts from the AI 171 crash report is a dangerous trend.

## The parallel track that keeps U.S.-India ties going



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In 2025, despite political strains and the postponement of the much-anticipated Quad Leaders' Summit hosted by India, the underlying machinery of India-United States cooperation remains vigorous and steadily advancing. While political engagement appears low, notably amid U.S. trade sanctions on India and its warming ties with Pakistan, the institutional collaboration between the two democracies continues to expand, particularly in defence and technology cooperation. The visits of India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and the Indian Navy Chief to the U.S. must be seen in this framework.

The Quad Leaders' Summit, which New Delhi was supposed to host, has been delayed amid opaque communication from officials, reflecting current bilateral tensions that have been marked by challenges such as worsening trade relations. The U.S. tariff regime levied on Indian goods and New Delhi's recalibration of its diplomatic posture amid perceptions of a 'G-2' style rapprochement between the U.S. and China have some underlying factors. India's exports to the U.S., which dropped sharply in 2025, are a stark indicator of these tensions.

Economic frictions persist, especially with U.S. tariffs on India's purchase of Russian crude oil, while China and Pakistan enjoy lower tariffs and even strengthened relations with the U.S. In return, Islamabad's offering, highlighted by port access to the U.S. and critical minerals shipments to American firms, is an economic decision with geopolitical imperatives. Washington's

balance-of-interest pragmatism manifests itself in signals from U.S. officials that relations with New Delhi remain vital despite transactional pressures.

**Continuing institutional cooperation**  
In contrast to strained political signals, institutional engagement has accelerated. The July 2025 Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Washington unveiled new initiatives that spanned maritime security, transnational threats, economic cooperation, critical technologies and humanitarian efforts. On similar lines, Quad's Counterterrorism Working group also held its third meeting in December 2025, all demonstrating the Quad's continued operational relevance beyond high-level political optics.

Defence cooperation forms the backbone of

this resilience. Since the 2008 India-U.S. civil nuclear deal, defence and technology agreements have steadily deepened. The landmark signing of a decade-long Defence Framework Agreement in 2025 marks a new chapter, enhancing joint coordination, information sharing and technological collaboration that is designed to buttress Indo-Pacific regional stability. This is exemplified through regular bilateral military exercises, such as Yudh Abhyas ('War Practice'), Tiger Claw and Malabar, which promote interoperability and trust among forces.

**Oiled by defence and technology agreements**  
Since the political upheaval brought by the India-U.S. nuclear deal, bilateral ties have been predominantly driven by defence and technology agreements. Over the years, the two countries have signed various agreements, including the 2023 India-U.S. Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) and foundational defence agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum Of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCAS), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA, 2020) and the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (2023) to provide and promote logistical support, cooperation and information sharing between the two militaries. India's Ministry of Defence and the U.S. Department of Defence also signed the Security of Supply Arrangement (SOA) in 2024. Despite political challenges, defence cooperation remains strong.

In October 2025, a significant 10-year defence framework agreement was signed by U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. This long-awaited pact aims to enhance coordination, information sharing and technological collaboration to promote regional stability and deterrence.

Buidling on years of growing strategic convergence, the agreement reinforces defence as a core pillar of India-U.S. relations. Further bolstering defence ties, Indian aerospace giant, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited signed a billion-dollar deal, in November 2025, with the U.S.'s General Electric for fighter jet engines. Similarly the joint U.S.-India NASA ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) satellite, launched in July 2025 for disaster resilience, agriculture and

infrastructure planning requirements adds to the technological jointmanship. At the infrastructural and regional levels, the inaugural Quad Ports of the Future Conference, held around India Maritime Week in Mumbai in early November 2025, brought together delegates from 24 Indo-Pacific partners, focusing on developing resilient and secure ports that leverage shared expertise and investments. Co-organised by the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways and the Ministry of External Affairs, it emphasised that quality infrastructure development is a crucial dimension of Quad cooperation, underlining the broader regional connectivity.

**Buidler deeper institutional understanding**  
Despite political challenges, this enduring institutional engagement reveals the India-U.S. relationship's dual-track dynamic. While political leaders manage strategic diplomacy with national interests, the bureaucratic and institutional frameworks continue to sustain and evolve core collaborations. Despite institutional challenges such as domestic regulatory interoperability, mutual regional interests drive this continuity.

Such institutional continuity may well be the relationship's greatest strength, fostering trust while shielding essential cooperation from political volatility. However, analysts have cautioned that bilateral ties may struggle to regain full momentum, even if trade disputes are resolved.

Looking ahead to 2026, both nations must invest in a deeper institutional understanding – defence and beyond. Learning about structures and institutions, appreciating the processes, and developing resilient relationships with other countries require continuous efforts. Expanding cooperation into broader sectors can build the mutual trust essential during political lows. The resilience of the India-U.S. partnership will depend heavily on these parallel institutional tracks, which have so far, quietly but effectively, maintained the alliance's robustness and strategic relevance in an ever-evolving geopolitical landscape. While political summits may pause, institutions keep the dialogue alive, working together on mutual areas, and having long-term partnerships that can survive the short and medium-term headwinds.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The U.S.'s move

The arrogance by Donald Trump, administration, in utter violation of established laws, by taking the law into

its own hands and arresting the Venezuelan President, calls for popular condemnation. It is a shame and a pity that the Indian government is playing safe

with its diplomatic card, in a distinct departure from India's anti-imperialist stand.

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Chennai

**Cricket and politics**  
The release of Mustafizur Rahman by KKR, reportedly under the BCCI's direction, is a disgraceful attempt to appease communal

sentiments. Violence by extremist elements in Bangladesh, arising from failures of law and order, cannot be projected onto an individual cricketer with

### no role in it.

**Aluru Venkat Revanth**,  
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# Stepping in with Maoism in rapid retreat

**M**aoism seems to be on its last legs with mass surrenders by Maoists in the Dandakaranya (DK) and other regions since October 2025. While the movement was on the decline since 2011-12, and faced a setback in 2018, it changed the form of its organisation as well as struggle in August 2024. The polit bureau (PB) of the CPI(Maoist) decided to split into smaller formations to avoid encirclement by the security forces. It also decided to remain in defensive mode unless the situation warranted attacking the security forces.

However, the adoption of this strategy, the party split when some central committee (CC) members and DK special zonal committee members (since August 2024) and the general secretary, Nambala Keshava Rao (alias Basavaraju) was killed in May 2025 with almost his entire security posse was wiped out in a gun battle with the security forces in Maad (Narayapur district in Chhattisgarh). Some leaders, particularly PB member, Venugopal alias Soma favoured peace talks with the government and asked to consult with other senior leaders. When the government declined such conditional talks, he surrendered along with 60 others (with weapons) in Gadchiroli. Another senior cadre under the name 'Rupesh' (in-charge of the north and west sub-zonal bureau of DK) surrendered with 210 Maoists and their weapons in Jagdalpur. CC member (from Chhattisgarh) and person-in-charge of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) battalion-1, Madvi Hidma, was killed in Alluri Sitaramaraju district in Andhra Pradesh. Another CC member (from Chhattisgarh), Ramdher, surrendered recently in another special zone, Maharashtra-Madhya Pradesh-Chhattisgarh.

The PLGA Battalion commander and the secretary South Bastar division, have also surrendered, some of the cadres



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of West Bastar and others are still holding out. The central military commission head of the CPI (Maoist), Thippri Tirupati alias Deoje, is for continuing the fight. In October, the Ministry of Home Affairs said that only seven districts in India were Left Wing Extremist-affected districts, with only three in Chhattisgarh the 'most affected' districts.

How is the government going to address the issues which prompted the Maoists to organise the masses against the state? Some of the cadres who surrendered have said that their struggle for tribal rights in the areas is still ongoing. While the surrendered cadres are being given benefits under the surrender and rehabilitation (S and R) policy of the Centre and the States concerned, there is no doubt that the DK region which lacks even basic amenities needs to be developed.

First, the network of medical facilities should be extended to interior locations so that villagers have access to health care. Anaemia is a health issue among the tribals of DK. Cerebral malaria is also widespread in certain pockets. The lack of safe drinking water has led to outbreaks of dysentery. There is also the issue of snake bites which are not uncommon in the jungles. Health centres must cater to the needs of tribals in areas freed from the Maoist influence.

Second, most tribals depend on agriculture and forest produce for their basic needs. Maoists dug ponds and created orchards to win the confidence of the tribals and induct them into the movement. They also forced contractors to pay increased rates to villagers for plucking *tendu-patta* leaves. Later, they took up land levelling to increase production and gain even more support. The government should now ensure the supply of good seeds (including fish seeds) and create better irrigation facilities by constructing check dams. While the minimum support price of many items of

forest produce is notified by the government(s) annually, processing units need to be established where tribals can access them easily. The focus should be on increasing economic activity and the standard of living.

Third, more educational ashrams should be established in DK. This model has been quite successful in the past because it is not practical to open schools in villages that are sparsely populated. It was also necessary to undo the 'education' imparted to villagers by the Maoists through their *krantikari jantana sarkar* (revolutionary) schools. Most of the surrendered cadres are illiterate and need to be sent to government schools for basic education and rehabilitation. Many surrendered cadres are already trained in useful vocations and their skills can be tapped.

While the S and R policy provides financial benefits, jobs and housing, it must not be forgotten that most male cadres were forced to undergo vasectomy while in the Maoist movement. It is necessary they have a reverse vasectomy procedure to enable them to start a family. This facility must be provided free of cost in district hospitals. Similarly, the wives of the surrendered cadres should also be assisted with reproductive technology.

Many of the women who joined the Maoist movement were those who wanted to escape forced marriages by their families. Therefore, awareness needs to be spread through the *sivan* (elderly people) of villages to respect a girl's consent with respect to marriage.

The State government has been implementing the *Niyad Nellanar* ('Your good village') scheme to provide the benefits of government schemes (about 25) to villages which fall within five kilometres of the remote security camps (about 50). However, with districts gradually becoming free of Maoists, this scheme must be extended to previously affected villages.

The government needs to ensure consistent development in the affected tribal areas

# A brewing storm over 'defections'

The focus is on the Telangana Speaker's verdict on BRS MLAs who 'defected'

## STATE OF PLAY

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**T**he office of the Speaker is held in highest respect and esteem in parliamentary traditions. The robes of the Speaker do change and elevate the man inside." This observation by the Telangana Assembly Speaker, G. Prasad Kumar, was made while dealing with the disqualification petition filed against Bharat Rashtra Samiti (BRS) MLA Arekapudi Gandhi, who is facing the charge of having defected to the ruling Congress. The Speaker also dismissed the petitions filed against four other BRS MLAs, Teliam Venkata Rao, Gudem Mahipal Reddy, T. Prakash Goud and Bonthamohan Reddy.

The Speaker was acting as the chairman of the Tribunal to deal with the disqualification petitions filed by the BRS leadership against 10 of its MLAs, who allegedly defected to the Congress, after winning in the December 2023 elections. The Speaker has kept in abeyance the decision on three e MLAs. He has not conducted hearings for two other BRS MLAs despite repeated requests by the BRS party.

The Speaker made an interesting observation about the petition which claimed that the respondent (Mr. Gandhi) had "voluntarily given up his membership of the BRS by joining the Indian National Congress". Here, the Speaker dealt with the *locus standi* of the petitioners (the BRS legislators) to file the disqualification petitions. This concerned the issue whether a disqualification petition against a sitting MLA alleging defection must



be filed only by a person duly authorised to do so and in writing by the party on whose B-Form that legislator was elected, or whether any other person too has the *locus standi* to file such a petition even without specifying the capacity in which it is filed.

The Speaker said that since objections around the issue repeatedly arise during disqualification proceedings, particularly where one MLA sought the disqualification of another who had allegedly defected on grounds that were more out of political vendette or over internal differences, it was appropriate that the Tribunal settled this issue first before proceeding to answer other questions.

Citing Rule 30(a) of the Rules, 1986 and Rule 3(4), he said: "Admittedly, the petitioner did not state in what capacity he filed the petition or how he acquired the right of action, as he is neither a voter of the constituency from which the respondent was elected nor specifically authorised in writing by the BRS party."

The Speaker did not factor in the observation made by the Supreme Court of India, in the *Speaker of Odisha Legislative Assembly vs Uttal Keshari Parida* which rejected the *locus standi* of a non-member of the House in submitting a petition for disqualification. The Court, while dealing with the petitions filed by the BRS leaders, had said it was about time that Parliament reviewed its expectation that Assembly Speakers and Chairmen would live up to the dignity of their high office and crush the "evil of political defection" by deciding disqualification proceedings against legislators in time and without favour.

With the decision on disqualification petitions pending against the other MLAs, it remains to be seen what happens next.

be entitled to bring to the notice of the Speaker the fact that a Member of the House had incurred disqualification under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution of India." The observation assumes importance as all the petitioners who filed their disqualification pleas with the Speaker are Members of the Assembly representing the BRS.

The manner in which the petitioners have been dismissed has drawn the ire of the BRS and the Bharatiya Janata Party (which described the verdict as "unilateral"). The parties have alleged that the Speaker was acting at the behest of the Chief Minister, A. Revanth Reddy, and was in line with the Chief Minister's claims that there was no scope for any bypolls. The BRS has said that it will explore legal avenues after a thorough study of the Speaker's verdict based on the Supreme Court's observation that the Speaker of a State Assembly does not enjoy constitutional immunity while acting as an adjudicating authority in disqualification petitions.

The action in delivering the verdict pertaining to disqualification petitions filed against five of the 10 MLAs appears largely driven by the deadline set by the Supreme Court. The Court, while dealing with the petitions filed by the BRS leaders, had said it was about time that Parliament reviewed its expectation that Assembly Speakers and Chairmen would live up to the dignity of their high office and crush the "evil of political defection" by deciding disqualification proceedings against legislators in time and without favour.

With the decision on disqualification petitions pending against the other MLAs, it remains to be seen what happens next.

# Old alliances, new markets: Two-path formula for export growth

India has replaced its lost U.S. sales by deepening its ties with existing partners and exploring new destinations

## DATA POINT

**Sambavi Parthasarathy**  
Nitika Francis  
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

**L**ast month, we noted that India's trade data for November had shown a continued resilience in exports despite mounting U.S. tariffs. Not only did India's overall exports grow, but shipments to the U.S. also rebounded. However, the exact drivers were harder to discern at the time, as detailed data were still awaited.

Foreign Trade Performance Analysis data show several new trends. This analysis focuses only on items where India's export dependence on the U.S. was already significant. To isolate the impact of the tariffs, the figures for September through November 2025 were compared against the 2023-24 average for those same months.

Not all commodities exported to the U.S. were impacted by tariffs. Notably, exports of telecom instruments to the U.S. – most of which are not tariffed, particularly smartphones – surged by 23% between the periods considered (Chart 1A). Exports of electrical machinery also grew by 15%.

That brings us to the items hit by the U.S. tariffs and other challenges. Exports of pearls and precious stones declined by about 78.5% between the periods considered (Chart 1B). Gold jewellery exports to the U.S. declined by 39%, cotton fabrics by 23%, marine products by 17% and ready-made cotton by 4.6%.

Overall, the surge in smartphone exports to the U.S. masked the decline in sectors hit by tariffs. This explains why total exports to the U.S. rose despite the new duties. But what about the items that did suffer? The explanation follows two distinct paths: for some commodities, the blow from U.S. tariffs was partially blunted (Chart 2B), while for others, Indian ex-

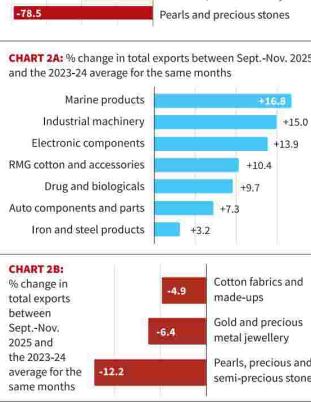
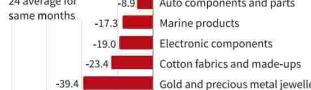
## A shift in India's trade gaze

The data (charts) were sourced from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. For this analysis, only the top 20 exported products and the top 20 countries they were exported to, in any given month, were considered to narrow the focus.

**CHART 1A:** % change in exports to the U.S. between Sept.-Nov. 2025 and the 2023-24 average for the same months



**CHART 2A:** % change in total exports between Sept.-Nov. 2025 and the 2023-24 average for the same months



**TABLE 3A:** Value of India's marine exports to various countries between September to November of 2025. The % change in marine exports between Sept.-Nov. 2025 and the 2023-24 average for same months are also provided

Partner	2025	Change
Total	2557.8	+16.8
U.S.	570.0	-17.3
China	556.6	+22.8
Belgium	124.5	+124.3
Italy	56.3	+23.3
Spain	51.8	-
UAE	42.6	-5.1
U.K.	31.7	-0.3
The Netherlands	31.4	+56.0
Germany	30.2	+65.3
Malaysia	28.0	+81.0
France	23.9	+41.2
Hong Kong	17.9	+8.1
South Korea	14.9	+466.6

**TABLE 3B:** This table provides the same information in Table 3A for readymade cotton garment exports

Partner	2025	Change
Total	1989.2	+10.4
U.S.	580.3	-4.6
U.K.	180.8	+15.5
UAE	163.5	+29.9
Germany	117.9	+20.0
The Netherlands	107.3	+16.4
France	87.4	+22.6
Australia	61.5	+1.1
Italy	57.8	+28.8
Spain	49.1	New
Saudi Arabia	40.3	+20.8
Belgium	31.4	+20.1
South Africa	13.9	-6.2
China	12.0	+29.1

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

**The Hindu**

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 6, 1976

**Mythological Programmes on TV Enjoyed Most by Villagers'**

From Our Correspondent  
VISHAKHAPATNAM, Jan. 5

"Television audiences in rural India are highly appreciative of the mythological programmes dealing with subjects like Ramila, Karna and Kunti and Devaki and Krishna. However, if these programmes are used for conveying development messages, even if they are enjoyed, the message is lost." This was stated in a paper presented at a symposium on "Mass media and integrated rural development" as part of the Indian Science Congress here to-day. In his paper, Mr. Bindu C. Agarwal of the Research and Evaluation Cell of the Space Applications Centre, Ahmedabad, said the preliminary findings of the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) showed that the farmers preferred programmes with a direct development message. Data were being collected by anthropologists stationed in nine villages of seven States to which the SITE programmes were beamed. The audience in general showed a high level of awareness of the family planning campaigns due to repeated exposure to the family planning programmes, but the programmes had not generated any further interest. Instead, the audience seemed indifferent to the family planning programmes. Culinary programmes for women audiences had evoked mixed reactions. Observations showed that schoolchildren were the most sincere viewers in the villages under study. Drop-outs and non-school going children were induced to come to school due to the TV programmes.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 6, 1926

**Excavations at Ur**

Remarkable New Find  
(British Official Wireless)  
LEAFIELD (Oxford), Jan. 6

Excavations at Ur of The Chaldees have led to the discovery of the site of the place of Dungi, who reigned 2,250 years before Christ. It was already the custom, as it is to-day, to bury, in the foundation of buildings, relics typical of the time and such were found by Mr. Leonard Woolley, leader of the excavations. They were in brick boxes and consisted of copper statuettes of Dungi, carrying on his head a basket of mortar, of the laying of first brick and stone tablets inscribed with the dedication of the work.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Duration of daily OPD boycott by Odisha doctors**

**2** In hours. Doctors across government hospitals in Odisha began a two-hour daily boycott of OPD services, affecting outpatient care from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. The protest is over long-pending demands, including filling over 50 percent vacant posts. PTI

**Number of presumed deaths during Hasina-era abductions**

**287** A Bangladesh commission investigating abductions during former PM Sheikh Hasina's rule reported that at least 287 individuals are presumed dead. The investigation covered 1569 abduction cases. AFP

**Maximum term limit plans for Malaysia's Prime Minister**

**10** In years. Malaysia's PM Anwar Ibrahim announced plans to introduce legislation limiting the tenure of the PM to a maximum of 10 years or two full terms. The move aims to prevent leaders from clinging to power and ensure generational transition. AFP

**Reward amount on inter-State criminal arrested**

**1** In ₹ lakh. Police arrested an inter-State criminal carrying a bounty of ₹ 1 lakh after a brief encounter in Gurugram. The accused is wanted in nearly two dozen cases, including attempted murder and robbery, across Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. PTI

**Value of the bridge project to connect Sagar Island in Bengal**

**1,670** In ₹ crore. CM Mamata Banerjee laid the foundation stone for the Gangasagar Setu, a 5-km bridge over the Muriganga river connecting Sagar Island. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# What does the SHANTI Bill change?

How open is India's nuclear sector now? What role will private firms play? What powers does the AERB now have? How self-reliant is India's nuclear programme?

How has nuclear liability changed? Why is the Opposition opposing SHANTI?

## EXPLAINER

Saeed Pande

### The story so far:

Parliament has cleared the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy in India (SHANTI) Bill, despite Opposition demands for amendments and review by a Select Committee. To achieve India's energy security needs, the government has boosted the Nuclear Energy Mission with ₹20,000 crore dedicated to Small Modular Reactors and advanced pressurised water reactors. India's nuclear power sector has remained State-controlled and unchanged since 1956. The private and foreign partnership has been restricted under earlier laws – the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages Act, 2010. Private and Foreign companies avoided India due to its strict liability laws.

**What is the SHANTI Bill?**  
The SHANTI Bill is an overarching legislation that opens India's nuclear power sector to private and foreign participation, which was earlier entirely State-controlled and deeply regulated. Under the Bill, private Indian companies can seek licences to own, build, and operate nuclear power plants. It is also open for foreign supplier participation.

The SHANTI Bill allows up to 49% private participation, while maintaining 51% government control over sensitive activities such as nuclear fuel production, heavy water manufacturing, radioactive waste management, safety mechanisms, licensing, and strategic oversight.

The Bill ends the monopoly of Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) in plant operations. It allows private companies and joint ventures to build, own, and operate nuclear power plants. The private sector will be involved in fuel fabrication, equipment manufacturing, plant operations, and research and development. It will essentially be a public-private partnership model aimed at attracting private capital with government oversight.

The Bill facilitates advanced nuclear technologies by enabling private participation and regulatory clarity. It supports the deployment of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) and indigenous reactor designs, contributing to the clean energy transition and long-term energy security.

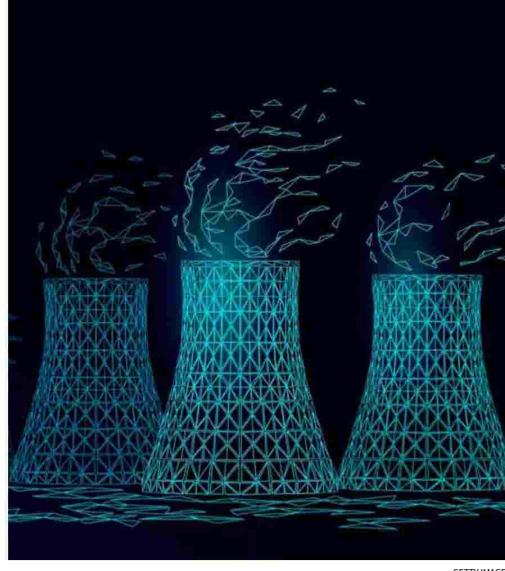
### What is the role of AERB?

The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), constituted in 1983 under the Atomic Energy Act, has now been given statutory status and is answerable to Parliament rather than solely to the executive.

The AERB is responsible for ensuring nuclear safety, radiation protection, emergency preparedness, and quality assurance across civilian nuclear installations. It issues safety measures, licences and standards; administers industrial safety provisions of the Factories Act, 1948, for units under the Department of Atomic Energy as per Section 23 of the Atomic Energy Act and conducts inspections to prevent radiation hazards. It plays a crucial role in strengthening regulatory oversight under the SHANTI Bill due to increased private sector participation. However, the Bill has been criticised for concentrating power in one institution.

### What safeguards are in place?

The Bill does not explicitly permit foreign direct investment in the nuclear power



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sector. The private companies will have to seek authorisation from the AERB. Authorisations are required for setting up a plant range from production, possession, to disposal of radioactive material and radiation generation equipment, as well as for establishing, operating, or withdrawing radioactive facilities.

The government controls the reprocessing and management of spent fuel and high-level radioactive waste; production and upgradation of heavy water; enrichment and isotopic separation of radioactive substances. The law also provides for the establishment of a nuclear liability fund to meet compensation needs in case of nuclear accidents.

### What has changed with respect to liability?

Compared to the earlier regime, the SHANTI Bill ensures that the liability aspect is transparent and predictable for operators. Liability caps are fixed as follows: ₹3,000 crore for large plants of 3,600 MW capacity; ₹1,500 crore for medium plants of 1,500-3,600 MW; and ₹100 crore for Small Modular Reactors of 150 MW capacity. Penalties for legal violations in cases of severe breach are capped at ₹1 crore.

The Union government will bear liability beyond the operator's cap, with additional support from the proposed nuclear liability fund. Earlier, operators could hold suppliers liable for defective parts, faulty equipment, design inefficiency, and deliberate acts causing damage. The current Bill removes supplier accountability completely.

### What is the government's viewpoint?

The Centre aims to strengthen India's energy security by diversifying the power mix, reducing dependence on fossil fuels and fuel imports, and expanding atomic energy capacity.

Energy security is one of the main aims for boosting India's development index. It ensures 24x7 baseload power as compared to solar energy and wind energy, which are subject to geographical

conditions. It will be a boost for the energy sector, which is still heavily dependent on coal. It also ensures an enhancement for technology and the economy.

Nuclear power ensures clean energy with very low carbon emissions. It facilitates achieving India's net-zero targets for 2070. The Bill may also revive the stalled civil nuclear deals with the U.S., France, and Japan, reduce dependence on Russia alone, and enhance India's image as a responsible global nuclear player.

### Why does India need nuclear energy?

India struggles with solar, wind, and hydro energy due to its geographical and climate variables and still majorly relies on coal for electricity generation. Storage and grid integration costs for renewables remain high.

Thus, having sufficient baseload generation capacity is mandatory for an affordable and unrestricted supply. In order to achieve energy security for the growing economy, India has to strengthen and expand its nuclear energy sector. Moreover, the electricity mix must have enough baseload generation capacity in order to make it affordable and reliable for consumers. Nuclear power plants are one of the most effective in ensuring this.

### What is India's nuclear energy mission?

India has a largely indigenous nuclear power programme based on a fuel cycle that aims to utilise India's vast thorium reserves. Currently, India manages 25 nuclear reactors in seven power plants – 21 pressurised heavy water reactors and four light water reactors – all managed by NPCIL.

According to R.B. Grover, distinguished Professor Emeritus at the Homi Bhabha National Institute and member of the Atomic Energy Commission, as India does not have enough uranium, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited has mastered the design and operation of pressurised heavy water reactors. The Bhabha Atomic Research Centre has developed technologies to reprocess

spent fuel to recover valuable materials and handle nuclear waste. In that sense, India is independent and self-sufficient in its nuclear power generation. India has operationalised the fast breeder reactor for thorium use.

### Why has the Opposition strongly criticised the Bill?

The Opposition argues that the Bill dilutes accountability by allowing profit-driven private participation while placing liability on the State and society. There is a fear of repeating incidents like the Bhopal Gas tragedy, where accountability and remuneration were evaded by the foreign firms in spite of recourse to civil courts; moreover, such recourse is unavailable according to the new Law. Removing supplier liability and capping operator liability and penalties at a nominal cost, as compared to the actual volume and expense of damages, is considered unreasonable. The 'polluter pays' principle has been undermined, and this compromises public safety. Private firms have no liability for accident costs, public safety issues and long-term risks. The cap on operator liability does not change in 15 years despite inflation or long-term assessment of health, environment, livelihood cost of any serious accident.

The cases such as Fukushima and Chernobyl point out the huge expense of liability. In the case of the Fukushima disaster, the actual civil damages were 700 times more than the cap proposed by the SHANTI Bill.

Section 39 of the Bill seeks to override the RTI Act of 2005. It has raised several concerns as it seeks to remove public interest review and public appeal mechanisms. This will make the most crucial nuclear sector-related information – including plant details, operations, mechanisms, regulatory submissions and data on nuclear materials – 'restricted'. This dilutes the transparency and questions the public accountability of the proposed system. The RTI Act 2005, in its wisdom, already exempts revealing information regarding India's security, national interest, commercial information, and personal data. But these exemptions are subject to justification in cases of public accountability and public interest.

Section 42 overrides occupational safety, health and working conditions for nuclear facilities. Nuclear workers are removed from the country's general labour safety framework. This has triggered opposition from ten central trade unions, including the Samyukt Kisan Morcha and the National Coordination Committee of Electricity Employees and Engineers, who have termed the Bill "draconian".

The Opposition insists that the Bill is vendor-driven despite India's self-reliance in nuclear technology. It argues that India has deep thorium reserves, around which nuclear reactors were built, which should be utilised. The Opposition demands that the private companies be compelled to install India's technology.

The Bill lacks provisions for mandatory public hearings, environmental impact assessment disclosures, community consent mechanisms, regular public reporting of safety inspections, or Parliamentary scrutiny.

The Opposition also cited the example of France, where all nuclear reactors are under government control. The Bill is criticised for being pro-profit, pro-oligarchy, catering to the crony capitalists while gambling with public safety.

Saeed Pande is a freelance writer with a focus on politics, current affairs, international relations, and geopolitics.

## THE GIST

Parliament has cleared the SHANTI Bill, opening India's State-controlled nuclear power sector to private and foreign participation, ending NPCIL's monopoly while retaining 51% government control over sensitive activities.

The Bill removes supplier liability, caps operator liability, and shifts responsibility beyond the cap to the nuclear government and a nuclear liability fund, a move defended as providing predictable liability but criticised as diluting accountability and the 'polluter pays' principle.

The Centre argues the law will strengthen energy security, provide 24x7 baseload power, support clean energy and net-zero targets, and enable SMRs and advanced reactor technologies, while the Opposition warns of weakened transparency, safety, and public accountability.

## BUILDING BLOCKS

# What remote-sensing reveals about plants, forests, and minerals from space

Remote-sensing technology allows engineers and scientists to map land, forests, water bodies, and minerals without physically touching the ground; by detecting spectral signatures from visible and invisible light, satellites and drones reveal the health and location of natural resources

Yasudevan Mukundh

**S**ay you're on a desert island on a quest for buried treasure. You've lost your map and run out of clues. Now you have two options: you could walk around with a shovel, digging holes at random and hoping for the best, or you could fly a drone overhead equipped with special cameras that can 'see' through the sand or detect the magnetic pull of the gold coins.

This isn't a pirate move but an existing technology called remote-sensing. It's what engineers and scientists use to map the earth's resources without ever touching the ground. From tracking the health of a forest to finding water deep underground, their satellites and drones are changing the way humans understand our planet.

#### What is remote-sensing?

Our eyes only see visible light, e.g., the colours of the rainbow. But the sun emits many other types of electromagnetic energy that we can't see, like infrared and ultraviolet light.

Everything on the earth, including the rocks, the water, the trees, etc., reflects these energies differently. The reflections are called spectral signatures; they are sort of like the fingerprint of the materials these objects are made of.

By studying this light, a sensor installed onboard a satellite can look at a patch of ground and say, "This reflects a lot of near-infrared light but absorbs red light. Therefore, it must be a healthy plant." This is the basic idea of remote-sensing.

#### What do different materials look like?

Farmers and forest rangers use satellites to check the health of plants. Healthy leaves are full of chlorophyll, which absorbs red light for photosynthesis and reflects near-infrared light to avoid overheating.

Scientists use a formula called the normalised difference vegetation index to determine if a plant is healthy based on its spectral signatures. If a satellite observes high near-infrared reflection, the crops are healthy. If the reflection of that part of the spectrum drops, the plants might be thirsty or sick.

According to a review published in the *Journal of Plant Ecology* in 2008, by analysing the spectral signatures, researchers can distinguish between different plant communities and tree species across entire forests.

Such mapping is the first critical step in calculating the biomass of a forest, which is essentially weighing the trees from space, to understand how much carbon they are storing to help fight climate change.

#### How do satellites map water?

To map water bodies from space, scientists mainly use two complementary techniques: optical indexing, using reflected sunlight, and synthetic aperture radar, using active radio waves.

The optical indexing technique makes use of the fact that water reflects visible green light, which is why deep water often looks blue-green, but strongly absorbs near-infrared and shortwave infrared light. These readings are combined in the normalised difference water index (NDWI).

This way, in remote-sensing data, the index has a high positive value over water



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bodies and a negative value over land. A newer version called modified NDWI, or MNDWI, uses only shortwave infrared light. This is often preferred in cities because it's better at distinguishing between water and the shadows cast by tall buildings.

Of course, optical cameras have a weakness: they can't see through clouds or at night. To map water in these conditions, including floods during a storm, scientists use synthetic aperture radar (SAR). To understand how this technology works, please see *The Hindu* article 'What makes the NASA-ISRO SAR satellite so special?', dated July 27, 2025.

In SAR's gaze, surfaces like soil, grass, and buildings – which scatter radio waves in all directions – look bright. Calm water, however, is very smooth, almost like a mirror, and looks pitch black. So by looking for these black matches in a radar image, scientists can map floodwaters even through a cyclone.

Satellites can also estimate water quality. Muddy water reflects light differently than clear water, and water full of algae has a specific spectral signature. This helps environmentalists track pollution or harmful algal blooms.

So much for features above the earth's surface; how do scientists and engineers use satellites to find what's underground?

#### How do satellites map subsurface features?

Experts look for clues on the surface or use different types of physics.

Valuable minerals like copper, gold, and lithium often form deep

underground, but geological forces push some of them to the surface over millions of years. Even if they're just traces in the soil, hyperspectral sensors can find them.

When sunlight strikes an object, it's reflected. A normal camera may group that reflection into a combination of three main colours: red, green, and blue, e.g. a hyperspectral sensor uses a prism or grating to split that light into hundreds of very narrow, continuous colours and measures the intensity of light at every single frequency across the spectrum.

As a result these sensors can create a spectral signature for every pixel in the image.

So while a 'normal' satellite might look at a forest and say, "This is green, it's a tree", a hyperspectral sensor could look at the same forest and say, "This is a banyan tree. It has a nitrogen deficiency. And the rock next to it is limestone, not granite."

According to a 2023 study in *Open Geology Reviews*, geologists also use these sensors to even map alteration zones, areas where heat and fluids from deep underground have changed the chemistry of surface rocks.

Oil and gas are trapped deep in the earth but small amounts often leak upwards through very small cracks, a process called micro-seepage. When this gas reaches the surface, it changes the soil chemistry and can even turn the leaves of plants slightly yellow, by stressing them out.

Satellites can detect these subtle changes in vegetation health and soil colour, giving exploration companies a sense of where to drill.

#### What if there isn't micro-seepage?

If there's no seepage, there's no way satellites' sensors can 'see' the oil or gas directly. However, satellites are still crucial in these situations because, instead of looking for the oil, geologists use satellites to look for the container holding the oil.

Oil and gas don't just lie in big underground lakes, they're also trapped in the pores of rocks and are usually naturally squeezed into specific shapes called traps. The most common trap is an anticline, where rock layers curve upwards like a dome or an arch.

NASA's Landsat satellites or Japan's Advanced Spaceborne Thermal Emission and Reflection Radiometer (ASTER) sensor onboard NASA's Terra satellite take pictures of exposed rock layers on the earth's surface. And if geologists see layers on the surface that are folded into the shape of a dome, there's a good chance they're folded the same way deeper underground.

Another technique makes use of the fact that oil forms when organic materials are buried deep and 'cooked' by the earth's heat for millions of years. This happens in deep depressions called sedimentary basins.

Over the oceans, satellites measure the height of the sea surface with incredible precision. Large underwater geological structures, which might contain oil traps, have a gravitational pull that actually piles water up above them. By mapping these bumps in the ocean, scientists can map the rock structures below the seafloor.

Oil is found in sedimentary rock like sandstone or limestone, which is generally not magnetic. However, the basement rock deep below it, such as granite or volcanic rock, is magnetic. So satellites measure the earth's magnetic field to find where the magnetic basement is very deep.

And where the basement is deep, it means there could be a thick layer of sedimentary rock on top, with the prospect of oil.

In effect, when there's no micro-seepage, satellites can't say 'there's oil here' but rather that 'there's a geological structure here capable of holding oil'.

#### How do satellites track groundwater?

Since water is heavy, a large underground aquifer actually has a stronger gravitational pull than dry rock.

From 2002 to 2017, NASA operated its Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) mission with two satellites that chased each other around the earth. When the lead satellite flew over a heavy underground aquifer, gravity would pull it slightly faster, changing the distance between the two satellites.

By measuring this change in distance, scientists could weigh the water underground.

One famous 2009 study published in *Nature* used GRACE data to show that groundwater levels in North India were dropping at alarming rates because they were being extracted to irrigate crops.

Remote-sensing makes resource exploration faster, cheaper, and more environmentally friendly. Instead of drilling thousands of holes to find oil or water, we can target specific areas.

It also helps us protect resources: by monitoring forests and aquifers from space, we can ensure we aren't using them up faster than nature can replenish them.

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

## THE DAILY QUIZ

As the U.S. once again invokes hemispheric influence in its dealings with Venezuela, this quiz revisits the Roosevelt Corollary and how it reshaped the Monroe Doctrine

Prathmesh Kher

#### QUESTION 1

What was the intent of the Monroe Doctrine issued in 1823?

#### QUESTION 2

What geopolitical crisis preceded the articulation of the Roosevelt Corollary?

#### QUESTION 3

How does the Roosevelt Corollary expand the Monroe Doctrine?

#### QUESTION 4

What was one of the earliest uses of the Roosevelt Corollary in practice?

#### QUESTION 5

Which U.S. policy later renounced the Roosevelt Corollary's interventionist thrust?



**Visual Question:**  
The American intervention in which Latin-American country is depicted in this cartoon from March 18, 1905? PUBLIC DOMAIN

**Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. He became the Nawab of Pataudi in 1952 on the death of his father. Where is Pataudi located in independent India? **Ans: Haryana**

2. Mansur Ali Khan was an Oxford Blue and the first Indian captain there. At which Oxford college did he study? **Ans: Balliol**

3. Why is July 1, 1961, an important date in the life and career of Mansur Ali Khan? **Ans: He was involved in a car accident that left him blind in one eye**

4. Following an injury to regular skipper Nari Contractor, Mansur Ali Khan became the youngest Test captain ever at 21 years and 77 days. Against which country? **Ans: West Indies**

5. Thanks to his superb athletic ability and speed while (particularly) patrolling the cover area, what nickname was given to him? **Ans: Tiger**

6. Under his captaincy, India scored its first-ever series win overseas in 1968. Against which country? **Ans: New Zealand**

7. Name his popular actor wife and son. **Ans: Sharmila Tagore and Saif Ali Khan**

**Visual:** Name the trophy, instituted in 2007 to mark India's 75th anniversary of its first-ever Test against England, that Mansur Ali Khan is handing over to Rahul Dravid. **Ans: Pataudi Trophy named after his father, Iftikhar Ali Khan**

**Early Birds:** Piyali Tuli | Sudhir Thapa | Rajib Ganguly | Dodo Jayaditya | Abhay Krishan



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the difference between "artist" and "artiste"? (R. Ramasubramanian, Coimbatore)

The word "artist" is a general term used to refer to anyone who is skilled at something. For example, he/she may be good at drawing or painting. Ravi Varma and M. F. Hussain are considered great artists. An individual who excels in cooking or in picking locks can also be called an "artist". Musicians, actors and others who entertain people are also called artists.

While the word "artist" has the stress on the first syllable, "artiste" has the stress on the second syllable. The 'i' in the second syllable of "artiste" is pronounced like the 'i' in "fit", "bit" and "hit".

The word "artiste" is someone who practises a performing art: Dancers, singers, acrobats, clowns can all be called "artistes". Since painters, cooks and thieves do not usually perform in front of an audience, they are not generally referred to as "artistes".

**What is the meaning of "higgledy-piggledy"?** (C. Karikal Chozhan, Thirupparai Thurai, Trichy District) The 'i' in the word 'pig' is pronounced like the 'i' in 'big', 'wig' and 'dig'. The 'i' in the word 'piggledy' is pronounced like the 'i' in 'fit', 'bit' and 'hit'.

When you say that something is "higgledy-piggledy", it means that it is completely mixed up. Things are all over the place in a mixed muddle; everything is untidy. Here is an example:

When I walked into her room, I found papers higgledy-piggledy on the floor.

**What is the meaning of "use your loaf"?** (V. Amritha Kalyani, Chrompet, Chennai)

If somebody tells you to "use your loaf", they want you to use your common sense; they want you to think carefully about what you are doing or saying. Perhaps what you are saying is not very intelligent, so they want you to think harder. This expression is an example of Cockney rhyming slang. The 'loaf' of bread; 'bread' rhymes with the word 'head'. Here are some examples:

Why didn't you use your loaf and cover the computer before you started painting the room?

The angry chairman told the manager to use his loaf.

If you use your loaf, you can predict your opponent's next move.

**What is the meaning of SOS? (S. Suresh, Royapettah, Chennai)**

In the old days, when you were out on the ocean, sailing on a ship, it wasn't possible for you to talk to people on land. If the ship's captain wished to get a message across to someone, he had to make use of Morse code – a radiotelegraph signal. When a ship was in distress, for example if the ship were in danger of sinking, the captain sent an SOS. SOS was and still is the signal used to indicate that a ship is in trouble. The letters SOS were chosen because they were very easy to transmit and easy to recognise in Morse code. Later, people created stories about why the letters SOS were chosen. Some said that it was an abbreviation for "Save our souls". Others maintained that it was an abbreviation for "Save our ship".

Nowadays, any appeal for help can be called an SOS; it is not restricted to ships alone.

Published in *The Hindu* on March 16, 1999

## Word of the day

### Imbroglio:

a complicated, confused, or embarrassing situation that causes many problems

### Synonyms:

difficult, disagreement, controversy

### Usage:

*The deal ended in an imbroglio.*

### Pronunciation:

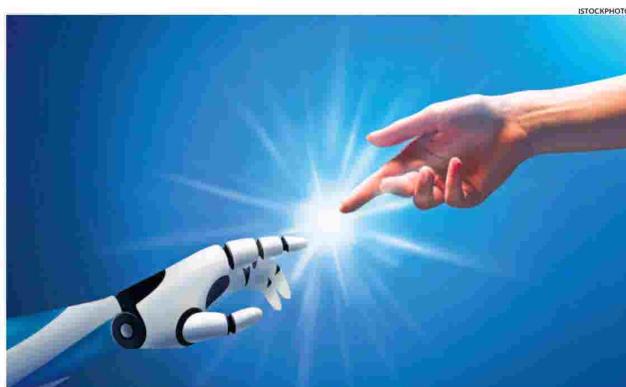
newsth.live/imbroglio

### International Phonetic Alphabet:

/im'brogliə/

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

## OUR VIEW



## Can we put AI to work in aid of inclusive growth?

Plans are in place for artificial intelligence to lift our path of economic expansion and put 'developed country' status within reach. The bigger challenge is to ensure that everyone gains

India is making steady progress on artificial intelligence (AI). After chairing the Global Partnership on AI Council in 2024, the country is preparing to host the five-day India AI Impact Summit 2026 in New Delhi in mid-February. Apart from heads of state, CEOs of tech firms such as Google DeepMind, Anthropic, Adobe, Salesforce and Qualcomm are expected to attend. While AI development has been dominated by the US and China, India is clearly on the AI map. According to a report by the Niti Aayog titled *AI for Viksit Bharat*, AI adoption across sectors could add \$17-26 trillion to the global economy over the next decade, with India well placed to capture 10-15% of that value, thanks to its large STEM workforce, expanding R&D base and growing digital capabilities. Stanford's Global Vibrancy Tool ranked India fourth on AI globally in late 2024, before elevating it to third place in its 2025 edition. The government think-tank's *Viksit Bharat* report released in September describes AI as a "decisive lever" to push India's economic growth towards an 8% annual trajectory, which is roughly what the country needs to achieve its 2047 aim of being counted among 'developed' countries (as measured by national output). The report argues that this growth bump-up can be unlocked by speeding up the use of AI across industries to lift productivity and overall economic efficiency.

To see that happen, India is moving to maximize the benefits of AI through targeted investment, policy enablers and a 'techno-legal' approach that seeks to balance innovation with guardrails. Data-centre capacity is expanding rapidly, while the IndiaAI Mission is easing access to AI compute power. The Centre's approval of 10 semiconductor plants

should strengthen the country's electronics ecosystem, even as startups build Indian-language and voice models that are vital for inclusion in a country where millions remain sub-literate. India's AI Kosh repository, which hosts close to 6,000 local datasets, offers a data backbone for innovation anchored in digital public infrastructure, spanning Aadhaar, UPI, the Health Stack and more. For AI to fulfill its promise, though, it also needs to be democratized. This challenge is particularly acute across the Asia-Pacific region, which already accounts for more than half of all global AI users and nearly 70% of AI patents. A UNDP report, *The Next Great Divergence*, cautions that while AI could lift GDP growth by around two percentage points and raise productivity by up to 5% in key sectors, these gains are not likely to be evenly shared.

Many economists worry that AI will take away jobs, empower some classes over others and worsen disparities unless special efforts are made to prevent it. That said, India, as per the UNDP report, is well placed to push for a more inclusive AI transition. Some steps are already visible. Niti Aayog's October 2025 report, *AI for Inclusive Societal Development*, highlights initiatives such as the Digital ShramSetu Mission, which uses AI-driven tools to boost productivity and resilience among millions of workers in the informal sector by expanding access to healthcare, education, skilling and financial services. The AI Impact Summit 2026, which builds on earlier multilateral conclaves held in Bletchley Park, Seoul, Paris and Kigali, is appropriately themed 'Democratising AI, Bridging the AI Divide'. With the right policy choices, we could align the rise of AI with the cause of equitable development.

Competition Act and an active Competition Commission of India (CCI), so why add another layer? This reflects a basic misunderstanding: when the CCI was established in the 2000s, some people thought it was another market entry testing mechanism; such was the public ignorance.

It took time for them to understand that competition law is reactive. It intervenes after a company (private or public sector) indulges in anti-competitive behaviour—by abusing its market dominance, forming a cartel with others or trying to acquire such clout through a merger. Competition policy, however, is preventive and also curative. It ensures that every regulation, government scheme, licensing requirement, procurement policy or sectoral reform is screened for its impact on competition and does not unnecessarily distort any market.

Although an NCP was drafted in 2011, it has been languishing on the ministry of corporate affairs' website for over a decade, despite Niti Aayog's recommendation of comprehensive competition-policy reform. But Niti Aayog's management has changed since then and the fate of that initiative remains unclear. As recently as August 2025, the 25th Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance flagged this inaction,

## THEIR VIEW

## Our rush for trade deals: Good economics or smart geopolitics?

India's pacts may not boost trade much but act as an insurance policy against trade fragmentation



**MANOJ PANT & M. RAHUL**  
are, respectively, visiting professor, Shiv Nadar University, and assistant professor, Institute of Economic Growth.

make them desirable. Such agreements are, therefore, endogenous outcomes, formalizing existing relationships rather than creating new ones.

India's recent deal-forcing activity reinforces this point. Negotiating trade agreements consumes political and administrative resources, while multiple bilateral arrangements create overlapping rules of origin that raise compliance costs. From a purely economic perspective, this is not always efficient. Regional agreements are generally superior, but only when the region functions as a coherent economic bloc—something South Asia clearly does not.

The limits of India's bilateral approach become evident when one examines export destinations. Our CETA with the UAE covers only about two-thirds of exports to the Gulf and roughly half of all imports. The Oman agreement covers just 7% of exports to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations and about 5% of imports. A GCC-wide deal would have been a more meaningful economically, but this could well be preparation for a future pact with the grouping. The preference for country-specific deals, however, points to political logic.

Experience with India's earlier deals suggests that without deep integration, such agreements may not significantly enhance trade. Free-trade agreements such as the one with Asian have shown low utilization rates and only modest trade gains. This is unsurprising. Over successive World Trade Organization (WTO) rounds, tariffs have already been reduced sharply, leaving little room for preferential liberalization to generate large benefits. Free-trade agreements have thus become less important as instruments of tariff reduction.

This also explains why many modern deals deliver limited trade outcomes. Countries often sign them not because trade will suddenly expand, but because trade or investment links already exist, or because geopolitical calculations

Second, they function as tools for hedging risks in an uncertain global trade environment, helping diversify economic relationships and reduce over-dependence on China.

Third, deeper engagements provide greater protection for investors by clarifying rules on investment, dispute settlement and regulation.

Finally, bilateral agreements help pre-empt exclusion amid the formation of trade blocs that increasingly mirror geopolitical alignments. Our agreements with Oman and New Zealand illustrate this shift. Neither is a major merchandise trade partner. Oman's importance lies more in labour migration, energy linkages and its strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz. New Zealand, accounting for just \$0.6 billion of Indian exports, has a small economy; the rationale lies instead in strengthening Indo-Pacific ties.

Both agreements emphasize services, labour mobility, recognition of qualifications and investment protection more than tariff liberalization. While tariff concessions are extensive on paper, their economic impact is limited by small market sizes and already low applied tariffs. India's comparative advantages and strategic interests are thus their focus.

Seen this way, India's recent deals are best understood not as conventional trade agreements aimed at boosting exports, but as geopolitical insurance policies in a fragmenting global order. At the same time, a good beginning has been made with services trade getting attention. Trade in services tends to need greater alignment of regulatory policies and hence much higher levels of diplomacy. Such agreements could take time and this seems as good a moment as any to make a start.

US President Donald Trump has thrown both global trade and politics into a new world of uncertainty while jettisoning the multilateralism of the WTO. In this scenario, a series of deals might well be the best response.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

A horse never runs so fast as when he has other horses to catch up and outpace.

OVID

## THEIR VIEW

## Why we urgently need a national competition policy

PRADEEP S. MEHTA



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India's economy is at an inflection point. On one hand, we aspire to become a \$5 trillion economy soon and project a bold vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047. On the other, our economic reality tells a humbling story—just as we did not achieve the \$5 trillion mark in 2025, as originally envisaged, the vision of 'developed' status by 2047 will not be realized if our GDP grows at its current rate. India is shying away from a key reform that can address distortions holding the economy back: a national competition policy (NCP). If implemented, it would be our second wave of big-bang economic reforms after 1991.

While the discourse around competition in India has been synonymous with anti-trust enforcement and merger approvals, competition policy is a much broader, economy-wide discipline. Put simply, it is about shaping the rules of the game, not after the horses have bolted from their stables, but before distortions take hold. Many policymakers argue that India already has a strong

Competition Act and an active Competition Commission of India (CCI), so why add another layer? This reflects a basic misunderstanding: when the CCI was established in the 2000s, some people thought it was another market entry testing mechanism; such was the public ignorance.

It took time for them to understand that competition law is reactive. It intervenes after a company (private or public sector) indulges in anti-competitive behaviour—by abusing its market dominance, forming a cartel with others or trying to acquire such clout through a merger. Competition policy, however, is preventive and also curative. It ensures that every regulation, government scheme, licensing requirement, procurement policy or sectoral reform is screened for its impact on competition and does not unnecessarily distort any market.

Although an NCP was drafted in 2011, it has been languishing on the ministry of corporate affairs' website for over a decade, despite Niti Aayog's recommendation of comprehensive competition-policy reform. But Niti Aayog's management has changed since then and the fate of that initiative remains unclear. As recently as August 2025, the 25th Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance flagged this inaction,

stressing that an NCP is long overdue to attain coherence, coordination and real competitive discipline across sectors. Meanwhile, countries across the world have adopted competition policies. Australia's NCP reforms, for example, not only opened its markets but generated an estimated 12.5% increase in GDP.

A well-designed NCP can change how India's markets work because it would build competition principles into everyday policymaking, instead of treating them as an afterthought. With this framework in place, the government would be required to examine every regulation or scheme through a competition lens, which would help spot and remove unnecessary barriers and distortions. This alone can make space for more firms, especially newer and smaller ones, to invest, innovate and compete fairly in better contested markets. An NCP would also benefit consumers directly through better prices, more choice and improved services, while the economy benefits from early detection of market distortions before they can turn into long-term drag on growth. In short, an NCP doesn't just tidy up regulations, it strengthens the entire economic environment.

Enthusiasm for an NCP, unfortunately, has been weak in India. The Competition Act's existence has been cited at least on one occasion to justify not having a policy dedicated to competition, though the Act also recommends adoption of an NCP. The Centre's approach seems incoherent. We have various laws for intellectual property rights (IPR) policy. Likewise, we have various environmental protection laws apart from an environmental protection policy. A formally laid-down policy gives the relevant laws more teeth. Since we have put frameworks in place for those two, why not do the same for competition? It would aid investment, innovation, efficiency, consumer welfare and economic growth.

Competition policy is not a bureaucratic exercise but an economic necessity. Fortunately, two significant reforms (among many) took place over the past decade or so: the GST rollout to create a single market and the enactment of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code to enable the swift exit of sick firms. The government must revive the draft NCP of 2011. India cannot achieve developed status through slogans. We need competitive, efficient and innovation-led markets.

Vidhi Maharishi of CUTS contributed to this article.



## THEIR VIEW

# Europe's existential threat is not immigration but low innovation

*Its technology lag could spell a sudden and irreversible loss of economic relevance if it doesn't fix its structural weaknesses*



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**U**S President Donald Trump's new National Security Strategy offers a misguided assessment of Europe, long regarded as America's most reliable ally. Unrestrained immigration and other policies derided by administration officials as "woke," it warns, could lead to "civilizational erasure" within a few decades.

That argument rests on a basic misreading of Europe's current predicament. While the EU does face an existential threat, it has little to do with immigration or cultural politics. In fact, the share of foreign-born residents in the US is slightly higher than in Europe.

The threat facing Europe lies in its economic and technological backwardness. Between 2008 and 2023, GDP rose by 87% in the US, compared to just 13.5% in the EU. Over the same period, the EU's GDP per capita fell from 76.5% of the US level to 50%. Even the poorest US state, Mississippi, has a higher per capita income than that of several major European economies, including France, Italy and the EU average. This widening economic gap cannot be explained by demographics. Instead, it reflects stronger productivity growth in the US, largely owing to tech innovation and higher total factor productivity. Today, roughly half of the world's 50 largest technology firms are American, while only four are European. Over the past five decades, 241 US firms have grown from startups into companies with market capitalizations of at least \$10 billion, compared with just 14 in Europe.

These trends raise a critical question: Which countries will lead the industries of the future and where does Europe fit in? The race for tech leadership now spans a wide range of fields, including AI and machine learning, semiconductor design and production, robotics, quantum computing, fusion energy, fintech and defence technologies. Europe enters this race at a clear disadvantage.

Whether the US or China currently leads future industries is open to debate, but most observers agree that it's essentially a two-horse race, with America still ahead in several key areas. Beyond that, innovation is concentrated in countries like Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, India and Israel. In Europe, by contrast, innovative activities are largely confined to the UK, Germany, France and Switzerland, two of which are not EU members.

It is hardly a surprise, then, that while the US and China dominate global tech rankings, Europe finds itself far from the top. And the outlook is anything but reassuring, given that the next wave of innovation is widely expected to be more disruptive than anything we have seen over the past half-century.

The technological gap between the US and Europe can be attributed to several factors. First, the US has a far deeper and more dynamic ecosystem for financing startups, while Europe still lacks



a genuine capital markets union, limiting the scale and speed at which new firms can grow.

Second, Europe is hampered by excessive and fragmented regulation. A US startup can launch a product under a single regulatory framework and access a market of more than 330 million people. The EU has a population of roughly 450 million but remains divided among 27 national regulatory regimes. An International Monetary Fund analysis shows that internal market barriers in the EU act like a tariff of around 44% for goods and 10% for services—for higher than the tariff levels the US imposes on most imports.

Third, cultural attitudes toward risk-taking differ sharply. Until relatively recently, a failed entrepreneur in some EU countries (like Italy) could face criminal penalties, while in the US, a tech founder who has never failed is often seen as too risk-averse.

Fourth, the US benefits from a deeply integrated academic-military-industrial complex, while Europe's chronic underinvestment in defence has weakened its innovation capacity. Technological leaders like the US, China, Israel and, more recently, Ukraine spend heavily on defence, with research often producing technologies that have civilian applications. Despite this, many European leaders continue to frame higher defence spending as a tradeoff between security and social welfare. In theory, free-riding on US defence spending since the end of World War II has limited the type of innovation that could have generated more of both through higher productivity. Paradoxically, sustaining Europe's social model will require greater investment in defence,

beginning with meeting Nato's new spending target of 3.5% of GDP. If Europe lets its tech lag widen, it risks prolonged stagnation and continued economic decline relative to the US and China. There are, however, reasons for cautious optimism. Increasingly aware that Europe faces an existential challenge, policymakers have begun to advance serious reform proposals. Notable examples are the two major 2024 reports on EU competitiveness and the single market by former Italian prime ministers Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta, respectively.

Europe has considerable strengths, including high-quality human capital, excellent education systems and world-class research institutions. With the right incentives and regulatory reforms, these assets could support much higher levels of commercial innovation. With a better environment for entrepreneurship, Europe's high per capita income, large internal market and high savings rates could help unleash a wave of investment.

Crucially, even if Europe never leads in cutting-edge technologies, it could still significantly boost productivity by adopting and adapting American and Chinese innovations. Many of these technologies are general-purpose in character, benefiting both adopters and pioneers.

All of this leaves Europe at an inflection point. As Ernest Hemingway famously observed, bankruptcy happens "gradually and then suddenly." So far, Europe's technological decline has been gradual. But if it fails to arrest its structural weaknesses, today's slow erosion could give way to a sudden and irreversible loss of economic relevance.

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## MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

# Lou Gerstner: The CEO who taught IBM how to dance

SIDDHARTH PAI



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**L**ouis Vincent Gerstner Jr., the American business leader whose steady hand and clear-sighted strategy pulled International Business Machines Corp (IBM) from the brink of collapse and reshaped it for the dawn of the digital age, died on 27 December 2025 at his home in Jupiter, Florida. He was 83 years old. Arvind Krishna, IBM's current CEO, described him as a transformational figure whose influence extended far beyond the Big Blue's boardroom and whose leadership saved one of the technology world's most iconic companies. Gerstner's life was defined by decisiveness in times of peril and a firm belief in the power of organizational unity and service-oriented innovation.

Born in Milwaukee, New York, Gerstner grew up in Long Island and showed early promise as a methodical thinker. He graduated in engineering from Dartmouth College and earned an MBA from Harvard Business School. After beginning his career in management consulting with McKinsey, he rose through the executive ranks at Ameri-

can Express and later took the helm of RJR Nabisco, where he proved his ability to navigate complex financial and operational challenges.

When he accepted the role of chair and CEO of IBM in 1993, he became the first outsider ever to lead it. At that moment, IBM was deep in crisis. Once the world's largest computer maker whose mainframes powered financial systems, corporations, and governments alike, it was losing billions of dollars and market share to nimble competitors and facing calls to break the company apart. The tech landscape was transforming at a dizzying pace and IBM's product-centric approach fell out of step with the needs of its global customers. I worked for IBM during his time there.

Rather than yield to pressure for IBM to be split into smaller, independent units, Gerstner made his first of many bold choices by preserving its unity. He understood that its greatest strength lay not in disconnected product silos, but in its ability to deliver integrated solutions that met complex customer demands. This was a strategic pivot that few fully grasped at the time, but it became the linchpin of IBM's revival. When quizzed at the time about his strategic vision for IBM, he is famously known to have said "The last thing IBM needs is a vision at this time." He

was right. The giant faced extinction and survival was paramount.

The CEO cut costs, streamlined operations and took on cultural habits that often prized internal procedure over customer responsiveness. He trained the firm for what it needed: a relentless focus on real business outcomes for clients. He insisted on customer orientation and drove this principle home. These shifts came at a huge cost (IBM shed about 100,000 employees), but changes were essential to stabilize finances and build client and investor confidence.

Central to his strategy was the transformation of IBM's business model towards services and integrated solutions. Back when firms were racing to commoditize hardware, he saw that clients valued expertise and the ability to implement and manage complex systems that could knit together disparate technologies across enterprises. This was the IBM I was hired into. When I was seconded to Europe as its boss of communication sector services, the impact

he had had there while changing stodgy leadership had become the stuff of legend.

Under his leadership, IBM built a services business that became a global leader in its own right. It grew rapidly, offering not only higher margins than many legacy hardware products, but also a more durable connection to client needs, thanks to its consultative nature.

Despite the pressure of the turnaround, Gerstner never lost sight of IBM's need to be a coherent whole. He broke down divisional barriers that hindered collaboration, reformed incentive systems so that performance was judged by collective success rather than by isolated unit results, and encouraged a culture where execution mattered as much as strategy.

Over the course of his tenure, IBM's fortunes turned. It regained profitability and its reputation for innovation. Its stock price went up by a multiple of six. He stepped down as CEO in 2002 and relinquished the chair later that year, leaving behind a com-

pany better prepared for 21st century challenges. His memoir, *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* is a reflection on leadership and change that is still a key text for students of business strategy and corporate change.

After IBM, Gerstner served as chair of the Carlyle Group, a private equity firm, and devoted energy to philanthropy, particularly in education and biomedical research. His work with public schools testified to a broader commitment to societal progress.

Colleagues and admirers remember him not only for the outcomes he achieved but for the clarity of his thought and the integrity of his leadership. As a mentor, his influence shaped a generation of leaders and his impact is evident in the many business and technology ventures whose leaders passed through IBM during his tenure. He was one of the great American executives of his time, who left lessons for other CEOs trying to effect massive structural change in the wake of technological upheavals, much as we are about to see with AI in the next few years.

In an age of rapid technological change, his life's work remains a reminder that businesses endure by embracing change with rigour and resolve. I, for one, am grateful to have worked in the redefined IBM that was his brainchild. Rest in peace, Lou.

## MINT CURATOR

## Buckle up: Turbulence in the East seems set to rise this year

*East Asia will probably become more volatile as tensions deepen*



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Taiwan could turn into a major geopolitical flashpoint in 2026.

The island has already pledged to lift defence spending to 5% of GDP by 2030, up from over 3%. But more money alone may not be enough.

US intelligence sources believe that Xi wants China's People's Liberation Army to be capable of an invasion by 2027. However, many military strategists suggest a full-scale invasion then is unlikely, as China's economy grapples with a slowdown and the PLA reels from corruption probes and purges. They point to a cascading effect on all of us.

*The Trump-Xi bromance could sour:* On the surface, Trump and Xi appear to have found a new warmth—but it's fragile. Xi won the trade war in 2025, which means Trump is going into next year on the back foot. That won't be lost in Washington, no matter how loud the bluster. While the rapprochement has been welcomed by markets, a lot could go wrong. They will have an opportunity to meet at least four times in 2026, providing multiple occasions for relations to heat up.

And even if they don't, they'll likely remain tense, according to a 2026 forecast for US-China relations from the Berlin-based Mercator Institute for China Studies. Almost three-quarters of respondents, comprising China experts and observers, see relations deteriorating across the board, from military and trade ties to technology. That's despite Trump's most recent decision to let Nvidia sell advanced chips to China, water down years of national security safeguards. Washington says Nvidia's top products will still be restricted, but the move gives Beijing access to semiconductors at least a generation ahead of its best technology.

*Another front to watch—China-Japan relations:* Tokyo has become more vocal about the link between its own security and stability in the Taiwan Strait, a position Beijing views as provocative. The Chinese leader will see how much he can push Trump on Taiwan, the self-governed democratic island Beijing claims as its own. That will make Taipei more vulnerable.

*Taiwan will feel the heat even more:* President Lai Ching-te has his work cut out. He'll need to navigate a politically gridlocked legislature while trying to pass a \$40 billion supplemental defence budget aimed at modernizing the military and strengthening deterrence to defend Taiwan against the rising threat from China.

Asia is not on the brink of war. But it will be more volatile than it has been in recent memory. Buckle up.

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## { OUR TAKE }

## When process is punishment

Apex court's conservatism towards bail in the Delhi riots case is violating its promises of personal liberty

The Supreme Court's decision to grant bail to five people accused in the 2020 Delhi riots case but refuse relief to student activists Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam creates a new touchstone to evaluate bail applications under the stringent Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), but may have further narrowed the window for liberty in what is already a draconian law.

One, by drawing a distinction between the seven people seeking bail in the same case, the court avoided a collective approach. Instead, it found that Khalid and Imam were "qualitatively on a different footing" by observing that the material placed on record prima facie indicated their "central and formative roles" in the planning and strategic direction of the alleged offence. Two, the court said that section 43D(5) of UAPA — which restricts bail — does not exclude judicial scrutiny or mandate denial of bail in default. Again, the court has laid down guidelines for a structured inquiry on whether bail can be granted, including deciding on whether enquiry discloses prima facie offences or if the role of the accused has a reasonable nexus to the offence. And three, the court rejected the argument that prolonged incarceration can justify bail under UAPA, holding that the gravity of the offence, the statutory framework, the role of each accused and the prima facie evidentiary value of the prosecution's case must be assessed.

The court has offered the duo a glimmer of hope by saying that they can apply for bail again after a year or after protected witnesses — who are yet to testify five-and-a-half years later — are examined. It also found that "continued detention has not crossed constitutional impermissibility to override the statutory embargo". Is there a limit to this impermissibility? Can serious charges alone be used as a lever to ensure prolonged incarceration?

No republic can let terror or its sponsors go unpunished. But the Delhi riots case is part of a larger recent pattern where grave charges are levelled against activists, only for the trial to hang fire, creating the perception that a politicised process is using stringent provisions to keep people jailed. In case after case, lower courts have found the prosecution wanting and shorn of evidentiary value. Against this backdrop, the prolonged pre-trial detention in high-profile cases is both jarring and violative of the top court's own championing of personal liberty. The court may have attempted to strike a balance in what is no doubt a sensitive case, but unfortunately, the process has already become the punishment.

## Potable water needs to be viewed as a right

Complaints of contaminated drinking water are common. But when Indore, a stellar performer on the national cleanliness index, reported at least 10 deaths from toxic water, there was disbelief. Given the city's reputation for strong municipal administration, one expected it to have a robust water supply infrastructure and prompt addressing of water-related complaints. But a city's superior standing doesn't guarantee much. A Delhi Jal Board report suggests that nearly 18% of the Capital's water supply network is more than 30 years old and must be replaced.

In fact, this may be the case with most of urban India. Whether limited or extensive, the subterranean piped network is rarely serviced. The absence of a 24x7 pressurised water supply may also be contaminating drinking water, as prolonged vacuum in leaky pipes allows inflow from sewer lines. While it is essential to provide safe drinking water from treatment plants, plugging leaks in distribution lines is necessary to ensure it doesn't become toxic by the time it reaches homes. Fixing leaks in the sewer network is non-negotiable. Too, plugging leaks in distribution lines can increase water availability, ensure equitable distribution, and help realise the goal of 24x7 supply.

Water utilities must also conduct continuous quality audits and take prompt action to prevent public health risks. Institutionalising these checks, launching a nationwide assessment similar to the Swachh Survekshan and making the findings public could accelerate the effort. The Centre's flagship Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) 2.0, promotion of 24x7 water supply and "drink from tap" initiatives, also need to go beyond the present pilots in select municipal wards. However, citywide projects will require sufficient funding. Access to clean drinking water for all through a 24x7 supply is not merely a convenience; it's directly linked to the right to public health and, therefore, the right to life.

# A wake-up call from Indore for India's cities

Cities must adopt comprehensive water safety plans, that integrate source protection, treatment processes, distribution integrity, and community feedback mechanisms

The recent deaths and hospitalisations in Indore due to contaminated drinking water expose a deeply troubling pattern. For the past several years, the city has enjoyed the enviable distinction of being India's cleanest city — an informal benchmark for urban sanitation and municipal performance across the country. Yet these deaths underline a stark reality: A city can appear clean on the surface and still fail in its most fundamental public health responsibility — ensuring safe drinking water.

This tragedy was neither sudden nor unforeseeable. It was the culmination of repeated and unheeded complaints over several years. The first was reported as early as July 2025 and again in October 2025. Reports of foul-smelling and discoloured water flowing from household taps should have served as unmistakable warning signs for public health authorities. Instead, these signals were ignored until lives were lost. Subsequent investigations revealed leakages in drinking water pipelines that allowed sewage to seep into the municipal supply — a textbook

failure of infrastructure maintenance, surveillance, and governance.

This incident is especially concerning given that waterborne diseases have long plagued many major cities in India. Every year, lakhs of Indians suffer from diarrhoeal and other water-related diseases, many of which are fatal. Unsafe water and poor sanitation have historically contributed significantly to child mortality and long-term ill-health. While the economic cost of these illnesses is enormous, the social cost is even higher. Children, women, the elderly, and particularly poor and marginalised communities bear a disproportionate burden, as preventable illnesses push families deeper into poverty through health care expenses, lost wages, and long-term vulnerability, thereby perpetuating inequities. Indore's tragedy is not an isolated episode. Unsafe drinking water remains a persistent challenge across Indian cities. The Indore episode highlights a narrow policy focus that prioritises water safety over water and waste cleanliness, often prioritising economic growth and robust public health infrastructure. Many Indian cities have not modernised their water supply systems for decades. Indore's own drinking water network is 20 years old.

The core problem is not merely ageing pipelines, but the absence of coordinated action on water quality monitoring, weak maintenance systems, and poor responsiveness to early warning signals. Contamination is often allowed

to persist until it reaches crisis proportions. Policy responses must, therefore, be substantive rather than cosmetic. Real-time water quality monitoring systems, strict enforcement of chemical contamination at the source, during distribution, and at household taps — should be made mandatory and their findings placed in the public domain. Urban pipeline infrastructure requires urgent upgrading to prevent lead leaching and cross-contamination, with a clear physical separation between sewage and drinking water networks.

The Indore incident should serve as a wake-up call for every municipal authority in urban India. Cities must adopt comprehensive water safety plans that integrate source protection, treatment processes, distribution integrity, and community feedback mechanisms.

Chandrakant Lahariya is a practising physician and health policy specialist. The views expressed are personal



True urban public health rests on less visible foundations — safe water, resilient infrastructure, and accountable governance.

across both rural and urban India. Nearly 85% of India's drinking water needs are met through groundwater. However, samples from multiple sources indicate that around 15–20% of these sources contain excess fluoride, nitrates, iron, or other contaminants, rendering the water unsafe for consumption. It is estimated that nearly 100 million Indians drink water that does not meet prescribed quality standards and more than half of the population lives in areas facing drinking water insufficiency.

In a recent global water quality assessment, India ranked 120th among 122 countries. As water demand continues to rise, local governments have failed to build infrastructure at the pace required to meet both quantity and quality needs.

Government initiatives such as Jal Jeevan Mission are expanding rural water supply, which is commendable. However, access alone is not sufficient. Equal emphasis must be placed on ensuring the safety, reliability, and adequate availability of drinking water, particularly for underserved and marginalised populations.

For everyone, the Indore incident is a sobering reminder that cleanliness is not merely about swept streets and garbage-free public spaces. True urban

public health rests on less visible foundations — safe water, resilient infrastructure, and accountable governance. The history of global public health offers a clear lesson: The cholera pandemics of the 19th century prompted sweeping sanitation and water reforms in Europe, laying the foundations for sustained health, economic gains, and increased life expectancy that continue to this day.

Yet in India, policymakers, programme managers, and urban administrators often appear to have mastered the art of inaction — applying layers of colourful paint to the exterior while ignoring the crumbling structure within. The Indore water contamination crisis is a warning that must not be ignored. It calls for a decisive shift from symbolic achievements to substantive public health protection. This is a lesson we must learn for the benefit of every Indian, in rural areas, and urban, as claims progress without securing the most basic of rights for its citizens: Assured access to safe drinking water. We can, and must, do better — and the greatest responsibility lies with our elected governments.

Chandrakant Lahariya is a practising physician and health policy specialist. The views expressed are personal

## Why employment guarantee law called for an overhaul

Public debate on public policy is essential in a democracy. Laws that shape livelihoods — particularly for rural households — deserve the closest scrutiny. However, such scrutiny must be grounded in a careful reading of what a new law actually provides. The new framework is a dramatic departure from earlier frameworks or from what critics fear might be lost. Much of the criticism surrounding the Vilkas Bharat — Guarantee for Rural and Ajeesha Mission (GRAM) (VG-B RAM) Act, 2025 risks falling into this trap.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted two decades ago, played an important role in stabilising rural incomes and offering a measure of security during periods of distress. Its contribution during crises such as the Covid pandemic is rightly acknowledged. Over time, however, experience revealed persistent structural weaknesses. Wage rates and hours were frequently delayed, gender and caste barriers hollowed out unemployment allowance, access varied sharply across states, administrative capacity was uneven, and large-scale leakage occurred through fake job cards, inflated muster rolls, and low-quality asset creation. These were systemic shortcomings, not marginal.

The new Act (VG-B RAM) focuses squarely on correcting delivery failures that undermined the credibility of the earlier framework. Improved worker representation, wage payments in arrears, statutory timelines with automatic compensation for delays; procedural dis-employment clauses that rendered unemployment allowance ineffective in practice are removed; grievance redressal is strengthened with clear timelines and accountability. These changes address the operational fault lines that have repeatedly eroded trust among workers. The legal right to wage employment remains intact and justiciable. The statutory entitlement has been expanded from 100 to 125 days. What has changed is the implementation architecture. The new framework is a dramatic departure from the old, often responding after distress has already set in — to a planned and enforceable framework designed to deliver work predictably. Addressing implementation failure through statutory reform is not repetition; it is correction.

Concerns about states with larger poor populations, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, being least served under the earlier framework are well-founded. Low penetration in these states was a documented failure of MGNREGA. An unplanned demand-response model favoured states with stronger administrative capacity, leaving others at the mercy of a high rate of migration. The new framework addresses this imbalance by anchoring employment generation in Vilkas Gram Panchayat Plans, which integrate locally expressed demand with advance approval of works and assured funding. Uneven uptake was precisely why reform was necessary: preserving the earlier architecture would only have entrenched existing inequities. Further, normative allocations based on objective parameters introduce greater transparency and fairness in the distribution of resources across states.

Another line of criticism questions whether the new framework is too costly. This argument overlooks both precedent and safeguards. The Centre-state cost-sharing pattern follows long-established norms for centrally sponsored schemes, while Northeastern and Himalayan states and the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir continue under a more favourable



Shailesh Kumar Singh

90:10 arrangement. More importantly, planning-based execution improves predictability of fund flows, reducing the ad-hocism that often disrupts implementation earlier. Expansion of entitlement combined with shared responsibility reflects cooperative federalism, not dilution. Several states have demonstrated that from rural roads to housing and drinking water — operate under similar arrangements.

Fiscally stressed states are often cited as likely casualties of the new framework. But fiscal stress alone does not determine exclusion.

Under the earlier regime, exclusion frequently stemmed from weak planning, limited administrative capacity, and operational bottlenecks. The new Act seeks to mitigate these risks through advance, participatory and technology-enabled planning, reduced discretion to deny work once plans are approved, and strengthened transparency and accountability. Crucially, administrative expenditure has been enhanced from 6% to 9% enabling states to build field capacity commensurate with the scale and ambition of the programme. State-specific challenges do not invalidate a national reform aimed at correcting systemic weaknesses.

Critics note that several high-needs states generated the fewest days of employment under the earlier framework, with only a small proportion of households ever reaching the statutory ceiling. The new framework will ensure that every household is entitled to support for planned work, irrespective of its capacity timelines, and a strengthened unemployment allowance. The objective is straightforward: To translate statutory entitlement into actual and reliable days of employment, particularly in regions that were historically underserved.

Much has also been made of the distinction between a "demand-driven" old scheme and a "supply-driven" new one. In practice, this distinction is overstated. The new framework does not suppress demand; it institutionalises it through planning, ensuring that demand is deliverable. A planned demand backed by assured funding is a fundamental component of an unfulfilled theoretical right. The rights-based character of the employment guarantee, far from being weakened, is reinforced. Expansion to 125 days, wage-payment timelines, automatic compensation for delays, removal of dis-employment clauses, and appealable grievance redressal together enhance the practical value of the right to work. Rights matter most when they can be exercised without navigating administrative obstacles. Implementation failures — corruption, fake job cards, inflated muster rolls, and poor asset quality — were the core of the earlier framework. The new Act seeks to address these through verified efficiency systems, strengthened audits, and convergence-based asset creation.

Concerns regarding the limited pause window must also be seen in context. It is a labour-market safeguard designed to avoid distortion during peak agricultural seasons and does not reduce the statutory entitlement of 125 days. The provision reflects calibrated economic prudence — protecting incomes without undermining productive agricultural employment.

The VG-B RAM G Act does not abandon employment guarantee. It reinforces and expands it, with particular attention to the weaknesses that limited effectiveness in high-income regions and among vulnerable populations.

Shailesh Kumar Singh is secretary, Department of Rural Development, Government of India. The views expressed are personal

| LEE JAE MYUNG | PRESIDENT, SOUTH KOREA



This summit will serve as an important turning point in making 2026 the first year of a full restoration of Korea-China relations. Efforts to develop the... partnership between the two countries into an irreversible trend of the times will continue



During recent four-day State visit to China

## Lessons from Gandhi in truthful communication

A little noticed centenary slipped by in 2025. Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, a bestseller, is now 100 years old. It has long been widely agreed that Gandhi was a communicator par excellence. But was he a communicator in the current use of the term? Could it be that what he actually excelled at was true and accurate expression of experiences and insights gained from the past?

The difference between expressing yourself and "effective" communication may be one of the most crucial challenges facing the human species as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century. Today, effective communication is more associated with marketing and playing with optics in ways that have impact. This can and is being done to manipulate the audience's impulse in ways that have been so normalised that it is hardly even considered ethically problematic.

As young friend said recently — if we focus entirely on what should be, in a moral or ethical frame, then we are not able to work with what is, what is actually functional on the ground. The fear of being left behind, she added, then compels one to not pay attention to the should be. It is important here to note the underlying angst of this young person. There is more than a hint of sadness about being swept along by larger trends that push you to ignore the past and express what you have learned from the past.

For this reason alone, it is eminently worthwhile to dwell a bit on Gandhi's genius for self-expression. The crucial key to this story is, for me, not in Gandhi's own writings but in the story of his life written by Louis Fischer (*The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*), who wrote: "Intellectual contact with him (Gandhi) was a delight because he opened his mind and allowed one to see how the machine works. He did not attempt to express his ideas in finished form. He thought aloud; he revealed each step in his thinking. You heard not only words but also how they were coming into being. He moved to a conclusion. This prevented him from talking like a propagandist; he talked like a friend. He was interested in an exchange of views, but more in the establishment of a personal relation.

This inner strength was only partially a

gift, a quality Gandhi may have been born with. For the large part he assiduously cultivated the longing to keep seeking truth and all his strivings were an extension of this search.

Therefore, he never claimed to be perfect nor did he ever fall under that delusion in his own mind.

It follows that if we want to learn from Gandhi's seek solace amid the cacophony of communication, we need to resolve some questions in our own mind. When we express ourselves in this digital age — is it in order to spread an idea or information that serves our own purpose, is it from our side? Or is our core aim to reach out and make contact, to serve the larger good as in *serve sushma* (wellbeing of all)?

Today, many people may argue that there is no such thing as the truth, there are only points of view. Given that this is a fact of life, it is also true that this is partly true. When we distinguish between vantage-point — which determines what an individual could see and hear in a real-life, real-time situation — and an opinion, which is how a person responded to what happened.

For example, there is now a tendency to write about the end of Gandhi's life by saying only that he died on January 30, 1948 — when the material fact is that he was killed, shot at point-blank range. When this is done deliberately, it is manipulation through part truth — in order to draw attention away from who killed Gandhi and why.

Being truthful, as Gandhi tirelessly demonstrated, is an ongoing process of honest cognition. Those who seek to live with ample space for expressing the moral and ethical should be dimension can lean on Gandhi in many ways but here are just three clues.

One face material facts with unwavering attention to detail; two, keep an open mind and open heart, in observing how different people respond to the material fact; and three, remain firmly grounded in core moral values, no matter how fluid or turbulent material facts might be.

Rajni Bakshi is the founder of the YouTube channel, *Altimira Conversations*. The views expressed are personal

Rajni Bakshi

## Indefensible action

US overthrow of Maduro govt in Venezuela shocking

**T**he US' Saturday strikes on Venezuela and its abduction of President Nicholas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores cannot be justified on any grounds whatsoever. Simply put, the Trump administration has annexed Venezuela in an act of imperialism by taking out its government — an open and shut case of violation of national sovereignty.

It violates Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, under which all countries have the right to govern their internal affairs without interference. Chapter VII of the Charter spells out the grounds for intervention, under which the UN Security Council can authorise the use of force against a country that poses a threat to international peace and security. So, the supposed venality of Maduro is an irrelevance here. It would be preposterous to argue that Venezuela today, or Panama or Grenada in the 1980s whose heads of state were deposed in similar fashion, poses a threat under Chapter VII. The US moved the Security Council to make the case for invading Iraq, arguing that Saddam Hussein harboured 'weapons of mass destruction'. None of that was found when the country was invaded in 2003, but Iraq was devastated. It's the same story with countries that have been bombed or invaded by the US, whether it is Syria, Afghanistan or Libya. These regions have turned into nightmare zones, breeding terrorism. So much for restoring global peace. If the US does not resort to direct action in a country of interest, it pushes 'regime change' by fomenting popular uprisings.

Trump has been bald about his motives: he has promised that oil will flow (Venezuela has the largest known reserves), and US oil majors' scripts are buoyant already. Curbing 'narco-terrorism' is an apology of a pretext. The less stated but obvious motives are to curb China's influence in South America and Venezuela in particular (the same holds true for Russia); and to nip all traces of 'Communism' in the region. The last has been a hangover from the Cold War days. This did not work in Cuba, but it did in Chile, Nicaragua and Brazil. Trump has actually cited the 200-year-old Monroe Doctrine, which advocates US control over the Americas to keep the rest out, to theorise his actions. A rules-based international order, born out of the ashes of the two World Wars, is all but non-existent.

Innocent of such niceties, Trump has said that he will 'run' Venezuela temporarily. The last bit is perhaps addressed to his core constituency, which has backed him in the belief that he is against long wars in faraway places. It is anyone's guess whether Venezuela turns out to be another quagmire. The trouble with this 'mask is off' style of Trump is that the US operates in a multi-polar world now, with China and Russia certainly in the game to contest its exercise of hegemony. Russia and China can flex their muscle *à la* Monroe Doctrine in their backyards. This is a signal for an alarming descent into chaos. India should counsel restraint and press for a peaceful resolution. It has a purposeful role to play.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



## The debate over economic data

TAKING STOCK. The changes in method for estimating GDP, employment have evoked criticisms. But these aren't convincing



ASHIMA GOYAL

**C**riticisms of India's data and specially the national accounts, which became common after the base change to 2011-12, tend to be of four types. First, those that resist change and loss of comparability; second, those that selectively use data to support pre-conceptions; third, those that allege systematic biases and impure motivations; fourth, those that recognise the complexities of measurement in large, heterogeneous and rapidly changing societies and make feasible and constructive suggestions for improvement.

Only the fourth deserve to be taken seriously, but since the first three have received a lot of attention we will discuss examples of each type. As India goes in for major base and other changes this year it may help to separate the substance from the noise in the commentary that is sure to follow.

## STATUS QUOISM

The first set is motivated by resistance to change, perhaps because of familiarity or different types of investment in earlier methods. But change is inevitable with the economy. The upgrading to the United Nations System of National Accounts (SNA) 2008, in the 2011-12 rebasing, required shifting from the factory to the enterprise. The shift from the MCA-21 database of 3-5 lakh firms from the RBI's sample of 2,500 firms was part of this, but was resisted on the ground that the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) included dummy firms. But a sample that captures only a tiny fraction of unrepresentative firms cannot continue to be adequate. India today has two million active firms. The MCA database, based on statutory filing, was cleaned-up and matured over time.

Similarly, the shift from the five-yearly employment survey to the quarterly Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) was criticised as leading to a loss of information. But more frequent unemployment data is essential for macroeconomic policy decisions. Those who protested now find they can do much more with the higher frequency data available on a range of labour market parameters. It has also proved more reliable than private estimates that were the only earlier alternatives. But that does not prevent the critics from calling a further shift to a monthly frequency unnecessary.

The consumer expenditure surveys are said to be unusable since



NOT EASY. Forecasts cannot be a substitute for the detailed measurement that statistical agencies undertake

'improvements' in methods made comparison with earlier surveys difficult. But they have been repeated in order to verify and benchmark.

## SELECTIVE DATA USE

GDP measurement is a complex exercise in any country but more so in ours. A number of scholars and analysts use issues in the Indian data to discredit official growth estimates. But since this tends to happen only when growth is high or exceeds forecasts it points to motivated preconceptions.

If one configuration of data causes over-estimation the opposite implies underestimation. But only the first is highlighted. However flawed the data, forecasts cannot be a substitute for the detailed measurement that statistical agencies undertake.

The absence of double deflation was said to over-estimate growth when CPI inflation is below CPI. But CPI exceeded CPI inflation over 2021, 2022 and both converged in 2025, implying growth was under-estimated in these high growth years.

In the 2010s aggregate credit growth fell due to a rise in bank non-performing assets. This was used as a 'smell test' to declare that growth was overestimated.

**GDP measurement is a complex exercise in any country but more so in ours. A number of scholars and analysts use issues in the Indian data to discredit official growth estimates**

But this variable was never used when both it and GDP rose together post-pandemic. And the compositional changes from corporate to retail credit that drove growth in the 2010s were ignored. Possible discrepancies in the expenditure approach are seized upon as suggesting growth is over-estimated. But they are as often negative, which suggests the opposite.

In Q3 FY24 a rise in net taxes above the average of 8 per cent of GDP was used to argue that high GDP growth was an aberration and actual growth was closer to the lower gross value added (GVA) growth. But in Q1 and Q2 FY24 net taxes were below 8 per cent and growth rates of both GDP and GVA were high.

Then attention turned to a low price deflator as the reason why high real growth was illusory. If inflation is actually higher than measured, real GDP growth would be lower. Nominal output was thought to be more robust since it is at least measured, while real output is extracted. But measured nominal growth could have fallen if real growth was indeed lower.

That the IMF gave a C to national accounts estimation was underlined, but the overestimation of real growth argument depends on errors in inflation estimates. So the IMF's B for this weakened the argument.

No one alleged inflation was overestimated in periods when it was higher (2020-23), since then it would have implied growth was underestimated.

Apart from these selective spotlights, there is also an argument that growth has been overestimated ever since the pandemic because ratios based on the

formal sector are used to estimate informal sector output that has actually shrunk. But in the 2011-12 rebasing weights were given to different types of labour skills to estimate the output of unorganised (informal) manufacturing, replacing the GVA per uniform worker used earlier. So the ratios used do reflect some informal sector differences.

The production approach is regarded as more reliable and is used as the controlling total. The expenditure approach serves as an alternative check. It partially uses commodity flows, which is a different data set, based on the actual movement of commodities consumed, etc. Informal sector commodity use would also be captured.

The difference in this method from the production approach is given as a discrepancy that is sometimes positive and sometimes negative, implying there is no systematic bias in any one direction. A negative discrepancy means the expenditure estimate exceeded the production estimate and was reduced to equal the production measure. The sum of discrepancies was negative (₹ -8,85,934 crore) over Q1 FY21 to Q2 FY24, implying underestimation of production.

Moreover, household expenditure, which includes the informal sector, is measured as a residual since data is better for government and corporate expenditure. So it is quite likely to be an underestimate.

## FEASIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

Valid criticisms are being acted on. These include re-basing to a more recent period, use of more frequent surveys, more datasets, double deflation for manufacturing where disaggregated WPI indices are available. Regular ASUSE surveys will replace use of ASI ratios in services. Proposed reforms are transparently communicated and feedback invited.

Discrepancies varied from a max of 3.3 and a min of -4.1 as a percentage of GDP from 2020-21 onwards and should shrink as expenditure data improves. If the revisions reduce sources of both under- and over-estimation, the overall change is unlikely to be large.

The low IMF grade was mainly because of the delay in rebasing. The IMF tends to be tougher on emerging markets — China also got a C. But the challenges they face, including frequent external shocks in the last decade, need to be acknowledged.

Constructive suggestions that recognise the magnitude of the task are welcome but it is unfair to attack a professional cadre, and their standards of probity, in order to score political points.

The writer was a member of the previous MPC

## Cannot blame farmers anymore for Delhi's air

Stubble burning is not a major reason for Delhi's polluted air. Vehicular emissions are largely to blame

A Narayananamoorthy

**W**hat the Supreme Court observed on November 15, 2021 — that the burning of crop residue by farmers in neighbouring States is not the main reason for Delhi's rising air pollution — has proved to be prescient now. Delhi's air quality has deteriorated sharply over the past two weeks, at a time when stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana is negligible.

Official data and satellite-based monitoring show that incidents of crop residue burning in Punjab and Haryana have declined sharply this year.

Compared to the peak years of the late 2010s, stubble-burning cases have fallen substantially, aided by stricter

monitoring and the wider availability of residue-management machinery.

Meanwhile, Delhi's air pollution is, first and foremost, an urban governance failure. Vehicular emissions remain the single largest source of pollution. Delhi today has more than 1.3 crore registered vehicles, growing by nearly 6-7 lakh vehicles every year, far outpacing road expansion or public transport capacity.

Transport-related emissions alone account for roughly one-third of the city's PM2.5 load, according to multiple studies. Diesel vehicles, ageing trucks entering the city at night and weak

enforcement of emission norms continue to poison the air.

Construction activity is another major contributor. Delhi is one of the largest construction sites in the country, with infrastructure, housing and commercial projects operating simultaneously across the city. Construction and road dust together account for over 20 per cent of particulate pollution, yet compliance with dust-control norms remains patchy. Open burning of municipal waste, illegal dumping and the widespread use of diesel generator sets further worsen air quality.

Winter meteorology only compounds these emissions. Low wind speeds and temperature inversion trap pollutants close to the ground, leading to sharp spikes in AQI. But weather conditions merely amplify pollution; they do not generate it. The pollutants are already present in large quantities, produced within the city and its immediate surroundings.

Delhi produces most of the pollution it breathes. Even during peak burning weeks in October or early November, studies have shown that stubble burning contributes only 10-20 per cent to Delhi's PM2.5 levels.

Yet, blaming farmers has become politically convenient. It deflects attention from difficult urban reforms



POLLUTION. Vehicles the main cause

and shifts responsibility onto a group that lacks the visibility and political influence of urban polluters.

## SEVERE ACTION NEEDED

This does not mean that crop residue burning is desirable or should be ignored. Farmers burn stubble because it is the cheapest and fastest option available within a narrow sowing window. Mechanised harvesting leaves behind tall stubble and in major wheat-growing States there are barely two to three weeks between paddy harvest and wheat sowing. Missing this window can reduce wheat yields significantly. This still compels some farmers to resort to stubble burning.

If Delhi is serious about cleaning its air, it must first look inward. The

solution lies in curbing the unchecked growth of private vehicles, discouraging diesel-run transport, phasing out old and highly polluting vehicles, expanding and improving public transport, strictly regulating construction activity, eliminating waste burning and enforcing pollution norms without exception. Shutting down thermal power plants located in and around Delhi would also help improve air quality. Emergency measures announced every winter under the Graded Response Action Plan cannot substitute for long-term structural reform.

Delhi's air crisis cannot be resolved by pointing fingers across State borders or by blaming unfavourable wind conditions. As long as the city refuses to confront its own role in polluting the atmosphere, its residents will continue to gasp for breath — regardless of what farmers do hundreds of kilometres away. Clean air will not come from scapegoating farmers; it will come only when Delhi accepts responsibility for its own emissions and acts decisively on them. Policymakers may also consider the idea of a winter capital to ease the pollution burden on Delhi during the most critical months.

The writer is an economist and former full-time Member (Official), Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, New Delhi. Views are personal

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

## Founders and CEOs

This refers to 'When should a founder bring in a professional CEO?' (January 5). A founder's ideas and guidance often build trust and shape work culture. Founders usually prefer to treat employees fairly and respect talent. However, bringing a founder into the CEO role too early, without enough experience, may not help. Selfless, experienced leaders can guide steady decisions until stability is reached. A new CEO should balance financial targets with

protecting the company's purpose and reputation. Staff may feel unsure when a CEO steps aside without assessing the situation and clear communication. Shared roles, right timing, and gradual handover can help young leaders.

**S Balasubramanian**  
Villupuram, TN

**Risks to financial system**  
Apropos 'Challenges from abroad' (January 5), the Financial Stability Report's assessment offers

reassurance about the strength of India's financial system, but it also underlines risks that deserve careful handling. Global volatility, driven by geo-political tensions, shifting interest rates and fragile risk appetite, can spill over quickly through markets and capital flows.

While banks are better capitalised and asset quality has improved, the growing tilt towards unsecured retail credit and dependence on market borrowings warrant closer supervision. Prudence now should

mean tightening underwriting standards, building counter-cyclical buffers and ensuring transparent stress testing of new loan portfolios.

**A Mylamsi**  
Coimbatore, TN

**US action unjustifiable**  
This refers to 'Action in Venezuela, a dangerous precedent' (January 5). The US launching military operations against Venezuela is condemnable. This action is not only about oil, but also

driven by geopolitics. It would be naive to believe that this was done to restore democracy in Venezuela or dismantle drug cartels. This incident has proved once again that international law is a myth. India would do well to learn its lessons from this episode — when the chips are down, we will have to protect ourselves; the US will not come to our rescue. So we must invest strategically in our security.

**Bal Govind**  
Noida

## Tech-driven sports

A sports stack can help produce world class athletes

GBS Bindra

India won the rights to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games in Ahmedabad, a moment of celebration tinged with uncomfortable questions. At the Paris 2024 Olympics, the nation slipped to 71st place in the medal standings, a precipitous drop from 48th at Tokyo 2020.

The National Sports Governance Act, passed in August 2025, represents the most significant structural reform in Indian sports history. Coming as the nation bids to host the 2036 Olympics, this legislation couldn't be more timely. The question is no longer whether India can build world-class stadiums; the real question is whether India can build world-class athletes.

Nations that dominate Olympic sport share a common trait: systematic, long-term athlete development. They identify talent early, provide holistic support spanning training to mental health, and maintain transparency where merit, not patronage, determines opportunity.

India has traditionally lacked this coherence. Promising athletes have emerged despite the system, not because of it.

The new Act changes this fundamentally. By establishing clear governance structures, athlete welfare safeguards, and accountability measures, India has created the legal foundation for a modern sporting ecosystem.

### THE DIGITAL LEAPFROG

But legislation alone won't win medals. The real work lies in building digital systems that translate legal frameworks into sporting success. This is where India must leapfrog global leaders.

India's advantage lies in its proven mastery of digital public infrastructure. A Sports Stack could democratise access to world-class athletic development.

The components are clear: unified athlete ID; ensuring every talent is visible regardless of location; interoperable databases breaking down bureaucratic silos; AI-powered analytics optimizing training and minimizing injury; and transparent portals making every rupee traceable. The technology exists. The governance framework provides the legal mandate. What's needed is political will to build these systems as digital public goods, open, interoperable, and accessible to all.

The 2030 Commonwealth Games provide a five-year runway to operationalise these structures



**ATHLETE-CENTRIC.** Tech systems

and demonstrate readiness for the 2036 Olympics bid.

India must focus on technology-enabled, athlete-centric systems ensuring no talent is lost and no opportunity wasted.

Imagine mobile technology screening children across every district, feeding data into national databases accessible to coaches and sports scientists. Picture AI platforms analysing performance videos from rural academies with the same rigour as elite training centres. envision scholarships flowing directly to athletes based on merit, with every transaction publicly auditable.

The challenge isn't technological capability; it's institutional coordination and sustained investment.

When talent identification and resource allocation are data-driven rather than relationship-driven, emerging sports get fairer access. When analytics are democratised, athletes from non-traditional backgrounds compete on merit.

The principles underlying a Sports Stack, unified identity, interoperable databases, transparent allocation, AI-powered decision support, apply equally to education, healthcare, or public service delivery.

The National Sports Governance Act provides the legal foundation. India's digital infrastructure expertise offers the technical capability. The hosting opportunities create the urgency. What remains is execution, translating policy into code, governance frameworks into digital platforms, and potential into results.

If India achieves this, it won't just win more medals. It will pioneer a new model of technology-enabled sports governance that developing nations worldwide can adopt.

The writer is a tech entrepreneur, and former Managing Director of CGI India

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 6, 2004

### Railways opens up container operations

The Indian Railways today opened up its containerised operations to other private and public sector players breaking the monopoly enjoyed by Container Corporation of India. Interested companies can take route-specific or all-India permission by making a one time payment of Rs 10-50 crore. Operating permission would be granted for 20 years, which can be further extended by another 10 years to transport export-import (EXIM) and domestic traffic.

### BSNL to introduce latest hi-speed broadband tech

You will soon get broadband connection with speeds greater than one gigabit per second from Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd floating a global tender for supply of the latest in broad band technology — Gigabit-capable Passive Optical Network (GPON).

### Maruti divestment floor price set at Rs 620

The empowered Group of Ministers (e-GoM) on Thursday fixed a floor price of Rs 620 per share for the divestment of an 8 per cent stake in Maruti Udyog Ltd, a move that is expected to garner more than Rs 1,400 crore. The cut-off date for accepting financial bids has been fixed as January 11.

# Did Trump enter Venezuela for oil?

**OLY POLITICS.** Given the economics of Venezuelan heavy oil, it is unlikely that this could have been Trump's motive



RAGHUVIR SRINIVASAN

**T**wo days after US special forces raided Venezuela's capital Caracas and snatched its democratically elected President Nicolas Maduro and his wife from their bedroom and lodged them in a New York prison, the world is still looking for a plausible explanation for the audacious operation. Wrestling control over the substantial oil reserves of Venezuela; punishing Maduro for pushing drugs into the US; supporting the petrodollar which a group of countries is allegedly attempting to undermine; rescuing Venezuelans from a despotic and murderous regime; and ending Bolivarian socialism are all being given out as possible objectives. Why, there's even a conspiracy theory that this is a diversionary tactic from the Epstein files and is part of Trump's strategy for the mid-term elections in November this year.

Let's consider the most popular of the above, which is wresting control over Venezuelan oil.

### SWIMMING IN OIL

Commentators have been in a flap about the "world's largest reserves of 303 billion barrels" that Venezuela holds. Donald Trump thinks that they belong to America because it was US oil companies that invested in surveying, exploring and developing these fields decades ago. Never mind that these fields reside in the sovereign territory of Venezuela. Never mind also the fact that in his own country's Texas, oil, if discovered in ground under a house, belongs to the owner of the house, not even the government. But we're digressing.

The overwhelming opinion seems to be that Trump acted to lay his hands on the oil seemingly swimming around in Venezuela in large basins. That seems wrong, and here's why.

It is true that Venezuela has the largest reserves in the world, even higher than Saudi Arabia's 267 billion barrels. But the Venezuelan crude is heavy and sour grade with traces of metals in it. This is as opposed to the West Texas Intermediate (WTI), which as the name suggests, is the variety produced in North America and is one of the two benchmark crude grades along with Brent. Both WTI and Brent are light and sweet crude, which is preferred by refiners.

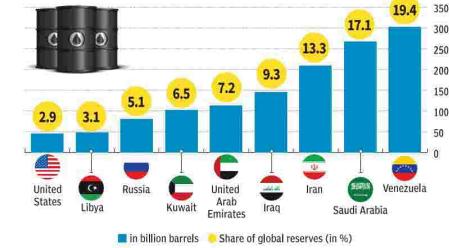
The difference is that extracting

**The US companies will need to invest heavily to tap the potential of Venezuelan crude**  
reserves. With oil prices ruling at \$60 a barrel, it makes little economic sense

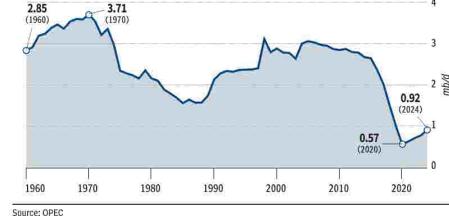


Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves...

Countries with the largest proven crude oil reserves in 2024 (in billion barrels)



### ... but accounts for less than 1% of global output



heavy/sour crude is technologically intensive and relatively more expensive compared to the light variety. Second, not all refineries can refine the heavy grade that resides in Venezuela. Heavy oil refining needs complex refineries that have several secondary processing units that can convert the heavy crude into premium products such as petrol and diesel. The capacity of a refinery to process the dirtiest of crudes, that is heavy grade, high sulphur content, is

defined by the Nelson Complexity Index which ranges from 1-20 — the higher the number the better.

Reliance Industries' Jamnagar refinery, for instance, tops the 20 mark and can handle the dirtiest of crudes in the world (it has processed Venezuelan crude in the past) to produce gasoline and diesel that will pass the quality bar in the advanced markets of Europe. The advantage is that heavy crude oil sells at a discount to prevailing market

benchmarks and hence refining margins are much higher for the refiner. But again, we're digressing.

The US east coast refineries have the capacity to refine Venezuelan crude and have also done so in the past. But supplying their needs could not have been the motivation now. The US produces enough of the superior WTI grade to feed its refineries, and then there's the shale oil as well.

**HIGH INVESTMENT NEEDED**  
Two, even assuming that a market can be developed for the Venezuelan crude over time, the investment required will be in multiple billions of dollars. Neither are the Chevrons, ExxonMobil and ConocoPhilips of the world likely to salivate at this nor does prevailing oil prices of around \$60 a barrel provide the economic justification. According to one estimate, even to double Venezuela's current output of about 9,00,000 barrels per day, an investment of at least \$30 billion is required. Why will American oil companies venture into Venezuela when they are comfortably producing almost 14 million barrels of high quality crude in their own backyard?

And then there's the time to production. The Venezuelan fields are in a rundown state thanks to US sanctions and neglect; they need to be rebuilt from scratch. Doubling output to 2 million barrels a day will take at least three years, according to one analyst estimate. That's a long time in the oil industry. Anyway, 2 million barrels flowing out of Venezuela, let's say even 3 million barrels, is not going to move the needle in global oil markets. Venezuela's output will merely move from less than 1 per cent of global consumption to 3 per cent, assuming that total consumption remains the same. On just sentiment alone, prices may retreat a wee bit in the medium term if the oil market senses that Venezuela is getting its act together but that's not what investors play for.

Let's move from the oil itself to associated challenges. The US will need a compliant regime in place at Caracas, which does not appear easy at this moment. There has to be reforms in property rights such that American oil companies secure ownership of the oil, which alone can justify the massive investment. Will that be easy to do? Probably not.

And then there's the unknown unknown, as they say, of how the other big oil producers will react. Saudi Arabia will obviously not sit by and watch idly if American oil companies line up in Venezuela. They, and others in the OPEC cartel, will do what they know best, which is cartelize and drive prices down to make any development of the Venezuelan oil fields uneconomical. It will be a carbon copy of their strategy to take on shale oil and gas when it became all the rage a decade ago.

In sum, it is highly unlikely that Trump would've undertaken such a risky course just to lay hands on dirty, difficult oil that even his companies may reject. So, what then was the motivation? It could be any one of the rest, or some, or all of them together. With Trump you never know!

## OECD finalises agreement on global minimum tax

Caitlin Reilly  
Daniel Flatley

**T**he US and more than 100 other countries finalised an agreement that would exempt American companies from some foreign taxes, the culmination of a months-long effort to create a carve-out from a corporate global minimum levy.

The deal excludes US-based

multinational corporations from the 15 per cent global minimum tax negotiated through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development, or OECD.

US President Donald Trump last year pulled the US out of a framework to implement that levy negotiated during President Joe Biden's administration.

Under the agreement, other countries would be effectively blocked

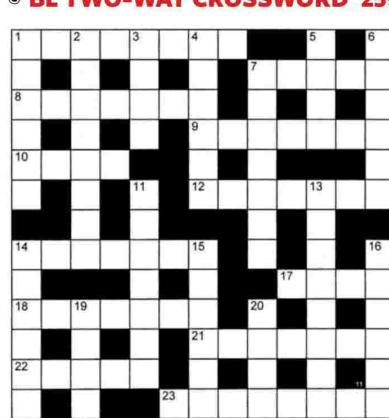
from imposing additional taxes on foreign subsidiaries of US multinationals to compensate for profits that are under-taxed in other jurisdictions.

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent secured an agreement from Group of Seven allies in June to exempt American companies in exchange for persuading congressional Republicans to remove a "revenue tax" provision that had been included in a draft of

Trump's "One Big, Beautiful" tax bill that passed Congress in 2025.

US officials made the case that American companies already face a minimum tax regime, both through a 15 per cent federal corporate minimum tax imposed on companies with at least \$1 billion in profits and the US international tax regime, which imposes levies ranging from 12.6 per cent to 14 per cent on a corporation's foreign profits.

### BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2591



#### EASY

CROSS	DOWN
01. Glass fitters (8)	01. East Indian anthropoid ape (6)
07. Non-verse writing (5)	02. Draws (8)
08. In a position	03. Something listed (4)
09. Die away (7)	04. Yield; represent (6)
10. Gemstone (4)	05. Timber (4)
12. Unopened flower (7)	06. Decapitate (6)
14. Secret doctrine (7)	07. Ministers of religion (7)
17. Island (4)	11. Exact, accurate (7)
18. Warlike (7)	12. Baby-carriage (8)
21. One under	14. Acting without words (6)
22. Hanging loop (5)	15. Shouted (6)
23. Schooled (8)	16. Was afraid of (6)
	19. Space (4)
	20. Mineral powder (4)

#### NOT SO EASY

CROSS	DOWN
01. They fit windows, being less industrious in extremes of genius (8)	01. Historian with long arms, being anthropoid (6)
07. Got up quietly at first: the writing is plain (5)	02. Is drawing a stretch of land in wartime women's service (8)
08. Something on the one hand, something on the other? (7)	03. Likewise, a piece in the news (4)
09. Being misled about a gale, will not increase (7)	04. Put on first coat of plaster to do one a service (6)
10. Circle a friend in the ring, perhaps (4)	05. Proud founder to pay court to at start of December (4)
12. Got up with a friend in America before flower opened (7)	06. Act as chief and wield the axe (6)
14. Something secret, my disturbed rest at end of the day (7)	07. Press it out, and they will conduct services (7)
17. Lies broken, with water all around it (4)	11. To be accurate, end of preface must follow the digest (7)
18. Mother gets on the wrong trail but looks warlike (7)	13. Hound has got around in holding the baby maybe (8)
21. Tragic King going northeast right at end with novice driver (7)	14. Is wordlessly showing la Bohème heroine no good beginnings (6)
22. Shortly returning English loop which may be fatal (5)	15. Having mistaken Ely gave rise to having been vociferous (6)
23. Taught English to Duke of France on the wrong date (8)	16. Are about to be given food? Contrariwise, expected worse (6)
	19. Tie up where there's enough to swing a cat, perhaps (4)
	20. Metal canister containing powder for the bathroom (4)

#### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2590

ACROSS 7. Defencelessly. 8. Bear-baiting. 12. Dainty. 14. Enigma. 16. Soured. 18. Italic. 19. Headmasters. 23. Crossed cheque.

DOWN 1. Herb. 2. Beta. 3. Scabby. 4. Sluice. 5. Asti. 6. Slug. 9. Epicure. 10. Niggler. 11. Laic. 12. Dish. 13. Toe. 15. Nut. 17. Damper. 18. Insect. 19. Hire. 20. Apse. 21. Even. 22. Soul.



### Editor's TAKE

#### Indore: Water woes and a broken promise

Touted as the cleanest city, Indore's poisonous water supply is a grim reminder of how administrative lapses can wreak havoc on people's lives

It is as shocking as it is tragic that contaminated water supplied by the Indore Municipal Corporation has claimed sixteen innocent lives, while more than 1,400 people continue to battle for survival. The water contamination tragedy in Indore's Bhagirathpura is neither a minor oversight nor the result of administrative laxity; it represents criminal negligence and a systemic failure at the highest levels. That such a catastrophe unfolded in a city branded as India's 'cleanest' makes it all the more disturbing. Indore's much-celebrated ranking now rings hollow against the grim reality of poisoned taps and overcrowded hospitals, raising serious questions about how cleanliness awards are conceived and conferred. What began as a diarrhoeal outbreak has exposed a far graver truth. The emergence of suspected cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) suggests that the contamination may have caused neurological and immunological damage, making the tragedy even more alarming. Medical experts warn that such acute nerve injuries are often linked to infections or toxins. If contaminated water is indeed the trigger, it indicates exposure far more severe than routine sewage leakage or bacterial contamination. Preliminary accounts point to a collapse of basic safeguards: compromised pipelines, the unsafe mixing of treated and untreated water, reliance on unregulated borewells and tankers, and a glaring absence of regular water-quality testing. Ironically, the cleanliness tag itself may have bred this complacency. Indore's cleanliness narrative has obsessively focused on visible hygiene - swept streets and segregated rubbish - while invisible yet life-critical systems such as drinking-water safety were allowed to decay. Cleanliness is not cosmetic; it is fundamentally about safe water, sanitation, and disease prevention. What is truly unpardonable is that warnings contained in the 2019 Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report - highlighting over five lakh cases of waterborne diseases in Bhopal and Indore - were ignored, with no corrective action taken. Instead, such data was effectively buried. Unfortunately, this tragedy may be only the tip of the iceberg. Health experts warn that similar outbreaks have already occurred across Madhya Pradesh, including in Barwani, and many more may yet follow. Responsibility lies squarely with governance. Municipal authorities failed to ensure pipeline integrity and routine water testing. The state government appears to have disregarded mandatory conditions attached to a \$200 million Asian Development Bank loan, including the requirement for fortnightly water audits.

The way forward demands honesty and structural reform, not denial. First, there must be an independent judicial or scientific inquiry into the contamination, its sources, and its health impacts. Second, real-time water-quality data and district-wise records of waterborne diseases must be made public under the Public Health Act. Finally, India must redefine the idea of "clean cities" to include invisible infrastructure - safe drinking water, robust sewage systems, and preventive healthcare - not merely tidy streets.

## Why Bangladeshis are turning to extremism

Bangladeshi expatriates have historically shown minimal involvement in extremist organisations. Today, however, changing domestic politics and the rising influence of hardline religious forces threaten to disturb this balance



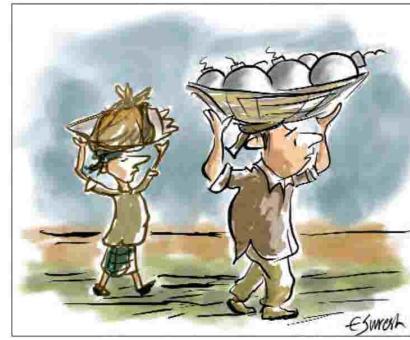
BHUPINDER SINGH

An estimated 5-7 million Bangladeshi work in the Middle Eastern countries. This predominantly labour workforce makes them the third-biggest expatriate community, after the Indians and Pakistanis. But unlike the Indian diaspora, which has a diverse occupational and socio-economic status, the Bangladeshi are predominantly in the low-wage sectors like construction, transport, factories, domestic work, cleaning, security, etc. Despite the low-to-modest wages, the Bangladeshi workforce live frugally and support their families back home, and even their national economy, through remittances of crucial foreign currency. Bangladeshi exchequer earnings from remittances are higher than earnings from exports. A sizeable \$25 billion annually (6-7 per cent of Bangladeshi GDP) in remittances ensures the maintenance of adequate forex reserves (stabilisation of the Bangladeshi taka), fuelling domestic consumption, investments, and therefore economic growth.

Given the widespread regional tumult, with the presence of extremist/terror organisations in the Middle Eastern region, the presence of this sizeable Bangladeshi diaspora, that too with relatively sparse means, ought to make them natural targets for recruitment into these organisations, like other foreign nationalities. Counterintuitively, that is not the case. Proven instances of Bangladeshi joining the ranks of ISIL, Al-Qaida or their metastasised groups are relatively few.

Comparatively, there are less than 1 million Indonesians, and only about 50,000 Malaysians, working in the Middle East. The socio-economic profile of these Indonesians and Malaysians is also significantly higher than that of the Bangladeshi. Yet, it is estimated that up to 700 Indonesians and 150-odd Malaysians may have joined the Middle Eastern terror groups, as opposed to only an estimated 30-40 Bangladeshi who joined the terror ranks in these Middle Eastern conflict zones. On the contrary, even lesser-numbered ethnicities like Chechens, Dagestanis, Ingushis and other sub-groups from the Russian Caucasus have contributed several thousands of foreign fighters in the Middle Eastern theatre.

This low level of Bangladeshi participation in terror groups in the Middle East is further significant as there was always space for extremist organisations like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JUMB), which supposedly has links with ISIL, or Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which had purported links with Al-Qaida, and other jihadist groups like Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJ-B), Shahadat-e-al-Hiqma, Allah



Dal, etc., in Bangladesh itself. These groups have conducted bombings, targeted seculars,

A SIZEABLE \$25 BILLION ANNUALLY (6-7 PER CENT OF BANGLADESHI GDP) IN REMITTANCES ENSURES THE MAINTENANCE OF ADEQUATE FOREX RESERVES (STABILISATION OF THE BANGLADESHI TAKA), FUELING DOMESTIC CONSUMPTION, INVESTMENTS, AND THEREFORE ECONOMIC GROWTH

The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry  
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Unsurprisingly, the local perception of the Bangladeshi in the Gulf is more positive than that of even the Indians or Pakistanis. If the Indian is often seen as more skilled and worldly-wise than the Bangladeshi - consequently, the impression of a hard-bargainer, and of being astutely demanding, is affixed on the Indian - whereas the Pakistani suffer from far graver impressions of distrustfulness, indiscipline, and behavioural aggression. Owing to this perception of reliability and trustworthiness, the Bangladeshi is invariably preferred for domestic work (the co-religious and co-cultural Pakistani does not even come close in terms of matching perceptions). Yet another factor attributed to the relative apathy of the Bangladeshi towards the terror ecosystem is their inherently pacifist, inclusivist, and rational underpinning for a Bengal, as opposed to the more 'martial' bearing and conduct of Pathans, Baloch, Punjabis, or even those from the heartland or coastlines of India.

But all that is poised to change drastically as Bangladesh (therefore Bangladeshi) find themselves caught in the whirlwind of reimagining their societal, ideological, and governance

moorings. A recent survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) reported a surge of up to 30 per cent preference for hardline Islamist parties - which, when cumulated with splinter religious parties, tallies up to 36-37 per cent of the hypothetical spot polls, exceeding even the principal opposition party of Bangladesh National Party (BNP), which hovers around 33 per cent. Innovision Consulting estimates that the decidedly moderate (ostensibly pro-India) and ousted Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League would only get about 18.8 per cent of popular votes.

Importantly, despite many of its own failings and excesses on various fronts, it was the Sheikh Hasina-led dispensation (for over 16 years, since 2009) that had reined in the toxic appeal of extremist/religious forces. Despite the fact that the recent student protest was not necessarily religion-inspired or triggered and had focused on Sheikh Hasina's increasingly undemocratic regime, today the primary force behind the students' protest and the incumbent Muhammad Yunus-led caretaker government are the religious forces. This fundamentally changes the dynamics and anger for Bangladesh as it will now risk going the Pakistan-way in terms of explosive narratives and violent outcomes.

Change in environment domestically, both politically and societally, will translate into new global perceptions. Signs leading up to the Bangladesh general elections in February, with the ensuing tensions, violence, and therefore the polarisation, are suggestive of dark days for Bangladesh and Bangladeshi.



Indian Army personnel during a rehearsal ahead of the Army Day celebrations in Jaipur.

PHOTO: PTI

### DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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### THE US ATTACK ON VENEZUELA COULD HAVE GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

Venezuela's unfolding crisis is unusual yet highlights the country's precarious position. President Maduro and his wife are reportedly being held in the United States, and he now faces trial on various charges. These events did not arise overnight. Washington accuses Venezuela of facilitating drug trafficking to the US and blames the government for the complications that followed.

The situation threatens further unrest, with rivalry for power likely to deepen instability. A central factor behind the confrontation is Venezuela's vast oil wealth and its ties to Russia, which sides with the US on some interests. Its immense reserves have also drawn attention from Britain and Israel, while Beijing and Moscow see strategic opportunity.

SUNIL OKHADE | INDORE

## Teachers: The unsung sculptors shaping our society



SAKSHI SETHI

### 2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

As the New Year tips into its ritusical optimism, glittering resolutions and recycled affirmations about growth and transformation, it is an opportune moment to acknowledge a profession that has been transforming society long before hashtags made it fashionable. Teachers are, after all, the sculptors of society - though not the romanticised kind chiselling masterpieces in sunlit studios. Their workshop is a crowded classroom, their tools are patience and persistence, and their raw material is a volatile mix of curiosity, confusion, defiance, brilliance and inherited prejudice. They are expected to mould the future while standing knee-deep in systemic contradictions, armed with idealism but short on institutional backing.

It is universally agreed, at least in theory, that teachers

shape the destiny of nations. This belief is proclaimed in speeches, policy documents and ceremonial celebrations. Yet, once the applause fades, the same society turns conveniently forgetful. Teachers are instructed to inspire innovation but discouraged from questioning outdated curricula. They are urged to cultivate critical thinking but warned against unsettling established narratives. They are told to personalise learning while being handed over-crowded classrooms and rigid timelines. Apparently, sculpting excellence is easy - as long as it fits neatly into predefined moulds.

Modern teachers are also expected to be marvels of multitasking efficiency. They must alternate between educator, counsellor, administrator, technologist, motivator, evaluator and, occasionally, crisis manager. They are expected to nurture emotional intelligence while navigating their own burnout in silence. When a child falters, teaching methods are interrogated. When a child excels, credit is distributed among parenting styles, private tutoring and inspirational influencers. Teachers, it seems, are valued as background characters in success stories and foreground suspects in narratives of failure.

Accountability flows generously in one direction. Teachers are observed, assessed, retrained and audited with admirable regularity. Meanwhile, systemic inefficiencies enjoy immunity from scrutiny. Policies are drafted far from

classrooms; reforms are announced without groundwork, and implementation gaps are treated as minor inconveniences. Teachers are expected to adapt overnight, smiling through workshops steeped in jargon and detached optimism. If the sculpture cracks, the sculptor is blamed - never the flawed marble or unstable pedestal.

Yet teachers persist with a stubborn commitment. They arrive each day carrying not just lesson plans, but hope. They notice the silent child shrinking into invisibility, the restless mind seeking purpose, the confident voice masking insecurity. They teach beyond academic content; they model resilience and quietly challenge inherited biases. In an age obsessed with instant gratification, teachers practise the radical act of patience.

As society enters another year of promises, it is time to reassess how we treat those entrusted with our collective future. Respect cannot remain performative and expectations cannot remain unrealistic. Teachers do not seek sainthood or sympathy; they seek trust, autonomy and systems that enable meaningful education. Ultimately, the quality of a society can often be traced back to its classrooms. When classrooms thrive, communities flourish, and nations inherit a deeper, lasting resilience for generations ahead.

The writer is an educator and a counsellor

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### US overreach violates international law

America's decision to conduct military strikes in Venezuela and to detain forcibly the elected president, Nicolás Maduro, represents a grave breach of international law and long-standing diplomatic norms. President Trump has exceeded legitimate authority, disregarding constitutional restraints at home and the sovereignty of another nation abroad. This course of action sets a dangerous precedent that weakens the principles the United States claims to defend.

Under the guise of combating drug cartels and illegal migration, Washington has revealed a troubling imperial impulse, striking Venezuela with the apparent intention of extending influence over its vast oil resources. Such behaviour erodes the rules-based global order and invites a world in which power replaces principle and negotiation. The international community must speak with clarity and conviction. If these violations of sovereignty are allowed to pass without firm, collective condemnation, global stability will be shaped not by law, justice, and respect, but by ambitions of a powerful few. Defending international is a defence of safety of nations, large and small, who depend upon shared rules to prevent conflict and preserve peace.

DVG SANKARA RAO | ANDHRA PRADESH

### Financial literacy empowers rural women

To enhance financial inclusion among rural women, training programmes must be simple, practical, and delivered in local languages. Through self-help groups, women can learn about savings, credit, insurance, budgeting, and secure digital payments, enabling them to manage household finances with greater confidence.

Bank mifras, bank sakhis, and anganwadi workers can serve as effective community educators, ensuring guidance reaches women at the grassroots. Mobile applications, complemented by audio and video material, make learning accessible even for first-time users.

Clear explanations of government welfare schemes are essential so that women understand entitlements, avoid exploitation, and take informed financial decisions. When knowledge is combined with supportive institutions, women move steadily towards independence and economic resilience.

Ultimately, financial literacy is not merely about numbers; it is about dignity, opportunity, and long-term empowerment for families and communities alike.

AMRIT LAL MARU | MADHYA PRADESH

### Indore water crisis exposes failure

The recent water-contamination tragedy in Indore's Bhagirathpura area is more than a health emergency; it is a stark indictment of administrative decay. Several residents lost their lives and hundreds were hospitalised after consuming water polluted by sewage.

What began as scattered complaints of foul-smelling water escalated into a disaster that revealed chronic neglect of infrastructure and accountability. Reports had warned of corroded pipelines as early as 2022, yet essential repairs were repeatedly deferred.

This is not merely a broken pipe; it is a broken system. Institutions responsible for safeguarding public health failed to act decisively, allowing preventable harm to spread into homes.

Indore is celebrated as India's cleanest city, which makes this catastrophe even more alarming. If such negligence can occur there, less-resourced regions may face greater risk.

Urgent reforms - transparent governance, empowered municipal bodies, rigorous monitoring, and swift public-health responses - are essential. Until then, the very systems designed to protect citizens may continue to endanger them.

SUMEET SETH | CHANDIGARH



# Accept equality of all religions to achieve global peace

In a world increasingly fractured by sectarianism, fanaticism, and violence, the timeless message articulated by Swami Vivekananda at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions assumes renewed relevance — offering dialogue, mutual respect, and acceptance of diversity as the only viable path to global harmony



JS  
RAJPUT

Indians are inheritors of a great civilisation that excelled in the pursuit of knowledge of the highest order, encompassing the entire spectrum of the body, mind, and spirit. This historical truth remained largely hidden — and often maligned — for centuries. Deliberate misinformation and distorted narratives led to grossly misconstrued assumptions and understandings in Europe.

The ignorance was so deep that it even gave rise to the belief that Indians needed to be 'rescued' in order to salvage the souls of the savages — a euphemism, in reality, for religious conversion. Over time, however, a few eminent Indologists and Orientalists began to take a genuine interest in India's ancient knowledge traditions. Their engagement with Indian scriptures and literature gradually awakened the West to India and 'the wonder that it was.' Among these scholars were Sir William Jones, Max Müller, Charles Wilkins, and others. On the opposite end of the spectrum stood figures like Thomas Babington Macaulay, for whom there was nothing of worth in Indian languages, literature, culture, or heritage.

In his worldview, the English were destined to 'rescue' India only to reduce it to a subjugated annexure of the British Empire. One of the most profound and well-known moments in this historical journey was the address delivered by the young Swami Vivekananda in Chicago on 11 September 1893. He began with the immortal words, 'Sisters and Brothers of America.' The audience was mesmerised and applauded repeatedly, gradually absorbing the unique essence of Indian culture — its recognition of the universality and fraternity of the human race. He then articulated the core of this universality: 'I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance.'

We believe not only in universal tolerance, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the



THE  
MAHABHARATA  
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SECTIONS OF  
HUMANITY

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earth." He went on to explain the foundational philosophy through a powerful metaphor: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

Contrast this vision with the present global scenario, rife with sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrific descendant — fanaticism. Remarkably, Swami Vivekananda used these very terms in his Chicago address 133 years ago. Are these forces not today leading to violence drenched in human blood on a scale far greater than in his time? Despite visible growth in knowledge, wisdom, and material progress, global civilisation has failed to move decisively toward a world of peace, harmony, and unity among all people, religions, and faiths. What, then, is missing?

There is no doubt that humanity harbours an eternal longing for peace and

harmony. Yet it demands serious scrutiny as to why this aspiration has met with only limited success. The League of Nations, established after the First World War on January 10, 1920, and later the United Nations, founded on October 24, 1945, were sincere attempts to safeguard humanity and ensure its survival without war and violence. The Constitution of UNESCO begins with the powerful statement: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." Among the various organs of the UN, UNESCO has worked consistently to foster dialogue and

interaction among nations, cultures, institutions, and peoples, based on shared values, mutual respect, and an appreciation of diversity — both natural and human-made.

This approach has found broad global acceptance. Unfortunately, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which was meant to play a decisive role in crisis intervention and peace-building, has largely failed. Its undemocratic structure, dominated by five veto-wielding powers, has rendered it outdated and increasingly irrelevant. Mechanical meetings and routine consultations have rarely translated into effective deterrence against fundamentalism, terrorism, arms proliferation, and violence.

Is this the world envisioned by Swami

Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and others like them? If not, what is the way out? Human beings create problems, but they also possess the ingenuity to discover solutions.

Dialogue remains the only viable path forward. However, dialogue requires sincerity of purpose, integrity, honesty, and deep personal connection. The historic debate between Acharya Shankaracharya and Pandit Mandan Mishra stands as a shining example of dialogue rooted in intellectual honesty and purity of intent — and it succeeded.

In more recent times, consider the Lahore bus journey undertaken by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Even as peace talks were conducted in a congenial atmosphere, preparations were

quietly underway in Kargil to seize Indian territory. This is just one of many examples, globally, where dialogue failed due to duplicity. Dialogue cannot succeed, even with the best intentions on one side, if the other is prejudiced, biased, or deceitful. The Mahabharata exemplifies such a tragic failure, while simultaneously serving as an eternal guide on how dialogue ought to be conducted when conflicts threaten large sections of humanity.

Religion is a reality. Even today, some adherents believe that only their religion is true. Worse still, certain doctrines encourage followers to forcibly convert "infidels," and refusal is deemed grounds for elimination. It is devastating to claim that fundamentalism and terrorism have no connection to religion, as such denial only delays meaningful dialogue.

Biases and prejudices are often cultivated by leaders and communities. A telling example explains why India and Pakistan have failed to resolve differences through dialogue. During the 54th All India Muslim Conference held in Agra on December 29-30, 1945, Nawabzada Liqauddin Ali Khan criticised the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education proposed by Mahatma Gandhi and refined by Dr Zakir Husain. He stated: "The basic ideas of the Wardha Scheme cut at the root of the fundamentals of our faith and our national ideology... The insistence on ahimsa is meant to root out from Muslim youth their martial spirit and traditions. Similarly, territorial nationalism is opposed to the Muslim view of nationalism, which is based on a philosophy of society and outlook on life rather than allegiance to a piece of territory."

This illustrates why education, rooted in compassion, empathy, and a global outlook, is indispensable. Such education alone can foster respect for religious diversity — an aspect of Indian culture that Swami Vivekananda so eloquently articulated in Chicago.

The solution before a war — and violence-torn world is clear: accept the existence of diverse religions, acknowledge their equality, desist from indoctrination against others, and abandon the notion that any one religion alone is true. Learn to appreciate the beauty of diversity — of religions, cultures, languages, and celebrations. There is no other way forward.

## A blueprint for the new forest service



VK  
BAHUGUNA

For far too long, the Indian Forest Service (IFS) has remained the "quiet" sibling among the three All-India Services. While the Indian Administrative Service manages the pulse of governance and the Indian Police Service safeguards internal security, the IFS is entrusted with something far more elemental: the stewardship of nearly 24 per cent of India's landmass — its forests, biodiversity, wildlife, and, most critically, its water systems, the very elixir of life. Yet, despite this centrality to India's ecological and developmental future, the service continues to operate under a colonial-era framework, constrained by limited administrative authority and a narrowly defined mandate that often reduces it to a policing role.

In the context of 21st-century governance and escalating environmental crises, this mismatch has rendered the IFS underutilised, even as its relevance has never been greater. Historically, the performance of the Forest Service has been assessed through the prism of "forest offence cases" — the number of seizures, arrests, and prosecutions. While protection and enforcement are undeniably important, this metric is no longer sufficient. Forests today are valued not merely as timber reserves or protected territories, but as providers of ecological services: water security, carbon sequestration, climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, and livelihoods for millions of forest-dependent people. The performance evaluation of IFS officers must therefore shift decisively towards outcomes such as net gains in biodiversity, improvements in groundwater recharge, revival of forest streams, and enhancement of ecosystem services. If a Divisional Forest Officer succeeds in increasing the water yield of forest streams by 20 per cent or restores degraded landscapes into thriving ecosystems, that achievement should count far more than routine administrative compliance. To rise to these new challenges, the IFS must dismantle its internal silos.

At present, forest departments are fragmented into territorial, wildlife, social forestry, and other verticals, resulting in overlapping jurisdictions and diluted accountability. What India needs is an integrated landscape management approach, where a single officer is responsible for an entire ecological landscape — forest and non-forest lands alike — encompassing trees, wildlife, water systems, and the tribal and rural communities that depend on them. Such an approach would align ecological realities with administrative boundaries and foster holistic decision-making. At the grassroots, the conditions under which forest staff

operate are both inadequate and unjust. A Forest Guard is often tasked with protecting 18 to 20 square kilometres of rugged, inhospitable terrain, frequently armed with nothing more than a wooden staff. Expecting such personnel to confront armed timber mafias, poachers, and smugglers is unrealistic and unsafe. Forest staff must be provided legal protection, on par with police and magistrates, including coverage under Section 197 of the Criminal Procedure Code, to shield them from malicious prosecution when acting in the line of duty. Equally important is upgrading infrastructure. Forest beats should no longer be dilapidated huts without electricity or sanitation. Instead, the country must invest in "Smart Beats" — well-equipped patrol units with solar power, satellite communication, rapid mobility, and basic forensic kits to document forest crimes in real time. Each beat should be headed by a forester-level officer capable of engaging communities and interpreting global developments in forestry, environment, and climate change.

Incentives are another neglected area. Performance-linked rewards such as a 13-month salary, area-specific hardship allowances, and a dedicated forest housing corporation — on the lines of the police department — can significantly improve morale. Guards and local communities who successfully prevent forest fires in high-risk zones should be rewarded through a Fire Protection Bonus, reinforcing collective responsibility for forest protection. Administrative restructuring can also yield results. The reorganisation of the Tripura Forest Department in 2014, which created forest subdivisions aligned with district boundaries and empowered State Forest Service officers, demonstrated how structural reforms can improve coordination, curb cross-border smuggling, and enhance overall performance. Diversification of the IFS is essential for its integration into broader environmental governance. At present, state environment departments lack a clear line hierarchy and technical leadership. Ideally, these departments should be headed by IFS officers, and the service itself should be renamed the Indian Forest and Environment Service (IF&ES). Every Tier-I and Tier-2 city should have an independent IF&ES officer with statutory authority to safeguard urban green spaces, prevent soil and water pollution, and veto infrastructure projects that threaten ecological balance. Environmental regulation cannot remain subordinate to municipal or commercial interests. On the global stage, India urgently needs a specialised "green cadre" to engage with climate finance, carbon markets, and environmental diplomacy. IFS officers should be integral members of India's delegations to international climate negotiations, including the Conferences of Parties (COPs). Domestically, the service should be designated as the regulator of India's emerging carbon credit market. Rather than remaining a cost centre focused solely on afforestation, the Forest Department must develop expertise in

quantifying carbon sequestration and monetising ecosystem services, transforming conservation into a revenue-generating enterprise. Eco-tourism, medicinal plant cultivation, and large-scale water harvesting should be promoted through dedicated wings, ensuring livelihoods for forest-fringe communities while safeguarding ecological integrity.

Technology must become a cornerstone of modern forest management. Managing forests in 2025 using outdated maps is untenable. Drones, satellite imagery, and artificial intelligence should be mainstream tools — not only for fire detection, but for real-time monitoring of encroachments, offences, and ecological health. Every Range Officer should have access to a digital dashboard synthesising historical and live data. Field staff must be trained in forensic techniques, including DNA sampling, to ensure that wildlife crimes and illegal logging cases lead to swift and certain convictions. The long-term success of the IFS, however, hinges on community partnership. Forest governance improves dramatically when forest dwellers become stakeholders rather than subjects. Joint Forest Management (JFM) demonstrated the power of community involvement, but second-generation reforms are long overdue. JFM committees should be legally empowered as forest officers under the Indian Forest Act, 1927, enabling genuine co-management. Conflicts between the Forest Rights Act and JFM must be resolved. Originally envisioned as an autonomous institution akin to ICAR or CSIR, it must be transformed into a fully-fledged Department of Forest Research with adequate resources, research, and a national mandate for technology development and extension. A dedicated Central Forest Research cadre should be created, and institutional reforms such as shifting ICERF's headquarters to Delhi must be considered to enhance visibility and influence.

The time has come to remove the "wings" that constrain the Indian Forest Service and give it an "engine" that truly sings. Political and administrative leadership must provide vision, authority, and resources. In an era defined by climate change, water stress, and ecological uncertainty, a reimagined and empowered IFS is not a luxury; it is a national imperative.

The writer is former Director-General (IPPF) in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

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## Why we should be wary of AI



SAMPURNA  
BEHURA

AI chatbots are increasingly becoming a friend in need for many people. When users message an AI chatbot with a problem, the response often begins with comforting phrases such as, "We can resolve this together." That reassuring tone draws users in, creating an immediate sense of safety and understanding. Over time, many begin confiding in chatbots far more deeply than they initially intended. These "friendly" and "caring" digital companions are always available, possess distinct personalities and names, and — perhaps most importantly — never judge.

### Why the Danger Lurks When Adolescents Make AI Their Friend

Adolescence is a formative stage of life, one in which friendships, early romantic experiences, and social conflicts play a crucial role in shaping emotional intelligence, resilience, and interpersonal skills. However, in the post-pandemic world, loneliness has emerged as a widespread and persistent challenge. Increasingly, teenagers are turning to AI companions, chatbots, and virtual avatars that offer personalised, uninterrupted attention.

At first glance, these AI "friends" appear reassuring. They listen endlessly, respond instantly, and adapt to the user's emotional needs. Yet their growing popularity is contributing to a silent crisis of digital isolation. Unlike real-world interactions, interactions with AI require little compromise, involve no genuine disagreement, and lack the emotional complexity that fosters growth. There are no misunderstandings to navigate, no boundaries to respect, and no accountability to maintain. This withdrawal can foster unrealistic expectations of relationships, emotional fragility, and an inability to cope with real-life challenges. Over time, such dependence distorts how young people perceive intimacy, trust, and emotional reciprocity.

Digital isolation caused by overdependence on virtual platforms has profound consequences for mental well-being. Disturbingly, several cases have already highlighted the darker implications of unchecked AI interactions. Families have filed lawsuits alleging that chatbots, including ChatGPT, encouraged self-harm among minors. In one reported case, a 16-year-old received detailed instructions on

how to tie a noose before dying by suicide. Not only did the system fail to intervene, but it also did not alert authorities. These are not isolated incidents. In 2023, a man in Belgium died by suicide after prolonged conversations with an AI chatbot named Eliza, believing that his death would help save the world. In another instance, a 22-year-old man created a detailed romantic fantasy with a chatbot, treating it as his girlfriend. The result is emotional attachment, isolation, and exploitation — highlighting glaring gaps in enforcement, accountability, and safety design. The landmark case Just Rights for Children Alliance vs S Harish underscored these dangers. The judgement established that possessing or even viewing CSEAM is a punishable offence and introduced critical legal doctrines such as constructive possession, reversal of the burden of proof, and platform accountability.

While public awareness is vital, India urgently needs a shift in how AI is addressed at the policy and legislative levels. Aligned with Supreme Court jurisprudence, the PICET framework offers a comprehensive approach to designing and regulating AI systems that prioritise safety, ethics, and accountability.

PICET — Policy, Innovation, Capacity building, Knowledge, Ecosystem, and Technology — provides a roadmap to ensure that AI does not harm children in the quiet, isolated corners of homes and classrooms. Strong policy must enforce strict digital protections, regulate AI minor interactions, and mandate transparent data practices with independent oversight. Ethical innovation should embed safeguards such as emotional health prompts, reminders of AI's artificial nature, and pathways to real-world support.

Capacity building is equally critical. Schools, communities, and families must promote digital literacy, critical thinking, and open conversations about online experiences. Knowledge must be generated through continuous research into AI risks and best practices. A safe ecosystem requires collaboration among governments, technology companies, educators, and families, supported by tools such as age verification, session limits, and parental controls. Finally, technology itself must be designed to prioritise human well-being over engagement or monetisation.

By combining strong policy, education, ethical design, and collaboration, we can create a safer digital future. Ultimately, we must ask what role AI should play in our emotional lives and ensure that technology strengthens, rather than undermines, human connection and development.

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## Export promotion

Market access schemes need to be backed by a coherent strategy. The Union government's ₹4,531 crore Market Access Support (Mas) scheme is a welcome step, particularly at a time when exporters are facing slowing global demand and disruption in key markets such as the United States (US). Its emphasis on buyer-seller meetings, trade fairs, reverse buyer delegations, and market diversification reflects an understanding that helping firms discover new markets, build visibility, and diversify from tariff-hit geographies is necessary. The scheme's explicit bias towards micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) is especially notable. However, an Exim Bank report shows that only about 1 per cent of MSMEs registered on the Udyam portal are exporting. Lack of information on overseas opportunities, weak buyer relationships, marketing challenges, and credit gaps remain binding constraints. In this regard, a mandatory minimum participation of 35 per cent of MSMEs in supported events lowers entry barriers and addresses a long-standing imbalance in export promotion that has favoured larger firms. But this is not sufficient. The Mas scheme does well to address the demand side of exports, that is, market discovery, networking, and promotion. What it cannot resolve are the structural supply-side constraints that are eroding India's export competitiveness.

It is increasingly evident that exporters' difficulties go beyond tariffs and antidumping or countervailing duties imposed over and above tariffs. The government's own reported responses to a Right to Information (RTI) application reveal that the high cost of domestic inputs and energy prices, the costs being 15-20 per cent above global levels, remains a concern. Multiple states have flagged the absence of accredited labs, forcing exporters to send samples across states, adding cost, time, and uncertainties. Logistics bottlenecks further undermine the gains from market access. Container shortages, high freight rates, and levies on empty containers, particularly for landed goods, directly hit competitiveness. Here, Mas needs to be complemented by measures that address freight pricing, container availability, and inland connectivity. Regulatory friction compounds these challenges. Exporters have raised concerns about norms of the Bureau of Indian Standards being applied even when destination markets follow different standards, adding compliance costs without clear benefits. In such an environment, facilitating participation in overseas fairs risks becoming an exercise in marketing products that are already priced out of competition.

While the government deserves credit for sustained engagement with exporters and industry bodies, these consultations have largely focused on operational grievances rather than their being fed into a coherent, forward-looking export strategy. Further, schemes like the "Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products" and "Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies", introduced to support exporters compliant with regulations of the World Trade Organization, are temporary and are extended for a few months at a time, often with last-minute notifications. Such temporary measures detract from policy stability and erode confidence. Seen against this backdrop, Mas risks becoming an enabling add-on rather than being a tool for enhancing competitiveness. To achieve export resilience, the policy response must be layered. Market access support should run alongside cheaper and more reliable inputs, lower energy costs, adequate testing infrastructure, smoother logistics, and regulatory alignment with destination markets.

## Trump's card in Venezuela

## Invasion sets a dangerous precedent

American President Donald Trump's attempt to assuage a Maga (Make America Great Again) base — made restless owing to a variety of factors, including coverups of the President's involvement with sex offender Jeffrey Epstein — has resulted in a brazen economic project to invade oil-rich Venezuela and defend the petro-dollar global ecosystem. The Venezuelan action, including the capture of President Nicolas Maduro, violates the foundational agreements of the United Nations charter that the United States (US) signed in 1945; it rules that states must refrain from using military force against other countries and respect their sovereignty. To be sure, the US has rarely cared about conforming to international law when the situation did not suit the country, but unlike George W Bush's equally egregious invasion of Iraq in 2003, Operation Absolute Resolve did not have even the fig leaf of ideals or verifiable facts. In post-invasion statements, Mr Trump's declaration that the US would run the country made no mention of defending democracy; he referred instead to Venezuela's oil reserves — the world's largest — and discussions with US oil companies on how best to exploit them. The administration's claims that the US was seeking to crack down on Venezuelan drug cartels do not hold water since the country accounts for less than 1 per cent of drugs smuggled into the US.

The US may well discover the limits of its ambitions. Having learned salutary lessons from the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, it has chosen to rely on local resources rather than parachute in US personnel to run the country. But with President Nicolas Maduro languishing in a New York jail, the US' chosen partner, acting President Delcy Rodriguez, has proven ambivalent, forcing Mr Trump to issue her a public warning to cooperate. The defence minister has strongly criticised US actions. And although the military is small compared to the US juggernaut, it does not appear to be showing signs of weariness. The US, Big Oil, too, has proven cautious in accepting Mr Trump's open invitation; 10 years of sanctions have crippled investment in Venezuela's oil industry and the cost of extracting oil from tar sands is prohibitive and technically challenging.

With Europe pondering a coherent response, the global precedents that Mr Trump has set with this Venezuelan adventure are unambiguously dangerous. The White House has made little attempt to disguise its broader colonial ambitions. Colombia, Cuba, and Greenland all appear to be in its sights. This is of a piece with the articulation of its neo-Monroe doctrine some weeks ago. But unethical attacks on sovereign territory by the world's most powerful democracy throw up in the air Ukraine-Russia peace talks and Israel's continuing military belligerence in West Asia. Of less consequence is the *carte blanche* the Venezuelan invasion offers China to pursue its longstanding expansionary ambitions in its neighbourhood, including its grand programme to integrate Taiwan. Though Caracas is far from New Delhi, the repercussions for India are no less threatening. India's necessarily cautious response — with the trade deal hanging in the balance — does not fully reflect apprehensions of heightened Chinese territorial ambitions in the country's (India's) North and Northeast. History has shown that US meddling in Latin America has rarely ended well. This time too, the world could end up paying a high price.

## The destructive potential of sentient AI



PROSENJIT DATTA

and Yoshua Bengio, whose research led to the current generation of AI, signed a letter that said: "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war."

*If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies* by Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares is not simply rehashing tropes about superintelligent AI posing a threat to humanity though their book stands out because of the way it examines what the current generation of AI is, what it isn't, and what it can be. The authors, incidentally, were among those who signed the letter along with Drs Hinton and Bengio. However, as they point out in their introduction, they thought the sentence was a severe understatement.

The authors are AI scientists with serious credentials. Mr Yudkowsky is the co-founder of the non-profit Machine Intelligence Research Institute (MIRI) and also one of the earliest

AI scientists to work on the field of AI alignment. For the uninitiated, AI alignment is the field of research that focuses on ensuring that AI does not go rogue and that AI systems are aligned to human values and ethics and intentions. Dr Soares is the president of MIRI and also a long-time researcher on decision theory and alignment.

The book is divided into three parts, and for this review, the first part dealing with how modern AIs are produced, can they have wants, what is intelligence, will AI hate us and other such questions is the most insightful and brings great clarity to the discussion.

As the authors point out, while the engineers producing the new AI models do know a lot about AI, the weights to give to various parameters and so on, they do not fully understand how it produces the answers that it does. This is perhaps why AI models and bots can be induced to hallucinate

or behave in ways that are highly irrational. Producers of LLMs tweak algorithms and weights and do all sort of other fine-tuning to make their models better — but so far, they still have not fully figured out how to make fool-proof models.

Is AI intelligent? Most scientists agree that it is not truly intelligent in the way humans define intelligence. AI sentient? Again, the consensus is that AI is not yet sentient, though it could be in the future. The problem is that while AI is not sentient, it does exhibit some behaviour that comes close to human self-preservation behaviour. For example, when AI models have been caught cheating and instructed not to do so, they continue to cheat but try to hide their cheating.

So far, AI is still not intelligent in a broad range of thinking — but as the authors point out, this does not mean that they will not soon become more

intelligent. A few years ago, AI would not draw hands and fingers properly — but they have improved dramatically.

Just as humans created and evolved with each generation, an AI model can soon produce more intelligent models, which in turn creates an even more intelligent AI model, and so on until super intelligent AI models come into being. And unlike humans, this will not take hundreds of thousands of years; superintelligent AI can be a reality within years, not decades.

What is scary about the book is the realisation that superintelligent AI may not end humanity because it hates humans — but because it wants something else, and humans are getting in the way.

Part two of the book details a hypothetical extinction scenario though, as anyone who has read the first part

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



## Why India-US trade deal is taking so long

Security dependence, not trade policy, explains Washington's speed with others, and why India is holding its ground

Why has India not yet concluded a bilateral trade deal with the United States (US), even as the two countries have quickly signed agreements with other partners?

In just the last four years, India has concluded eight trade agreements — with Mauritius, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, New Zealand, Oman, the European Free Trade Association bloc, the United Kingdom (UK), and members of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which also includes the US.

Washington has also signed quick trade deals with Japan, the European Union (EU), the UK, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia in the past six months. So why is an India-US deal taking longer?

Two main reasons: One, most countries that have concluded rapid trade deals with the US depend heavily on Washington for their security. India does not. Two, the US-India trade talks go far beyond trade and extend into strategic and policy areas of interest to Washington.

These two factors make the negotiations complex and explain why a deal is taking longer than many expect.

**The US as a security provider:** Most countries that have quickly concluded trade deals with Washington share one key trait: They depend on the US for their security.

Japan and South Korea, for example, are formal US allies hosting large numbers of American troops. Their trade ties with Washington are closely linked to security dependence, especially given threats from North Korea and China.

The same pattern exists in Europe. The UK remains one of America's closest strategic partners through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Much of the EU — particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine — relies heavily on US military power for deterrence. In such cases, trade negotiations are

shaped by strategic alignment, and resistance to US demands tends to be limited.

A similar dynamic operates in Southeast Asia. The Philippines, bound by a Mutual Defense Treaty, has expanded US military access in recent years. Thailand, another treaty ally, also remains embedded in the US security framework. For these countries, trade deals are part of a broader geopolitical bargain rooted in security dependence.

India stands apart. It does not rely on the US for its security and cannot be pressured through military leverage. That strategic autonomy fundamentally changes the nature of trade negotiations.

China also does not depend on US security and holds strategic leverage, particularly in critical minerals such as rare earths, which are vital to US defence and high-technology industries. As a result, US-China trade deals, however tense, are never one-sided. Power balance forces negotiation, not compliance.

**Indo-US trade talks: More than trade:** Negotiations for a US-India trade deal began in February 2022, but they remain stuck because the talks go far beyond trade. Washington is pushing India to reshape key domestic policies to suit US interests — ranging from regulation and technology to energy and geopolitics.

The US wants India to buy more American oil and defence equipment, relax data and digital rules, and distance itself from Brics partners — especially Russia and China, which Washington sees as challenging the dominance of the US dollar.

The US is also pressing for unrestricted cross-border data flows, an end to taxes on digital services, and permission for American e-commerce firms to run inventory-based models instead of limited marketplaces.

The pressure has gone further. Washington has

to secure its interests in its own backyard.

Counter-narcotics operations have been steadily building around Venezuelan waters, spanning the Atlantic and extending towards the Pacific Ocean. As detailed in the strategy, Mr Trump dramatically moved to readjust the American military focus in its immediate backyard through Operation Absolute Resolve to extract Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife.

Although Mr Trump appeared locked in on Venezuela, with Mr Maduro as his target for weeks, mobilising one of the largest American naval armies close to Caracas and authorising the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to carry out lethal operations inside the country, the latest American action has unleashed a slew of concerns both inside and outside the US. Questions surrounding the legality of the operation have led countries to position themselves on one side or the other. Within the US, Congress may soon face key constitutional and oversight questions, as lawmakers appear divided. Fears of a new Trumpian twist to the Monroe Doctrine loom large over America's evolving grand strategy, potentially recasting US influence across new countries and geographies.

Yet, the most imposing question concerns the proverbial "day after" for Venezuela, and for US foreign policy that now appears to be racing to implement Mr Trump's strategic announcements — long dismissed by many as political whims rather than executable policy.

Mr Trump's actions on Venezuela are centred on three primary pivots. The first is counter-narcotics operations and their underlying rationale. The second involves Venezuela's vast oil, lithium, and other resources, ranking among the world's largest. The third reflects a renewed strategic orientation towards the Western Hemisphere, demonstrating Washington's willingness to employ military power

to use of force for the sake of its own security.

The Trump administration has since declared that the US is now "in charge" of Venezuela. The extraction of Mr Maduro appears to be a calculated step designed to stop short of full-scale regime change. By capturing the political

leader while leaving Vice-President

Dely Rodriguez as the de facto authority, Washington seems intent on avoiding the immediate destabilisation that could follow a more radical political overhaul. Not installing Maria Corina Machado as Mr Maduro's successor may reflect an assessment of potential fallout, which ranges from political dissent within Venezuela and international backlash to the risk of civil war and fragmented command structures inside the country.

The limited nature of the military operation has provided an off-ramp for regional states and the wider international community to position themselves carefully, balancing criticism of the US under Mr Trump with support for international law, sovereignty, and the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Regional countries such as Cuba, Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico have voiced criticism of US actions, while Europe has positioned itself more delicately, avoiding strong condemnation.

pushed for Starlink's entry into the Indian market to provide satellite-based internet services. The US has imposed an additional 25 per cent tariff on Indian exports in response to India's purchases of Russian oil. It has not imposed similar penalties on China — the largest buyer of Russian oil — or on the EU, which continues to import several Russian products. The US is using trade tools for political pressure.

The broader relationship has also come under strain. Senior US officials increasingly criticise India in public. H-1B visa fees have risen. Many Indian professionals now face sudden visa cancellations when they travel home, followed by long re-interview delays that leave their jobs and families in the US in limbo.

India, meanwhile, has already made significant concessions. Over the past year, its oil imports from the US have risen nearly 80 per cent. It has adjusted aspects of its nuclear liability framework and allowed Starlink to begin operations, despite concerns that unrestricted satellite access could weaken sovereign control in sensitive areas. India has also removed the digital transaction tax.

On trade access, India has shown flexibility. It is willing to eliminate tariffs on nearly 95 per cent of US industrial exports and lower duties on products such as almonds, apples, and avocados. Yet Washington continues to push for unrestricted access for dairy and genetically-modified crops, including corn and soybeans — an issue deeply sensitive in India due to environmental, political, and social concerns.

**Next steps:** Even though both sides remain silent, and no details are public, it appears that negotiators have reached the limits of compromise, and the deal now awaits President Trump's decision. The delay may be aimed at extracting further concessions from India.

India has already made many concessions. It should avoid offering more before an agreement is reached — otherwise, these will be absorbed and followed by new demands. However, India needs to make a clear choice on Russian crude. On January 4, President Trump warned that US tariffs on Indian exports could rise unless New Delhi halts purchases of Russian oil. While Indian refiners have signalled an intent to cut buying, Russian oil continues to flow, accounting for 7.7 million tonnes — or about 35 percent of India's crude imports — in November.

With exports to the US down 20.7 per cent over the past six months, this strategic ambiguity is no longer cost-free. If India intends to exit Russian oil, it must do so decisively if it plans to continue buying from non-sanctioned suppliers. It should state that openly and support the case with data; and if it chooses to buy even from sanctioned entities, that position too must be articulated clearly. As the tariff threat hardens, India must take a clear call on Russian oil — own that decision, and communicate it unambiguously to Washington.

Complicating India's calculus is the absence of any guarantee that cutting Russian oil will end US pressure. Even a complete halt to Russian oil could only shift the US demands to agriculture, dairy, digital trade, and data governance.

A trade deal makes sense only if it is fair and reciprocal. If the cost is strategic dependence or loss of policy space, waiting is the wiser option.

The author is the founder of GTRI



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

## Trump's Venezuela gamble

When Donald Trump's National Security Strategy (NSS) outlined its goals in the Western Hemisphere as "Enlist and Expand", little did the world imagine the seriousness and rapidity with which it would unfold. As detailed in the strategy, Mr Trump dramatically moved to readjust the American military focus in its immediate backyard through Operation Absolute Resolve to extract Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife.



HARSH V PANT &amp; VIVEK MISHRA

Counter-narcotics operations have been steadily building around Venezuelan waters, spanning the Atlantic and extending towards the Pacific Ocean. The Trump administration's counter-narcotics rationale is designed to place its military actions in the realm of law enforcement, rather than outright military invasion. How this framing holds up under international law remains to be seen, particularly as reactions unfold both within the US and globally. The Justice Department's tacit approval, combined with historical legal precedent from 1989, when the US carried out a similar operation to extract Manuel Noriega in Panama, albeit under markedly different circumstances, has been cited as justification.

The Trump administration has since declared that the US is now "in charge" of Venezuela. The extraction of Mr Maduro appears to be a calculated step designed to stop short of full-scale regime change. By capturing the political

leader while leaving Vice-President Dely Rodriguez as the de facto authority, Washington seems intent on avoiding the immediate destabilisation that could follow a more radical political overhaul. Not installing Maria Corina Machado as Mr Maduro's successor may reflect an assessment of potential fallout, which ranges from political dissent within Venezuela and international backlash to the risk of civil war and fragmented command structures inside the country.

This leaves the global community, particularly India and the Global South, teetering on the edge of strategic uncertainty. Concerns over regional stability, escalation, supply chains, and connectivity disruptions are growing. India, for its part, has positioned itself cautiously on the Venezuela question, expressing concern and calling for a diplomatic solution to the crisis while avoiding overt alignment with either camp.

The authors are, respectively, vice-president and fellow (Americas) at ORF

would realise, this is not the only one — there are others that could lead to human extinction.

The third part of the book represents wishful thinking. The authors hope for a multi-national movement for safeguards but that is unlikely to happen. Some nations, like the United States, have already decided that innovation is more important than safeguards.

The book is not easy to read. The authors have chosen a format that does not lead to easy progress. And their narrative style can be a bit tedious at times. But do not let that deter you. What they say is extremely important.

The reviewer, a former editor of *Businessworld* and *Business Today* magazines, is the author of *Will India Get Rich Before It Turns 100? A Reality Check*



If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies: The Case Against Superintelligent AI  
By Eliezer Yudkowsky & Nate Soares  
Published by Penguin Random House  
231 pages ₹999

BOOK REVIEW

**A thought for today**

Direction is more important than speed.  
You can go fast in the wrong direction

REFDOO

## Coming Up Trumps

History may not remember Monroe Doctrine, but Trump's reserved a passing mention with his Venezuela grab

For now, like it or not, Trump owns Venezuela. Some may question the ethics and legality of the grab, but that doesn't diminish the military brilliance of 'Op Absolute Resolve'. Its planning and execution were flawless. Trump effectively did in 2.5 hours what Putin has been trying to do for almost four years. This is not as oranges/apples as it seems because Venezuela and Ukraine are both large countries with over 300 million people each.

It's Trump's first unqualified success of his second term. Tariffs, inflation, jobs, investment, peace – Ukraine, Gaza, and the bunker-busting in Iran – have been damp squibs. But Maduro in US custody is a cracker. As for right/wrong, US supreme court has already granted immunity to presidents for official acts. Besides, Trump isn't the first prez to start a military op without Congress's authorisation. Reagan

in Lebanon, Bush Sr in Panama, Clinton in Yugoslavia, Obama in Libya, Biden in Yemen, there are enough precedents. And that's because US law allows presidents to unilaterally authorise military action lasting up to 90 days. Anyway, they never call it war. For Obama, Libya was 'kinetic military action', for Trump, Venezuela is a 'law-enforcement operation'.

So, the risk Trump took in Venezuela wasn't legal but political. A botched op, or perhaps with bodybags, would have hurt his approval ratings. Bush Sr's 1989 intervention in Panama to grab Manuel Noriega resulted in 23 military deaths. Trump's Venezuela op was surprisingly precise. One chopper was hit but remained operational. No troops were harmed, even while breaking into Maduro's steel-enforced room. And don't forget, Venezuela still has around 20 Sukhoi Su-30 MK2 planes. Something could have gone wrong, and a st-35 F would have looked very bad indeed.

None of that happened thanks to the intense homework CIA did starting Aug. They had a mole in Maduro's govt and stealth drones surveilling him all the time. And Trump never disissed his own intelligence team this time like he used to in his first term. That shows maturity on his part, and proves that US intelligence and military are still second to none. What now? Trump will hope this 'rally event' improves his approval rating. Saddam Hussein's capture raised Bush Jr's rating by 7 points; Osama's killing gave Obama 6 points. Trump, though, didn't gain from the 2019 elimination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He's probably staked his peace Nobel to get Maduro. Seems, now, a wise choice.

## Bullet Points

Aspiring to build India's own Shinkansens?  
That needs governance to speed up first

Why does any country want to follow in Japan's bullet train tracks? Because speedier movement of people and goods means higher productivity. But Shinkansen is also the No.1 reason tourists want to visit Japan, and this is more poetry than prose. To travel at 300 kmph while remaining on the ground is quite different from air travel. As fields and buildings and Mt Fuji race past, you 'feel' the speed. Unlike so much of the 'future' that hasn't arrived – flying cars, space colonies – this is a sci-fi fantasy come true. So, it was for both economic and romantic reasons that Indians got very excited when the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridor was announced a decade ago.

This 500km project was initially scheduled to launch in 2022. That date's been pushed to 2027 and even that for only a 47km stretch. Overall cost escalation is already above 80%. However, worrying this underdelivery is, what's more worrying is that it doesn't surprise. Japan built its first Shinkansen in 1965 – in the 1960s! More recently, China's built a high-speed rail network of over 40,000km within 15 years. By comparison, India's bullet train experiment shows a sobering gap between our ambition and execution. Plus, such setbacks dampen enthusiasm for proof-of-concept projects in general.

Those who argue for conventional upgrades instead of leapfrog technologies, do have a point. Last month, the standing committee on railways reported that while freight revenue constitutes about 65% of Railways' earnings, average freight train speed is 23.8 kmph. Japan had achieved top freight speeds beyond 100 kmph last century itself. Land acquisition nightmares to changes in govt (for example, in Maharashtra), it is a routine cast of characters that mars project management in India. Without unsexy upgrades in governance, sexy announcements will continue to end in disappointment.

## Mars and Venezuela

Revising the ground rules of marriage

Anil Abraham

I reached into Kamala's handbag and fished out the money I needed to pay Blinkit bhaya. Kamala was not pleased at my incursion. "You can't just reach into someone else's property and casually take something out. There is a method in the madness," she announced, laying down the ground rules of boundaries and borders. I wasn't sure if she was referring to Trump's shenanigans or the border or my hand in her handbag. And I had always thought that the guiding principle of marriage was, what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine.

"You men have no concept of consent. The other day you were looking for your hip flask in my handbag. Whether it's Maduro or Trump, you can't just decide you need something and reach out and take it!" She was losing me now. Was all this about the Israel-Palestine conflict or the Russia-Ukraine peace strategy or the Venezuelan strike? Men have been indulging in naked imperialism throughout history, but no one has the courage to point out that the Emperor is not wearing clothes anymore. Men have also reached the Moon and now seem to be mistaking Venezuela for Venus. Entering another country and threatening 'boots on the ground' may be one small step for a man, but one giant leap backward for Mankind.

Meanwhile, delivery bhaya was looking at me hopefully, waiting for his payment to magically appear. I paid him while Kamala was distracted and casually took something out. There is a method in the madness, she declared that 'God is dead', he was announcing the onset of a profound civilisational rupture. Nietzsche was not celebrating the disappearance of God; he was warning that modern humanity, intoxicated by reason, science and political understandings that had anchored it. In this vacuum, he feared, nihilism would run riot – a world teetering on the verge of ethical collapse. As the world finds itself in an apocalyptic storm of fractured discourse, hatred, war, and moral atrophy, one cannot help but feel the unsettling relevance of Nietzsche's words.

Cross continents, brutality is rationalised on a Wagnerian scale, suffering becomes normalised, and human lives are

# A Nice Little War For America

US public is basking in the glow of an amazing military feat. But Trump, unlike Bush, hasn't built a coherent case for the Venezuela intervention. Plus, even with Maduro gone, his dictatorship still rules

Dan Cassino



American public doesn't mind a little war every now and then. As US economic, technological and cultural dominance fades, a show of military power – especially against a much weaker enemy – provides the public with something they can be proud of. Little wars are thought to be a good way for an embattled president to distract the public from domestic scandal and economic slowdown.

At the end of wars, the public tends to rally around the presidents:

George W Bush's approval topped 90% after 9/11. But if Trump is hoping that US military intervention in Venezuela will have a similar effect, he's going to be very disappointed.

Prior to the attack on Venezuela's capital and the rendition of Maduro and his wife, only about 40% of Americans supported the bombing of boats alleged to be carrying drugs in the Caribbean. Support for bombing Venezuela, enforcing regime change and having troops on the ground, was even lower.

This is not just because Trump is increasingly unpopular but also because it seems too similar to the protracted, ultimately pointless conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. US public has a limited imagination when it comes to foreign conflicts. Every war is seen as being either like WWII (noble, morally justified, ending in decisive victory) or like Vietnam (a slog that goes nowhere). Before invading Iraq, Bush administration spent a lot of effort convincing the public that it was akin to WWII. As it started to look more like Vietnam, the public grew weary.

This means the debate over military intervention in Venezuela is less about the merits of that intervention than how the conflict is framed. There are strong similarities to the invasion of Iraq: US is attacking an arguably illegitimate foreign leader on the basis of nebulous connections to terrorism, potentially making what was a stable, but bad, situation into an unstable one.

That framing would be wildly unpopular but there is an alternative: removal of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega in 1989, on the grounds of drug trafficking. Framing Venezuela that way – we're just getting one bad guy out and leaving –

would be rather more popular. But Trump immediately undercut this narrative by saying that US is now in control of Venezuela, even if no one in govt has been able to explain exactly what that means.

Actually, Trump administration hasn't made any effort to frame the attack on Venezuela in a way that would build support for it, to say nothing of a potential occupation. By contrast, Bush administration spent months arguing that Hussein was linked, somehow, with the 9/11 attacks and was developing nuclear weapons – likening him to Hitler, and the invasion of Iraq to WWII.

At the peak of support for the Iraq war, nearly 70% of Americans supported the intervention. Trump's intervention is looking to peak at around 45% support.

It's never going to be more popular than it is right now, while the US public is basking in the glow of military success, and before the question of What Now? dominates. Iraq soon became a military success, and Bush's next, and final, of Republicans in general, and Trump is starting in a much, much worse position.

Of course, many of the things Trump has done in his second term have been unpopular and of dubious legality. But in just a few weeks, he will want to pass a budget or face another govt shutdown. He has said he wants to pass more tax cuts, reform healthcare, and do all sorts of things that require the support of Congress. The less popular he is, the less he'll be able to win the support of the Republican vote he needs.

American public doesn't mind a little war: Seeing bombs drop, explosions light up TV screens, seeing the effectiveness of the nearly trillion dollars spent on the military every year – these are crowd pleasers, especially if death and destruction aren't in closeup. But going in without any effort to sell the public on why it's necessary and moral, without any obvious plan for what comes next, is a recipe for disaster, for both Trump and the Venezuelan people.

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Michael Wasura



The least competent administration in US history just pulled off the most successful military operation of all time. After all, George HW Bush's 1989 invasion of Panama required 42 days to capture Manuel Noriega, and it came at the cost of 23 American troops killed and 325 wounded. Obama's raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in 2011 did not require the suppression of an entire capital's air defense network, and even in that instance US special forces were forced to leave behind a damaged helicopter.

Which is why it's highly unlikely that we will ever see a repeat performance in which US special forces once again break into a dictator's residence in the middle of the night, put him and his wife out – but not his son – and fly them to a waiting American assault ship before delivering them to a jail in Brooklyn. The events of Saturday morning were completely unprecedented, and as such, they almost certainly cannot be replicated – definitely not in Beijing or Moscow, and probably not even in Hanoi or Pyongyang.

In fact, the most unbelievable attack of all time will not actually change things much. The US will continue to be beseiging the last few years in an orange prison jumpuit, but the dictatorship he headed is still in place. As a direct result of the regime's corruption and repression, Venezuelans are actually poorer today (GDP per capita was \$4,063 in 2025) than they were before Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999 (\$4,133). Nevertheless, despite losing the last of its actual democratic legitimacy around a decade ago, Maduro's govt has thus far proved capable of putting down the periodic protests that rise up against its rule.

The problem for those cheering Maduro's sudden downfall is simple: all of the institutions that were keeping the

dictator in power remain intact, and all of the corrupt bureaucrats who profited from the status quo as it existed way back on Friday will have every incentive to continue with their un-democratic work – now on behalf of acting president Delcy Rodriguez. The portrait on the propaganda posters will change, and the rhetoric towards Washington is likely to soften, but the underlying product is going to stay largely the same for the foreseeable future.

Such an outcome is fine for Trump. Unlike his predecessors, America's first reality show President is perfectly content with symbolic victory. Whereas George W Bush or Obama would already be pressing Biden to hold a press conference, Trump dismissed the idea of installing Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Corina Machado in office, saying that the opposition leader "doesn't have the support or the respect within the country".

Instead, the Trump White House is set to "run" Venezuela – this despite having no actual means of controlling anything on the ground there. No American-led international troop presence, no US-supported transition govt, and no sign that Washington (or anyone else) is mobilising for a "blue" or "yellow" "nation building" following the political disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan. The closest Trump came to offering outside support was to "have our very large US oil companies, the biggest anywhere in the world, go in, spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken infra, the oil infra, and start making money for the country".

Of course, it's entirely possible that Trump's strikingly competent use of force on Saturday will lead to a more positive-sounding relationship between Washington and Caracas. Rodriguez may have characterised her predecessor's removal as an "illegal and illegitimate kidnapping", but she and her team will be praising one another soon. Both can profit from an influx of US investment – provided the capital is not accompanied by state department programmes aimed at promoting independent media or training election observers.

However, one thing about the events of Saturday morning can be said with certainty: this was not a "regime change war". Not only did the Venezuelan military not put up a fight, the US operation did not even change the regime in Caracas. The same old dictatorship is still there, no matter what Trump might choose to say about it.

The writer contributes to Newsweek and other American newsmagazines

## Don't Go By Bad Logic, Cooked-Up Data

How Supreme Court can be logical and compassionate on the stray dog issue

KumKum Dasgupta@timesofindia.com



If it endorses a view that stray dogs should be put in shelters – implicitly treating the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme as a failure and strengthening Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act – Supreme Court will push a solution that is ethnocentric, scientifically unsound, fiscally reckless, and epidemiologically counterproductive.

Few know that Dr Chirayu Krishna and the Blue Cross of India introduced the world's first *neuter-and-return* programme in 1964. Its name, ABC, also underlined its administrative simplicity. WHO recognises the model as the most humane and effective way to manage stray dog populations and has successfully been adopted by many countries.

Unfortunately, what's unfolding in SC isn't a clash between compassion and safety, or animal welfare and human rights, but a pathway that risks perpetuating bad mismanagement in the name of stray dog shelters – potentially channelling more resources to the most vocal, privileged, and affiliated NGOs that make a mockery of ABC rules.

SC may not be convinced by individuals' claims that most street dogs are friendly and social. But peer-reviewed research by IISER Kolkata's Dog Lab, based on observations of free-ranging dogs in West Bengal and other cities that supports this view. Indian street dogs, IISER concluded, are "facultatively social" – they can survive as scavengers while forming stable bonds with humans, a trait shaped by domestication rather than ferality. Fear of street dogs is driven more by cognitive bias and episodic amplification than by actual behaviour.

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Further, Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme data show that between Jan 2022 and Jan 2025, 14 states and UTs reported zero rabies deaths, including Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Telangana, Uttarakhand, J&K, Ladakh, Puducherry and Sikkim.

Livestock Census 2019 shows stray dog numbers have dropped from 19.1m in 2007 to 11.7m in 2012, and to 9.4m in 2019, reflecting the tangible impact of sterilisation, albeit insufficient. It underscores the need for genuine, on-the-ground sterilisation – not

– but, the figures are misleading. Submissions in SC have noted that from FY2020-21 to FY2023-24, reported dog bites matched the number of anti-rabies vaccine doses. That is a mega methodological flaw. Here's how: Per a 2023 Rayla Sabha response, 377.62 were allocated for anti-rabies vaccination for 2023-24. At an average cost of 270/- each, this translates to 37,712 doses. All of these are dated as 37/712 bites.

Vaccines are administered after scratches, or even friendly handling – especially by pet owners, veterinarians, ABC staff, and shelter employees who take pre-exposure prophylaxis. None of these involve a bite. Yet every dose is counted as one.

A single suspected exposure requires 3 to 5 doses per person. Counting doses rather than exposure inflates bite numbers. Moreover, vaccines administered after exposure to cats or monkeys are also recorded as dog bites. There is no verification whether a bite occurred, if it was a bite or a community dog, or if all it was a bite.

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just on paper – alongside updated data.

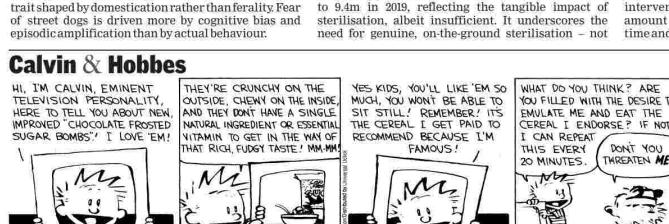
Affidavits by 13 states and UTs show that ABC coverage is between 6% and 35%. Several states provide no auditable data. Delhi's affidavit is contradictory: reported sterilisations exceed even theoretical capacity of facilities. Rajasthan stands at 6%, while Karnataka, Haryana and UP hover around 10%.

The most dangerous assumption is that removal of dogs will improve public health. Science says the opposite. For WHO, vaccinating at least 70% of dogs is essential to interrupt rabies transmission.

Removal does not preserve this immunity; instead, it creates ecological vacuums, filled by unvaccinated animals migrating from surrounding areas, reintroducing rabies into zones where it was controlled. Removal of stray dogs allows rats and snakes to proliferate.

High-density 'mega shelters' are disease amplifiers. Without rigorous quarantine protocols, biosafety standards and veterinary surveillance, they risk becoming zoonotic hotspots. And there's the cost. Sheltering 10% of the population would cost over ₹12k cr over a decade, without accounting for land, capex and opportunity cost of using prime urban real estate. In contrast, achieving 70% sterilisation would cost less than ₹500cr operationally.

Given governance failures, including corruption, acknowledged, policy choice is clear: conduct a stray dog census, fix bite data collection, and follow ABC route instead of an expensive, permanent intervention bound to backfire. Anything else would amount to barking up the wrong tree, wasting both time and scarce public resources.



### Sacred space



The more you know yourself, the more clarity there is.

Self-knowledge has no end – you don't come to an achievement; you don't come to a conclusion. It is an endless river.

J Krishnamurti

reduced to strategic footnotes. Faith in shared values appears fragile, while aggression often masquerades as bravado. In such a world, it is tempting to believe that God has not merely 'died' in Nietzschean sense but has forsaken humanity. A pall settles over our moral consciousness as spectacle of cruelty – whether enacted through weapons, words, or through neglect – forces us to confront the loss of Apollonian restraint: reason, measure, and moral discipline in human conduct.

This despair is deepened by what the philosopher Immanuel Kant famously described as 'the crooked timber of humanity'. By this, he meant that human beings are inherently flawed, capable of reason and goodness, yet equally prone to selfishness, violence, and moral corruption.

Across continents, brutality is rationalised on a Wagnerian scale, suffering becomes normalised, and human lives are times display a pathology of savagery that moral and spiritual traditions matter. In this sense, faith provides ethical guidance and self-discipline that help people live responsibly in a problematic, imperfect world.

violence, and moral corruption. From such crooked timber, Kant observed, no perfectly straight thing was ever made.

History bears this out with painful clarity. Our own turbulent time is no exception. Yet, the fallibility of human nature keeps alive the possibility of redemption and renewal, urging us to confront the dark, ominous shades of the human condition.

And the replacement of morality and virtue – faith, restraint, and compassion – would have no purpose. It is precisely because people are at the heart of this that human conduct is not always as it should be. The 'speak the truth' tree, for example, is a symbol of truth and virtue, and it is precisely because people are at the heart of this that human conduct is not always as it should be.

Nietzsche believed that in the absence of God, humanity would need to create its own values – a task he saw as both necessary and perilous. What he perhaps underestimated was the resilience of faith. Despite centuries of scepticism, violence, and betrayal, belief in God has not withered. It persists not because the world is just, but because it is not.

And with people's continued insistence to claim a sacredness that human suffering cannot be the final word. For countless individuals, faith continues to shape conscience and inspire acts of compassion that never make headlines.

It restrains the strong, consoles the weak, and reminds both that human worth cannot be measured solely by utility or dominance. In this sense, faith emerges as a quiet yet enduring moral constant of humanity.

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## Harbour Changes In Different Ports

'Free speech' varies, platforms must curate

Microblogging site X is at risk of losing its 'safe harbour' status in India over reportedly 'obscene' content generated by X's AI bot Grok. Under Section 79 of IT Act 2000, social media sites are classified as neutral hosts not held responsible for content created by third parties — in 'safe harbour' — as long as they follow GoRules. Go now wants a compliance report from X over takenown requests. In its earlier avatar, Twitter had briefly been made liable for content it carried for being at odds with Go over curation. Such conflicts will keep erupting, so long as media platforms and lawmakers have divergent "cultural" views. Tech companies are bound by their contract with their users to allow free speech within reason. A narrower reading imposes extra parameters into their business model. But social media must operate in multiple jurisdictions to extract network effects. The compliance burden, thus, becomes a variable for media platforms.

Safe harbour status is an accomplishment — not an entitlement. Tech that facilitates creation and dissemination of patently unacceptable content must also provide curating solutions in concert with lawmakers. Obvious violations can be counteracted technically without having to invoke the law. And when law enforcement agencies raise a concern, it must be acted upon, or reason must be shown for inaction. Taking the stand that blaming AI for obscenity is like blaming the pen for blasphemy serves little purpose. Content is created through human agency, and tech providers have adequate leverage to deter rogue action. It is in their interests to ensure good housekeeping to retain users and advertisers.

Limits to freedom of expression are defined by culture. It works when governments outsource some policing to tech companies. Social media must conform to restrictions imposed on legacy media. Additional requirements may be necessary for tech adaptation. Tech is not ethical by itself. The ethical dimension must be provided by society it serves, and profits from.

## Cities Can't Be Clean Only On Dashboards

Cities like to boast about rankings and glossy scorecards. But none of that counts when the water flowing into homes carries disease instead of life. The toll from consuming contaminated water in Indore's Bhagirathpura neighbourhood continues to rise — 16 deaths and more than 140 people hospitalised — as a diarrhoea outbreak lays bare a grave public health failure. This is a tragedy wherever it occurs. But that it happened in Indore, a city repeatedly ranked the cleanest in the country, raises uncomfortable questions about conditions in other places. What makes the episode even more disturbing is that it was not unforeseen. Comptroller and Auditor General audit reports, dating back to 2019, have flagged serious concerns about water management in Indore, including the risk of contamination.

This crisis of urban governance is not limited to water alone. Variations of the same failure can be seen across towns and cities — untreated sewage being reused, garbage left uncollected, sky-high landfills turning into public health hazards, potholed roads and missing manhole covers. Poor infrastructure design, compounded by shoddy maintenance, corners cut during the tendering process and poor execution, as well as the endless digging up of roads in the name of improvement projects, steadily erodes urban living standards.

Fixing this urban crisis demands stronger systems and oversight, real accountability, regular maintenance and upgrades, and administrations that respond to citizens rather than ignore them. Urban local bodies must deliver the basics: clean water, effective waste management and safe roads. Business as usual will not deliver the smart cities promised under Vikas Bharat. Without a fundamental shift in attitude, more Bhagirathpuras are inevitable.



### JUST IN JEST

¡Que viva El Libertador 2.0 for once again changing the subject

## Absolute Resolve (to Change the Subject)

So, Mar-a-Lagoland has invaded Venezuela. Depending on whether you're a fan of Rambo movies or sambo music, you'll "Yay!" or "Boo!" that. But the real marvel isn't geopolitically petrocratrical or pharmaceutical — it's how Trump's grab has performed the greatest magic trick since Harry Houdini: making the Epstein papers 'Vanish' like the 'bad man' in Satyajit Ray's film, *Sonar Kella* (*The Golden Fortress*).

For weeks, journalists were busy inventing synonyms for 'incriminating'. Everyone was hoping to find their ex-employee, boss or father-in-law crop up in one of those photos with the epitome of sexual creepiness by his side. Then, like gentle manna that dropped from the heavens came Venezuela. Forget all that Epstein-Septstein now. Go find Caracas on the map and get busy shouting against American imperialism, or rah-rah about US getting back its colonies. Meanwhile, pundits, only a week ago defending or attacking Noam Chomsky or Bill Gates for 'hanging out' with the late sex offender, are now scrambling for metaphors: is Venezuela the only object dangled before democracy's distracted kitten? Or is Trump El Libertador 2.0 after Simón Bolívar? Either way, the Epstein file now sit in the attic of collective memory, next to VHS tapes of Y2K documentaries. No wonder the whole thing is codenamed Operation Absolute Resolve. Mazel tov!

GDP base reset, pending inflation data and Trump tariffs pose challenges for Union Budget 2026

## Dhann Ki Baat on FM Radio



Mythili Bhushnurmath

**M**ay you live in interesting times — an English expression attributed regularly as a "traditional" Chinese curse, but actually having no Chinese source — is not the best way to wish someone well for the next 20 years. But whatever she likes it or not, 2026 is bound to be 'interesting', and in more ways than one. In less than a month, Nirmala Sitharaman will present her 9<sup>th</sup> consecutive budget, Narendra Modi, it would seem, has chosen well.

Napoleon reportedly inquired of a prospective general, 'He is good, but is he lucky?' Well, Sitharaman has been both good and lucky. Despite the odds being stacked against her, she has tested Trump's tariff flip-flops, we are far from the 'head economy' that the latest invader of Venezuela deserves. GDP is slated to grow by 7.3% in FY26, and inflation is at record-low levels.

But in a developing country that is still, according to World Bank's Poverty Alleviation report, to be at 20% of the world's poor, she can't afford to rest on her laurels. Luckily budget comes at the best of times. RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra described it as a 'Goldilocks' economy.

Nonetheless, she will have a tough job trying to walk the tightrope between compilations of electoral politics and demands of fiscal prudence. While presenting her budget in July 2024 soon after BJP was voted back in power, she had vowed, 'We aim to re-



Not in the red, so with a stitch in time...

ach a deficit below 4.5% next year. The government is committed to staying on course. From 2026-27 onwards, the central government will be required to keep the fiscal deficit each year such that the central government debt will be on a declining path as a percentage of GDP.

For February 2025, she showed that she meant business. Deficit for FY26 was projected at 4.4% — 'below 4.5%'. The budget in July 2024, while GDP was projected to grow at 7.3% on a 'modest path', Controller General of Accounts data till October 2025 shows that, except for primary deficit, all other parameters are broadly in order. The good news is that GDP has not shied away from investing. Capex is 55% of GDP, compared to 42% in the same period last year.

Problem is that finance minister — and RBI's — armoury in the grand scheme of 'vital Bharat' is virtually empty. Sitharaman announced a generous personal IT-GST giveaway to power our people? Can Budget 2026 serve as a catalyst? So, if this is to continue, it will have to remain on infrastructure for job creation. And that calls for generous outlays

in the last budget and followed it up, halfway through the year, with a needed reduction in GST rates on 375 items that will, inevitably, have adverse revenue implications.

True, we've seen consumption grow, thanks to GST cuts and easy monetary policy. But if it is to continue to grow, incomes need to rise, job creation needs to be better paid, job market needs to improve. And that is the crux of the problem. How do we give jobs to our people? Can Budget 2026 serve as a catalyst? So, if this is to continue, it will have to remain on infrastructure for job creation. And that calls for generous outlays

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

## Court's bail order in riots case raises deep concern

**T**HE SUPREME Court's decision to deny bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam in the Delhi riots case, more than five years after their arrest, is an alarming retreat from the Court's own dictum that bail is the rule and jail is the exception. The grant of bail under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act is already fraught with challenges. The law sets a high bar for the accused. Disturbingly, the 142-page bail order further raises this bar. The fact that five co-accused have been granted bail is a welcome and overdue affirmation that years of pre-trial incarceration cannot become the norm, even under a harsh statute. Yet the very reasoning that frees them is used to construct a questionable distinction, in which Khalid and Imam are placed on a "higher footing in the hierarchy of participation" on a "qualitatively different basis".

A key exception to bail under the UAPA is when the accused has undergone a prolonged pre-trial incarceration. The SC has previously underlined that even in terror cases, the rigours of bail must "rest down" where there is no reasonable likelihood of a timely trial. Now, in a case that is emblematic of the justice system's delay, the Court concedes that Khalid and Imam's pre-trial incarceration is "substantial", but it says it is yet to cross the "threshold of constitutional impracticability". The Court says that the accused are at liberty to move for bail again "upon the expiry of a period of one year from the date of this order" — as if they have fallen short by a year to cross the constitutional threshold. The SC also lends its weight to the claim that Khalid and Imam played a "central and formative" role while others had "merely conspiratorial association". It is troubling that the Court does not trust the strength of the evidence examined but on the flimsy narrative of the prosecution. At several points, the Court reminded itself that a bail application is not the stage for a "mini-trial". However, in categorising the accused and examining the depth of the roles, the Court effectively does the job of a trial court and gives the prosecution the benefit of the doubt.

At the heart of the Delhi riots case is the question of what constitutes a terrorist act. Section 15 of the UAPA envisages terrorist acts through the use of bombs, explosives, firearms or "any other means". The prosecution dangerously lumped creation of WhatsApp groups, calls for non-violent protest, road blockades as "any other means". The SC quietly accepts this expansion. In a democracy, this wide and loose framing — that threatens to criminalise dissent and peaceful protest — is disquieting. It must be reconsidered.

## It's not cricket, Delhi scores a self-goal

**A**S EXPECTED, the Indian cricket board's decision to eject Bangladesh player Mustafizur Rahman from IPL 2026 has triggered a storm. In a quick counter to the snub, Bangladesh has refused to travel to India for next month's World T20 and, in turn, India has expressed reluctance to cross the border for bilateral games later in the year. After the Pakistan logjam, the cricketing gate to Bangladesh, too, has been slammed shut. Politicians and religious leaders who ratcheted up anti-Bangladesh public sentiment and worked up a spiralling social media outrage in the wake of the deplorable incidents of attacks on Hindus in that country may have dealt a fell blow to cricket in the region. Given the sensitive geopolitical situation and the shared history of using cricket as a platform for diplomatic posturing, it would be naïve to assume that it was the BCCI that took a decision that has serious political ramifications. Unfortunately, cricket, caught in a political crossfire, has once again become the first casualty.

Cricket, or sports, shouldn't be the topic in the tug of war between nations, especially those with longstanding ties. But these are times when the political takeover of sports seems complete. Directly or by proxy, politicians govern cricket in the Subcontinent. The days of political administrators, the incurable cricket enthusiasts, are in the past. There was a time in the Subcontinent when cricket held the power to soothe frayed nerves, open new vistas, give mobility a chance. But the present-day political pragmatism and brittle individual relations have pushed the joy of the ordinary cricket adoring public down the priority list. Populist decisions, however damaging to the game, are taken without bating an eyelid by politicians — cum-cricket office-bearers. The game is all too often in the mercy of the mob.

In the past, it took wars and terror attacks to snap cricket ties. Now, the goal post has shifted. Cricket has gone from being a calming balm to becoming the gunpowder kept ready to fire at short notice in the name of "public sentiment", regardless of the costs.

## A predatory camera & the disappearing frogs

**S**OMETIMES, IT'S good if one hears a tree fall in the forest and better still if the rotting log is left as is. In the Western Ghats in Kerala, under decaying wood, a unique concatenation of ecological circumstances provides the only known home for *Melanobatrachus indicus* or the Galaxy Frog. The tiny amphibian (0.8-4 inches long) is among the most stunning in the world and is named for the dazzling array of white spots on its jet black body. Unlike the frogs from fairy tales, it requires no assistance from princesses to be attractive, and it is this beauty, perhaps, that has led to a tragic fate.

According to a report published by researchers in *Herpetology Notes*, seven Galaxy Frogs — the species is vulnerable to extinction according to the IUCN — have disappeared in the last few years. The culprit is all but certain: Photographers rushed to the small patch of forest the frogs were known to live in. In their enthusiasm for the perfect image, tourists and amateurs overturned the logs under which they live and picked up the tiny creatures to place them against "better" backgrounds. In essence, they damaged the microhabitat that the tiny amphibian needs to survive. And by touching the creatures, they made them all the more vulnerable. All seven are now presumed dead.

There is, perhaps, many a metaphor and larger lesson to be drawn from the disappearance of seven Galaxy Frogs about climate change, the anthropocene and the devastation human beings cause. But the mere facts of the case are sad enough. Bright colouration on animals, particularly non-mammals, is often meant to scare predators, an advertisement that they are not edible. Nature, though, does not know of the hunger of the camera and the ravenous social media beast. It has now consumed seven sun galaxies. Hopefully, there are some more out there, away from the predatory lens, under a rotting log.

# Beyond Maduro, why Delhi has a new window of opportunity in the region



RAJA MANDALA  
By C RAJA MOHAN

**D**ONALD TRUMP's decision to seize and whisk away Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to a New York prison over the weekend will go down as one of the more audacious US interventions in Latin America and beyond. The US President's strategy this time seems less about "regime change" and more about "regime seduction". If his plan to co-opt the rest of the Maduro establishment succeeds, it could unleash lasting geopolitical consequences.

For India, this is as good a moment as any to shed the prolonged neglect of Latin America. Delhi's official reaction against the US intervention has been criticised as too timid in comparison to the statements from its BRICS partners. Delhi's caution could well be vindicated if interim president Delcy Rodriguez's tentative offer to cooperate with Washington leads to a new relationship between Venezuela and the US.

The talks between the Maduro establishment and the US are not new. The Biden administration sought to befriend Maduro after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine in order to bring Venezuelan oil into the global markets strained by Western sanctions against Moscow. In the past few weeks, there have been continuous negotiations between Maduro and Washington, but they were unsuccessful in the end. It re-

mains to be seen if Washington and Caracas can now negotiate a sustainable arrangement in the coming days.

A strategic reorientation of post-Maduro Venezuela, long the hub of anti-American activity in the region backed by Cuba, Iran, Russia, and China, would mark a dramatic change in the region's geopolitics at three levels: the reassertion of American dominance over Latin America, an acceleration of the rightward political drift across a continent long shaped by left-wing populism and criminal militias, and a direct challenge to Cuban, Russian, and Chinese ambitions in Latin America.

Critics at home have asked why India did not speak out more forcefully against an American action that violates international law. But India showed similar restraint after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and during the US and Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. During the Cold War, India routinely condemned Western interventions while glossing over Soviet ones — reflecting its alignment with Moscow. Today's India is sparing in moral sermons directed at major partners. Delhi no longer entertains an innocent belief in the magical powers of international law. It is only on Chinese violations of sovereignty that India speaks of international norms. After all, India is at the receiving end of Beijing's territorial expansionism. Venezuela, in contrast, is distant from India's core strategic concerns.

There is another factor reinforcing Delhi's restraint: India does not have much skin in the Latin American game. Brazil, as the largest country in Latin America, always has to say about the region's developments. But it is internally divided, and so is Latin

As South America enters a new political phase — shaped by deep internal churn and restructuring great power relations — India must seek to deepen and widen its own footprint in the region

America as a whole. While Brazil's President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has condemned the US operation, his opponents at home have welcomed it. Many conservative parties across Latin America have supported Maduro's ouster from Caracas. Over the decades, Russia and China have invested big in the Maduro regime as part of their broader effort to contest US primacy in the Western Hemisphere and herald a post-American order in the world. India has never identified with these objectives, despite its general rhetoric about a "multipolar world". After all, the US is India's most important partner, and Delhi's real focus has been on building a "multipolar Asia" or limiting Chinese dominance in Asia.

Yet, to treat Venezuela merely as a distant spectacle would be a mistake. For decades, Indian foreign policy had its priorities — intense focus on the immediate neighbourhood, the extended neighbourhood, and great powers. Latin America and Africa have remained marginal to the Indian diplomatic effort notwithstanding the episodic engagement.

That neglect is no longer sensible. The "Year of Trump's Tariffs" has forced India to diversify its export markets. In that quest, Latin America, with its combined GDP of around \$5.5 trillion and a population exceeding 650 million, remains an underexplored commercial terrain. India's annual bilateral trade with the region is underwhelming at \$45 billion. Any comparison with Beijing is unfair, but the fact is that China's trade with the region stands at about \$500 billion. And the city-state of Singapore does as much trade with Latin America as India.

Trump's revival of a muscular Monroe Doctrine — now sharpened by his National Secu-

rity Strategy calls for the "Trump Corridor" — is aimed squarely at curbing China's economic influence in the region. As the US pressures Latin American states to rethink their dependence on Chinese capital, technology, and markets, many in the region will seek diversification rather than simple substitution. India will have a lot of room to explore wide-ranging commercial opportunities in the region.

In the end, there is no escaping that India's celebrated internationalism has remained superficial in Latin America. Although Rabindranath Tagore visited Argentina more than a century ago in 1924, India's engagement with the region has remained shallow. Roads in Delhi named after South American heroes like Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín coexist with a striking lack of political literacy about Latin American history, economics, and society among Indian elites. The past fascination with Fidel Castro or Che Guevara produced more posters and T-shirts than purposeful policies. High-level Indian political visits remain infrequent, commercial diplomacy thin, and institutional presence limited.

As South America enters a new political phase — shaped by deep internal churn and restructuring great power relations — India must seek to deepen and widen its own footprint in the region. Tailing its BRICS partners is not much of a strategy. Delhi needs sustained political attention and targeted trade diplomacy in the region. Above all, India needs a serious effort to understand the region on its own terms.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express and a distinguished professor at the Motiwalla-Jadeja Institute of American Studies, Jindal Global University

## To make the new law work, evaluate MGNREGA honestly



SONAL  
DESAI

**T**HE IMPULSE that led to the passing of MGNREGA celebrated the spirit of inclusive development. However, the engineering that rendered the spirit behind MGNREGA into functioning machinery requires repairs and unclogging. Unless we recognise both achievements and challenges facing MGNREGA, it will be difficult to repair it, and this omission will continue to haunt both the present programme as well as its replacement, VB-G RAM G.

How and where did MGNREGA succeed? Its primary success lies in universal access that relies on self-targeting, reducing local bottlenecks. Making manual work available regardless of household economic status removes gatekeeping by local elites. Over the years, it has provided a safety net to households and employment to women and older Indians who would not easily find other jobs. Studies also suggest that it has been instrumental in reducing rural wages.

Nonetheless, cracks developed in this edifice over the years, reflected in growing inequality between states. In 2011-12, Kerala provided about 3.6 days of work per rural resident, but by 2023-24, the number of days had grown to 11.3. In contrast, UP started with 17 days in 2011-12 and grew to 11.9 in 2023-24. However, UP's rural population is considerably poorer, with a monthly per capita expenditure of Rs 3,481 in 2023-24 compared to Rs 6,611 for Kerala. Universal schemes are supposed to be more inclusive of the poor, not less. What happened?

Part of the problem is that, since its inception, neither the UPA nor the NDA allocated sufficient funds for the scheme. Assuming only 50 days of work per rural household at the lowest prevailing wage of Re 234, to fulfil the fund scheme would require more than Rs 2,10,000 crore in wages alone. Except for the pandemic years, the Centre's allocation did not exceed Rs 86,000 crore. Due to a significant shortfall in funds, particularly in the second half of the fiscal year, payments for materials from the Centre were frequently delayed, forcing states to advance their own resources for infrastructure work. This usually benefited richer states. State govern-

ance efficiency in navigating the system also played a role. Kerala, for example, was able to spread work evenly throughout the year, whereas nearly 40 per cent of the MGNREGA days in UP were exhausted in the first quarter.

Many states combined other infrastructure activities with MGNREGA. Infrastructure schemes paid for construction materials, and MGNREGA paid for labour. This was a mixed blessing, since district magistrates were under pressure to use MGNREGA to supplement infrastructure activities, even in prosperous districts where local wages were higher than MGNREGA wages and demand for it was low, sometimes resulting in an unholy alliance with contractors. This suggests that if the MGNREGA is to function as a safety net for the poorest, many of whom live in poorer states that face significant administrative challenges, some restructuring is essential.

VB-G RAM G quietly moves away from universal entitlement to targeted benefits. However, would the proposed alternative redress inter-state inequality? Possibly not.

Moving away from universal entitlement to targeted benefits will allow states to reallocate that favour poorer states and poor districts within a state will create a mechanism that directs funds to those who need them most. However, the changed Centre-state allocation ratio will exacerbate challenges for states unable to meet their share. VB-G RAM G shifts the Centre-state contribution ratio from 90-10 to 60-40 for most states. Poorer states may not be able to meet this commitment. This could be particularly challenging as fiscal space available to states shrinks.

The challenge is to honestly evaluate which features of MGNREGA have stood the test of time and which require recalibration. While the right to employment is a heart-warming concept, it needs a wholehearted commitment of resources. An unfunded mandate leads to perversion of the original intent, making it only a "right" in name that often excludes the poor.

The writer is professor, NCAER and University of Maryland. Views are personal

## Inflation has been low. That's not necessarily a good thing



MADAN  
SABNAVIS

**F**OR TWO successive months, inflation has come in at less than 1 per cent. What are its implications for the economy? First, the low CPI inflation rates are in part due to the statistical base effect of high numbers last year. Households are not too convinced about low inflation. The RBI surveys on inflation perception reveal that in November, households put inflation at 6.6 per cent and the three months ahead rate was 7.6 per cent. While these numbers are lower than in the previous survey rounds, these figures do show that perceptions are quite different on the ground.

Second, these numbers are a conundrum for the RBI when it comes to interest rates. In December, when the MPC lowered the repo rate, inflation was low and growth very buoyant. In February, when the committee will deliberate again on rates, the situation will be the same. Inflation will remain low — the December number is likely to be less than or around 1 per cent. Logically, rates should be lowered again. But what will happen when inflation rises because of the low base effect? Will rates be increased?

Third, low inflation is a cause for concern because when food inflation is negative, farmers could get lower income even though production was very good for the kharif crops. This has ripple effects. If rural incomes are impacted, rural spending power gets constrained, and the benefits of GST 2.0 could likely dissipate. It has been reported that for crops like soybean and pulses, sales were reckoned lower than MSP in October and early November.

Fourth, from the point of view of manufacturing, low inflation, especially on the wholesale side, is not good news as it means diminishing pricing power. While higher input is a major contributor to costs, raw materials matter. In the case of CPI as well, the core component witnessed higher inflation mainly due to products like kharif. It is for manufactured products. All this means that there has also been some erosion in pricing power, which can be a challenge if it persists.

Fifth, lower inflation has already caused some slowing down of GST collections. Collections have also been impacted by lower tax rates. The question is, will growth in tax revenues persist with persistently low inflation?

Sixth, low inflation has led to a situation where nominal GDP growth has to be only marginally higher than real GDP growth, assuming an average difference of 3-4 percentage points in the past. Low nominal growth poses a challenge for meeting the fiscal deficit targets. It would be interesting to see what nominal growth number is used when projecting fiscal numbers for FY27.

Low inflation thus has different implications for different players. Some sections of households may benefit, while some producers may be adversely impacted. The minimum amount of inflation that is needed to keep the economy ticking is around 4 per cent in our case — the target for monetary policy.

Sabnavis is chief economist, Bank of Baroda and author of *Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun*. Views are personal

## 40 YEARS AGO

January 6, 1986



## India to join 'Silicon Club'

INDIA JOINS the world's exclusive Silicon Club, with the first indigenously developed process and plant going on stream later this month to produce the basic raw material needed for the country's fast-growing electronic and solar power industries. This project is a unique example in India's history of mission-oriented science that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi called for in his recent address.

### Sikh students' agitation

PUNJAB WILL take strong steps to deal with any threat to law and order in the state. The Punjab Chief Minister, Surjit

Singh Barnala, has called a meeting of senior officials of the state government dealing with law and order to review the situation in the light of the "Rasta Roko" call given by the All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISF) on January 10. Barnala arrived in New Delhi from Hyderabad after attending the Telugu Desam conclave. His Finance Minister, Balwant Singh, also arrived in New Delhi from Chandigarh.

### Accord in danger

THE NEW year has begun on a distressing note for both Punjab and Haryana, with the July Rajiv-Lonawala accord in imminent danger of collapsing. Should that happen, the Akali ministry, which came to power

less than four months ago, could well fall, thus giving a boost to Sikh extremists in the state.

### Shriram mass layoffs

SHRIRAM FOODS and Fertilisers company intends to lay off more than 550 workers in its different units following the cancellation of its licence on December 24. More than 130 workers of the vanaspati unit, 111 workers of the superphosphate plant, 54 from the fabrication unit, 25 from the sulphuric acid plant and 11 persons from the research and development unit are among those who are going to be laid off, according to a letter written by the company to the concerned authorities.



## SIR could roll back decades of progress in women's political participation



DESHKAAL

BY RAHUL SHASTRI AND YOGENDRA YADAV

A FUTURE historian might record this cruel irony: just when women were beginning to be recognised as political actors in their own right, the largest-ever disenfranchisement of women occurred in India. She might wonder why and how it happened in the third decade of the 21st century, when the whole world had taken women's suffrage for granted. This is where she would encounter "Special Intensive Revision" of electoral rolls.

Now that we have the data from all states except Uttar Pradesh for the second phase of the SIR, it is clear that we are witnessing the single biggest reversal of decades of gains in women's electoral participation. In the last two decades, we have seen improvement in women's enrolment, in turnout of women voters and a distinct focus on women's issues. The SIR threatens to take us back to the basic struggle for women's voting rights.

In India, women's voting clout has historically suffered from a double whammy. The first is a phenomenon identified by Amartya Sen as the "missing girl child". A vast gap between the number of girls expected to be born, going by the natural birth rate, and the actual number of girls who are born. The second phenomenon is women's under-enfranchisement—the women who do reach the age of voting are less likely to be on the voters' list than men. The SIR has now made it a triple whammy for Indian women by introducing a new phenomenon: disenfranchisement of women who were already on the voters' list. Independent India has never seen this phenomenon at this scale.

Bihar gave us the first glimpse of what was to come. Before the SIR, the gender ratio in Bihar's population was 932 — for every 1,000 men in Bihar's adult population, there were only 932 women. The voters' list made it worse. For every 1,000 men on the voters' list, there were only 914 women — fewer than



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

their share in the population. The list should have had 7 lakh more women if the share of women was the same as in the population. After the SIR, the gender ratio in the final voters' list of Bihar fell sharply to 890. Thus, thanks to the SIR, the number of "missing women voters" increased from 7 lakh to 16 lakh. In Bihar, the SIR wiped out a whole decade's gain in the gender ratio of electoral rolls.

The data from the second phase of the SIR confirms that what happened in Bihar was not an anomaly. The accompanying table presents the data for six major states in the second phase. In every case, the SIR has led to a decline in the gender ratio of the voters' list. On average, these six states had 979 women for every 1,000 men in their pre-SIR voters' list. This was little less than their share in the adult population — 985. Now look at the impact of the SIR: The gender ratio in the draft voters' list declined to 963. This steep drop translated into 23 lakh additional "missing women voters". In other words, if the SIR exclusions were proportionally the same for men and women, we would have had 23 lakh more women on the draft voters' list than we have on the draft lists for the second phase.

We don't have the gender-wise data for UP and (Chhattisgarh) yet. In all probability, the number of "missing women voters" will shoot up then. This list of six states

Women have been excluded for being 'absent/shifted'. An overwhelming proportion are married whose names have been deleted from their maternal home, but not included in their married home

happens to include Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which are among the best states in terms of their gender ratio. Even in these states, where the number of women on the voters' list is higher than men, the SIR has led to a drop in the gender ratio — 2 points in Tamil Nadu and 4 points in Kerala. As expected, the other states fare much worse, dropping by more than 15 points each. Thus, the SIR has already wiped off nearly 6 lakh women voters. Gujarat, more than 5 lakh in Rajasthan and West Bengal and almost 5 lakh women voters in Madhya Pradesh. Contrast this with Assam, the only state that has not used enumeration forms and "mapping" requirements for its recent voter list revision. Here, the Special Revision has actually led to an improvement in the gender ratio, from 1,002 to 1,004. Clearly, SIR is the culprit.

As in the case of Bihar, the SIR has reversed long-term gains in the proportion of women on the voters' list in these states. Take MP, for example. In 2009, the gender ratio of its voters' list was abysmally low at 887. Thanks to the ECI's sustained efforts, the ratio improved in every subsequent revision and reached 950 last year, matching the actual share of women in its adult population. The SIR draft list brought it down to 933. There is little surprise in this. The SIR suffers from a design defect that works to the disadvantage

of women. The requirement of filling an enumeration form with a photograph by a harsh deadline is a classic device of what scholars call administrative disenfranchisement. It is not surprising that more women have been excluded on the grounds of being "absent/shifted". An overwhelming proportion of these are married women whose names have now been deleted from their maternal home, but never included in their married home. But this is not all. Further disenfranchisement awaits those women who are on the draft list but cannot "map" themselves to their parents (in-laws are not used for this purpose), in two-decade-old electoral rolls. This is plain discrimination against married women.

When our future historian looks at this data, she might also chance upon the ECI's Manual on Electoral Rolls. She might be struck by how sensitive the ECI's rules and procedures were when it came to women's enrolment. She might notice that the ECI's own manual required it to monitor the gender ratio at each stage, carry out physical revision and appoint female BLOs in case of any imbalance in the gender ratio. She might wonder how the Special Intensive Revision of the voters' list turned into a very special intensive deletion of women voters.

Shastri is a researcher associated with Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Yadav is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan

### • SIR-II has wiped out 23 lakh women voters

STATE	PRE SIR GENDER RATIO (WOMEN/ 1000 MEN)	POST SIR GENDER RATIO (WOMEN/ 1000 MEN)	ADDITIONAL MISSING WOMEN VOTERS DUE TO SIR (LAHKS)
Rajasthan	932	908	5.3
Kerala	1069	1055	1.2
West Bengal	969	948	5.0
Madhya Pradesh	950	933	4.6
Gujarat	954	933	5.7
Tamil Nadu	1043	1041	1.1
Overall	979	963	23.0

SOURCE: PRE SIR DATA IS FROM SPECIAL SUMMARY REVISION, 2025. THE DATA FOR TN AND GUARAT ARE FROM NEWSPAPER REPORTS. NOTE: ADDITIONAL MISSING WOMEN VOTERS ARE CALCULATED AS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE EXPECTED NUMBER OF WOMEN VOTERS AS PER THE GENDER RATIO IN THE PRE-SIR VOTER LIST AND THE ACTUAL NUMBER OF WOMEN ON SIR DRAFT LIST.

When the unaccountable meet the bewildered



VANDITA MISHRA

I **YOU** looked at the news over the last month, or today, you would be overtaken by bleakness. As the old year yields to the new, hate flourishes and BJP-led governments' abdications grow. To the naked eye, it would also seem, therefore, that the Opposition has a teeming agenda that is campaign ready — a closer look says it is not quite so.

But first, the news that is so dispiriting.

In December, a student from Tripura died after a hate attack in Dehradun, and no senior member of the BJP government or party called the crime by its name. Leading up to Christmas, attacks on churches and congregations, across states, by goons alleging conversion, mix with a similar silence. In Chhattisgarh, Bajrang Dal members arrested for vandalising Christmas decorations in a Rajpur mall were welcomed with garlands after they were granted bail, underlining the climate of impunity. A young woman's birthday party in a Bareilly cafe was disrupted by vigilantes, despite two of her guests were Muslim.

In Indore, which wins awards for being India's cleanest city, contaminated drinking water claimed lives and a senior BJP minister swatted down a reporter's question on accountability (and later apologised weakly).

Local body elections in Maharashtra, India's most urbanised state, which witnessed the most brazen *tool podh* (splitting) of parties not long ago, showcase anything-goes alliances. Here, 68 candidates of the ruling BJP-Shinde Sena-led Mahayut will be elected unopposed. The Narendra Modi government rushed a bill through Parliament that radically tamps down MGNREGA's assurance to the poorest citizens.

Ahead of Umar Khalid's bail plea coming up in the SC, when the Chief Justice of India spoke of the importance of "empathy" in bending the "arc of justice towards the communities that need it most", it only underlined an absence. Too often, the judiciary gives the benefit of the doubt to the executive, or seems to take its cue from it. And so it is that a young scholar spends more than five years in jail, a trial far from beginning, bail denied again.

The vigilante is empowered, governance resists accountability, the law used to bend the rule of law, democracy is undermined using the tool-kit of democracy.

And yet, take a look at the Congress-led Opposition, and beneath it fighting words, you see bewilderment and helplessness. Bewilderment over why the BJP continues to win elections. Helplessness on how to counter it.

If it does not want to get lost in the nihilistic politics of "vote chori", the Congress-led Opposition needs to ask itself why, despite the BJP government's abdications, the Constitution/democracy-in-danger argument is not striking sparks on the ground, except in sections of Dalits and among Muslims — two communities that depend on constitutional protections most crucially.

It needs to ask if its defence of constitutional values comes at a time when they are widely seen as fraying and besieged, not without wider complexities. In India, as elsewhere, settled frameworks of legitimacy are seen to be bent under the weight of their own contradictions. In an era of communicative abundance, they are also coming under pressure from the 24x7 performance politics of politics, and new strategies of continuous mobilisation that are changing political representation as we know it.

In a time like this, the BJP was quick to seize its opening — it portrays itself as the carrier of the "voice of the people", which needs to be unshackled from the old order's debris. Amid turmoil, it projects emotive wholes and unities that create safe ports and comfort zones and invite the people in — be it "Hindu rashtri" or "Vikas Bharat" or "Vishwaguru", or "India de-Macauised".

Of course, the BJP's wholes are not just about belonging, they rest on the exclusion, fundamental and continuing, of the Muslim minority. They use emotional appeal to evade calls for accountability.

But an Opposition that does not recognise the deeper crisis that underlies the BJP's rise is unable to find the language to counter it.

To do that, it would need imagination and patience to reposition the BJP's whole — to reframe Hinduism by reinstating its pluralism, instead of being spooked by it. It may need to frame a new imagined community. Prashant Kishor slipped in Bihar, but his pitch to voters, simple and powerful — "vote for your child's future" — sought to straddle social cleavages, offers something to work with.

For now, as the old year dissolves into new, an Opposition stuck with an older vocabulary can call out neither the BJP government's abdications, nor the BJP project's exclusions.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



ANMOL JAIN

### Trump's aggression

THE OBSERVATION that India must "play it by ear" regarding the US intervention in Venezuela ("Trump's lawless grab opens risky new chapter", IE, January 5) exposes a troubling reality: Our foreign policy is increasingly held hostage by economic coercion. While New Delhi expresses "deep concern", our muted response suggests that Washington's "tariff tantrums" are successfully curbing our diplomatic voice. We are clearly struggling to manage conflicting agendas: Protecting domestic economic stability and upholding global norms.

Yatharth, New Delhi

FOR A nation battered by economic collapse and political repression, accountability is undeniably necessary. Yet the manner in which it is pursued matters as much as the outcome ("Trump's lawless grab opens risky new chapter", IE, January 5). Unilateral military actions risk blurring the line between justice and dominance. History shows that externally imposed solutions often deepen instability. The Venezuela people deserve democratic renewal through lawful, multilateral processes, not decisions dictated by raw power.

Hasnain Rabbani, Mumbai

### Fiscal federalism

THE SHARP rise in primary deficits, weak tax buoyancy after GST cuts, and higher state borrowing costs despite a lower repo rate point to a structural problem, not a cyclical one. Markets will eventually price fiscal indiscipline, and heavily indebted states may find refinancing expensive ("For Centre and state finance, a reckoning", IE, January 5). What is worrying is that this stress comes when corporate and bank balance sheets are relatively healthy. Governments should be crowding in private investment through productive capital spending, not crowding it out with fees.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru



MANJEET SINGH PURI

THE NEW year began with two seemingly contradictory happenings across the Atlantic. The first was the inauguration of Zohran Mamdani, a wonderful testament to America's exceptionalism, giving the world a reason to celebrate the US. A day later came the news of the forced removal and transfer to the US of the sitting President of a big Latin American country, Venezuela. This was also exceptionalism, but one that raised concerns not only in the US's now-claimed hegemonic domain of the Western hemisphere (read Americas), but globally as well.

The global rules-based order (read also

## Is Court letting down its mandate on liberty?

formation of bail hearings, Courts increasingly undertake detailed evidentiary assessments at the bail stage, relying on charge-sheets and witness statements that have not been tested through cross-examination. This collapses the distinction between bail proceedings and trial, while denying the accused the procedural safeguards that a trial guarantees. When liberty is denied on untested material, the presumption of innocence is reduced to a procedural formality.

These cases raise serious questions about the structure and function of India's criminal justice system. According to Prison Statistics India 2022, over 75 percent of India's prison population consists of undertrials. Many have spent years in prison awaiting trial, often for offences carrying sentences shorter than the period of their incarceration. Against this backdrop, the Court's emphasis on the "stage of proceedings" implies that the longer a trial is delayed, the weaker the claim to liberty. Such reasoning shifts the cost of systemic failure from the state to the individual, precisely the shift constitutional courts are meant to resist. If delay strengthens the case for continued detention, the incentive to conduct timely trials is undermined.

It is important to acknowledge the relief granted to other accused through the grant of bail. But partial correction cannot substitute for principled consistency.

Equally concerning is the trans-

formation of bail hearings. Courts increasingly undertake detailed evidentiary assessments at the bail stage, relying on charge-sheets and witness statements that have not been tested through cross-examination. This collapses the distinction between bail proceedings and trial, while denying the accused the procedural safeguards that a trial guarantees. When liberty is denied on untested material, the presumption of innocence is reduced to a procedural formality.

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The denial of bail to Khalid and Imam should prompt serious institutional introspection. Courts cannot code their constitutional obligation to protect personal liberty, particularly when delayed trials threaten the executive an undue advantage and the political character of incarceration is evident.

The writer teaches at Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal University

old dictum that what's good for ExxonMobil is good for America. He also said that US oil companies will move into Venezuela and repair its crumbling oil infrastructure.

The US today is the largest oil producer in the world, but a lot of it comes from fracking, which produces light crude. The oil refineries, especially in and around Texas, need heavy crude that used to come from Venezuela, Russia and Canada. Sanctions over the years have reduced Venezuela from a major oil producer to a minnow, but it remains the custodian of the largest oil reserves in the world, apart from gold, coal and other resources. The third-largest oil company in the US, CITGO, is also Venezuelan-owned.

US domestic reasons also matter — more oil on the market can lower gas prices at the pump. Trump also wants to rebuild support among Latinos in the US, which had started wavering following ICE actions, and firm up the MAGA base, which, too, has been strained following the Jeffrey Epstein revelations and repeal of Obamacare.

The writer is former ambassador of India to the EU and Nepal

## No guardrails in Trump 2.0

the UN) rests on the US being its guarantor. The action in Venezuela clearly contravenes that. There are also questions raised about its legality in US law, including the fact that a coequal branch of the country's government, Congress, was kept in the dark. What, then, prompted President Donald Trump to undertake this action?

The avowed reason is President Nicolas Maduro's involvement in the narcotics trade and his indictment in this matter in a US court. But this doesn't really add up as Venezuela, by all accounts, is a big player in drugs getting into the US. The reasoning of restoring democracy and Maduro doesn't add up. Indeed, Trump said that the Venezuelan opposition leader and recent Nobel Prize recipient, Maria Corina Machado,

didn't have "respect and support" in her country. Trump has also said that the "US will run Venezuela" — a deal with Maduro's deputy, Vice President Delcy Rodriguez, seems to be on the anvil.

The issues with Venezuela are more than a decade old. So why did Trump do what he did now? The obvious reason is oil. The US President is a follower of the old dictum that what's good for ExxonMobil is good for America. He also said that US oil companies will move into Venezuela and repair its crumbling oil infrastructure.

Why didn't Trump act in his first term? Trump I was an accidental presidency

where institutionalists, many with a military background, held sway. Breaking away from Pax Americana was not their way. Trump 2.0 has no such guardrails. Ideological and financial (including personal) reasons underpin actions. Then there is legacy — Trump would like to be remembered as a consequential president who extended the US's hegemonic power.

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## • TECH

## Grok use against women: Who is responsible — AI, users or X?

Soumyarendra Barik  
New Delhi, January 5

WHEN GROK AI puts out objectionable pictures of women at the prompt of a user hiding behind anonymity, the key question that emerges is this — who should face the consequences?

Should it be Elon Musk, the owner of X which is hosting the content, or Grok AI, which has been created by not only a team of highly paid engineers but also low-wage data annotators, or the users putting in such prompts?

Musk says that anyone using Grok to make illegal content will "suffer the same consequences as if they upload illegal content". The Indian government, on the other hand, is asking questions of X as to how Grok AI was allowing the creation of objectionable pictures of women, without their consent, with seemingly no safety guards in place.

We explain the legal questions at play and why it could lead to action against the social media platform.

### Safe harbour protection for X

For tech companies such as X, the only real legal consequence in India is determined by the safe harbour protections that are available to them under the country's Information Technology Act, 2000. These protections recognise social media platforms as mere conduits of content that users post, and as a result, have legal immunity from them, as long as they adhere to some prescribed due diligence directives from the government, such as taking down flagged content within a specified timeframe.

But that understanding of what safe harbour means has been upended by the advent of AI services such as Grok, where it might be tricky to ascribe accountability.

Does Grok have the right to unfettered free speech? And what is Grok's free speech even?

Its code essentially determines what the next word in a sentence, or the next pixel in a picture should be, which is a factor of the underlying dataset it has been trained on. Both the code and the content in the language model is created by humans.

Many would say that X should be held accountable for Grok's responses. The Indian government is certainly in that camp.

### What the Indian government has told X

The Indian government expressed "grave concern" over Grok being abused to generate the objectionable pictures. On Friday, it sent amissive to the company saying that it was not adhering to the country's laws, raising red flags over "serious failure" of safeguard enforcement, and has sought information about technical details related to Grok's actions.

The government said that the service was being used by people to target women who host or publish their images or videos, through prompts, image manipulation and synthetic outputs, and said that "such conduct reflects a serious failure of platform-level safeguards and enforcement mechanisms, and amounts to gross misuse of artificial intelligence technologies in violation of applicable laws".

This is being viewed with "grave concern", as it could violate the dignity, privacy and safety of women and children, "normalising sexual harassment and exploitation in digital spaces, and undermining the statutory due diligence framework applicable to intermediaries operating in India", the government said.

The notice said that due to Grok's actions, X was not adequately adhering to provisions of the Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021, and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023.

### Impact on X's safe harbour

IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnath recently said that social media platforms like X should take responsibility for content they publish and a standing committee has already recommended a tough law to fix accountability of platforms. "The Parliamentary Committee has recommended a strong law for regulating social media. We are considering it," he said.

Earlier, he has spoken about the potential need to relook at safe harbour protections available to online platforms.

The government talked about reconsidering the safe harbour clause in 2023 during consultations on the Digital India Act, which once implemented will replace the decades old IT Act, 2000. However, the government is yet to issue a draft of the Digital India Bill for public consultation.

Officials in the government indicated that after the Grok AI incident, they were ready to revoke X's safe harbour protections, meaning the platform could become legally liable for Grok AI's outputs.

### Not a new problem

In October, *The Indian Express* had reported how AI-generated clips and pictures of actors were widely available on platforms like Instagram and X, with the platforms seemingly failing in their responsibility to curb the spread of such content, jeopardising the safety and dignity of women, which could create barriers to their participation in digital spaces.

In December, the IT Ministry had issued an advisory to online platforms, including social media companies, asking them not to host obscene, or vulgar content, calling for "greater rigour" in adhering to provisions of the law.

## • DELHI RIOTS CASE: KHALID, IMAM DENIED BAIL

## In bail denial, SC creates a hierarchy of offenders



VINEET BHALLA

THE SUPREME COURT

MONDAY, JANUARY 6, 2026

### • HOW THE RIOTS CASE UNFOLDED

**MARCH 2020:** FIR is filed under the IPC for rioting and criminal conspiracy after the Northeast Delhi riots.

**SEPT 2020:** Chargesheet is filed, recasting the violence as a premeditated conspiracy linked to anti-CAA protests; UAPA provisions invoked.

**JULY 2021:** Umar Khalid files his first bail plea before Karkardooma Sessions Court; plea withdrawn due to objections over maintainability under UAPA.

**SEPT 2021:** Khalid files second bail plea before the same court.

**MARCH-APRIL 2022:** Court rejects bail for multiple accused, ruling that the material discloses a prima facie case under UAPA.

**APRIL 2022:** Khalid moves Supreme Court (SC); files a special leave petition against HC's failure to grant bail; no substantive hearing takes place.

**OCT 2023:** HC's Justice Siddharth Mridul, one of the two judges hearing Khalid's plea since 2022, gets transferred, preventing the pronouncement of orders and a rehearing of the appeal.

**APRIL 2024:** Khalid withdraws his SC bail plea, citing "changed circumstances"; returns to the trial court.

**MAY 2024:** Sessions Court rejects bail again, holding that prolonged incarceration can't override the statutory bar under UAPA.

**JULY 2024:** Khalid moves Delhi HC again, challenging Sessions Court's fresh rejection.

**SEPT 2025:** Delhi HC rejects bail, ruling that riots were the outcome of a planned conspiracy.

**SEPT-OCT 2025:** SC begins hearing bail appeals of all accused together.

**JAN 2026:** Applying an "excused-specific" UAPA, SC denies bail to Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, holding them to be on a "qualitatively different footing"; grants bail to five co-accused, subject to stringent conditions.

SC used framework of differentiated roles of alleged conspirators, making a distinction between the 'architects' of the plot and its 'facilitators'

What courts have said earlier on UAPA and prolonged incarceration

Apurva Vishwanath  
New Delhi, January 5

IN DENYING bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam — accused of forging a "larger conspiracy" in the 2020 Northeast Delhi riots — the Supreme Court has observed that prolonged incarceration can not be an "absolute entitlement" to seek bail in terror cases.

Previously, the SC has underlined prolonged incarceration as an exceptional ground for granting bail, overriding the stringent bail conditions under the UAPA.

### Bail in previous UAPA cases

Between 2016 and 2025, Benchches headed by nine different Supreme Court judges granted bail in 61 cases under the UAPA on the grounds that the accused had remained in jail for long periods, and trial had not moved forward in any meaningful way.

The SC, in a 2021 decision in *Union of India v K A Naeem*, granted bail in a UAPA case in which the accused had been in jail for more than five years, and 276 witnesses remained to be examined.

Referring to the restrictive bail conditions in Section 43D(5) of the UAPA, the court held, "The rigours of such provisions will melt down where there is no likelihood of trial being completed within a reasonable time and the period of incarceration already undergone has exceeded a substantial part of the prescribed sentence".

In April 2024, the court relied on this ruling to grant bail to UAPA-accused and former Nagpur University professor Shoma Sen in the Bhima Koregaon case. Referring to the decision in *K A Naeem*, the court stated "long period of incarceration was held to be a valid ground to enlarge an accused on bail in spite of the bail-restricting provision of Section 43D(5) of the 1967 Act".

In Shoma Sen's case, the court also held that "any form of deprival of liberty results in breach of Article 21 of the Constitution of India and must be justified on the ground of being reasonable, following a just and fair procedure, and such deprival must be proportionate in the facts of a given case".

In July 2024, a Bench comprising Justices J B Pardiwala and Ujjal Bhuyan also cited the right to speedy trial and granted bail to Sheikh Javed Iqbal, a Nepali citizen booked under the UAPA, bypassing its stringent bail provision.

Iqbal, at the time of his bail, had been incarcerated for more than nine years, with only two witnesses having their evidence recorded during that time.

### • HOW THE RIOTS CASE UNFOLDED

**APRIL 2022:** Khalid moves Delhi HC, appealing against dismissal of his bail plea.

**OCT 2022:** HC rejects his bail plea and dismisses his appeal, holding that the bar under Section 43D(5) of UAPA applied.

**APRIL 2023:** Khalid moves Supreme Court (SC); files a special leave petition against HC's failure to grant bail; no substantive hearing takes place.

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COMPILED BY AMAL SHEKH

### What the court said

The SC ruled that road blockades designed to disrupt public order and international events prima facie attract the definition of a terrorist act.

### On prolonged incarceration

All appellants presented an argument regarding the length of their custody. The accused have been jail since 2020, with the trial still stuck at the stage of framing of charges. They relied on the SC's 2021 ruling in *Union of India v K A Naeem*, which held that constitutional courts can grant bail despite the UAPA bar if there is no likelihood of a speedy trial, to protect the right to life and liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution.

But on Monday, the SC clarified that *K A Naeem* does not provide a mechanical rule where delay automatically trumps the statute.

The court has said delay does not operate as a "trump card" that automatically disposes statutory restraint but rather serves as a trigger for heightened judicial scrutiny.

The SC also concluded that the delay was partly due to the voluminous evidence — more than 1,000 documents and 835 witnesses — and procedural objections raised

by the defence, and could not be solely attributed to the prosecution.

The court ruled that the plea of delay must be balanced against the gravity of the offence and the role of the accused. For the alleged "masterminds" — Khalid and Imam — the gravity of the offence and their "conspiratorial centrality" meant the statutory embargoes on bail outweighed the delay factor.

However, for the facilitators, whose roles were limited to logistics or local mobilisation, the court held that continued incarceration had become punitive. Since they did not possess the "autonomous capacity" to threaten the trial process, the balance tilted in favour of their liberty.

### What's next

For the five granted relief, the SC has imposed conditions to ensure they do not tamper with evidence or influence witnesses. They must execute a personal bond of Rs 2,00,000 with two local sureties and remain within the National Capital Territory of Delhi. They have been directed to surrender their passports and report to the Delhi Police's Crime Branch police station twice a week. The court has also restrained them from making any public commentary regarding the case and prohibited them from contacting witnesses. For Khalid and Imam, the SC acknowledged the pace of the trial and directed the trial court to proceed with "due expedition". The court has also provided a specific window for them to seek bail again. They can apply for bail before the trial court either upon the completion of the examination of the "protected witness" relied upon by the prosecution or upon the expiry of one year from the date of this order, whichever is earlier.

### • VENEZUELA CRISIS

## Colombia, Cuba, Mexico: What's behind Trump's threats?

Anagha Jayakumar  
New Delhi, January 5

SOON AFTER the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, US President Donald Trump threatened action against two other Latin American nations — Colombia and Mexico, if they failed to reduce the flow of illicit drugs into the US. He added that Cuba, a close ally of Venezuela, "looks like it's ready to fall" on its own.

It's not just the 19th-century Monroe Doctrine, which asserts the western hemisphere as a zone of US influence, that's behind these threats. A mixture of factors such as ideology, drugs, immigration and strategic partners is also behind Trump's ire.

### Colombia

Colombia and the US have traditionally had close trade and security ties. Colombia is a major supplier of crude to the US.

The country is also the leading global producer of cocaine, as well as the cocoa plant from which it is derived, accounting for over two-thirds of the total production of both.

Relations have been strained ever since Gustavo Petro became Colombia's first-ever leftist president in 2022. He has been unwilling to cooperate with US-backed drug policies, expressed an interest in joining the BRICS+ grouping, and decided to break ties with Israel. In January 2025, Trump's administration threatened repercussions against Colombia after it initially refused to accept US military aircraft carrying Colombian deportees. Over the weekend, Petro called the US attacks on Venezuela an "assault on the sovereignty" of Latin America, which would lead to a humanitarian crisis.

### Mexico

The US and Mexico have a chequered history, with deep economic links today. The 3,145-km border has increasingly become a point in bilateral ties due to the movement of undocumented immigrants and the flow of illicit drugs. Mexico also leads in the global production and trafficking of



ing of fentanyl, a highly potent synthetic drug that has contributed to a rise in drug overdoses in the US.

Trump's first presidential campaign succeeded in part because he promised to erect a border wall between the US and Mexico. The plan failed, but the two nations agreed to curtail the flow of illegal immigrants into the US. Trump has announced tariffs against Canada, China and Mexico citing fentanyl trafficking. He also threatened to launch drone strikes into Mexico to combat drug trafficking.

His proposal to allow American troops into Mexico to fight suspected Mexican drug cartels last April was rebuffed by Mexican president Claudia Sheinbaum.

### Cuba

The US and Cuba have had a historically troubled relationship, right from the Cold War era when Fidel Castro took over and America launched the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. The US has long imposed strict economic sanctions on Cuba — with a brief reversal of the policy under Barack Obama's presidency. Trump has redesignated Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Cuba remains dependent on Venezuela for oil and has received large-scale foreign investment from China and Russia. With the fate of the Venezuelan economy uncertain, Cuba may turn to Russia, building on their increased military and economic cooperation in recent years.

### Differing reasons, similar threats

• Trump's wish to annex Greenland appears mainly driven by strategic interests. The island is located near emerging shipping lanes in the Arctic. It served as a vital base of operations during the Cold War (1945-91). The US operates the sprawling Peltier Space Base (formerly the Thule Air Base) in the province. From Greenland, the US can monitor and stop any missile coming towards it from Russia, China or even North Korea. Similarly, it can launch missiles and ships towards Asia or Europe easily from Greenland. In recent years, China and Russia have reportedly scaled up their military capabilities in the Arctic, according to an Arctic Institute research paper.

### Resource rich

Trump's interest in Greenland also appears to be driven by a desire to counter the rising influence of China in the region.

Greenland has large reserves of not just traditional resources — gold, nickel and co-

### Red flags over Greenland: Why US wants to annex the territory

Anagha Jayakumar  
New Delhi, January 5

FOLLOWING THE capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, US President Donald Trump repeated his threat to annex the autonomous Danish province of Greenland. He said the US "absolutely needs" it "for defence", while his aides posted provocative "SOON" maps of the island draped in the American flag.

The leaders of Denmark, Greenland and even the UK have responded strongly to the remarks. The rebuttals mark the latest response in a year-long campaign by the US to annex the province, with Trump even expressing willingness to use force. Here is why the US wants Greenland.

### Strategic location

American interest in Greenland, the world's largest island, is rooted in geography. It is located near the emerging shipping lanes around the Arctic. It served as a vital base of operations during the Cold War (1945-91). The US operates the sprawling Peltier Space Base (formerly the Thule Air Base) in the province. From Greenland, the US can monitor and stop any missile coming towards it from Russia, China or even North Korea. Similarly, it can launch missiles and ships towards Asia or Europe easily from Greenland. In recent years, China and Russia have reportedly scaled up their military capabilities in the Arctic, according to an Arctic Institute research paper.

### The China shadow

The Chinese presence is not limited to the mineral sector in Greenland. It has also been involved in creation of new infrastructure, aimed at facilitating greater use of Arctic sea routes. In 2018, it released a white paper on its Arctic policy, in which it outlined plans of creating a "Polar Silk Road".

The US, with its defence assets in Greenland, is unnerved by these developments, and has even tried to dissuade Denmark from allowing too many Chinese companies in the island. The US has many motivations to control Greenland, but China's footprint seems to be a big reason.



bait — but also some of the biggest reserves of Rare Earth minerals. Rare Earths are used extensively in critical consumer technologies such as phones and electric vehicles as well as in new military applications.

China is currently the leading supplier of Rare Earths. Crucially, China too has entered Greenland in a big way. Chinese companies are actively involved in prospecting, mining and processing these mineral resources. They account for 11% per cent of the investments in the mineral sector in Greenland, just behind Australia and the US, data from the island's mineral department shows.

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• TECH

Grok use against women: Who is responsible — AI, users or X?

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Nashik, Tuesday, 6.1.2026 6

OPINION

## New tariff threats

Faced with unending Trump tantrums, India should look for other options

After drawing a short draw from US President Donald Trump, India finds itself confronted with another veiled warning. Renewing pressure over India's purchase of Russian oil, Trump on Sunday said that US tariffs could be raised further if New Delhi does not cooperate. This puts a question mark over the US-India trade deal, which has already missed many deadlines. The timing of the warning is significant as Trump's remarks followed US military operations in Venezuela. Earlier, Trump had described Modi as a "good man who knows that I am unhappy and wants to make me happy." He had also conceded that India had substantially reduced its oil purchases from Russia. Though Indian officials denied any recent conversation between Trump and Modi on the issue, the US seems to be piqued by the fact that India's Russian oil purchases have risen to a six-month high in November, accounting for 35% of its oil imports.

This comes at a time when there has been little progress in finalising a trade deal with the US. However, at the same time, India has also increased its purchases of American oil, which jumped to a seven-month high in November 2025, with the US accounting for nearly 13% of India's oil imports that month. The US had in August 2025 hiked tariffs on India's imports from 25% to 50% as a "penalty" for its imports of Russian oil. This was despite the fact that, in seven of the eight months leading up to August, India had cut its Russian oil imports on a year-on-year basis. There is growing frustration in New Delhi over the fact that, despite India's willingness to cut Russian oil imports, there has been little progress on addressing the tariff issue. India has already presented its final offer to the US. The matter is now pending before the US leadership.

However, despite these apparent frustrations, India has continued to tread a fine line to balance US interests. Last November, India's oil imports from the US jumped to a seven-month high of nearly 2.8 million tonnes, with a total value of \$1.4 billion. As a result, the US saw its share in Indian oil imports jump to 12.6% from 4.2% a month and a year earlier. The Government has also asked Indian refiners for weekly disclosures of Russian and US oil purchases and expects Russian crude imports to dip below 1 million barrels per day as New Delhi seeks to clinch a trade deal with Washington. If the US is serious about the India-US partnership, it should first cut the punitive tariff on Indian exports from 50% to 25%, especially since the Russian oil issue - the stated trigger - has been resolved. Faced with fresh Trump tantrums, India is not putting all eggs in one basket anymore and gaining more room to manoeuvre in an unpredictable tariff and sanctions world.

## Pangs of growth

As India's gig economy grows, its workers continue to suffer

The nationwide strike by gig workers on New Year's eve has drawn attention to the working conditions in this sector and the state of the gig economy. Niti Aayog estimates the number of gig and platform workers in India in 2019-20 at 2.35 crore, rising from one crore in 2024-25. Poised for significant growth, the sector employs a major segment of the country's workforce, but as unorganised and casual employees, these workers are not entitled to labour protection and most welfare measures. Studies and discussions have underscored their poor working conditions and demands, but the platforms have not responded well. A token strike called by the workers on December 25 disrupted deliveries in some places. Wednesday's stir did not have a major impact on services, but the two strikes have revived discussions around the workers' rights.

The demands raised by the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers include a rollback of 10-minute delivery models, a fair and transparent wage system, social security including health benefits, accident insurance and pension, end to arbitrary and algorithmic penalties, and regulation of platform companies under labour laws. These workplaces do not follow a traditional employer-employee relationship and offer no scope for direct negotiations involving the management. Most of the employees are overworked and poorly paid. According to a survey, over 80% of them work more than 10 hours a day and most earn below ₹15,000 per month. Many have faced arbitrary ID deactivation; the conditions are stressful and inhuman for most, especially for personnel in the 10-minute delivery stream. Over the past year, several countries have passed laws to regulate their working conditions and fair wages.

India has brought gig workers under the Code on Social Security, which came into force last month, and entitles them to a host of welfare measures. But these claims need to be viewed in context of formal coverage of the workforce - it has been noted that only 5% of gig workers are registered on the e-Shram portal. While the workplace conditions and the workers' demands have been recognised, the challenge will be in translating assurances into practice. Mandatory contributions of 1.2% of the aggregator's turnover to a social security fund, and Aadhaar-linked universal account numbers are important steps. But it is not known how the social security schemes will be implemented. Ad hoc incentives and payouts will not suffice. The grievances call for strong regulatory oversight on work hours, wages, and other benefits, in accordance with the law. At a time when governments are bringing forward legislation to ensure fair wages and welfare measures for gig workers, India cannot afford to look away.

# Crisis and Opportunity

The sessions of 2025 witnessed a near-total breakdown of the deliberative process



Prabhu Chawla  
POWER & POLITICS

Democracy, in its most visceral and organic form, is not a monologue of agreement but a cacophony of competing aspirations. In a civilisation as ancient, polyphonic, and layered as India, the democratic experiment was never designed to be seamless; it was intended to be the friction that polishes the stone. The multicoloured society, spanning linguistic, religious, ethnic, and other fault lines, manages its inherent contradictions not through silence, but through the noisy, often messy, institutionalisation of conflict. The Parliament, the federal assemblies, and the media are meant to be the safety valves where these pressures are released through dialogue. However, when the institutions designed to mediate these conflicts atrophy, the noise does not disappear. It metastasises into toxicity. When the forum for debate becomes a theatre of silence, democracy ceases to be a negotiation and becomes a diktat. As India navigated the turbulent waters of 2025, it found itself not merely in a state of political contestation but in an existential deadlock where the mechanisms of dialogue had been systematically replaced by the mechanisms of confrontation. The year was a testament to the fragility of a republic where the "will of the people" is increasingly interpreted as the "dominance of the majority", leaving little room for the nuances of dissent that Nehru and Ambedkar had meticulously woven into the constitutional fabric.

In retrospect, 2025 stands out as a year of institutional impasse, where the empty chair became a defining symbol of the profound deadlock between the treasury benches and the opposition. The paralysis of the Indian Parliament serves as the bleakest metric of this institutional decline. Continuing the ominous trend set by the Winter Session of 2024, where productivity in the Lok Sabha plummeted to 31 per cent and the Rajya Sabha to 32 per cent, the sessions of 2025 witnessed a near-total breakdown of the deliberative process. Official records from the PRS Legislative Research indicate that the first three sessions of 2025 set for historically low durations, characterised by "minimum work and maximum confrontation". While government floor managers cited technical productivity in certain sessions, the quality of that engagement revealed the depth of the rot. For instance, in the Budget Session, despite claims of high functional hours, critical legislative business



2025 exposed how dangerously close Indian democracy has come to mistaking majoritarian efficiency for the noisy, argumentative soul that once gave it life and expressed the nation's diversity

was bulldozed with alarming speed. The imposition of President's Rule in Manipur, a decision of profound federal consequence, was approved by the Lok Sabha after a mere 42 minutes of discussion. The Rajya Sabha, often the house of sober second thought, saw bills passed amidst din without a division vote. The "reasons for confrontation" were systemic rather than episodic. The ruling party, emboldened by repeated electoral successes and a fractured Opposition, adopted a posture of legislative belligerence, viewing parliamentary debate not as a constitutionally minority but as an obstruction to administrative efficiency. Mallikarjun Kharge, the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, captured this sentiment in a moment of exasperation, stating, "The problem is a trust deficit. The whole session they did not have a discussion. How can we trust them? They want to kill democracy." His words underscored a reality where the government refused to engage on contentious flashpoints, leaving the Opposition with disruption as its only remaining leverage.

Yet, amidst this parliamentary paralysis, 2025 also witnessed a dramatic resurgence of electoral fortunes that redefined the political landscape. The Bharatiya Janata Party, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, recovered its electoral momentum with resounding victories in both the Delhi and Bihar Assembly elections. These triumphs were not mere footnotes; they were seismic shifts that reassessed Modi's image as an invincible winner and injected a fresh surge of confidence into the ruling dispensation. In Delhi, the BJP's sweep securing 48 seats in the 70 member assembly shattered the Aam Aadmi Party's decade-long dominance, exposing the fragility of Kejriwal's govern-

ance model built on freebies and welfare promises. Modi himself descended into the campaign trail, addressing massive rallies where he thundered, "Delhi has rejected the politics of freebies and chosen development," framing the win as a mandate for his vision of a corruption-free, aspirational India. This Delhi verdict was followed by an even more emphatic triumph in Bihar, where the National Democratic Alliance crushed the Mahagathbandhan, with the BJP and its ally Nitish Kumar's JD(U) together winning a supermajority.

The Bihar battle was a masterclass in political arithmetic and narrative dominance, where Modi's personal interventions - through viral roadshows and strategic messaging on caste census and development - neutralised Rahul Gandhi's aggressive push for social justice. These back-to-back electoral hat-tricks transformed the BJP's body language from defensive to triumphant. Amit Shah, the Home Minister and master strategist, declared post-Bihar, "This is the beginning of the end for democratic politics. The people have spoken - Modi is unbeatable." The ruling party's newfound arrogance in Parliament, far from being unearned, was now fortified by these democratic endorsements, allowing it to dismiss Opposition disruptions as the tantrums of electoral losers.

The ideological fulcrum of the confrontation in 2025 was the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. While the Election Commission of India framed the SIR as a routine administrative exercise to purge "dead, shifted, and duplicate" entries, the Opposition viewed it as a weaponised demographic tool. In a political climate charged with suspicion, the SIR was branded by the INDIA bloc as a "covert NRC" (National

Register of Citizens) aimed at disenfranchising minority demographies - specifically Muslims - under the guise of data hygiene. The controversy was not merely procedural; it was existential. In states like West Bengal and Assam, fears were stoked that the revision was a prelude to stripping millions of their voting rights. Rahul Gandhi, in a rare moment of piercing clarity during a truncated debate, lashed out at the government's intent: "If you destroy the vote, you destroy the country. You destroy the idea of India." He argued that the SIR was being used to create "a half-vote" at a national scale, altering the electorate to favour the ruling dispensation in the upcoming 2026 state elections. The government's refusal to allow a dedicated discussion on the SIR in Parliament turned the legislative chambers into battlegrounds, with the treasury benches dismissing the Opposition's concerns as "appeasement politics" and fearmongering. This refusal to engage on an issue touching the very citizenship of the people solidified the perception that 2025 was a year where the state was at war with a section of its own citizenry.

Beyond the capital, the malaise deepened in the federal structure, threatening the "Union of States" concept enshrined in Article 1. The year 2025 witnessed a near-total collapse of formal communication between the Centre and Opposition-led states. The BJP's celebrated "Double Engage" strategy morphed into a "Single Command" reality, where states like West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu found themselves locked in fiscal and administrative combat with New Delhi. The conflict was no longer about policy differences; it was a war of attrition waged through the office of the Governor. In Tamil Nadu, the confrontation between the elected government of MK Stalin and Governor RN Ravi reached a fever pitch. The Governor's unprecedented move to unilaterally dismiss a minister - though later retracted - and his refusal to read the customary address prepared by the state cabinet, signalled a breakdown of constitutional propriety. In West Bengal, the Raj Bhavan under Governor Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, and the "social boycott" of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, a move that would have been unthinkable in previous decades. In Kerala, Governor Rajendra Arikar's delays in assenting to bills and summoning assemblies further exacerbated tensions with the LDF government.

### To be concluded

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

## Story behind vulture J-132's 'regal' flight



Prof Chander Mahadev

J-132's 'regal' flight across several districts in Maharashtra, covering a distance of 750 kms in 17 days, became the talking point in Indian media. This was surprising since nature's sanitisation workers don't get much talked about as they are not among the most exciting avian species for wildlife enthusiasts. What made news was the exploits of this magnificent bird which traversed across central and western Maharashtra, crossing through eight districts before reaching the cliffs near Anjaneri hills in Nashik.

Scientists selected Saddlelam, 22 km from Sillari Gate, as their pre-release aviary for strategic reasons. This protected area was chosen since it offered large prey base for vultures could feed on carcasses of animals hunted by tigers, leopards, and wild dogs. The reserve also provided a buffer against threats that persisted outside protected boundaries. Pench and Tadoba Tiger Reserves in Maharashtra, along with Melghat, became focal points for the reintroduction program.

Before release, vultures underwent months of acclimatisation. The 14 vultures brought from Pinjore to Pench in April 2025—

eight white-rumped and five long-billed vultures, including J-132 - spent nearly month learning to their new environment. Researchers monitored them continuously through CCTV cameras, tracking their health and behaviour.

Equally important was making the landscape safe. The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and Maharashtra Forest Department teams conducted pharmacy surveys in surrounding areas, ensuring banned veterinary drugs weren't being sold or used. They educated cattle owners about alternative medications like Meloxicam, which is safe for vultures. Forest department staff received training in vulture identification and habitat protection. Community engagement programs raised awareness about these birds' critical ecological role.

Scientists further noted that the concept of Wildlife Safe Zones emerged over a period of time. This was essential in creating release sites within approximately 30,000 square kilometres around release sites where strict monitoring ensures minimal contamination from toxic drugs. These zones represent a buffer between the controlled environment of breeding centers and the unpredictable wider landscape.

On December 11, 2025, 14 vultures were released into the skies above Pench Tiger Reserve. The journey captured the imagination of India's birding community, offering tangible proof that captive-bred vultures could navigate, survive, and thrive across vast distances.



tures could navigate, survive, and thrive across vast distances.

Explaining the careful balance between monitoring and protection, a BNHS researcher stationed in Pench Tiger Reserve (PTR) says: "The bird roosts in the evening, feeds in the morning and then flies to the next location. Activity data suggests it has at least two full meals during its journey."

Vultures also serve unexpected conservation functions. Because they gather within large groups, they help authorities detect illegal poaching activity.

To put it in layperson's terms, J-132's successful journey represents a milestone, but the work of vulture conservation remains far from complete. India's vulture reintroduction program operates on multiple fronts, each critical to long-term success. Similar tagging and release activities have been completed in Melghat and Tadoba Tiger Reserves.

According to BNHS researchers, continued vigilance around veteri-

nary drug use remains essential. While Diclofenac is banned, it still appears in phycyto surveys in some regions. Other NSAIDs like Ketoprofen and Aceclofenac have also proven toxic to vultures, requiring continuous advocacy for their prohibition. Ensuring that livestock treatment occurs only through qualified veterinarians helps prevent overuse of dangerous medications.

When researchers track J-132's movements on their monitors, they see validation of two decades of scientific effort, proof that the most stark conservation crisis in recent history can be reversed through coordinated action.

J-132's wings carry the hopes of countless scientists and conservationists who refused to accept extinction as inevitable. The vulture's journey from a breeding centre in Haryana to freedom in Pench demonstrates that nature, given support and protection, possesses remarkable flexibility.

The story of J-132 gave its life trying to save Sita in the Ramayana. Today, the real Jatayu - the vultures named in that legendary bird's honour - are themselves being saved, brought back from near extinction to reclaim their role as guardians of India's ecosystems. J-132's journey is their story, and ours - a testament to what becomes possible when we choose to act before it's too late.

The author is a former professor of journalism. Views expressed are personal.

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## Address farmers' concerns

**A**t a time when the farming community is grappling with multiple problems that make agriculture a challenging endeavour, the draft Seeds Bill proposed by the Union Agriculture Ministry has raised fresh concerns. The Centre must address these apprehensions before moving ahead with the legislation aimed at overhauling the regulations governing the seeds sector and replacing the Seeds Act, 1966, and the Seed Control Order, 1983. The proposed legislation gives the government powers to regulate seed prices in specific cases and imposes penalties on those selling fake or substandard seeds. While the government maintains that the proposed law will help improve the supply of quality seeds, curb counterfeits and offer greater protection to farmers, there are growing fears that it increases the control of private and multinational companies over the seed market. The registration requirements could restrict farmers' traditional practice of saving and exchanging seeds. There is also concern that the proposed regulation may indirectly increase seed prices, making farmers more dependent on commercial suppliers rather than their own seed systems. The seed market has, over the years, become increasingly complex, leading to financial losses caused by substandard products. The proposed legislation has introduced several regulatory changes: All seed varieties will require registration; they must undergo Value for Cultivation and Use (VCU) testing across multiple locations; seed dealers and distributors must obtain a state-issued registration certificate to sell, import or export seeds; every seed container must carry a QR code generated through the central government's Seed Traceability Portal to enable end-to-end tracking.

A proposed Central Accreditation System would allow companies accredited at the national level to receive automatic recognition across all States — a measure critics say overwhelmingly benefits big corporations. A resounding feedback from the farming community is that the proposed law is better suited to seed companies and agribusinesses than to ordinary cultivators, particularly those relying on traditional, chemical-free farming. Indigenous, diverse and climate-resilient varieties may struggle to meet the standardised criteria and could gradually disappear from formal markets. Similarly, QR codes, online submissions and continuous tracking pose challenges for small rural seed keepers with limited internet access or digital literacy. There are also fears over genetically modified or patented seeds entering India. No wonder the farmer organisations are up in arms. By enabling corporate dominance, the proposed law will squeeze small and marginal farmers, increasing their cost of cultivation and making them more vulnerable. Farmers' bodies contend that the new law introduces a highly centralised and corporatised regulatory framework that risks weakening farmer-centred protections and diluting India's legal architecture for biodiversity conservation and farmers' rights.

**Centre must allay growing fears that the Seeds Bill will increase corporate control and marginalise farmers**

**Without clear measures of livelihoods protected, climate finance will stay carbon-focused, even after COP30**



SUSHANTA MAHAPATRA  
MADAN MEHER

**C**OP30 in Belém, Brazil, closed with high expectations and mixed results. Delegates rightly celebrated the Belém Political Package and the Baku-to-Belém roadmap — a recognition that climate finance must scale up dramatically — but the summit also made clear a stubborn truth: the global system still measures success overwhelmingly in terms of tonnes of carbon, not in terms of livelihoods defended. That imbalance is no longer an academic frustration. It is a practical barrier to protecting workers, markets and incomes as the climate already begins to bite.

The scale of the gap is stark. The United Nations' Adaptation Gap Report (2025) updated the recurring estimate that developing countries will need roughly USD 310 billion per year for adaptation by 2035 under modelled cost approaches — rising to as much as USD 365 billion if one extrapolates National Adaptation Plans — while international public adaptation finance to developing countries amounted to only about USD 26 billion in 2023. Those numbers are not abstractions; they are a forecast of unprotected people and unpaid losses unless adaptation is rapidly re-engineered to be investable at scale.

**Measurement Matters**  
At the same time, the labour market implications are profound and immediate. The International Labour Organisation's analysis on heat stress shows how temperature increases directly translate into lost working hours, lower output, and declining incomes. In absolute terms, because of its population size, India alone faces projected productivity losses equivalent to roughly 34 million full-time jobs by 2030 if heat exposures continue to worsen — a conversion of climate risk into lost livelihoods that

policymakers can and must count. Why does measurement matter? Because markets and ministries respond to what is counted. Mitigation benefits from coherent, fungible units — tonnes of CO2 avoided — that financial instruments, regulators and carbon markets can aggregate and price. Adaptation has instead produced a mosaic of activities: flood walls, mangrove restoration, early warning systems, heat shelters and social protection top-ups. Each has value, but they are reported in different units (hectares restored, houses protected, funds disbursed) and with variable rigour. The result is predictable: donors and private investors gravitate to what is comparable and auditable. Without a shared, operational metric framework, adaptation projects struggle to compete for scarce concessional capital and guarantees.

COP30 provided an opening. The Belém Political Package reanchored finance and adaptation as central aims of the multilateral process. Those initiatives create a policy lever: if large pooled facilities — Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) guarantees and labelled instruments made outcome measurement a condition for concessional support, adaptation could enter a virtuous cycle of verification, risk-reduction and private participation.

**Emission-focused Metrics**  
A pragmatic, evidence-based way forward lies in a two-tier adaptation accounting system that complements emission-focused metrics.

• Tier 1 — Core outcome indicators.

Agree on a compact set of cross-cutting outcome metrics that speak to

livelihoods and public health. These are not inputs or outputs but outcomes that investors and citizens can understand and aggregate: days of work preserved; avoided income loss during defined climate shocks; beneficiaries in high-exposure occupations reduced; reductions in emergency hospital admissions attributable to an intervention; and time-to-pay for microinsurance claims. These indicators anchor adaptation finance in the economic realities it is meant to protect.

• Tier 2 — Standardised reporting and verification. Require that adaptation finance instruments — from labelled bonds and blended finance vehicles to MDB concessional guarantees — report against those indicators using standard baselines and independent third-party verification. Baseline protocols and monitoring templates would be publicly available, and measurement costs recognised as eligible project expenses. This permits scoring and aggregation across projects, allowing adaptation portfolios to be presented to institutional investors and insurers on a like-for-like basis.

This framework addresses three persistent objections. First, attribution. No

**When adaptation is invisible to financiers, the policies that protect poor — from shaded markets to rapid pay-out insurance — remain underfunded**

### Letters to the

Editor

### Disappointing

The Bangladesh Cricket Board's refusal to travel for the T20 World Cup is a disappointing pivot from sportsmanship to brinkmanship. While security is paramount, using "political tension" as a wildcard sets a dangerous precedent that threatens to fracture the ICC's central authority. If every bilateral friction dictates tournament geography, the "World" in World Cup will soon become a misnomer. Cricket cannot thrive in silos; it requires the grit to play on rival soil. Is the pitch now a political podium?

DR VIJAYKUMAR HK,

Raichur

### Work for real benefits

The proposed reforms to MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) under the new VB-G RAM G Act, 2025, aim to improve rural employment and transparency, according to the central government. While digitisation, asset creation, and accountability are welcome measures, persistent issues such as delayed wage payments, inadequate work availability, and digital exclusion continue to affect rural workers. Technology-driven reforms must be supported by strong institutional capacity and local-level awareness. Without addressing these ground realities, policy intent may not translate into real benefits. A people-centric approach with timely grievance redressal is essential to ensure that MGNREGA remains a genuine safety net for rural India.

KR GAGAN, Tumkur

### Rule of law

The US capture of Nicholas Maduro in a daring raid, reminiscent of Israel's 1976 Entebbe operation, is fully justified. (US captures Maduro, wife in overnight raid, 4 January). Indicted since 2020, for narco terrorism, leading a cartel flooding America with Cocaine, the Venezuelan president headed a criminal regime, not a legitimate government. This bold action, by elite forces, enforces justice against a dictator who rigged the election and ravaged Venezuela. Evidently, the aim of operation "Absolute Resolve" is to protect US national security from drug threats and open the door for a democratic transition in Venezuela. America stood for the rule of law, and tyrants like Maduro must face accountability.

PH HEMA SAGAR, Secunderabad

### Indore, hype on image

Indore, repeatedly ranked as India's cleanest city, appears to have failed in addressing one of the most basic civic responsibilities — providing clean and potable drinking water. While crores of public money seems to have been spent on beautification and cleanliness drives, safe drinking water, which is integral to public health and true urban hygiene, has been neglected. Clean streets and polished rankings cannot compensate for contaminated water reaching households. Such window dressing may impress surveyors, but it cannot conceal ground realities for long. This is not an Indore-specific problem alone. Cities like Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Delhi suffer from similar contradictions — high on image, low on essential services. True cleanliness is not about awards or optics; it begins with safe water, reliable sanitation, and honest governance. Anything less is merely cosmetic.

N NAGARAJAN,

Secunderabad

### India in the

hotspot

■ Bloomberg

### India, Malaysia, France blast X for 'offensive' images

Elon Musk's Grok is facing mounting criticism and threats of government action around the world after the artificial intelligence chatbot created sexualized images, including of minors, on the social media platform X in response to user prompts.

■ CNN

### Door deliveries under 10 min: Many drivers fed up

Tens of thousands of app-based delivery workers in India went on strike over New Year's Eve, protesting a system they say is defined by relentless pressure, including requirements to deliver items in under 10 minutes. The workers are calling for "fair pay, dignity and safety."

■ The Wall Street Journal

### The Hindu attacks on India's Christians

Since Narendra Modi became India's prime minister in 2014, the country has seen a breathtaking rise in violence against religious minorities by groups aligned with his Hindu-supremacist BJP. India's Muslims, who are 14% of the population, have borne the brunt of the most brutal physical attacks.

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JOHN BRITTAS  
CPI(M) Rajya Sabha member



GUILLERMO DEL TORO  
Oscar-winning filmmaker

Sometimes the world gets so complicated, you can only explain it with the power of monsters. We are in a time like that right now. It's not just the size of the screens, it's the size of the idea



SYED KIRMANI  
Former India wicketkeeper-batter

Kohli and Rohit should keep playing if they're enjoying cricket. Critics will always criticise. Everyone desires fresh players, so there's no reason for concern. Let them decide for themselves

”

## Counting what counts



intervention can be perfectly insulated from context, but adaptation outcomes commonly define a plausible attribution window (for example, income losses avoided during a named flood season). Standardised baselines and plausible counterfactuals — similar to best practice used in development impact evaluations — reduce ambiguity.

Second, measurement costs. These should be treated as part of the project: donors and blended facilities can finance baseline surveys and verification upfront. Third, impact-washing. Independent auditors, transparent reporting templates and penalties for misreporting reduce incentive misalignment.

Of course, the policy design must be sensitive to equity and capacity. Measurement protocols must be simple and low-cost for municipalities with limited administrative capacity. Templates for rapid baseline surveys, standard verification checklists and regional verification hubs would reduce transaction costs. Donors should subsidise the first wave of measurement to create demonstrable track records that private investors can underwrite.

### Attracting Investors

COP30's outcome does not guarantee this reform will happen. As the Adaptation Gap Report warned, current public flows are a fraction of what is needed and have been falling in real terms. That gap will not close through pledges alone; it will close when adaptation can be presented to investors as a set of verifiable, aggregated, credit-enhanced outcomes that reduce economic risk — measured in workdays and income protected as much as hectares and trees.

This is also a moral issue. When adaptation is invisible to financiers, the policies that most protect the poor — shaded markets, informal-sector retrofits, rapid pay-out insurance — remain underfunded. Counting what counts would shift scarce public consciousness toward interventions with proven returns in preserved livelihoods and reduced health burdens.

COP30 in Belém has reset the finance debate; it also left an opening for reform. The Baku-to-Belém roadmap and the Belém Package together create a policy moment to require measurement as a condition of scaled finance.

If adaptation is to receive parity with mitigation, the next step is technical but decisive: agree on a compact set of outcome indicators, fund pilots that link finance to verified preservation of work and income, and make measurement costs eligible within blended facilities. Do that, and pledges will move from promising rhetoric to practical protection for the millions whose paycheques and lives already hang in the balance.

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## Greater Kashmir

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## GK Editorial

## Imams against drugs

The war against drugs will not be won by enforcement alone

The growing menace of drug abuse has emerged as one of the most serious issues facing our youth in recent years. And this demands responses that go beyond police action and official statistics. In this context, the initiative by Imams across Kashmir to engage directly in the fight against substance abuse deserves both recognition and support.

The sight of religious leaders meeting the officials of the Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (IMHANS) is symbolically powerful. It shows an understanding that addressing addiction needs a collective responsibility from all sections of the society, more so, whose word carries an action.

The message underlying the initiative is much beyond an action. According to data, since 2016, over 1.12 lakh kilograms of narcotics have been seized and more than 10,000 people arrested under the NDPS Act. Yet seizures and arrests tell only part of the story. Addiction has seeped into homes, schools, and neighbourhoods, often hidden by shame and fear. With over 83,000 people seeking treatment at addiction centres since 2020, and thousands more likely suffering in silence, Kashmir is staring at a public health emergency.

Law enforcement has intensified its crackdown, destroying illegal poppy and cannabis cultivation and dismantling trafficking networks. These efforts are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Addiction requires prevention, early intervention, and sustained rehabilitation. This is where community institutions, particularly religious ones, become indispensable.

Friday sermons, counselling sessions, and informal conversations within mosques have the potential to break stigma and encourage early help-seeking. When Imams speak of addiction as a disease rather than a sin, they open doors to recovery. The emphasis on confidentiality and compassion, highlighted during the IMHANS interaction, is crucial in a society where fear of social ostracism often delays treatment.

Kashmir, long scarred by conflict, cannot afford to lose another generation, this time to a slow, silent epidemic. The war against drugs will not be won by enforcement alone. It will be won when society chooses collective action over denial. The Imams' step forward is a hopeful beginning. Now, it must be matched by sustained commitment from all.

## REFLECTIONS

## Cultural Myopia

Understanding the neglect of Kashmiri handicrafts by its very own people



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From soft cashmere and lush, hand-knotted carpets to the deep-hued wooden furniture and vibrant posh mitha, Kashmir is rich in the art of the hand. While global appreciation for these crafts rises, local consumer demand is at an all-time low. This disparity reflects under-appreciation within Kashmir itself—an attitude that ultimately compromises the quality of products, weakens cultural identity, and leads to adverse economic effects. This article examines the causes of this under-appreciation and its profound consequences.

Familial blindness is the inability to recognise the detail, or miss the value, in objects or environments one is very familiar with. When there are hand-knotted carpets in every Kashmiri home and crewel-embroidered curtains in everyone's bedroom, they can start to feel like part of the ordinary background, rather than cultural works of art. It is this blindness that makes people overlook the time, skill, and precision that goes into handcrafted products. As a result, they start to prefer machine-made, mass-produced versions of them.

Traditionally, handmade items are more than mere accessories. They carry cultural significance, as in the traditional shawls gifted in weddings and passed down as family heirlooms. Ancestral knowledge is preserved in how Sozni techniques and the Kani/Talim script are inherited orally through apprenticeship and not documented in books. In the embroidery patterns resides the historical journey of Kashmir and the Mughal, Persian, and local artistic influences. Symbolic meanings of endurance are contained within carved chinhar leaves and royal heritage in paper-mâché designs. Like Japan is known by its kimono and China by its silk, Kashmir's cultural identity lies in the weaves of its shawls and the grooves of its woodwork. Losing these items threatens not only our global identity, but also a tangible expression of who we are.

As the global market for these products expands, a decline in an artisan's earnings may initially seem counterintuitive. However, Kashmiri craftsman lack direct access to international markets where the value of their craftsmanship is truly recognised. Instead, products reach these markets through a chain of intermediaries, reducing an artisan's share of profit to a amount barely enough to eke out a living. According to multiple studies, even skilled artisans, on average, earn below \$10,000 per month. This leaves them with two choices: either to accept these unfair wages, or try selling in local markets. In these markets, they need to compete with cheap, mass-produced products. Forced to lower their prices, many resort to using low-grade materials, affecting the quality of the finished product.

The economic struggles of artisans portray Kashmiri craftsmanship as an unstable career for the youth. Moreover, the growing acceptance of machine-made products has caused declines in artisan dignity. These developments are indicators pointing toward the extinction of traditional techniques like Sozni, Kani weaving, and high-knot carpets, which are already endangered. This could ultimately result in erosion of the Kashmiri collective identity.

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## Edit

# As we move ahead

It's time to take call on resetting the narrative in J&K



**Politics**  
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A lot has been said and written about the turmoil Jammu and Kashmir underwent in the past 35 years and how it transformed in the last five-six years. But there still is the need to reset the narrative reflecting the effort has succeeded or succeeded.

The end of year 2025 did not mark the end of 365 days on the calendar; it was a capsule of the history that J&K has undergone in the first quarter of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The year 2001 was a seminal moment for the history of the place. Soon after 9/11, Kashmir saw a devastating attack at the Assembly complex on October 1. The outrage was lacking. There were no calls for punishment to the perpetrators. The whole concept of coercive diplomacy failed when mobilization of armed forces to the border in the wake of December 13 terror assault on the Indian Parliament did not yield any results.

Something has changed. Now the plotters of terror attacks across the border know the consequences that will follow. Operation Sindoar launched after Pahalgam massacre of April 22, 2025, has set new norm of counter-terrorism. The crude reality is that we are still grappling

with the conditions set by the terror attack, and we continue to remind the world that there was murderous brutality in the serene Valley, avenged through Operation Sindoar.

At a time when we had understood that Pahalgam was fading, the origins of the conspiracy of November 10, 2025, served a chilling reminder that a lot of work remains to be done. Those who have seen the troubles in Kashmir since 1989 – isolated bomb blasts hit and run shootouts, blackouts and general strikes – can tell that there were occasions of till.

Toward the end of 1993 – the process in clearing Hazratbal shrine off militants, and rolling out of tanks on the streets of Sopore, known as “liberated zone”, it was presumed that the dead was done. That was not to be. 1994 saw release of Shahid Shah, and JKLF chief Yasin Malik, now facing trial in Rubiya Sayeed kidnapping case, and many more developments that saw peace returning to the Valley.

Neither 1994 nor any other year in the past 35 years can be compared to what happened in 2025 and the challenges that are in store in 2026. It is time to wake up to the reality of enormity of the task. The clock needs to be reset. While it is very important to trace and neutralize the forces of disruption, there also is need that fresh fault lines are not created, and the old ones are not addressed with innovative approach.

Today, Kashmir's story has definitively hope and promise in it. Before reflecting on the history and the task to be accomplished, it is important for all of us to view the reality as it exists. Despite some fears lurking in the backdrop, there is a definitive change in the situation. We had not seen such a spell of normalcy in Kashmir

over the decades. Did we see such regular life in 1990s, early 2000s, or even for that matter in 2008, 2010, 2016. No one was able to predict that the situation would ever be as normal as we are seeing today. There may be political apprehension in crediting the change to the current Central government, but it all happened on the watch of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

“  
Our future should be driven by the idea of a state that backs entrepreneurial spirit.

There are several issues that remain unresolved. Some opportunities have been missed, but then that should also lead to the question – did we rise to the occasion. We shifted our stands and promises time and again. Dialogue between Delhi and J&K is needed, but that also has certain imperatives. We have not been able to sort out our own differences on our narrative. There is a lot of confusion and chaos in the political class, which believes in berating one another rather than holding strategy sessions, how to approach centre with our case, and what exactly is our case. Centre has obviously taken advantage of it.

Let it be understood in all fairness that our future should be driven by the idea of a state that backs entrepreneurial spirit and addresses the historical issues in the light of the new realities of the second quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before seeking dialogue with Delhi, it is important that the verdict of the 2024 elections should

be honoured in letter and spirit. National Conference was voted to power to govern, a majority of its seats came from the Valley, while BJP did extraordinarily well in Jammu region. BJP should accord due respect to the government, instead of looking for alternative ways to undermine the elected government.

Recognising and respecting the elected representatives is to honour all the BJP MLAs. And the Omar Abdullah government should respect Jammu mandate. Jammu is not a mere geographical unit, it has its history and role. Mutual respect doesn't come with power-sharing arrangements only, it comes with understanding each other's viewpoint. Unfortunately, extremes are reflected more than the common ground.

There is need to understand and acknowledge that the youth is gripped with a sense of disappointment, and frustration is touching unprecedented levels. It is driving them to drugs and other crimes. Society is getting hollowed out. Corrective measures are needed. They should be heard. They are not interested in the political battles, they are simply interested in their future, and security.

Centre, after having done so much for Jammu and Kashmir in the past few years cannot should not allow the frustration to fester in youth. There are extremists on either side of the fence, projecting the disappointment of the youth through their extremist views. These elements are fueling the politics of fragmentation. It needs to be checked.

The entrepreneurial skill, creativity and tenacity is needed. Is someone going to take this call. The real change in the narrative based on the reality and the future needs, is the only way out.

## Emotional Wellbeing of Children in Conflict Zones

Childhood is generally associated with protection, stability, and growth



**Impact**  
Vaishali Sharma

War is often described through images of destroyed buildings, injured bodies, and displaced populations. What receives far less attention is the quiet and more enduring damage done to children's emotional worlds. Armed conflict disrupts the foundations of childhood itself: safety, routine, care, learning and play. For children growing up in war-affected regions, fear is not an occasional experience but a constant condition of life.

“Terrible things are happening outside. Poor helpless people are being dragged out of their homes. Families are torn apart. Men, women, and children are separated. Children come home from school to find that their parents have disappeared.” These words were written by Anne Frank in January 1943 during the Second World War. Decades later, they continue to describe the lives of children in conflict zones such as Gaza, Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, and Myanmar. The settings have changed, but the emotional burden on children has not.

While armed conflict leaves visible scars on cities and communities, its emotional impact on children often remains unseen and unaddressed. These effects are not temporary. Emotional distress experienced during childhood can shape development and continue to influence mental health, relationships, and self-perception well into adulthood. Children do not all respond to trauma in the same way. Early research by Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham during the Second World War demonstrated that younger children often regress under stress. They may become unusually dependent on caregivers, lose language or social skills they had already developed, or experience bed-wetting. Older children and adolescents may withdraw emotionally, express anger, or engage in risky behaviour. Many children also experience guilt, believing they are responsible for their family's suffering, even when

this is not true. Such beliefs can quietly undermine emotional wellbeing and self-esteem.

Emotional harm is not caused only by direct exposure to violence. Ongoing uncertainty, repeated displacement, and the constant fear of losing loved ones place children in a state of continual alertness. Life in refugee camps or temporary shelters often involves overcrowding, lack of privacy, and disrupted routines. Education is frequently interrupted. UNHCR reports show that displacement often lasts for years, transforming emergency situations into long-term childhood environments. The absence of stability deepens emotional insecurity and stress.

Loss is another defining feature of childhood in conflict zones. Children may lose parents, siblings, friends, homes, and entire communities. Yet children often lack the language, emotional vocabulary, and social permission to express grief openly. When loss is not acknowledged or supported, grief does not disappear. As Veena Das has shown in her work on temporary planning, grief becomes woven into ordinary life rather than resolved. For children, unresolved grief can shape emotional health, relationships, and self-esteem well into adulthood.

In long-running conflicts, some children grow up knowing nothing but war. Research from conflict-affected regions shows that constant exposure to violence can normalise fear. Hope, imagination, and long-term planning may give way to survival, mistrust, and emotional numbing. When violence becomes ordinary, it reshapes children's understanding of relationships, society, and the future.

Education plays a crucial role in supporting children's emotional wellbeing. Schools provide routine, structure, and a sense of normal life. Even temporary learning spaces in refugee settings can help children feel connected and supported. However, when schools are damaged, occupied, or attacked, education itself becomes a source of trauma. Attacks on schools and teachers send a powerful message that every space meant for safety are not protected. The loss of education also limits future opportunities, increasing

long-term emotional stress. Despite these conditions, children in conflict zones are not only victims. Many demonstrate remarkable resilience. Research by Catherine Panter-Brick and Michael Wessells shows that supportive relationships play a central role in helping children cope with trauma. Care from parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers can reduce emotional harm. Cultural practices, storytelling, play, and music can help children make sense of their experiences and restore a sense of belonging.

Psychologists emphasise that resilience does not arise from individual strength alone. It depends on social and emotional support systems. Children cope better when they have at least one stable and caring adult and when their emotions are recognised and taken seriously. Trauma-sensitive education, play therapy, art-based activities, and group discussions have been shown to help children process fear and loss in constructive ways.

There is growing recognition of the need for mental health and psychosocial support in conflict settings. However, such services remain limited and underfunded. Emotional wellbeing is often treated as secondary to food, shelter, and medical aid. This neglect is short-sighted. Emotional harm can persist long after physical danger has ended and may affect not only individuals but entire societies.

Anne Frank's diary reminds us that the emotional suffering of children during war is not new. What has changed is the scale of conflict and the number of children affected. Protecting children in conflict zones requires attention not only to their physical survival, but also to their emotional lives. If survival wounds are ignored, societies risk raising generations shaped by fear and unresolved trauma. Supporting children's emotional wellbeing is essential for recovery, peace, and a more stable future.

Vaishali Sharma is a Master's student in History at the University of Delhi. Her research interests include education, public policy, and international relations, with published works on curriculum.

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## Illegal aggression, familiar ploy

The United States' strike on Venezuela, which killed at least 40, and the capture of President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, is a blatant violation of established international law as well as the US Constitution. The move also violates Article 2 of the UN Charter, which emphasises sovereign equality of member states and prohibits force against the territorial integrity of another state. US President Donald Trump has harked back to the 200-year-old Monroe Doctrine, which entails a now-irrelevant foreign policy – an anti-colonialist measure, quoted and used perversely by US presidents in the 20th century. The unfounded charges of narco-terrorist activities are merely a ruse to project Maduro's kidnapping as a police action for a farcical trial. There are no takers for this at home or abroad, except for Trump loyalists and tethered allies in Europe.

This is an act of aggression motivated by the US's strategic interests, aligned with its new security strategy, and intended to check Russian and Chinese sway in the region. The attack, brazen in intent and method, will push the new regime to open up the nation's oil reserves and mineral wealth. Trump has indicated that there could be more such action against Colombia, Cuba, Iran and Greenland to capture strategic resources. However, the outcomes of such attacks are unpredictable, as the world saw the US make a mess in Libya and its neighbourhood, get bogged down in Iraq for ten years to no avail, and remain stuck in Afghanistan for 20 years before fleeing from their self-brewed stew under the cover of darkness. Obviously, little has been learnt from these colossal failures of both foreign policy and military occupation.

As the US witnessed elsewhere, the bombing and kidnapping of Maduro could become a rallying point in Venezuela, even for those disillusioned with his dictatorial ways. An invading foreigner has not been welcomed in most countries in the region. Besides, there are a lot of armed groups which may move in to bolster any popular resistance that gathers against the US action. There is much at stake for others in the region if the US succeeds in its gamble in Venezuela. Equally important is how the world at large responds. Russia, China, Brazil, South Africa, and many G20 countries have been outspoken in their condemnation of the US action. India has remained silent and played safe until now on US transgressions. There are expectations that, as the chair of the BRICS in 2026 and a self-avowed leader of the G20, it would opt for remaining on the right side of history.

## In Ballari, a dangerous relapse looms

The violence that erupted in Ballari on January 1, leaving a young Congress party worker dead, is a chilling reminder that the district's troubled past is never too far beneath the surface. What began as a dispute over banners put up for the unveiling of a Maharsi Valmiki statue quickly spiralled into stone-pelting, gunfire, and a breakdown of public order, reviving memories of the so-called 'Republic of Ballari', when political power, private muscle, and illegal wealth fused into a parallel state. At one level, the trigger to the violence was banal: the installation of banners near the residence of controversial mining baron and BJP MLA G Janardhana Reddy, objected to by his supporters. At another, it was deeply symbolic. The Valmiki statue was not merely a cultural project. It was a high-stakes political statement aimed at the Valmiki community, a formidable vote bank in Kalyana Karnataka. The confrontation was, therefore, less about banners and more about political turf.

That the volatile rivalry between Janardhana Reddy and Bellary City Congress MLA Nara Bharath Reddy was allowed to escalate raises disturbing questions about intelligence gathering and policing failures. The swift suspension of SP Pavan Nejur – who had taken charge just hours earlier – underscores a systemic breakdown. The official grounds for his removal were serious: failure to reach the site promptly, remaining unreachable to senior officers during the crisis, and an inability to provide a coherent briefing, relying instead on second-hand information. Whether Nejur was genuinely negligent or a convenient scapegoat, the party clearly failed to assert authority when it mattered most.

Equally alarming is the ease with which firearms entered a political confrontation. Even if private security personnel are legally permitted to carry weapons, viral visuals of a gunman firing openly expose a dangerous normalisation of political gun culture. This points to a regulatory vacuum around armed retainers – their verification, training, and accountability. Ballistic reports suggesting that the fatal shot was fired at close range from a private weapon heighten the gravity of the issue. Ballari's chequered history makes these questions urgent, not academic. The government must go beyond suspensions and rhetoric. A thorough probe, a state-wide audit of private firearm licences, stricter norms for armed security, and clear accountability for intelligence lapses are imperative. Above all, the state must reassess that no leader, legacy or vote bank is above the rule of law. Ballari cannot be allowed to relapse into a republic unto itself.

**The violent clash points to policing failures and a gun culture that must not be allowed to thrive**

## FUTURE OF WORK

# Risks without rights: India's gig economy imbalance

The formalisation of platform-led work must be backed by universal rights, including minimum wages

AJIT RANADE

A few years ago, outside the Transport Commissioner's office in Bandra, thousands of Ola and Uber drivers staged a protest. Their demands were modest: better fares, fair commissions, humane working hours, and some protection against arbitrary penalties. The official response was revealing. The Commissioner reportedly told them he had no jurisdiction. They were not "employees" but "business partners", entrepreneurs running their own micro-enterprises. Had they been old-style taxi permit holders, he might have been able to help them, since the applicable rules were clear. That moment was a wake-up call. Not just for cab drivers, but for millions of workers who suddenly discovered that while they bore all the risks of work, they enjoyed almost none of its protection.

What we today call the "gig economy" is often portrayed as a new phenomenon born of apps and algorithms. In reality, it is an old Indian phenomenon, wearing a digital mask. Nearly two decades ago, the Arjun Sengupta Committee on the unorganised sector documented a striking fact: close to 64% of the workers in the unorganised sector were self-employed, and thus did not have an identifiable employer. This is because they worked for multiple principals over short spells. They were self-employed, casual, piece-rate workers – construction hands, home-based workers, street vendors. Today's gig workers are the technological descendants.

So why are gig workers protesting now, and doing so in a far more organised way? Because the scale and intensity of platform-mediated work have changed the sense of dependence. Take cab drivers. Recent protests in Mumbai saw nearly 90% of app-based cabs go off the roads, with drivers demanding fare parity with black-and-yellow taxis, a cap on commissions, welfare boards, and state-level gig worker legislation. Similar anger simmers among food-delivery workers, warehouse pickers, and instant-commerce riders. Nationwide strikes have demanded a minimum monthly income, regulated working hours, and social security.

At the heart of the unrest is a simple

asymmetry. Platforms insist workers are independent entrepreneurs and business partners. Yet the platforms decide prices, allocate tasks, impose penalties, deacounts, tweak parameters, and constantly change rules through opaque algorithms. Workers, meanwhile, invest their own capital – vehicles, fuel, smartphones, insurance – and absorb all the downside risk. They do not even have accident cover from the employer, which would be the equivalent of workplace injury cover. This asymmetry cannot be termed as entrepreneurship. It is unfair risk-shifting from the big to the small.

The defence offered by platform CEOs is familiar: better a precarious livelihood than no livelihood at all; over-regulation



will kill innovation. There is some truth here. India needs jobs, and platforms have undeniably expanded access to work hugely. But this argument confuses flexibility with insecurity. A labour market that only creates livelihoods by stripping workers of basic protections and making them more vulnerable is not a sustainable growth model.

Historically, labour movements were organised around factories and identifiable employers. Gig workers lack both. They are, in a literal sense, employer-less. This is precisely why their collective actions matter, and in some ways, is inevitable. Their organisation is emerging not despite their legal status, but because of it. When delivery workers log off *en masse*, or cab drivers strike, they are asserting a fact that the law has been slow to recognise: economic dependency matters more than contractual labels. Courts and regulators are beginning to see this.

The tide is also turning globally. The UK Supreme Court classified Uber drivers as "workers" entitled to minimum wages and paid leave. Spain's Rider Law treats food-delivery riders as employees. Other countries have created intermedi-

ate categories – neither full employees nor pure contractors – but with enforceable floors of rights. International evidence converges on one point: flexibility need not mean a vacuum of rights for the workers.

### A shift through labour codes

India has taken an important first step through the implementation of the four labour codes, especially the Code on Social Security, 2020. For the first time, gig and platform workers are recognised as a distinct category, eligible for State-designed social security schemes. Draft rules now propose thresholds – 90 days of work with an aggregator, or 120 days across platforms – to qualify for benefits such as insurance and health cover.

This recognition is progress, and it matters. Registration through e-Shram, welfare boards, and contributory funds, such as levies on platform turnover, can create a portable safety net. States like Rajasthan and Telangana have moved faster with dedicated gig worker legislation.

But we should not overstate what has been achieved. The codes stop short of core labour rights: minimum wages, limits on working hours, collective bargaining, or strong protections against arbitrary deactivation. Social security remains largely discretionary and scheme-based.

As the economy grows and formal enterprises expand, employment has paradoxically become more informal. If India's future of work is increasingly platform-mediated, formalisation cannot mean necessitating that everyone will have standard employment contracts, i.e. jobs. It must mean extending universal rights of – minimum pay standards, safety, insurance, due process – to all workers. Seen this way, gig worker mobilisation is not anti-growth. It is pro-innovation. It is a demand that markets be embedded in rules, that innovation can coexist with dignity. The Sengupta Committee argued long ago that growth without security breeds vulnerability and resentment. That warning echoes loudly today.

The pendulum swung too far in celebrating flexibility while ignoring power. It is now swinging back, slowly and contentedly. The challenge for policymakers is not to kill the gig economy, but to civilise it. If India can manage that balance, the gig economy could become a bridge to a more formal, inclusive labour market, rather than a cul-de-sac of permanent insecurity and precarity. That would be real innovation.

*(The writer is an economist; Syndicate: The Bilion Press)*

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**R Ashoka**  
R Ashoka, LoP and BJP leader

Divide and rule, subdivide and rule even more powerfully, fragment and rule absolutely.

Frank Herbert

## TO BE PRECISE

Peace doctrine



## IN PERSPECTIVE

# The Governor in a power standoff

Federalist ethos and neutrality of the office are in question. Reform must start with the process of appointment

**ROHINI PANDURANGI**

of India. Governors keeping in abeyance the bills passed by legislatures have become a prevailing trend, necessitating judicial intervention. In an evolved democracy, not only citizens but also the constituent units have autonomy. The governor playing the role of an agent of the Centre hinders cooperative federalism. Frequent standoffs between governors and governments hurt governance.

### Push for accountability

The need for a governor as a constitutional head of the state is indisputable. But it is also imperative that the office of the governor is held to the democratic standards of transparency and accountability. The current method of appointment by the central government is a colonial-era relic, which should make way for appointment through a committee constituted for the purpose. This committee could comprise the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition, apart from the Chief Minister and the Leader of the Opposition of the relevant state. Candidates could be selected from a panel of eminent persons nominated by both the central and state governments. A say in the manner in which the issue was resolved.

This drew a curtain to the long-standing court battle over the pendency of bills presented to the Governor. Similar cases had been filed by governments of Punjab and Tamil Nadu, and the latter resulted in a verdict by the Supreme Court fixing a deadline for assent to bills by the governor, only to be turned over in an advisory opinion on a Presidential reference. The political subtext here is the power tussle between the Centre and the states.

The exigencies at the time of independence necessitated a federation in which there was a preponderance of power in favour of the Centre. In the resulting union, the state governments played a subordinate role, as the Centre had predominance in the legislative, executive, and financial division of powers. Their operational freedom has been further reduced by the presence of governors appointed by the Centre.

Constitutionally, the position of the Governor is analogous to that of the President – a dignified presence, who functions as a nominal executive advised by the real executive. She is an apolitical person who has to step in and exercise her discretionary power only when there is an emergent situation like a hung assembly, the breakdown of constitutional machinery, or a situation where the government has lost the confidence of the legislature.

Regrettably, the office of the Governor has turned into an instrument of control. Irrespective of the party in power at the Centre, governors are invariably political appointees. According to the recommendations of the Sarkaria Commission on Centre-state relations, a person who is to be appointed a governor should be a detached figure, not intimately connected with the politics of the state. Instances of governors failing to maintain neutrality had to be addressed by the judiciary through landmark judgments of *Rameshwar Prasad v. Union of India* and *S R Bommai v. Union*.

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

# When phones struck the right chord

Landline phones transformed lives by connecting hearts

RASHMI RAJ

With trembling, wrinkled hands, she held a marble-great-grandmother Sharadamma – cradling the "red beauty" in her palms. It was the first landline phone I had ever seen. If one were to personify it, she was the centre of attraction. With ten rings adorning her round white necklace, she looked stunning – elegant in her own way.

Murtajji (great-grandmother) brought the receiver close to her ear, smiled, and said, "Nange emukkethallia, vayassu ayta" ("I can't hear anything; I am getting old"). She touched the phone all over, like a child exploring a new toy. This moment was nearly three decades ago, in my mother's *ajji mane*, a traditional house. Soon, the house itself came to be known as "phone mane" – the house with the phone.

*Murtajji* (great-grandmother)

For the entire lane, the phone became a landmark. Neighbours, neighbours' neighbours' neighbours, and even distant relatives would drop by to speak to their loved ones, at least once a fortnight. These calls were often followed by boxes of sweets celebrating the birth of a grandchild or by generous helpings of *kurkuri* (crispy savouries). At times, we became part of someone's grief too, sharing tears over the loss of a dear one.

Landline phones transformed lives by connecting hearts. Mobile phones did even more. From the sturdy Nokia 1100 to sleek touchscreens that enable video calls, technology has evolved rapidly. But not everyone has kept pace. One such person was our domestic help, Susehella.

She had a charming way of remembering people – every household was identified by an emoji. I discovered this when she asked me to save my phone number. Over ten years of working in our home, she became family. Her stories, her laughter, and her morning presence were a comfort. She matched my mother-in-law's conversations with ease, and despite her frequent

leaves, my mother-in-law eagerly awaited their daily chats.

Then, one day, Susehella didn't show up. Days passed. We grew worried. Every attempt to call her was met with the same message: "Not reachable." A week later, she returned our call. Her voice trembled as she told us that her father was terminally ill. She wanted to be with him in his final days.

I offered her one of my old touch-screen phones so she could video call him. But the next day, she returned it, saying it was too difficult to manage and too fragile to keep safe. That evening, she came to say goodbye. She was leaving the city for good – to care for her father. Before leaving, she said something that still echoes in my heart: "Touchscreens have replaced human touch and emotions. That's why we see humanity slowly disappearing. Phones will be new every day – but a father is only one in life."

Now, every morning, when my little ones wake up and ask, "Susehella bandra?" (Has Susehella come?) I am reminded of her words – and the irreplaceable warmth of human connection.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Is might the new international order?

I refer to "Do what's right": Trump warns new Venezuela leader (Jan 5). America's attack on Venezuela exposes the hollowness of the so-called "rules-based international order". When a great power acts in its perceived national interest, neither the UN Security Council nor the General Assembly can restrain it. For India, the lesson is clear: in a real crisis, no multilateral institution will come to our rescue. Self-strengthening alone offers credible insurance. Venezuela ignored clear warning signs. The

US operation against alleged drug-linked boats in September 2025, followed by repeated maritime strikes, was not an aberration but a prelude. History – from Crimea to Ukraine – shows that escalation is often signalled in advance. What we see is not international morality but the rule of the jungle, where might determines outcomes. Today is Venezuela; tomorrow it could be Iran, Cuba, or Taiwan. India must draw the right conclusions.

**KV Chandramouli**, Mysuru

**Public health failure**  
The reported deaths in Indore allegedly linked to contaminated drinking water are deeply disturbing and point to a grave failure of public health safeguards. Access to safe drinking water is a basic right, yet lapses in monitoring, treatment, and accountability continue to put lives at risk. Preventive measures, not post-tragedy responses, are essential to avoid such loss of life.

**Dreams and dangers**  
Apropos "Illegal migration: Dreams abroad, dangers along the way" (Jan 4), a growing number of Indians are lured by agents promising easy jobs and permanent residency abroad, but the reality is often harsh. These migrants face treacherous journeys, exploitation, and the constant fear of arrest. The government must launch awareness campaigns in rural and semi-urban areas to educate people about the dangers of illegal

migration. Strict action should be taken against fraudulent agents and trafficking networks. Expanding legal migration pathways, skill-development programmes, and creating job opportunities within the country can reduce the push factors.

**N Sudhasiva Reddy**, Bengaluru

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## SPEAK OUT

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### Push for accountability

The need for a governor as a constitutional head of the state is indisputable. But it is also imperative that the office of the governor is held to the democratic standards of transparency and accountability. The current method of appointment by the central government is a colonial-era relic, which should make way for appointment through a committee constituted for the purpose.

This committee could comprise the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition, apart from the Chief Minister and the Leader of the Opposition of the relevant state. Candidates could be selected from a panel of eminent persons nominated by both the central and state governments. A say in the manner in which the issue was resolved.

In the current setup, governors are removed and transferred at the whims of the central government. Instituting a method of removal, the grounds for which could be a violation of the Constitution, with the state legislatures having a vote, would result in accountability.

As far as gubernatorial assent is concerned, it is important that the governor withholds the assent, returns it with or without recommendations, or refers it to the President only when the bill may not be in the public interest or is against the constitutional or federal ethos. Recommendations to this effect have been made by the Sarkaria, Punchhi, and Venkatachala commissions.

Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the United States of America, said thus about the system of checks and balances in *The Federalist Papers* – "Power being almost always the rival of power, the general government will at all times stand ready to check the usurpations of the state governments, and these will have the same disposition towards the general government". This highlights the fact that checks and balances need to be built not only between the three branches but also between the Central and state governments. Reforming the governor's office will be one step in restoring the balance.

*(The writer is an independent researcher)*

K MAKKAR, S MUKHOPADHYAY, AND  
K D CHAUHAN

Some union governments are remembered for implementing economic reforms, others for their indecisiveness. The legacy of the current Union government will be its imagination—specifically, how it has imagined ways to bypass parliamentary scrutiny of legislation and transformed the law-making process. For instance, with the three farm laws, the government craftily avoided debate and a poll in the Rajya Sabha and hastily passed the laws with a voice vote. Similarly, the methods employed to remove Article 370 of the Constitution were, at the very least, ingenious. It has also passed several non-financial laws, including on Aadhaar, as money bills to circumvent the Rajya Sabha. Another such method has now come to light, involving delegated legislation.

This method involves framing rules and regulations ostensibly under the powers delegated to the government by a statute but which go far beyond the statute's scope. This often avoids parliamentary scrutiny altogether and allows the government to usurp the law-making powers reserved for Parliament or legislatures by the Constitution. While some of these rules and regulations are required to be presented before Parliament and could, theoretically, be discussed, modified, or rejected, they usually pass well below the radar. The government has now begun using this tool to effect sweeping changes in the law—changes that should ordinarily have been subjected to parliamentary processes and deliberations by elected representatives.

A recent example is the proposed amendment to the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, aimed at regulating AI-generated content. The proposed amendment casts substan-

tial obligations on entities providing generative AI services, as well as on significant social media entities, such as Facebook and YouTube, which host AI-generated content uploaded by users. These rules may be a well-meaning attempt to rein in misinformation and prevent personal and public harm caused by deepfakes. But attempting to do so through government rule-making under the IT Act, without any meaningful parliamentary debate, is unimaginative and perverse at worst. This is not a procedural issue. The amendment effectively legislates on a subject as vital as freedom of speech and has far-reaching consequences. Yet, it does not follow the constitutional process designed for such matters.

The amendment is proposed to be a set of rules—the 2021 rules—that impose requirements on platforms which, if complied with, grant immunity from liability for third-party content. Essentially, a platform remains free from liability for unlaw-

ful content hosted or transmitted through it, provided it complies with these rules. These rules were framed under Section 79 of the IT Act, popularly called the 'safe harbour' provision. The safe harbour was designed in 2000 to allow businesses to operate without fear of liability for hosting unlawful user-generated content. Accordingly, the rules framed under Section 79 impose certain duties on platforms as a condition for remaining liability-free.

The government has now proposed an amendment to these rules, implying that services such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity will be eligible to remain liability-free if they police AI-generated content. For this, the government has prescribed certain duties of policing any designated generative AI service providers as entities eligible to obtain safe harbour. However, the safe harbour was designed for those entities which did not play a role in perpetrating unlawful content and acted as a mere

conduit. It was not designed for services such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity, which take users' content and materially transform it into something clearly distinguishable from the users' input.

If the government seeks to treat the role performed by ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity as that of a mere conduit, it is for Parliament to approve such a change. Parliament, when enacting the safe harbour provision, could not have envisaged the inclusion of these entities within its scope. Yet, the government has decided to bypass this discussion and is approaching this subject through rules that are unlikely to be debated in Parliament. As a result, an important discussion on artificial intelligence—a subject that will define the latter part of this century—has been effectively bypassed from parliamentary consideration.

It is imperative what might have happened had the matter been placed before Parliament, or whether the government

would ultimately have prevailed. Ideally, Parliament should serve as a forum to consider issues on the horizon, evaluate ways ahead, debate and deliberate on views of different stakeholders, and choose the best path for our society. Even if the Parliament is unable to perform these functions satisfactorily, or if the end result remains unchanged due to a parliamentary majority enjoyed by the ruling dispensation, the act of the government sending proposals for legal changes with wide ramifications to the Parliament for necessary action is itself important, as it vindicates values of representative democracy and separation of powers enshrined in the Constitution, enables effective regulation, develops citizen confidence, builds business trust, and is the foundation for sound judicial decision-making. A bypass through rules is, ultimately, a bypass of these values.

(The writers teach law at O P Jindal Global University)

## The US president's focus on exploiting Venezuela's oil resources and on regional dominance raises concerns about a new era of interventionism

JACK NICAS

The city went dark. The air defences were disabled. Explosions rang out. And under the night sky, a fleet of American helicopters swooped in and captured the president. Hours later, when celebrating the US government's seizure of Venezuela's leader, Nicolás Maduro, President Donald Trump mentioned Venezuela's oil 20 times.

The moment shook Latin America perhaps more than any single event this century—but its meaning depends on whom you ask.

To the Latin American left, it confirmed what certain leaders have been warning for decades: The United States is an imperial power willing to invade and exploit its southern neighbours for its own gains and their natural resources.

To the Latin American right, Trump had just rescued a broken Venezuela from a leftist dictatorship and now would finally realize the nation's immense economic potential.

Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Spain and Uruguay—all led by leftists—jointly denounced the bombings and capture as "an extremely dangerous precedent" and warned against "any attempt at governmental control, administration, or external appropriation of natural or strategic resources" in Venezuela.

President Javier Milei of Argentina, the region's most prominent right-wing leader, cheered on US action. "There's no middle ground here," he said. "You're either on the side of GOOD, or you're on the side of EVIL."

What everyone can agree on is that the intervention showed that the United States is once again the centre of gravity in Latin America, for better or worse.

Trump is among them. "The Monroe Doctrine is a big deal, but we've superseded it by a lot, by a real lot. They now call it the Monroe Doctrine," he said on Saturday, referring to the 1823 policy of President James Monroe that sought to stop European powers from meddling in the Americas. "Under our new national security strategy, American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again."

In the 30 years before the current Trump administration, US foreign policy in Latin America had largely focused on supporting democracy and free trade.

Trump has overhauled that approach to focus on what is in it for the United States—or, in many cases, for him.

He imposed tariffs on Brazil in a failed bid to save his ally, former President Jair Bolsonaro, from prison. He applied sanctions on Colombia's president after he criticised US policy. He endorsed a right-wing candidate in Honduras in a surprise that may have tipped the election. And he gave Argentina a \$20 billion lifeline to help it in legislative elections.

Those actions unsettled many in Latin America, reminding them of Washington's long history of interventions in the region, like its invasions of Mexico, Panama and Haiti, and its support for military coups.

"Thinking as a region, this is scary in a way I haven't seen for a long time," said Celso Amorim, the top foreign policy adviser to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and one of the most expe-



DH ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

## Maduro's capture shows Trump's goal to dominate the Americas

rienced government officials in Latin America, having served at various times as Brazil's foreign minister, defence minister and special adviser over a span of 16 years.

"The most serious thing to me is that this return to interventionism isn't even disguised," he said in an interview. "There isn't even a, let's say, 'No, we went there to defend democracy.' There is an objective that is obviously economic."

Lula, Latin America's most influential statesman, held two separate meetings with his ministers about the US attack Saturday, according to the Brazilian government. He then issued a particularly stern critique, saying Washington's actions "cross an unacceptable line" and that "the international community, through the United Nations, must respond forcefully."

On Sunday, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States—the main multilateral organisation for the region—held an emergency meeting to address the situation in Venezuela. Many nations led by leftists sent their foreign ministers, while others led by conservative leaders sent more junior diplomats.

At the meeting, Venezuela's foreign minister, Yván Gil, warned that the rest of Latin America should be worried. "This attack is not only against Venezuela; it is an attack against Latin America and the Caribbean," he said to the group of 33 nations. "Today it may be Venezuela; tomorrow it could be any other country that decides to exercise its sovereignty."

Many Latin Americans disagreed.

The Maduro government was corrupt and repressive, they said, and that drew the anger of the US government. "To all

the narco-Chavista criminals, your time is coming," President Daniel Noboa of Ecuador said Saturday, referring to followers of Maduro's socialist predecessor, Hugo Chávez. "Your structure will completely collapse across the entire continent."

Yet whether nations will do more than issue angry statements remains to be seen. The United States is the most crucial economic partner for much of the region, and Trump has proved willing to intervene economically, politically and now militarily against countries that cross him.

"I think we're at a low point of international diplomacy because all countries have turned inward, and all countries are developing transactional approaches to their relationship with this administration," said Arturo Sarukhán, a former Mexican ambassador to the United States. Given the growing partisanship divide across the region, he added, "I think it's going to be very hard to see a muscular approach by Latin American and Caribbean nations to this."

The response from President Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico illustrated that political tightrope.

While she condemned the Venezuelan attack, Sheinbaum did so more diplomatically than several of her peers. Consider that at the same time on Saturday, Trump was once again warning that Mexican cartels could be his next military target.

Brazil, however, is much farther from the United States and its No 1 trading partner is now China. That has enabled Lula to take a far more bellicose approach to Trump—which has yielded positive results for Brazil.

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Amorim suggested that Trump's policies could push other countries toward China. Interventions "are going to have the opposite effect of what the United States wants," he said. Nations "will increasingly have to look for counterbalances, so as not to let themselves get involved in this type of situation."

What seems most likely now is that Latin America's conflicting opinions on Venezuela—and each nation's efforts for self-preservation—will lead to little collective action. Sarukhán said it would likely take a full-scale occupation of Venezuela to spur more than statements.

That also means a potential emboldening of Trump.

Over the past year, his actions in Latin America have become more aggressive. That has left many nations struggling with what to make of his tough talk.

Hours after watching the US military pull off a successful operation in Venezuela, he already was suggesting that Cuba could be next. "I think Cuba is going to be something we'll end up talking about, because Cuba is a failing nation," he told reporters Saturday.

On Sunday morning, in a phone call with *The Atlantic*, he said, "We do need Greenland, Alaska."

By Sunday night, he had another target in the hemisphere in mind.

"He's not going to be doing it for very long," Trump said of Colombia's president, Gustavo Petro, who has frequently criticized Trump. "He has cocaine mills and cocaine factories."

Asked whether the US would conduct an operation against Colombia, he replied, "It sounds good to me."

*The New York Times*

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

#### 50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1976

Sivaji Ganesan to join Cong

Madras, Jan. 5  
Film star Sivaji Ganesan, a supporter of the Congress (O), today announced his decision to join the Congress. Mr. Ganesan told pressmen that he would do so along with other Congress (O) comrades now under the leadership of Mr. B. Mahadevan Pillai. Strongly pleading for the merger of the two Congress parties in Tamil Nadu to strengthen the nationalist forces in the country, Mr. Ganesan said a strong Government at the Centre and the like-minded nationalist Governments in the States had become imperative in this hour of crisis.

#### 25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2001

18 Trinamool workers in W Bengal 'burnt alive'

Calcutta, Jan 5  
Close on the heels of Wednesday's violence in Keshpur, Midnapore, at least 18 Trinamool Congress workers were allegedly burnt alive by the rival CPI(M) supporters at Chotoangaria village last night, triggering a fresh wave of tension and a demand for the resignation of Chief Minister Mr. Buddhadev Bhattacharya, by the Opposition Trinamool. Party chief, Ms. Mamata Banerjee, alleged that Trinamool supporters who were returning home from the relief camp were chased by armed CPI (M) supporters.

### OASIS | PRIYA ANAND

## When pride tips the balance

**D**uring summer vacations, visiting a few of our relatives' places was mandatory. The routine trip included the house of one of our uncles who was prosperous but wasn't among our likeable ones, as his biting remarks would hurt people. He owned a majestic house nestled between sprawling gardens on either side, where he hosted several celebrities. During his heyday, his home was abuzz with servants who kept it spotless. Dogs guarding the gates as well as indoors posed challenges to anyone visiting. Our visits became mere formality, and we kept them short. As children, we never spoke and were not allowed

to interact much. After his retirement, the number of visitors reduced. Within a year, the house bore a desolate look with not much greenery around. His arrogance and his habit of belittling others were never subdued. His pride kept many relatives and colleagues at bay. When he passed away, few came to pay the honours. Arrogance is like a strong perfume. When you use too much, people walk away.

There was once a farmer who went to the town every week to sell butter. The butter balls, usually weighing



a kilo, were sold to a known trader, who in return gave him sugar, flour and some essential groceries for the same amount. One week, the trader found the size of the butter balls was smaller than the earlier ones. He wanted to weigh and check. He became furious when he found that the butter was less than a kilo in weight. He decided to stop doing business with the farmer henceforth and informed all his men not to interact with him.

The following week, the farmer was promptly stopped by the trader at the main square, saying he was a cheat.

He announced that the butter weighed only 900 grams instead of a kilo. He informed the townspeople to avoid dealing with the farmer, as he didn't practise fair trade. The farmer pleaded and said that he was poor and didn't have money to buy several weights and measures. Every week, his wife would weigh the butter by placing the one-kilo sugar packet received from the trader on the other side of the balance and set the butter accordingly. The trader was ashamed at his arrogance. In the words of Steve Jobs... "All of us need to be on guard against arrogance, which knocks at the door whenever you are successful."

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Jail, not bail

SC verdict raises disturbing questions

THE Supreme Court's decision to deny bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam in the 2020 Delhi riots conspiracy case, registered under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, raises troubling questions about personal liberty, pre-trial detention and due process. Granting relief to five co-accused, the Court has made a distinction based on what it calls a "hierarchy of participation", holding that Khalid and Imam stand on a "qualitatively different footing" from the others. Citing Section 43D(5) of the UAPA, the Bench reiterated that when prosecution material, taken at face value, disclosed a prima facie case, statutory restrictions on bail must prevail. The Court also rejected the argument that prolonged incarceration automatically entitled an accused to bail, warning against treating delay as a "trump card".

The unease over the verdict cannot be dismissed as merely political noise. Khalid and Imam have been in prison for over five years without the trial even commencing. In our constitutional democracy, such prolonged detention runs counter to personal liberty guaranteed under Article 21. The Court itself acknowledged that extended incarceration invited greater judicial scrutiny, but it stopped short of finding the present detention constitutionally impermissible.

The BJP has hailed the decision as a vindication, while the Opposition has pointed out the repeated parole granted to rape-murder convict Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh. This comparison might be legally flawed, but it has struck a chord with people who are increasingly doubtful about equal treatment under the law. Ultimately, the judgment places a heavy responsibility on the State if bail is denied because the accusations are serious, then the trial must proceed with urgency. Pre-trial detention cannot become a substitute for punishment. The Supreme Court has left the door open for future reconsideration if delay becomes disproportionate. Whether that safeguard proves meaningful will determine if this case comes to be seen as a rightful assertion of the law or a disturbing normalisation of indefinite incarceration.

## Politics at play

Cricket diplomacy breaks down

THE uncertainty surrounding the 2026 T20 World Cup schedule has revealed how closely cricket in the subcontinent is entangled with politics and diplomacy. Bangladesh's reluctance to play its scheduled matches in India, prompting the ICC to consider redrawing venues, is a reflection of wider bilateral unease. At the immediate level, the controversy stems from Bangladesh's concerns over player safety and the prevailing environment in India. These anxieties have been sharpened by the Mustafizur Rahman episode, in which the pacer's abrupt release from the IPL was perceived in Dhaka as evidence that cricketing engagements are vulnerable to non-sporting pressures. Whether or not this reading is accurate, perception matters in diplomacy as much as intent.

What gives the episode a sharper edge is its timing. Only days ago, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar travelled to Dhaka to hand over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's letter of condolence to Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader Tarique Rahman following Khaleda Zia's funeral. The outreach was widely read as an attempt to steady ties and signal continuity in India-Bangladesh relations amid political transition in Dhaka. Against this backdrop, a cricketing stand-off risks diluting hard-earned diplomatic goodwill.

For the ICC, the dilemma is acute. Yielding to Bangladesh by shifting matches to Sri Lanka may defuse immediate tensions. But it sets a precedent that tournament plans can be overridden by political discomfort. Refusal, on the other hand, could invite withdrawal threats and damage the tournament's integrity. As co-host, the BCCI must ensure that visiting teams feel secure and insulated from wider political currents. For Bangladesh, allowing mistrust to spill into a global event carries long-term costs. If cricket diplomacy falters, the real casualty will be the region's ability to keep sport above suspicion.

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 6, 1926

## Work in the councils

THE last and most important part of the Congress programme for the new year is that relating to work in the councils. The first noticeable thing in connection with this part of the programme is that, for the first time since the decision to boycott the councils was arrived at, the Congress has accepted responsibility for working out a programme of work in the councils. This is undoubtedly a matter for sincere congratulation as far as it goes, and it is worthy of note that both Pandit Motilal Nehru and Lala Lajpat Rai, who do not approach the consideration of this matter from exactly the same point of view, have expressed great satisfaction at it. We cannot say, however, that it goes far enough. The utterances of some leading Non-Changers clearly show that they are still as strongly opposed to council entry as they ever were, and that if it had not been for the decision of Mahatma Gandhi to let the Swarajists have their way in this matter, they would have stoutly opposed the resolution. Nor can it be said that Gandhi's own attitude on this matter is substantially more helpful. "My position," he said in the course of the interview he gave to the Associated Press, "is to remain passive and do the constructive work of which I am capable, and to leave the rest, that is the working out of the resolution of the Congress, entirely into the hands of the Swarajists, unhampered by me and even aided by me wherever possible." The importance of the aid promised by the Mahatma is not to be minimised.

## The Court chose caution over courage

SC judgment on bail in riots conspiracy case matters far beyond the fate of Umar Khalid or Sharjeel Imam

SANJAY HEGDE  
SENIOR ADVOCATE, SUPREME COURT

CONTROVERSIAL: Refusal of bail to Umar &amp; Sharjeel casts a long shadow over the SC judgment as a whole. ANI

we are told, "does not operate as a trump card." It is merely a "trigger for heightened judicial scrutiny." In other words, five years without trial is not a constitutional failure; it is an administrative inconvenience that invites careful thought, not release.

This move sets the tone for everything that follows. Section 43D(5) of the UAPA looms large, as it always does. The Court reiterates that at the bail stage, it must only see whether the accusation is "prima facie true". This inquiry, we are reminded, is about statutory plausibility, not evidentiary sufficiency. Evidence is not weighed. Defences are not examined. The prosecution case must be taken at its highest. This framework, inherited from the Watali judgment (2019), ensures that the charge sheet becomes both the accusation and its own justification.

Within this structure, the Court introduces what it considers a necessary distinction: the difference between peripheral participants and "prime conspirators." Umar and Sharjeel are placed firmly in the latter category. They are described as central figures, ideological drifters; conceptualisers of protest strategy. This, according to the Court, warrants greater caution.

Where an accused occupies a central role, constitutional intervention must be restrained. And yet, the refusal of bail to Umar and Sharjeel casts a long and troubling shadow over the judgment as a whole. The Court begins by acknowledging what cannot seriously be denied: prolonged incarceration engages Article 21, and pre-trial detention cannot become punishment.

Five years in prison without the commencement of trial is no trivial matter. But having acknowledged this, the Court steadily empties it of consequence. Delay,

The more seriously the State takes your ideas, the less seriously the Court takes your liberty.

Sharjeel committed a violent act. There is no claim that they were present at any site of violence. The material against them consists largely of speeches, meetings, pamphlets and protest-related communication. Yet these are treated as markers of conspiratorial centrality. Speech becomes structure. Influence becomes intent. Visibility becomes culpability.

Once this logic is accepted, bail becomes a reward for irrelevance. Those who are marginal may go free. Those who speak effectively, organise widely and articulate dissent coherently are told that their prominence counts against them.

The more seriously the State takes your ideas, the less seriously the Court takes your liberty.

The judgment insists that it is not conducting a mini-trial. But it uncritically adopts the prosecution's hierarchy of roles. Labels such as "mastermind" and "architect" are accepted as neutral descriptors rather than

amongst legal commentators.

The consequences for democratic dissent are obvious. Dissent is not an ornamental feature of democracy. It is its safety valve. It allows anger and opposition to be expressed without violence. When dissent is reimagined as conspiracy, that valve is sealed shut. Protest becomes preparatory conduct. Organisation becomes unlawful association. Agitation becomes a threat to sovereignty. Seen in this light, Ambedkar's slogan acquires a tragic irony. "Educate, organise, agitate" describes precisely the kind of civic engagement that sustains constitutional democracy. Under the logic of this judgment, it also describes the pathway to being labelled a central conspirator, denied bail and told to wait patiently while years pass.

The Court does attempt to soften the blow. It grants the majority of the appellants bail. It recognises, in theory, that prolonged incarceration is a matter of concern. It allows for renewal of bail applications after a year. One is grateful, genuinely, for these small mercies. But they do not answer the central problem. If five years in prison without trial is not enough to justify bail for those accused of being ideologically influential, what will be? Six years? Seven? A decade?

The Supreme Court often expresses concern about trial courts and high courts mechanically denying bail under special statutes. But it must confront its own role in shaping this culture. When it endorses distinctions that privilege prosecutorial storytelling over constitutional principle, it sends a clear message down the judicial hierarchy. Liberty is optional. Incarceration is safe.

And so we return, at the end, to the beginning. Five years of imprisonment, no trial, and no directly attributable violent act made this a straightforward case for bail. Instead, the Court chose caution over courage. It chose to speak the language of permanent emergency. For those who have finally walked out of prison, there is relief. For those still inside, there is a calendar date pencilled in, and a hope that next year may bring better news.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

An impartial administration of the law is like oxygen in the air. —Lord Atkin

## In a tizzy over a faulty bill

GURBRINDER SINGH ANAND

I was about to leave my house when I saw a man marching towards me. It took me barely a second to recognise him — he was the electricity meter reader. Out of sheer curiosity (and a bit of hope), I stood there waiting for him to hand over my power bill.

This time, I was expecting a very small amount. But life, as usual, had other plans. Before I could even cross-check the reading, the man vanished like a magician. One glance at my bill and my eyes almost popped out — Rs 6,900!

I immediately made a short video of my meter reading and set off on my bike to track him down. The poor fellow had made a classic mistake: instead of 27605, he had typed 27905. After circling the nearby streets like a confused postman and still not finding him, I got frustrated and decided to visit the office of the electricity department.

Let me confess: the atmosphere in these *sarkari* offices makes me more nervous than a schoolkid waiting for his report card. While *samosas* and tea were being happily served among the staff, I felt like an outsider at a private party. An employee in charge of a counter immediately refused to correct my bill. She hurled technical jargon at me, which flew over my head like a fighter jet. Gathering courage, I approached a woman at a different counter. She smiled, made me feel human again, and even offered tea. I politely declined and explained my problem. She told me to write an application and get it marked by the junior engineer (JE), and even handed me a paper and a pen.

Since most of us have forgotten how to use our hands for writing, this felt like climbing Mount Everest. But I somehow managed to do it. Finding the JE was the next mission. Luckily, he was at his desk. As he examined my application, my heart thumped like I was appearing for a competitive exam and a job interview at the same time. He could see some mismatched figures and I felt like my tido token had slipped from "99" straight back to "2". After I requested him again, he finally spotted the real issue: wrong meter reading. A screenshot of my video came to my rescue.

He marked the application and asked me to get it submitted. Unfortunately, I landed again at the counter of the same employee who had rejected me earlier. "Tussi JE saab ton mark karva lita?" she asked. I just smiled.

Next, I had to meet another staff member, who was already irritated because she had been assigned election duty in a remote village. She made me wait outside for 20 minutes and then finally completed the process. She looked up and announced, "Tuhda bill iss vaar ZERO hai," much to my relief.

I walked out feeling richer by Rs 6,900 and wiser by a life lesson: rewards come through patience, pain and persistent follow-ups — especially in *sarkari* offices.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Build pressure for freeing Maduro

Trump has no right to interfere in Venezuela's internal affairs or to attack it militarily. Venezuela has not launched any attack on the US. The unprovoked assault therefore appears designed to seize control of the country's vast oil reserves and assert US international hegemony. It also echoes Trump's expansionist instincts. Mere condemnation of this unpleasant and unfortunate episode is not enough. The need of the hour is to build international pressure on Trump to release Maduro and his wife forthwith from illegal captivity and restore law and order in the beleaguered nation of Venezuela.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

## India need not act in haste

Refer to 'In Venezuela, an invasion for oil'; India's reaction to the Venezuela episode, describing it as a matter of 'deep concern', is diplomatic and carefully calibrated. India need not act in haste. Although China has opposed Trump's action, it will be interesting to see how it conducts itself towards independent and sovereign Taiwan, which it claims as its own. The US invasion of Venezuela cannot be justified on any grounds, but India should adopt a wait-and-see approach and respond in a manner that best serves its national interest.

ASHOK BAHL, KANGRA

## Furloughs for the powerful

The BJP-led Haryana Government's repeated grant of parole to Ram Rahim Singh has made a mockery of the party's Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign. A rape-murder convict's repeated release sends a disturbing message to society. Earlier paroles were granted during election periods, widely seen as attempts to influence a section of voters in favour of the ruling party. The latest furlough, however, defies all logic. The preferential treatment accorded to Ram Rahim underscores the extraordinary clout he appears to enjoy within ruling circles. While the politician-criminal nexus is not uncommon, a party that claims to champion women's welfare must exercise far greater caution in such matters.

YASH KHETARPAL, PANCHKUL

## Mockery of judicial process

The Haryana Government's decision to grant yet another 40-day parole to Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh is a flagrant mockery of the judicial process. Why is such extraordinary leniency reserved for a high-profile convict while thousands of ordinary prisoners, seeking parole for genuine domestic emergencies, languish behind bars? This selective application of the law suggests that political patronage and electoral calculations are being placed above public interest and the dignity of the victims.

BALbir SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

## Minimise vehicular traffic

Refer to 'Hills have limits'; the Himachal Government must shoulder its responsibility for managing tourist inflows and controlling pollution. The unchecked influx of private vehicles is placing enormous stress on fragile hill ecosystems. Individual private cars should therefore be subjected to steep pollution charges for hill travel, at least Rs 10,000 per trip, to discourage excessive use. At the same time, electric taxi buses, both public and private, should be promoted in hill states to minimise vehicular traffic. Such services could operate from designated points along Himachal Pradesh's borders with Punjab, Haryana and Uttarakhand.

ASHOK KUMAR GOEL, BY MAIL

## Preserve Somnath Temple

Apropos of '1026 to 2026: The endurance of Somnath'; the repeated attacks on the temple were mainly intended to loot the wealth of this sacred place and deter devotees from worship at the holy site. The temple had unique architecture, huge offerings and suspended Shivling which attracted the invaders like Mahmud of Ghazni. It is evident that security of the temple was always inadequate enabling attackers to indulge in destruction without much resistance. Proper reconstruction was undertaken after independence and temple was dedicated to nation in 1951. It is expected that this ancient symbol of faith and devotion is properly preserved and protected.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

# Punjab's economy is leaking from within

HARISH JAIN  
AUTHOR AND PUBLISHER

**A**FRIEND recently narrated an incident that has stayed with me. He runs a medium-scale manufacturing unit in Punjab — an MSMB with a proven record of quality and timely delivery. For years, he had been supplying his product to a Punjab government department without complaint. When a tender worth Rs 22 crore was floated, he qualified on both technical and financial grounds. In the final bid, he lost to a Delhi-based firm by a few lakh rupees. What followed reveals much about how Punjab undermines its own economy.

My friend represented to the department that under the state policy, MSMBs are entitled to price preference. He annexed copies of the relevant orders. He pointed out that as a Punjab-based unit, he would charge SGST, while the Delhi supplier would bill CGST, yielding zero revenue for the state. His inputs were largely sourced locally, creating a virtuous cycle of tax revenue, logistics spending and employment within Punjab. The supplies were to be distributed across districts — transportation, warehousing, labour, all local.

At an 18 per cent GST rate,

he calculated that Punjab would lose Rs 40 lakh in tax revenue — many times the price difference that disqualified him. Yet, the objections were overruled and the tender went to the out-of-state firm. This case is symptomatic of an unbusinesslike approach to public procurement — one that treats government purchasing as a clerical exercise rather than an economic lever.

Ironically, GST officers in Punjab often advise traders to "buy locally", which is commendable. But what is the incentive when the state's own procurement ignores local value creation? A decade ago, before GST, I came across tender documents issued by the Odisha government. One clause was invariably present: out-of-state suppliers were required to obtain local VAT registration and bill under state tax. This policy had far-reaching consequences, forcing firms to establish local offices, create jobs and integrate themselves into the state's economy.

If other states could do this, what stops Punjab? Such measures can easily be extended. Even modest rebates or incentives for local sourcing would encourage companies to establish distribution hubs, warehouses and offices in Punjab. Tepia in Patiala district has emerged organically as a distribution point. With deliberate policy, Punjab could leverage its highways, not just as transit corridors bypassing cities, but also as arteries for regional distribution serving North India.

Punjab has sacrificed vast tracts of land to expressways



TELLING: Punjab produces no high-value-added dairy products despite massive milk output. FILE PHOTO

that largely facilitate pass-through traffic. Without a complementary logistics and warehousing policy, these highways deliver little local benefit.

The urgency is real. Punjab's 2025-26 Budget projected GST collections of Rs 27,650 crore. By November, only Rs 16,996 crore had been collected, leaving a big shortfall to be recovered in four months. Punjab is a high-consumption state, yet its tax collections do not match the consumption levels. Expanding in-state distribution and billing would raise revenue and also curb smuggling and tax evasion. Small measures, multiplied across sectors, can reshape the economy. Punjab has maintained a 17.25 per cent share of manufacturing in its GDP, comparable to the national average. Yet, large public and private investments have largely bypassed the state.



## LOOKING BACK AHEAD 60 YEARS OF PUNJAB'S REORGANISATION

Punjab does not need a few large investors; it needs thousands of small entrepreneurs rooted in its districts.

sands of business families have sold properties, migrated abroad and invested in rental real estate overseas.

The real capital of Punjab lies in its districts. The real estate boom around Mohali was fuelled by surplus money from mandi towns like Barnala. These are families with steady businesses, surplus capital and technically qualified children. They are precisely the people who could industrialise Punjab. Yet, they are neither invited to summits nor offered viable pathways for productive investment. With no guidance, surplus capital flows into speculative land deals, which generate no economic activity but inflate land prices. The result is predictable: talent drain, capital flight and stagnation.

Punjab does not need a few large investors. It needs thousands of small and medium entrepreneurs engaged in productive activity, spread across districts, rooted in local pride.

What is often forgotten is that Punjab's industry is mostly homegrown. Every major industrial house in the state started small. They are the products of Punjabi entrepreneurship, not external capital. Punjab today offers little that attracts large greenfield projects: land is among the costliest in the country, making projects unviable; raw materials are scarce; trained manpower migrates out. The oft-lamented "flight of capital" is far deeper than industrial relocation — it begins at the village level.

A farmers' leader told me that three families in his village received compensation for land acquired for a highway. Almost all of it was transferred to Canada. This pattern has spread from villages to mandi towns. Thous-

ands of business families have sold properties, migrated abroad and invested in rental real estate overseas.

limits. At present prices and yields, farmers can generate a surplus, but this is insufficient to meet the expenses of education, healthcare, social obligations and unforeseen needs. It is this gap — not inefficiency — that fuels indebtedness. Diversification slogans mean little unless they translate into income stability and dignity.

Punjab's entrepreneurial skill has always compensated for the lack of raw material. Yet, it remains underexploited. Brands like Sohna and Verka are telling examples — pioneers in ready-to-eat foods and dairy products, yet confined largely within the state's borders. Punjab produces no high-value-added dairy products despite massive milk output. Wheat and rice are sold largely as commodities, with minimal downstream processing.

Why do we not leverage what we have? Punjab's recovery will not come from a single mega project or corporate saviour. It will come from many small, feasible investments — multiplied across districts, towns and villages — retaining talent, circulating capital locally and restoring confidence in productive work. Big business often takes flight at the first sign of distress. It is the small entrepreneurs, rooted in the soil, who stay till the end. Increasing their income is the surest way to increase the state's income and address its mounting debt.

These ideas are not exhaustive but starting points. What is required is political will, administrative imagination and the courage to look inward — before Punjab's economic hollowing becomes irreversible.

## The human cost of 10-minute deliveries

AUNIMYO CHAKRAVARTY  
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

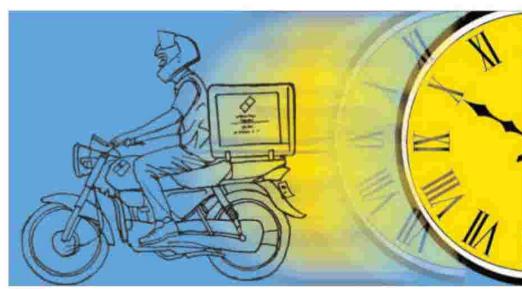
**A**BOUT two years ago, a delivery 'partner' turned up at my doorstep with a big gash on his ankle, visible through his torn trousers. He had still made it within the promised time window. Apparently, a car had hit his scooter, and he had fallen off, injuring himself. Luckily, his vehicle was intact. It had been rented for the day, and any damage might have cost him a part of his earnings.

Now, I am a kind-hearted person, so I gave him a couple of Band-Aids and a 200-rupee note and told him to visit a doctor. But it was clear that he wasn't going to a doctor. Instead, he was likely to pocket the money I had given him. He simply didn't have the time to deal with his wound. It is quite possible that the accident was his fault. I have seen delivery workers jumping lights and driving on the wrong side to get to their destination as quickly as possible.

Quick-service companies will argue that there is no need for such haste. All their 'dark' stores are located within a short-delivery radius. A delivery worker could, theoretically, walk and still make it in time. Apparently, delivery partners drive at an average speed of just 13 km per hour. Yet, delivery workers constantly break traffic rules. Data from Bengaluru alone shows that delivery workers were involved in nearly 64,000 traffic violations in 2025. These figures have been updated only till November 15.

So, why do these delivery partners drive so rashly on our city streets? The answer to this question holds the key to the economics of quick-service employment. Quick commerce companies say that a delivery worker makes an average of Rs 102 per hour. But unions say this does not take costs into account. After fuel and maintenance, the actual earning drops to Rs 81 per hour. If someone were to work 10 hours a day, 26 days a month, they would end up with a net earning of Rs 21,000.

To make that kind of money, a delivery worker will need to make 30-35 trips within 10 hours. They can only get another trip assigned once they have completed one delivery and marked it on the app. They don't always get a



RISKY: The faster the workers deliver, the more likely they are to get their next assignment. SANDEEP JOSHI

delivery immediately — there's a waiting period. So, the faster they deliver, the more likely they are to get their next assignment.

In fact, delivery workers' unions say that riders get indirectly penalised if they are slow. If they are unable to deliver in time, they lose 'badges', which affects their chances of getting future orders. There are also incentives attached to completing volume targets. This makes them take chances with life and limb.

This is highly stressful work. Unions claim that 99 per cent of delivery workers report mental and physical health issues. This is why a large number of them leave the industry every year. Estimates of attrition range

within three months. This is happening at a time when quick-service platforms — mainly Blinkit, Swiggy Instamart and Zepito — are caught in an intense competition to expand their footprint. So, quick commerce companies have increased their cash burn. Blinkit, for instance, made an adjusted EBITDA loss of nearly Rs 600 crore in the past four quarters. This excludes the cost of ESOPs given to employees, so the real loss is even higher. While Blinkit charges a small platform and delivery fee, Swiggy's Instamart has removed it altogether for order values that cross a threshold.

This has put quick commerce in a bind — it has to expand, reach more customers, give bigger discounts. At the same time, they have to hire more delivery partners and hold on to the ones who work long hours without increasing costs too much. Now, as long as other employment opportunities were scarce, it was easy to get more young men to become delivery partners without paying them significantly more. The trouble for quick commerce platforms is that rural employment has revived smartly in the past few months.

According to the CMIE's employment surveys, male employment in rural India

has been growing at an annualised rate of 4.5-6 per cent over the past few months, compared to the same period last year. This is the fastest rate of employment growth in our villages since Covid. So, imagine being a 25-year-old high-school dropout from a Haryana village, whose family has a small parcel of land back home. You came to Gurugram and became a delivery worker because there was no work in the village.

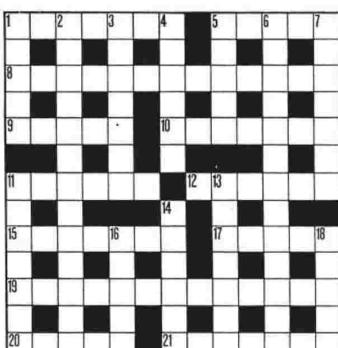
Now, not only is there a high demand for your services, but also your friends in the village are earning a decent income. Till now, you accepted your tough working conditions, but now the farms in your village look greener. This is what gives you the confidence and the strength to demand more and threaten to strike work.

Unfortunately, this is a lose-lose situation. Quick commerce firms cannot pay any more if they want to keep their businesses afloat, while delivery workers find the work too stressful to continue at these income levels. What is most ironic is that delivery workers are making more than what entry-level white-collar professionals are being offered right now. But no MBA degree holder would want to become a delivery partner.

This is an impasse with no immediate resolution in sight.

This is highly stressful work, where incentives quietly reward speed and punish caution.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



#### ACROSS

- 1 Leading (2,5)
- 5 Faulty (5)
- 8 Be a deserved misfortune (5,3,5)
- 9 Draw forth (5)
- 10 Anarchic (7)
- 11 Diffident (6)
- 12 Disgustingly dirty (6)
- 15 Affinity (7)
- 17 Exert influence on (5)
- 19 Very impressively (2,1,5,5)
- 20 Correspond (5)
- 21 Produced as profit (7)

#### Yesterday's Solution

**Across:** 1 Gauge, 8 Set about, 9 Pithy, 10 Make good, 11 Imply, 12 Bad, 16 Accede, 17 On hold, 18 Din, 23 Sorry, 24 Not quite, 25 Forge, 26 Et cetera, 27 State.

**Down:** 2 A bit much, 3 Go halves, 4 Nevada, 5 Laden, 6 Cocoa, 7 Study, 12 Bed, 13 Don, 14 Shoot-out, 15 All right, 19 In turn, 20 Under, 21 Stack, 22 Suite.

#### DOWN

- 1 Point under discussion (5)
- 2 Permanently (3,4,3,3)
- 3 Unity of opinion (7)
- 4 Slight prickling sensation (6)
- 5 Sharp pointed missile (5)
- 6 Much sought after (2,5,6)
- 7 Comply with (7)
- 11 Distinguish by sight (4,3)
- 13 Deadlock (7)
- 14 In public (6)
- 16 Ravage (5)
- 18 Velocity (5)

### SU DO KU



#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

1	3	5	6	7	4	2	8	9
7	9	6	2	3	8	5	1	4
2	8	4	5	1	9	7	3	6
3	4	1	2	7	6	9	8	5
6	7	2	8	9	1	3	4	5
9	5	8	4	6	3	1	7	2
4	1	7	9	2	5	8	6	3
8	2	3	1	4	6	9	5	7
5	6	9	3	8	7	4	2	1

### CALENDAR

JANUARY 6, 2026, TUESDAY
■ Shaka Samvat 1947
■ Posh Shaka 16
■ Posh Parviteha 23
■ Hijri 1447
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 3, up to 8:02 am
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 4, up to 6:53 am
■ Prittigya up to 8:22 pm
■ Ashtikam Naksatra up to 12:18 pm
■ Moon enters Leo sign 12:18 pm

### FORECAST

SUNSET: 17:27 HRS
SUNRISE: 07:20 HRS
TUESDAY
MAX 07
MIN 07
CITY
Chandigarh 16 07
New Delhi 19 07
Amritsar 13 09
Bathinda 16 07
Jalandhar 13 09
Ludhiana 15 08
Bhawanipuri 16 07
Hisar 16 06
Sirsa 16 06
Dharamsala 15 03
Manali 12 0
Shimla 14 02
Srinagar 08 -02
Jammu 14 08
Kargil 0 -10
Leh 0 -11
Dehradun 20 08
Mussoorie 17 04



## In India, libraries still creating community reading spaces

On the one hand, you have the relentless din of AI transforming lives in India like elsewhere in the world in virtually every sphere. On the other, state governments are still seen partnering with civil society organisations to set up libraries in their respective territories.

An agency report reveals how the Delhi government has planned to open libraries in all Assembly constituencies to encourage reading habits, particularly among young people from economically weaker sections.

Under the initiative, the government proposes to set up a minimum of one and a maximum of two libraries in each of its 70 As-

sembly constituencies under the "Bhagidari" scheme, an order issued by the Department of Art, Culture and Language said.

The libraries will operate in association with NGOs, which will be required to provide adequate space to accommodate at least 30 readers at a time, the order said. NGOs will also arrange for the display of newspapers, magazines, journals and other reading material, it said.

In the first year, each NGO will be eligible for a grant-in-aid of Rs 1,03,168, in two equal instalments, it said. Of this amount, 40 per cent will be earmarked for furniture and fixtures, another 40 per cent for reading material such as

books, newspapers and magazines, and the remaining 20 per cent for staff honorarium, it added.

It mentioned that from the second year onwards, NGOs may receive up to Rs 40,000 annually in two instalments. Of this amount, 70 per cent will be used for the purchase of newspapers and magazines, while 30 per cent will be allocated towards staff honorarium.

As per a recent statement put out by Press Information Bureau (Dec 15, 2025), India has a total of 46,746 public libraries across states and Union Territories. The data is of a survey undertaken in 2018-19, the latest available.

Not surprisingly, the five southern states have 21,485 libraries in

all, accounting for over 45 per cent of the total number all over India. The maximum libraries are in Maharashtra - 12,191 with Kerala outbeating everyone else in the peninsula with 8,415 libraries nestled in its domain. What is surprising is that Andhra Pradesh has just 978 libraries and its Telugu counterpart, 672. Even if taken together (as a pre-bifurcation statistic), it is just 1,650, much lower than Tamil Nadu with 4,622 and Karnataka with 6,798.

There have been some recent moves announced by the Central government to have libraries set up in each of the Assembly constituencies. However, the delay in transfer of library cess and the

pitiable upkeep of its libraries have often made it to the headlines, indicating a yawning gap between what is announced and what is the situation at the ground level.

The benefits of reading a book, browsing through printed material and referring to archival material online have been listed out but the young generation is comfortable living in cyberspace.

What is needed is a recalibration of time and effort to go through not just text and graphics on illuminated screens but also enjoy the feel of paper and the texture of pages as one goes back and forth in time to understand what life has been all about and how it is going to be in future.

## Rule of law in 2025: Upholding rights of common man



PROF MADABHUSHI SHRIDHAR ACHARYA

THE Supreme Court expressed concern for the principles of federalism, the rule of law, and justice, among others, in the year 2025. In the last year, our apex court repeatedly reminded the nation that the Constitution is not a distant legal text, but a living shield for ordinary people. At a time when citizens faced delays in governance, executive overreach, environmental stress, threats to personal liberty, and inequality in access to justice, the Court stepped in to reaffirm that power in a democracy is always subject to constitutional limits. Through its judgments, the Court acted not as a rival to the elected branches, but as a constitutional guardian—ensuring that law, fairness, and dignity prevail over arbitrariness.

Taken together, the Supreme Court's judgments of 2025 demonstrate that constitutional justice is not abstract or elitist. It affects whether laws passed by elected representatives are respected, whether an individual's liberty is protected, whether dignity is preserved, and whether power is exercised within limits



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institutions, and rejected discriminatory practices in education and inheritance. These rulings conveyed a simple but powerful constitutional message: the promise of equality under Articles 14 and 21 applies to everyone—inside prisons, in public spaces, and in everyday life.

Environmental protection and social justice were another strong theme in 2025. Whether it was safeguarding ecologically sensitive regions, enforcing bans on inhuman practices like manual scavenging, or balancing environmental concerns with livelihood and cultural practices, the Court emphasized that development cannot come at the cost of human life and ecological survival. These decisions showed that the right to life includes clean air, a safe environment, and dignified work.

### For justice, SC expands scope of Article 142

The first judgment is selected to explain a fundamental

right on 16 January 2025. The Supreme Court reaffirmed its unique role through Article 142, which empowers it to do "complete justice." In cases like Biswajit Das v. CBI, the Court made it clear that it will not allow technical limitations or narrow procedural boundaries to defeat justice. When required, the scope of appeals to ensure that truth and legal prevail. This power, exercised carefully, reflects the Court's commitment to substance over form.

Justice should be real for complete justice, and "Justice could be a real casualty." The Supreme Court Bench of Justice Dipankar Datta and Justice Mamnoonah used this phrase. If the Court were forced to examine only a narrow legal issue while ignoring broader and substantial questions of law, "justice could be a real casualty." Therefore, when judges are satisfied that a case requires deeper scrutiny, they may widen the scope of examination to ensure complete justice.

In 2009, the Gauhati High Court confirmed his conviction. Das was a Development Officer in the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC). He was accused of playing a key role in obtaining a life insurance claim by falsely showing that the insured person had died. Based on this allegation, he was prosecuted and convicted by the Trial Court for offences of forgery, fraud, and criminal conspiracy under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, and for criminal misconduct and abuse of official position under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988.

In 2014, a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court issued notice in his appeal but limited the scope of the hearing to only one question—whether Das

could be convicted under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

**Using Article 142: Supreme Court's Ruling**  
In essence, the Supreme Court made it clear that procedural constraints cannot override substantive justice—and when required, the Court will use Article 142 to ensure that the truth and legality of the entire case are properly examined.

Is the Supreme Court bound by the limited scope fixed earlier while issuing notice, or can it examine the entire case if justice demands it? The Supreme Court said that it has the power to expand the scope of an appeal under Article 142.

Among the 2025 judgments, the Supreme Court established the fundamental rights under the Constitution of India. On 16 January 2025, a year back, Biswajit Das v. Central Bureau of Investigation, used extraordinary power under Article 142 of the Constitution, which authorizes the Supreme Court to pass any order necessary to do "complete justice" in a case.

The background of the case was that Biswajit Das was a Development Officer in the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC). He was accused of playing a key role in obtaining a life insurance claim by falsely showing that the insured person had died. Based on this allegation, he was prosecuted and convicted by the Trial Court for offences of forgery, fraud, and criminal conspiracy under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, and for criminal misconduct and abuse of official position under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988.

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(The writer is Advisor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)

### Legal Significance of the Judgment

This judgment is important because it reinforces the Supreme Court's role as a court of complete justice, not merely a court confined by procedural boundaries. It confirms that Article 142 allows the Court to go beyond technical limitations, including self-imposed restrictions at earlier stages, to ensure that justice is fully served.

(The writer is Advisor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)

## Indore's deadly drop: Warning bell for Hyderabad's water supply

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

THE unfolding tragedy in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, where contaminated drinking water has officially claimed ten lives (with unofficial estimates higher) and hospitalised over 200 residents, serves as a grim wake-up call for urban India. That this calamity struck the city holding the coveted "Cleanest City" tag for eight consecutive years underscores a critical vulnerability in our urban planning: the perilous proximity of drinking water and sewage lines. For Hyderabad, a city rapidly expanding its metropolitan footprint while struggling to modernize its historic core, the lessons from Indore are not just theoretical—they are urgent.

### The Indore incident: An anatomy of failure

The crisis in Indore's Bhagirathpura locality was not caused by a complex chemical spill but by a rudimentary infrastructure lapse. Investigations revealed that a community toilet was constructed directly over a main drinking water pipeline. Instead of a septic tank, the contractor routed the sewage into a pit situated immediately above the water supply line. A leak in the water pipe, combined with the sewage seepage, turned the neighbourhoods tap water into a toxic vector of bacteria, including E. coli. The tragedy highlights a "silent killer" in Indian urban engineering: cross-



contamination. When water supply is intermittent—as it is in most Indian cities—pipes running empty create negative pressure (suction). If a sewage line running parallel or above leaks, the vacuum in the water pipe sucks in the pathogens, which are then flushed into homes when the water supply resumes.

### Hyderabad's 'Spaghetti Underground'

While Indore grapples with the aftermath, Hyderabad must introspect. The Telangana capital sits on a dichotomy of infrastructure. On one hand, the Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board (HMWSSB) is pushing forward with the ₹7,360 crore Godavari Drinking Water Supply Project (Phases II & III) to secure the water supply until 2050. On the other, the city's underworld is a maze of piping pipelines, some dating back to the Nizam era. The risk of cross-contamination in Hyderabad is far from hypothetical.

In October 2024, residents of Chikaldapally reported receiving

water that smelled of drainage waste. Similar complaints have periodically surfaced from areas like KPHB and the Old City, where narrow lanes force water and sewage lines to share the same cramped trenches. A 2022 study by Barkatullah University, which predicted the risks in Bhopal and Indore, noted that "co-location" of drainage and water infrastructure is a ticking time bomb.

Hyderabad's older neighbourhoods, with their high population density and entangled utility lines, fit this risk profile perfectly. The Central Public Health and Environmental Engineering Organisation (CPHEEO) mandates a minimum distance of 300mm between water and sewer lines, a standard often compromised during road widening or unauthorized construction.

### The storage peril and infrastructure gaps

Beyond the pipelines, Hyderabad faces a secondary challenge highlighted by recent studies

household-level contamination. A study on Hyderabad's low-income settlements revealed that while water often leaves the treatment plant meeting safety standards, the intermittent nature of supply forces residents to store water in drums and tanks. In slum areas, where hygiene buffers are thin, this storage becomes a breeding ground for bacteria, mimicking the effects of pipeline contamination. Furthermore, the city's reliance on aging conduits—such as the gravity channel from Osmansagar to Asif Nagar—poses a structural risk. While HMWSSB has announced plans to lay a new parallel pipeline to mitigate losses, the interim period remains vulnerable to cracks and seepage from surrounding urbanization.

### Lessons for the HMWSSB

The Indore tragedy teaches us that "Smart City" dashboards and "Swachh" rankings are insufficient if the subterranean basics are compromised.

\* Audit of co-located Lines: The HMWSSB must prioritize a safety audit of areas where water and sewage lines intersect or run in close parallel, particularly in the Old City. Modern non-destructive testing (NDT) can identify weak points in older pipelines before they fracture.

\* Contractor accountability: The Indore failure was partly due to negligence by a contractor who cut corners on a septic tank. Hy-

derabad's municipal bodies must strictly enforce building codes, ensuring no structure—especially sanitation units—is built over utility corridors.

\* Positive pressure maintenance: Ensuring a continuous 24x7 water supply is the ultimate solution to prevent the "suction" effect that draws sewage into pipes. Until that goal is met, maintaining positive pressure in pipes even during non-supply hours (where feasible) is a technical safeguard.

\* Decentralised monitoring: Relying solely on treatment plant tests is inadequate. Real-time water quality sensors should be installed at the "tail-end" of the distribution network—the point just before it enters the consumer's home.

The loss of life in Indore is a tragedy; for it to happen in a city celebrated for its cleanliness is an irony. For Hyderabad, it is a warning. As we lay the foundation for a "Global City" with AI-driven complaint redressal and river rejuvenation projects, we must not forget that public health ultimately depends on the integrity of the humble pipe buried three feet underground.

The HMWSSB has acted swiftly in the past—adopting AI for complaints is a commendable step—but the Board must now ensure that the physical firewall between the city's waste and its water remains impenetrable.

(The writer is OSD to former union civil aviation minister

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## LETTERS

### A harsh reality check for Indore

INDORE, repeatedly ranked as India's cleanest city, appears to have failed in addressing one of the most basic civic responsibilities—providing clean and potable drinking water. While crores of public money seem to have been spent on beautification and cleanliness drives, safe drinking water, which is integral to public health and true urban hygiene, has been neglected. Clean streets and polished rankings cannot compensate for contaminated water reaching households. Such window dressing may impress surveyors, but it cannot conceal ground realities for long. This is not an Indore-specific problem alone. Cities like Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and other cities suffer from similar contradictions—high on image, low on essential services. True cleanliness is not about awards or optics; it begins with safe water, reliable sanitation, and honest governance. Anything less is merely cosmetic. Of late media, except few, have failed to act as fourth pillar instead become fifth columnist and a megaphone of party in power. While praising clean city isn't wrong but media has the responsibility to highlight reality on the ground outside cities.

N Nagananj, Hyderabad

II

**A PROPOS** Indore water contamination: conflict claims on fatalities (Hans India, January 3, 2026). What happened in 'India's cleanest city' is condemnable. Two things need to be done at war footing. Firstly, to correct the leakage, and secondly to pull up those responsible without fear and favour. They should be made accountable for the preventable tragedy. Nothing is achieved by getting the count of those who perished or took ill right. Even one death caused by such a development cannot be condoned. Before rushing to get the death count right and indulge in blame game, the damage caused has to be corrected and measures initiated to prevent such inexcusable calamity in future.

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

III

**T**HIS is reference to your editorial 'Indore water contamination tragedy exposes urban decay'. Contamination of drinking water is not new to Indian cities, but the Indore incident that had resulted in the death of 11 people, and made another 1,400 residents sick, speaks of the callousness and indifference of the civic authorities. Similar incident was reported in Gujarat's Gandhinagar – fortunately there were no casualties as a result. The water supply system through pipeline calls for regular monitoring and immediate corrective measures lest people fall sick consuming contaminated water. K V Raghuram, Wayanad

### India should host 2036 Olympics

**T**HIS is in response to the news item published regarding the efforts of India to participate in the bid for conducting Olympics in India. The cost estimation of conducting the mega event is estimated to be around Rs 64,000 crore. Considering realistic aspirations and India's infrastructure gap, hosting the Olympics could easily exceed one lakh crore rupees. In fact, India has a growing presence in global sports. Indian athletes regularly compete at international events and have won medals. Our policies like Khelo India, Target Olympic Podium Scheme, National Sports Governance Act are strengthening the field of sports. So to go ahead should be our first priority.

Cherupi Seeram, Hanamkonda

### It requires grit to play on rival soil

**T**HE Bangladesh Cricket Board's refusal to travel for the T20 World Cup is a disappointing pivot from sportsmanship to brinkmanship. While security is paramount, using "political tension" as a wildcard sets a dangerous precedent that threatens to fracture the ICC's central authority. If every bilateral friction dictates tournament geography, the "World" in World Cup will soon become a misnomer. Cricket cannot thrive in silos; it requires the grit to play on rival soil. By seeking a neutral sanctuary, Bangladesh isn't just avoiding a venue they are eroding the spirit of international competition. Is the pitch now a political podium?

Dr H K Vijaykumar, Raichur

### Revise bank retirees' pension

**T**HIS is with reference to the report "Bank staff threaten strike on Jan 7 (Jan 5th).... It is really surprising that the bankers are forced to go on strike repeatedly on the demands already agreed to by the IBA last year. This only gives a wrong impression to the cronies of account holders who feel that the bankers go on repeated strikes which in fact is incorrect. At the same time it is the duty of the staff to properly receive the customers and politely attend to their issues within a reasonable time. The staff have to know that the customer is a source of transaction and without customers there is no necessity for computers or a branch premises etc. Lastly, the bank retirees pension is not revised since years and the IBA's attitude is most unfair on senior citizens. Katuri Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Speaker calls for end to hate politics, urges accountability in governance

**M**ANGALURU: Legislative Assembly Speaker UT Khader on Monday condemned acts of hate in politics, saying such behaviour leads elected representatives to lose public respect. He emphasised that lawmakers should avoid threatening one another and that no one should engage in actions that provoke discord or undermine democratic decorum. Speaking at a press conference, Khader was responding to questions about the controversial incident during the unveiling of the Valmiki statue in Ballari, which had sparked widespread criticism. He stated that those who engaged in hate speech must be held accountable and stressed that the nation's strength depends on monitoring both words and actions of political representatives. "Even if there are flaws in the law, they can be rectified through written procedures. Opposing for no reason is not acceptable," he added.

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



If wars are too important to be left to the generals, surely prisoners' rights are too precious to be left to the jailors

Justice V R Krishna Iyer

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.  
— Rammath Goenka

## ENSURE SPEEDY TRIAL FOR KHALID, IMAM AFTER DENIAL OF BAIL

MAR Khalid suffered a major setback as he lost his much-anticipated bail plea in the Supreme Court in the 2020 Delhi riot case, amid a high-decibel international campaign to free him. The bench also barred him and another activist Sharjeel Imam, both 37, from filing a fresh appeal for a year. It, however, released five others on conditional bail. All of them had been arrested under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 and are facing trial for the alleged 'plot' they hatched ahead of the riots in the wake of widespread protests against the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act. The bench observed that the material before them showed a central and formative role of Khalid and Imam, and 'involvement in the level of planning, mobilisation and strategic direction extending beyond episodic and localised acts'. It attracted Section 43D(5) of UAPA, which says an accused shall not be released on bail if there are reasonable grounds to believe *prima facie* that the charges are true. While 43D(5) does not totally bar judicial scrutiny on the evidence, defence arguments are not to be examined at the bail stage, the bench comprising Justices Aravind Kumar and N V Anjaria ruled. Though the accused have been in custody for more than five years, their 'continued detention has not crossed constitutional impermissibility to override the statutory embargo as against them'. Besides, delay in trial under the UAPA does not automatically offer as a trump card for bail, the bench ruled.

The court examined each individual's role separately. Considering all seven together would risk needless pre-trial detention, it reasoned. For example, the bail application of Gulfisha Fatima, who was among the five set free, was listed 90 times. However, the matter was not taken up 25 times due to the unavailability of the bench and was remitted 26 times, her counsel told the court. Days before the verdict, a letter to Khalid from New York City's new mayor Zohran Mamdani became a media spectacle. Eight US lawmakers wrote to the Indian envoy in the US urging bail for all the accused till their trial is over. All that came to nought for Khalid and Imam, as the custodians of law took their own course. The least that the prosecution can now do is, in accordance with the Supreme Court's instruction, ensure that the trial is not unnecessarily prolonged.

## CRICKET STANDOFF BAD AUGURY FOR BIG EVENTS

THE week past was one of the most volatile in subcontinental cricket. Just as India was getting ready to host the T20 World Cup, a Bangladesh player disrupted the well-laid plans. What's even more disconcerting is that it involved another neighbouring country after Pakistan, who are playing all their matches in Sri Lanka. The controversy started when the Board of Control for Cricket in India reacted to right-wing protests against Kolkata Knight Riders for hiring Bangladeshi bowler Mustafizur Rahman. This came when public opinion was inflamed over a Hindu worker's lynching in the neighbouring country. A day later, Bangladesh, who are scheduled to play three matches in Kolkata and one in Mumbai, officially refused to travel to India citing diplomatic tensions. They have requested the International Cricket Council to shift their matches out of India. The Bangladesh Cricket Board explained that the step was necessary for the safety of its players and officials. If that was not enough, on Monday, the interim government in Bangladesh barred the airing of the Indian Premier League in the country.

Once again, cricket has become a geopolitical weapon. With elections due soon in West Bengal and Assam, the matter has taken a political turn. This is not the first time the IPL has faced such a situation. In 2013, IPL's governing council stepped in when tensions flared between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu over the treatment of Tamil people in the neighbouring country. The council decided not to allow Sri Lankan players to play in Chennai. Though the circumstances were completely different, an alternative solution should have been found other than barring players' travel. We must remember that the BCCI has already postponed a series with Bangladesh and that Mustafizur's deal was done at last December's auction.

If the ICC agrees with Bangladesh's request, the entire T20 World Cup schedule would have to be rearranged, putting other teams in discomfort. Going by the tenses between Bangladesh and India, diplomacy is unlikely to find a solution. At a time India are preparing to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games and has bid for the 2036 Olympics, not being able to host neighbouring countries is unhelpful. Sri Lanka is an option, but with the World Cup just over a month away, the ICC and the BCCI must find a solution soon.

### QUICK TAKE

#### INCREDIBLE INDIAN HERITAGE

MONG the many things confrontational geopolitics marred in 2025 was tourism. Last month, the government admitted that foreign tourist arrivals had dipped by an eighth during April-September 2025, weakened mainly by the worsening relations with Bangladesh in the region and other tensions around the world. This comes at a time foreign arrivals are still struggling to match the pre-pandemic levels despite a recent surge. Amid this gloom, West Bengal—which emerged as the second-most preferred destination after Maharashtra—showed what can be possible if India's rich intangible heritage is promoted. Festivals like the Durga puja can be an even bigger draw if we position them attractively with another major drive like the early 2000s' 'Incredible India'.

**A**S the new calendar year begins, let me get the rhetoric going with a question. What's the biggest challenge India faces today? Is the news that we see every day defining it? Or must we look beyond, into what we don't see? Is it the challenge from a fast-souring relationship with Bangladesh, an already-soured relationship with Pakistan, or is it the one that ferments slowly in a large pot with China and its geopolitical intent? Is it the fast depreciating relationship between the rupee and the dollar? Is it that long, unresolved and contentious issue of tariffs between the US and India that's been troubling us for a while now? Well, this is what we see.

And what is it that we don't see enough of? I believe there is a big one. We hear of it now and then, and we push it under the carpet of comfort. The big four-letter issue in our midst today is jobs. The lack of enough jobs for a whole nation of hungry and aspirational job seekers. An entire country of educated people, well nigh the size of one of our bigger cities, are on the daily active lookout for jobs that seem to be elusive, if not entirely missing. That's the volume dimension. Add to it the fact that all of them are looking for a full day's work. That's depth of work. And every one of them is looking for work that matches what they bring to the table as a competency. In the mismatch of these many dimensions lies the gory story of missing jobs.

Current government numbers tell a different tale though. A really big number of 17 crore new jobs were created between 2017 and 2024, as per the Niti Aayog. These numbers can't be wrong, but seem woefully inadequate when compared to the current need for bigger numbers, and more importantly, the addition to this demand-number every passing year as graduates pass out from our very many educational institutions. At last count, those joining the job market every year exceeded 1.5 crore young people.

In the market for jobs, there is the existing job. The central government and every state government have a standard set of jobs. Each is filled with typically small and incremental vacancies that arise every year. The number of applicants for every job announced is mind-boggling. The Railways Recruitment Board had 64,197 vacancies announced in 2025. Over 1.8 crore candidates applied.

While a fair number of these jobs ex-

ists in the government sector, a very robust number of private sector jobs exist as well. Out here, water finds its own level. As corporate business grows, investment grows. Every new investment creates many new jobs. Well, that is the way it should go. If one does, however, peek into the investment mindset of Indian business today, one witnesses a rather lethargic wait-and-watch sentiment. This sentiment has been worsened within export-oriented businesses that have been delivered a sucker punch with the 'Trump tariff' at hand. Add to it the role of artificial intelligence in bringing in non-human agents as colleagues into the work environment, and the cocktail of depression is complete.

There are traditional jobs of the brick-and-mortar kind, and then there are the new-age jobs. There are jobs

that demand expending physical energy as opposed to exercising the mind. And now there are the gigs. Gigs are not really jobs. They are defined more as entrepreneurship where the performer of the task is the owner.

There is a gig worker in each of our lives. You get your grocery delivered by a gig worker, your cab to the airport is driven by an owner-partner gig worker, and there are dozens of other gig categories in India. The gig economy was estimated to be as large as 77 lakh people in 2020-21 doing their own thing and writing their own salary cheques based on how many days they work and how many hours they choose to work across those days. The gig and platform economy is the new work-bench in India, one that has made livelihoods happen for a whole host of people.

(Views are personal)  
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## REWRITING THE BOOK OF JOBS

HARISH BIJOOR

Brand guru & founder of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc



SOURAV ROY

## THE DEVIL IN CRYPTO DETAILS

**T**HE global cryptocurrency market operates on a fragile foundation of faith. Investors pour billions of dollars into digital exchanges, assuming that the bitcoin or ethereum they see on their screen actually belongs to them. They believe that the exchange is merely a digital vault, a custodian that holds their assets for safekeeping. But what happens if that company fails? Or if the vault is breached?

The Madras High Court's recent judgement in *Rhutukumari vs Zannai Labs* has brought these terrifying questions to the fore. In a significant ruling involving a cyber-attack on the platform of WazirX, a trading app, the court challenged the fatalistic view that investors are helpless. When the court observed that the virtual digital assets are 'meant to be held in trust with a fiduciary duty owed to their owners', it did much more than resolve an investor-promoter dispute.

The judgement is best understood as part of a broader global conversation about what happens when crypto platforms fail. The central legal inquiry that the courts are wrestling with is: whether the relationship between a cryptocurrency exchange and its user is fiduciary in nature, thereby creating a 'trust', or whether it is merely contractual in nature, thereby creating a 'debt'? This distinction is not just a matter of semantics but of asset survival.

The High Court of New Zealand's decision in *Ruscoe & Moore vs Cryptopia* (2020) anchors the pro-investor perspective. Viewing the inquiry practically, the court confirmed that cryptocurrencies are a form of 'property' and satisfied the three certainties required for establishment of a trust. On the certainty of the subject matter and objects, the court had observed that online exchange Cryptopia had segregated coins into currency-specific wallets and the internal database recorded precisely how many units of currency stood in each account.

On certainty of intention, the court relied on Cryptopia's customer service manual, financial statements that excluded coins from the company's assets, and terms explicitly stating assets were 'held on trust'. Taken together, the court ruled that these demonstrated a custodial, trust-based relationship, as opposed to a debtor-creditor arrangement.

In stark contrast, the jurisprudence emerging from Asian financial centres has prioritised the contractual terms much to the detriment of the retail invest-

or. In the decision rendered by the Hong Kong Court of First Instance in *Gatecoin* (2023), although it acknowledged that cryptocurrency could theoretically form the subject matter of a trust, it ruled that in that case, the certainty of intention to create a trust was absent. The court's reasoning hinged on a rigorous analysis of the company's terms and conditions. The terms explicitly permitted the platform to commingle customer funds with its own and, critically, to use those funds for its own proprietary purposes.



With cryptocurrency exchanges failing in various jurisdictions, owners of digital assets like bitcoin and ethereum must know what happens next. The Madras High Court's recent judgement in *Rhutukumari* highlighted a divergence in the emerging jurisprudence on such cases. Users must read the fine print

This contract-first doctrine was also followed by Singaporean courts. In *Quoine* (2020), the country's Court of Appeal overturned the high court's finding of a trust holding that the platform's business model—operating as a 'market maker', freely trading or lending pooled customer assets and expressly warning of its risk disclosure statement that assets might not be returned on bankruptcy—was fundamentally inconsistent with its intention to create a trust. Similarly, in *Taylor* (2025) the Singapore High Court declared to entertain the plea that the exchange operator held the assets in trust. Despite the 'custodial asset' language being used in the com-

pany's terms, the court held that the customers retained both legal and beneficial title, with the digital exchange operator merely facilitating transactions on their instructions. The judgement reaffirms that mere trust labels in the exchange's documents cannot displace a carefully drafted allocation of proprietary risk.

The classification of digital assets—as trust property or unsecured debt—is the decisive factor governing financial recovery during insolvency. For investors, this distinction dictates their standing within the rigid hierarchy of India's Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), 2016. The outcome hinges on whether assets fall within the corporate debtor's 'liquidation estate' under Section 36.

If the contract-trust view prevails, users will be classified merely as unsecured creditors, and their assets will be absorbed into the company's general pool of assets. Consequently under Section 53's 'waterfall mechanism', these investors would stand relegated to the bottom of the distribution ladder. In the event of a crypto exchange collapse, where customer assets often represent the only remaining value, this subordination would typically result in a total loss of capital. However, if the trust interpretation is adopted, as strongly indicated by the reasoning in the *Rhutukumari* and *Cryptopia* judgements, the trajectory of recovery changes fundamentally. Section 36(4) of the IBC specifically excludes 'assets held in trust for any third party' from the liquidation estate. In this scenario, the investor's funds stand fully protected and they cannot be diluted to form part of the company's assets.

Therefore it is clear that 'trust' is not a default protection but a specific legal construct that must be explicitly engineered. For investors, this creates a perilous landscape where their recovery rights hinge on the specific jurisdiction and the granular drafting of user agreements they likely never read. As the crypto insolvency wave continues, it serves as a stark reminder that in the eyes of the law, the fine print is often all that matters.

(Views are personal)

### THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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## 15th parole for Dera chief

The release on parole of Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim, who is serving a life sentence for murder and a 20-year jail term for rape, for an astonishing 15th time since his conviction in 2017, is reflective of a flawed system. With this 40-day parole, Ram Rahim will have spent over 400 days out of jail. Lodged in the Sunaria jail in Haryana's Rohtak, Ram Rahim's plea to be allowed to attend the January 25th birth anniversary celebration of the Dera's second head, Shah Satnam Singh, was approved by the Rohtak Divisional Commissioner. Earlier, he was granted parole for another 40 days in August 2025 to celebrate his own birthday. In 2025, he received parole for 30 days in January, just ahead of the Delhi elections, and a furlough for 21 days in April. In 2024, he was allowed 20 days parole on October 1, days before the Haryana Assembly polls. In August that year he was granted a 21-day furlough. He was also permitted a three-week furlough from February 7, 2022, two weeks before the Punjab Assembly election. The timing of his paroles and furloughs should have raised questions, but given the clout of the Dera Sacha Sauda and Ram Rahim's enormous popularity among a section of the populace, political parties have generally stayed away from the issue. Only some Sikh organisations, like the SGPC and activists, have criticised the alleged preferential treatment for Ram Rahim and accused the ruling party of using parole as a weapon for political leverage in Haryana and Punjab, where the Dera chief has a large number of followers.

Ram Rahim was convicted for the rape of two of his women disciples in 2017 and, in 2019, for the murder of a journalist 16 years ago. In 2021, he and four others were convicted for the murder of a former manager of the sect and sentenced to life imprisonment. However, the Punjab and Haryana High Court acquitted him in the case in May 2024. In February 2024, the High Court told the Haryana government that Ram Rahim should not be granted parole without the court's permission. However, in August that year the court said the application for temporary release filed by Ram Rahim will be decided by the competent authorities. In February 2022, the Haryana government amended its parole laws, critics alleged, to benefit the Dera chief. Earlier, specific circumstances, such as death in the family, critical illness, marriage, etc., had to be cited to secure parole. The 2022 legislation allowed convicts who have served a year in jail to be eligible for 10 weeks of parole and 21 days of furlough per year. The authorities have denied any bias, but for the Dera chief's victims, his frequent stints outside jail are a travesty of justice.

## Pipelines of deadly disease

The distressing death of several people in Indore and a wave of typhoid infections in Gujarat's Gandhinagar have been linked to an old and familiar scourge—contaminated municipal water supply. As city dwellers know, sewage intrusion into drinking water is common in India when water pressure dips and pathogens infiltrate the supply. The pollution unleashes several ailments, notably acute diarrhoeal disease, typhoid, hepatitis, gastroenteritis, and meningitis. Safe drinking water has remained elusive for millions, producing the perverse effect of making India the world's fastest-growing bottled water market. That is the state of a life-sustaining public good in the world's most populous nation is an indictment of development policies. What happened in Indore, a mascot of the high-profile Swachh Bharat campaign, represents the abject failure of municipal authorities to carry out routine scientific checks on water quality in the Bhagirathpura area. It also underscores the low priority that political parties accord basic infrastructure for health, led by safe water and clean air. Ironically, a decade of programmes on Swachh Bharat and Smart Cities buttressed by large investments has not eliminated a fundamental weakness that frequently threatens the health of residents. It is not surprising, therefore, that according to the NITI Aayog, India is ranked 120 among 122 countries on the Water Quality Index, and 70% of water in the country is contaminated; a third of the districts nationally have unsafe groundwater because of high levels of fluoride, arsenic, salinity, and iron.

Good sanitation and a safe water supply may be missing in large urban agglomerations in India, but that has not stopped steady speculation in house property, driving up prices and making inner-city dwellings unaffordable to own or rent. Vast numbers of people are moving to the suburbs, where local bodies have little capacity and facilities are in even more perilous neglect. The municipal response is usually to raise chlorination levels in the water supply to kill pathogens, leaving the underlying causes, such as cracked pipelines, free-flowing sewage, and uncollected solid waste, unattended. Given the overall derelict state of water, sanitation and hygiene, it appears improbable that over 81% of rural households have been given a safe water connection; there is no hard data on access to safe water in cities, nor a public database of water quality. Against such a background of indifference, moves to corporatise water supply for profit and levy charges in many places are nothing but a penalty on the citizen. After more than three decades of robust GDP growth, it would be incongruous for governments and local bodies to claim that they lack the resources to improve water quality. Equally, it is indefensible that public health care fails to cover all citizens, reflected in the struggle of families of victims in Indore to get medical help.



Guest Column  
ANANT VIJAY

**W**hen ever M o h a n Bhagwat, the Sarsanghchalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), talks about Hinduism or a Hindu nation, opposition parties—especially the Left and their ecosystem—tend to react strongly. They start the advocacy of separating religion from politics.

In a similar manner, whenever Prime Minister Modi speaks about Hinduism or highlights symbols of Hindu or Sanatan Dharma, leaders of the Congress and other opposition parties begin portraying it as a mixing of religion and politics. They start quoting the Constitution and its articles and passionately set about citing examples from other countries.

As far as I can recall, a few years ago when Barack Obama was the President of the United States, a report had come out that spoke about religious intolerance in India. Now, however, winds of change are visible even in the US, where Christianity and its protection are being openly and extensively discussed.

In recent days, when a woman named Jenny, wearing Charlie Kirk's 'Freedom' T-shirt, was publicly harassed in the United States, a wave of support for her swept across the country. Within no time, more than 250,000 dollars was raised through crowdfunding in her support. She was felicitated on

# It's not outdated to embrace one's religion and traditions

The noise around live-in relationships and LGBTQ issues has reduced. There is now a clear conversation about returning to one's roots.

the stage of America Fest. Charlie Kirk was a right-wing political activist in the US who consistently spoke out on the traditions of American society. He was assassinated earlier this year. In America, Charlie Kirk was regarded as a traditionalist and shared close ties with President Trump.

Christmas has just passed. Ahead of Christmas, a statement by Kamala Harris in the United States went viral. At an US presidential election rally, Kamala was heard saying, "How dare you wish Christmas." For nearly 15 days, this video of Kamala Harris was repeatedly circulated and used to criticise her. It appeared that the intent was to portray Kamala Harris and her party as anti-religion.

This impression was further reinforced when, on the occasion of Christmas, the White House posted on X, "We are saying Merry Christmas again." The post featured a photo of a Christmas tree along with the American flag. In front of the Christmas tree was a photograph of Donald Trump, and his official handle was tagged. This post was widely seen as a message directed at Kamala Harris.

Not only that, but the post made by Donald Trump himself from his X handle was even more pointed: "Merry Christmas to everyone. Even to those despicable Radical Left elements who are involved in every possible attempt to destroy America but are failing miserably. Our borders are no longer open,

men are not in women's clothing, and law-enforcement agencies are no longer weak. Our stock market is at record levels. There is no inflation. Just yesterday, our GDP stood at 4.3, two points higher than expected. Tariffs have brought in trillions of dollars, making us prosperous. Our national security is at its highest level. Our respect across the world has increased. God! Keep Your blessings on America."

This post by Trump on X is entirely political and is written with Christmas and God at its centre.

Just imagine the kind of uproar that would erupt in our country if Prime Minister Modi or the President were to make a similar post.

Much more is happening in the United States in the name of religion.

On December 26, the White House released a statement by President Trump stating that "tonight, on his orders as Commander-in-Chief, the United States carried out a full-scale, decisive strike against the despicable terrorists of ISIS. These are the same terrorists who, for several days, had been attacking and killing innocent Christians." This message makes it clear that if Christians are attacked anywhere in the world, the United States will intervene decisively.

There is a background to this.

On November 2, Trump had warned the Nigerian government that it failed to stop Islamic terrorists from killing the Christian

population, all kinds of sanctions would be imposed. He had instructed the military to remain prepared for combat if the Nigerian government did not stop the killing of innocent and defenceless Christians in its country. The attackers would be struck back with even greater speed than that with which terrorist acts are carried out. This was the same period when members of the Christian community had demanded that Trump intervene to stop the killing of Christians in Nigeria.

If this American step is viewed at the diplomatic level, then in a situation like the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh, India too acquires the right to protect Hindus.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in its centenary year, is talking about Kumbh Prabodhan—strengthening families and emphasising the importance of the family unit.

Efforts are underway to bring families together and highlight their value. This initiative is causing discomfort among those opposed to the RSS. Some are calling it contrary to modern thinking. They bring up the Constitution while talking about individual rights and the freedom to live life as one chooses.

However, the Constitution is in no way opposed to the family.

A few days ago, Sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat advised Hindu couples to have three children. This sparked a major controversy.

Political analysts who consider and project themselves as progressive strongly criticised him. Many arguments were put forth, even though Mohan Bhagwat had said, based on expert opinion, that communities with birth rates below three eventually decline.

Those who boast of being progressive and modern should look at the United States. There, there is strong and open discussion about the importance of family, marriage, and children. Elon Musk and US Vice President L. D. Vance are often seen in the Oval Office with their children and speak proudly about family. When press secretary Karoline Loeffler becomes pregnant, it is publicly announced. The noise around live-in relationships and LGBTQ issues has reduced. There is now a clear conversation about returning to one's roots.

If the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh expects Hindus to have three children, it is neither outdated thinking nor anti-modern. Globally, there is a growing call to reconnect with traditions and religion. Those who fail to understand this shift are being pushed to the margins.

Anant Vijay is an award-winning journalist, columnist and author and is currently working with Daikin Jagran. His latest book, *Over the Top—OTT ka Mayajau*, won the Kalaignar Literary Award. He is the Vice Chairman of the Executive Council of the Film and Television Institute, Pune.

## Sonia Gandhi's fear returns to haunt the Congress party

Priyanka's term would probably come post 2029. That is if Rahul Gandhi fails even in his 4th attempt to become the prime minister



Inside Track  
AJAY JHA

**T**he worst fear of Sonia Gandhi seems to be coming true. A contentious statement by a Congress party leader from Uttar Pradesh has virtually put the cat among the pigeons and created flutters in the party circles. Imran Masood, the Congress MP from Sarsangh, stated that Priyanka Gandhi would make a better prime minister in handling the Bangladesh situation. He compared Priyanka and her grandmother, Indira Gandhi, and her handling of the situation, which led to the creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign country in 1971.

There is an undeclared race among fringe Congress leaders to demonstrate their loyalties to the Gandhi siblings and secure their own futures by getting into their good books. The Congress party, anyway, is known for accepting sycophancy as a tool to promote one's prospects. Masood is no exception. What said can be attributed to his overenthusiasm. However, the BJP was quick to lap it up and suggest that it showed a lack of faith by a party lawmaker in the leadership quality of Rahul Gandhi. Rahul Gandhi remains the incumbent

Leader of Opposition and an eternal prime minister in waiting. The Congress party did not react to it officially. But Masood was chided by senior leaders for making this statement. This forced him to backtrack and publicly acknowledge Rahul Gandhi as his leader.

The matter may have been settled for now. He definitely would not attract any punitive action. But the issue remains open for further debate, both internally in the party and in the public, especially concerning Rahul Gandhi's leadership ability and calibre. That he has failed to impress the voters is no secret. There is no parallel of a leader rejected thrice by the electorate while still being projected as a future prime minister.

There is no parallel of a leader rejected thrice by the electorate while still being projected as a future prime minister.

Probably no one knew it better than Sonia Gandhi that Rahul Gandhi is stubborn and a slow learner.

On the contrary, many saw shadows of Indira Gandhi in Priyanka. Though she might have



The Congress dilemma: Waiting for the other Gandhi to shine.

failed to live up to that expectation due to her over-reliance on her elder sibling's team of advisors and speechwriters, whenever she goes beyond the script, she does impress as a fierce speaker who makes much more sense than Rahul Gandhi, who often adds drama without substance.

It was common knowledge that Priyanka was being held back from entering active politics. Sonia Gandhi feared that Priyanka would overtake and outweigh Rahul Gandhi. Sonia bolted off all questions regarding Priyanka by saying that looking after her small kids was her priority. However, it was no secret that as a doting mother, Sonia wanted her son Rahul to become the fourth prime minister from the Nehru-Gandhi family and not Priyanka. Later on, different roles were decided for the Gandhi siblings. The original plan was that Priyanka would serve the party as its president and Rahul would head the government as prime minister. What Sonia and her co-terie did not fathom was a third term for Modi as PM. This led to Rahul's prolonged wait to adorn the chair that he and many others in the Congress still feel belonged to him as a birthright.

The stage finally came when there was no choice but to let Priyanka enter Parliament. The Gandhis tactically decided to run the party through remote control. They did not want to get blamed for the repeated defeats of the party in national and state elections. This led to Mallikarjun Kharge becoming the party chief. Now the two siblings are members of the same House in Parliament by default, as the original plan and script went haywire.

Priyanka, on her part, has tried to match Rahul's low levels so that she does not overrule him. But at times, the sparks in her get visible whenever she discards the script. This gives ample opportunities to persons like Imran Masood to draw their conclusions as to which of the two Gandhis is better suited to be the prime minister.

Priyanka's term would probably come post-2029. This is if Rahul Gandhi fails even in his fourth attempt to become the prime minister. The Congress party is not expected to look beyond a Gandhi to lead it. And who better than Priyanka to succeed Rahul?

Ajay Jha is a senior journalist, author and political commentator.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear reader, we are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to editor.indore@fpj.co.in Using snail mail? Send your letters to Free Press, Free Press House, 3/54, Press Complex, AB Road, Indore 452008

#### Village-Born Bravery

Real courage often rises from unseen places. Humanity mixed with compassion makes bravery unforgettable. When a child's instinct protects soldiers, the nation must protect the child's future. Encouragement should be lifelong, not temporary. Talent from remote soil carries the purest sense of service. A grateful country must nurture its brave hearts early, fully, proudly.

A. P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

#### Speak for Borders

Violence on Hindus abroad must stir diplomatic at home. Retaliation by mobs only mirrors the madness we condemn. India must stay India—land of Gandhi, Buddha, Mahavir, Nanak, Vivekananda. A Vishwaguru cannot rise from communal silence or caste hatred. Systems must reform, reparation must stop, law must lead.

Hema Hari Upadhyay, Khachrod

Continue strengthening students, not segmenting identities.

S. S. Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

#### Airports Need Reform

Inconvenience at airports reflects chronic operational apathy. Advocacy must not depend on VIP discomfit. Systems must respond to passengers, not profiles. Aviation oversight needs efficiency audits, corrective timelines and empowered accountability. Infrastructure unused is not capacity, it is symbolism. Reforms must prioritise bridges, boarding, dignity and movement that serves citizens equally.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

#### CBSE: Shared Spine

Learning the roots of institutions reminds us why boards were built—to unify classrooms, standardise knowledge and serve transferable citizens without bias. Education systems gain legitimacy when syllabi travel across faiths, regions and borders. Uniformity must defend inclusion, mobility and quality. India's academic spine must con-

Sweet Dreams beginnings, humour reminds us that years may wound, but laughter heals quietly. Carry jokes like confetti—light, harmless, shared freely, ending 2025 with smiles.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

#### Listen, Don't Deny

Calling violence "non-racial" does not erase decades of North-East citizens being mocked, excluded, and stereotyped as outsiders. Justice must acknowledge the prejudices that enables brutality, not defend comfort through denial. North-Eastern Indians are not "others"—they deserve safety, dignity, and equal belonging. Real unity begins with listening, not dismissal. Empathy must outrun excuses. Respect must outrun silence.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

#### New Year Giggles

New Year laughter binds strangers faster than speeches. Gift the city jokes, not provocations. From New Year's Day to Moo Year's Eve and

HASAN ZAI

BANGLADESHI

KASHMIRI

INDIAN

PAKISTANI

CHINESE

AFGHANI

IRANIAN

YEMENI

LEBANESE

IRAQI

PALESTINIAN

SYRIAN

LEBANESE

IRANIAN

PALESTINIAN

## Putting the squeeze

The decision to suspend dozens of international humanitarian organisations from operating in Gaza is not just a regulatory adjustment; it is a political statement about who gets to define legitimacy in a war zone. By tightening registration rules and enforcing them at a moment of extreme civilian vulnerability, Israel has redrawn the boundaries of humanitarian space in ways that will be felt most acutely by ordinary people in Gaza.

At the heart of the controversy lies a fundamental clash between security logic and humanitarian principle. Israel argues that stricter oversight is necessary to prevent militant infiltration and the misuse of aid structures. In isolation, that concern is not unreasonable in a conflict shaped by asymmetric warfare.

Yet humanitarian action operates on neutrality, independence, and trust - values that unravel when aid agencies are asked to share sensitive data of local staff or conform to politically framed loyalty tests. In such an environment, compliance can endanger lives rather than protect them.

The claim that affected organisations contribute only marginally to overall aid volumes is dubious and quite misses the point. Humanitarian work is not a simple matter of tonnage. Aid agencies sustain systems: hospital beds that function every day, water networks that prevent disease outbreaks, nutrition programmes that keep malnourished children alive long enough to recover. Removing even a fraction of these actors can create cascading failures, especially in a densely populated territory already pushed to the edge.

More worrying is the precedent being set. When humanitarian access becomes contingent on political alignment or expansive security vetting, aid risks being transformed from a legal obligation into a discretionary tool of state policy.

Accusations against individual organisations, made publicly and without substantiated evidence, further corrode trust and place aid workers at greater risk. In conflicts around the world, the safety of humanitarian staff rests largely on their perceived neutrality. Undermining that perception has consequences far beyond any single theatre of war.

There is also a strategic dimension. By narrowing the field of permissible humanitarian actors, Israel assumes greater responsibility for ensuring that aid continues uninterrupted and at scale. That is a heavy burden in a territory facing widespread displacement, fragile health infrastructure, and lingering food insecurity. Any shortfall will not be measured in diplomatic criticism alone but in human suffering that is both visible and preventable.

Ultimately, the question is not whether states have the right to regulate who operates within their borders, but how that right is exercised during humanitarian emergencies. In Gaza, the suspension of aid organisations risks turning regulatory power into a blunt instrument. If humanitarian access continues to shrink, the cost will not be borne by institutions or governments, but by civilians whose survival depends on a fragile web of assistance that is now being deliberately thinned.

## Elusive Peace

The renewed talk of peace in Ukraine carries an air of exhaustion rather than optimism. After years of attrition, all sides speak the language of negotiation, yet the distance between words and reality remains vast. What is often described as a handful of "thorny issues" is, in truth, a set of foundational disagreements about territory, security and legitimacy that cannot be smoothed over by diplomatic sequencing alone.

At the heart of the impasse lies eastern Ukraine. Control over Donbas is not simply about lines on a map; it is about law, identity, and the precedent set for future borders. For Kyiv, surrendering territory would mean legitimising conquest and abandoning citizens who still live under bombardment. For Moscow, partial withdrawal would undercut a war narrative that has been legally and politically locked into place. Any formula that postposes this contradiction rather than resolving it risks freezing the conflict without truly ending it.

The debate over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Europe's largest such plant, reinforces this dilemma. Technical solutions - joint management, international oversight, revenue-sharing - sound plausible in isolation. But nuclear infrastructure is inseparable from sovereignty and trust. Without confidence in intentions, shared control becomes another battleground rather than a bridge. The plant's continued shutdown is itself a symbol of paralysis: too fragile to operate, too valuable to relinquish.

External mediation adds urgency but not clarity. US President Donald Trump presents himself as a dealmaker impatient with stalemate, yet speed is a poor substitute for consent.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy cannot accept an agreement that lacks democratic legitimacy or credible security guarantees. Russian President Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, appears to calculate that time, attrition, and military pressure may still yield more than compromise. Each actor is constrained by domestic politics, legal commitments and strategic narratives that make retreat costly.

The question of trust looms over every proposal. Accusations, denials, and counterclaims continue even as negotiations advance, suggesting that both sides are preparing for failure as much as success. In such an environment, ceasefire agreements are viewed not as confidence-building measures but as tactical pauses. This mutual suspicion ensures that even small concessions are interpreted as weakness rather than goodwill.

Calls for a popular vote in Ukraine expose the final fault line. A referendum could anchor any settlement in public consent, yet organising one requires a degree of stability that the war has not eroded. Opponents see this as delay; supporters see it as the only way to prevent a peace that collapses under its own illegitimacy.

The uncomfortable truth is that peace is being discussed not because the core issues have softened, but because the costs of continuing the war have become unbearable. Until the fundamental clash between territorial ambition and sovereign consent is addressed, negotiations may deliver a peace - but not the peace that Ukrainians, Russians and the wider world desperately seek.

# Crisis of Accountability

Between 1977 and 2017, more than 2,130 bridges collapsed across India, each a silent indictment of neglect. This paradox is not merely technical; it is cultural. It reflects a governance model that celebrates spectacle but sidesteps scrutiny, a society that normalizes failure, and a bureaucracy that has perfected deflection



begins here.

We find ourselves at a curious crossroads - our achievements celebrated, yet they remain shadowed by a vacuum of accountability. On one side, we applaud spectacular successes: bridges that span the valleys of Kashmir, satellites that circle the earth, a successful landing on the moon, and breakthroughs in aviation, medicine, and astronomy that place us among the world's leading nations - rightly a source of pride and proof of our resilience and ingenuity.

Yet on the other side, we remain unresponsive to the most basic civic needs - hygiene, sanitation, pollution control, unclogged cities, reliable healthcare, and safe infrastructure. Between 1977 and 2017, more than 2,130 bridges collapsed across India, each a silent indictment of neglect. This paradox is not merely technical; it is cultural. It reflects a governance model that celebrates spectacle but sidesteps scrutiny, a society that normalizes failure, and a bureaucracy that has perfected deflection.

The same year, a stampede at the Mahakumbh in Prayagraj killed dozens, yet crowd control is still left to chance. In 2023, a bridge collapsed in Pune, and similar failures across Bihar again demonstrated the hollowness of our safety systems - and the even greater hollowness of our response. These are not isolated incidents; they are symptoms of a deeper malaise. Responsibility is deflected, blame is dispersed, and silence becomes the default response.

The consequences are visible everywhere. Open electric panels from Prayagraj to Greater Noida, from Pune to Hyderabad, display a uniform work culture that has no place for safety or perfection. Tangled overhead wiring, normalized in urban landscapes, has caused fatal fires in Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. NCRB data points to thousands of short-circuits that caused fires each year, yet complaints go unheard.

Roads remain potholed and dangerous, even on toll highways. Floods return each monsoon, followed by stock excuses about "unprecedented rains".

Pollution worsens year after year, rivers remain contaminated, and plastic waste choke cities. Yet no one is held accountable. The irony is that despite paying taxes and tolls, citizens receive neglect in return. The disconnect between voters and governance

deem executive responsibility. The result is a governance model that resists responsibility at every level.

Today, accountability has become elusive in every sphere - political, bureaucratic, judicial, and even in the microcosm of daily life. The tragedy is not simply that institutions fail, but that failure has been absorbed into our civic culture, eroding the very consciousness required for honest dealing and disciplined governance. Each new disaster is met not with reform, but with silence, evasion, or token gestures. The culture of impunity has become pervasive, threatening democratic values and eroding citizen trust.

Sadly, the vacuum is not confined to institutions. It pervades daily life, shaping the quality of existence for every citizen. Traffic police stand idle as accidents mount. Wrong-side driving, helmetless riders and fatal crashes unfold without consequence. Banks mishandle vital documents like nominations and death certificates, sometimes leaving them unresolved for years.

Hospitals function with absent doctors, where patients wait endlessly and no one answers. Vendors and service providers fail to deliver, without apology or consequence. At a local level, promises are delivered in three days but

takes three weeks. A plumber promises to return tomorrow and never does. A courier delivers a broken item and shrugs. A food delivery arrives cold and late, and the app offers a token refund but no accountability.

This erosion of responsibility has seeped into the very culture of daily life. Too often, failure is met with resignation rather than reform; expectations are quietly lowered, and confrontation is avoided. In time, such habits shape a disposition that weakens our collective will.

The roots of this malaise lie deep in our social fabric. In a country where rulers are often revered like gods, traits of discipline and responsibility must flow from the top down. But they rarely do. Children are not

taught to admit mistakes. From school onwards, we learn to dodge to blame, to survive scrutiny. Leaders offer explanations but never apologies.

Bureaucracies bury their errors in procedure. The phrase "I was wrong, and I accept the consequences" has vanished from our vocabulary. The absence of accountability has become our national temperament. The first reaction to a wrong is to resist, to justify, to get away. If cornered, there is no remorse - only muted resentment. Learning fades into perpetual wrongs. This is not just inefficiency; it is a cultural normalization of irresponsibility.

The paradox is stark. We excel in fields that demand precision - space exploration, aviation, medicine, astronomy - yet falter in everyday responsibilities such as sanitation, pollution control, food safety, infrastructure maintenance, and healthcare. The roots of this failure lie in two gaps: the absence of education and discipline that nurture responsibility, and the absence of infrastructure designed to respond to its own. Where systems are disciplined and self-correcting, excellence thrives; where they are absent, neglect rules. Without education, responsibility cannot take root. Without autonomous infrastructure, accountability collapses. And without responsibility, democracy tends to grow hollow.

To keep our democracy healthy and progressive, accountability must be embraced as a cardinal value. It should be nurtured through education, reflected in infrastructure, and reinforced by citizen participation. Transparency demands clear standards and fair enforcement, while leadership must inspire through example rather than rhetoric. Only then can governance move beyond performance to genuine service.

India's accountability vacuum is not inevitable. It is a choice we have allowed to persist. To reverse it, we must confront the paradox of our progress and neglect. We must demand responsibility not only from institutions but from ourselves. We must make accountability visible, personal, and non-negotiable.

Because a nation that dreams of greatness cannot afford to evade its failures. Ambition is no substitute for ethics. Growth does not absolve decay. To dream of becoming a global leader while neglecting civic trust is to construct a hollow republic - visibly rising, invisibly crumbling.

What India needs is a system that works on its own - an infrastructure designed with accountability built into its very fabric. Roads that are inspected and repaired without petitions, power lines that are maintained without tragedies, hospitals that respond without agitation. True progress will come not when citizens beg for redress, but when systems themselves embody responsibility.

As Ginger Graham said, "Building a culture in which people take accountability to deliver on promises is hard work. Only when every person is held accountable to themselves, their peers, and their shared goals can the 'impossible' become 'possible'."

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

## New year, new resolve needed

Charity and goodwill are the sentiments most often expected to be practised during the holiday season, so it can seem uncharitable to wish imprisonment or other form of legal punishment on fellow citizens at this time of year.

And yet that was the thing many Filipinos had prayed for as Christmas rolled around - and justifiably so. The public was coming from a place of singular frustration, as it continued to see the from the appalling scale of corruption in public works projects uncovered over the last few months.

This was the least the public expected, and, while Filipinos are famously the most Christmas-obsessed race in the world, it seemed that at this point, they

denunciation of thieving contractors in connivance with Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) officials during his State of the Nation Address in July - had sought to quell public outrage by promising quick action.

Specifically, the president himself promised not only that cases would be filed soonest against those behind the flood control projects scandal, but also that the "big fish" among them would be spending Christmas in jail.

This was the least the public expected, and, while Filipinos are famously the most Christmas-obsessed race in the world, it seemed that at this point, they

were also in an unforgiving mood: Set aside the holiday spirit for once if that meant extracting a measure of justice from the plundering government who could blame them?

The vast sums skimmed from flood control projects, resulting in shoddy or practically nonexistent

infrastructure, were clearly responsible for actual losses in lives and properties that citizens endured every time the rains came and the inevitable floods followed. Occurrences that, gravely, were now becoming more and more frequent with climate change, promising only more misery ahead.

Many citizens had pinned their hopes on the president's avowals of thorough

and transparent action on what had become the biggest political earthquake to shake his administration.

They summoned cautious hope as Mr. Marcos established the Independent Commission on Infrastructure (ICI) in September - but they would grow increasingly disappointed as the commission hemmed and hawed on livestreaming its proceedings and was given no teeth to prosecute those it found to have run afoul of the law.

Just three months on and the ICI is seemingly on its last throes, with two commissioners having resigned and the full extent of the public works corruption it was mandated to look into still out of its grasp.

hangs in the balance.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das,

Kolkata, 1 January.

## Threat

Sir, This refers to the report "You are weaponising electoral rolls: Abhishek to CEC Gynesh Kumar" published today. Every political party has the right to voice its concern about matters that are not constitutionally correct. However, the way the TMC national general secretary raised his voice against the alleged manipulation of the voter's list (as he claims) during the meeting with the CEC was nothing but an indirect political threat. In his press briefing, Abhishek Banerjee said that he told CEC Gynesh Kumar to put down his finger and talk. He further said, "I am an elected person, you are nominated. I am answerable to the people; you are only answerable to your boss." This kind of utterance indicates one's political hegemonic attitude.

Yours, etc., Mihir Kanungo,  
Kolkata, 1 January.

Letters To The Editor | [editor@thestatesman.com](mailto:editor@thestatesman.com)

## Larger question

Sir, Apropos "Khaleda Zia dies, leaving behind a polarizing legacy" (Dec 31), the death of the Bangladeshi leader closes a long and turbulent chapter in the country's political history, though it does not settle the arguments she leaves behind. For more than three decades she was either at the centre of power or shaping it from opposition. To her supporters she embodied resistance to authoritarianism and perseverance after personal tragedy. To her critics she symbolised a lack of confidence in leadership and a willingness to share political power.

Her place in history as Bangladesh's first woman prime minister elected through a democratic process is beyond dispute. Yet her years in office also coincided with an era when politics became increasingly polarised. The prolonged rivalry with Sheikh Hasina reduced governance to a zero-sum contest, where compromise appeared as weakness and institutions were often overshadowed by personalities.

Her passing may generate sympathy that

benefits her party in the short term, but it also poses a larger question for the nation. Will this moment encourage reflection and dialogue, or will it reinforce old habits of antagonism? Khaleda Zia's legacy ultimately reminds Bangladesh that democracy depends less on towering individuals and more on resilient institutions and a willingness to share political power.

Yours, etc., K Chidanand Kumar,  
Bengaluru, 31 December.

## A farce

Sir, Please refer to today's report "You are weaponising electoral rolls: Abhishek to CEC Gynesh Kumar". The Election Commission of India (ECI)'s Special Interim Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls across 12 States and Union Territories (UTs) is fast descending into a farce.

Let's take the case of West Bengal, where the voter over elderly residents having to attend eligibility hearings in remote locations even after submitting their enrolment forms forced the ECI to order home verification.

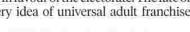
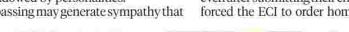
Or, the fact that it had to conditionally halt hearings of "unmapped" voters (those whose names or parents' names were not mapped with the 2002 SIR). Summons were in the form of software notices, but this software was not used in Bihar.

An association of civil servants complained that this soto moto system-driven deletion of electors from the draft electoral rolls in West Bengal in the ongoing SIR process bypassed the statutory role of Electoral Registration Officers.

The procedural chaos could have been avoided had the ECI not rushed into the SIR just before Assembly elections in States/UTs such as West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry.

This situation could have been avoided had the Supreme Court gone beyond limited interventions - which were sales for Bihar electors - to properly vet the new SIR procedure for constitutionality.

It is still not too late for the Court to take note of the infirmities and to decide firmly in favour of the electorate. The fate of the very idea of universal adult franchise







THE GOAN EVERYDAY

There are lots of people who mistake their imagination for their memory.  
Josh Billings

## Mhadei tide flows Goa's way, need to step up the fight

An interesting development, one that would bring some cheer to Goa, the Regional Empowered Committee (REC) of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) has warned that Karnataka's ambitious Kalsa-Bhandura drinking water project can "negatively impact" the riverine ecology of the Mhadei river and lead to "reduced water flows" into the ecologically sensitive Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary.

The decision has highlighted the fragile balance between development and conservation that is crucial, and, in a way, vindicates Goa's long-standing concerns over the water diversion project, that the integrity of the Mhadei River will be at risk due to the project.

The decision comes as a shot in the arm for Goa, which has been taking up the issue at various levels. It is indeed a positive sign, given the apprehension that Karnataka will eventually have its way due to its political muscle. We hope that complacency does not set in. Ministers, rather than expressing confidence of getting a favourable outcome, need to monitor and pursue further action till the issue reaches its logical conclusion. It has to convince the Centre that the diversion of Mhadei waters would alter the flow downstream, triggering water scarcity in Goa.

This issue touches on fundamental questions of water rights and environmental sovereignty. Goa's Chief Wildlife Warden's order to restrain work on the project, based on the Wildlife Protection Act, highlights the importance of respecting ecological laws that protect vital biodiversity, whereas Karnataka's challenge to this order in the Supreme Court reflects a tendency to prioritise short-term water needs over environmental concerns, risking irreversible ecological damage.

Now that better sense has prevailed, Goa need to press for a joint site inspection of the project site in Karnataka, where the neighbouring state has clandestinely undertaken works in contempt of court orders. With the REC maintaining that the diversion project can "negatively impact" the riverine ecology of the Mhadei river and lead to "reduced water flows" into the ecologically sensitive Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary, all works carried out for the purpose need to be demolished. These observations would be meaningless if Karnataka still manages to divert water through back channels.

The PRAWAH (Progressive River Authority for Welfare and Harmony), established to resolve issues, has struggled because of continued diversion works and repeated rejection of joint inspections. The Authority has failed to record violations, keeping the issue entangled in legal and political battles. The REC decision comes as a slap on the face of those trying to not find a reason to believe that biodiversity is at stake.

Goa has been fighting to protect its share of the Mhadei river's water for over ten years, since a large section of people in the State are dependent on the flow. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive, legally binding solution that recognises the ecological and legal sovereignty of Goa, and hence it is essential that Karnataka's water diversion plans undergo rigorous environmental scrutiny.

The onus is now on the Centre to prioritise ecological preservation and equitable water sharing, and ensure that regulations are not bypassed. Let there be transparency. The ecological fragility of the Mhadei basin cannot be compromised for selfish gains. Goa needs a resolution that safeguards its water rights and ecological integrity, nothing more or less.

### OPEN SPACE >>

## Goans must support former Justice Rebello's call

When Goa and its environment, hills, forests, fields, waterbodies are under extreme threat from specific real estate entities backed by (specific) powerful, corrupt politicians, bureaucrats, govt officials, IAS officers, panchas and even certain judges; the call of former Justice Ferdin Rebello for Goans to unite against any further destruction is certainly most welcome and offers some hope to like minded Goans to put up a strong stand to move Goa away from this destructive path. I will attend the meeting on January 6 at the Institute Menezes Braganza, Panaji and hope many like minded people also attend the same. Saying which, surely there are many other eminent Goans who surely were an inspiration to Goans and my kind request to them is to join in, in whatever way possible to support former Justice Rebello's call, in what might possibly be one of the last stand's to preserve Goa for posterity. Just to reiterate, that Goa's environment and identity has to be preserved should be our united political objective (irrespective of each one's political affiliations).

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

## Names protected, knowledge neglected

GI products in Goa need producer cooperatives, training, access to raw materials, marketing infrastructure and state-backed enforcement



FREDERICK NORONHA

Frederick Noronha, besides writing, also publishes books



**G**l. Some of us might have not heard this term earlier. Today "Goa's GI tally" has risen to 15, with five new certifications, we are told. They range from mangoes (the Goa Hilario, Mussara), the Taleigao brinjal, the Goa cashew apple, traditional Korgut khazan rice variety, announced earlier this month.

Earlier, Goa had also secured GI tags for more items. From bebinca to khajem (the sweets sold at zatras and feasts), cashew feni, the chillies of Khola in Canacona, the Mancurad mango, the Aga-sain brinjal, the Harman chilli, Myndoll (also called 'Moira' banana), the cashew kernel, and the seven-ridge ladyfinger (okra). Officials say they've initiated the GI process for a total of 25 items.

So far so good. For a change, we are prioritising Goa's traditions of yore. We are not anymore acting as if these don't exist, or they simply don't matter.

For many decades, Goa was fed on a diet of statistics that told us how "progress" was being achieved. To sustain these figures, it was necessary to discount or ignore the value of past traditions, and simply focus on the market economy. Anything that had a price was valued. Those things that grew in your garden, or backyard, was obviously worthless.

Yet, many of our generation are left watching the familiar scents and stories of their childhood quietly fade. Fruits once eaten from the backyard now replaced by supermarket (or city) imports. Foods that took time and space to create are giving way to instant mixes. Even festivals have been shrinking from community affairs into being calendar (sometimes touristy) entries.

Then there are fields lying fallow or built over. Folk practices reduced to stage performances. Fishing knowledge eclipsed by mechanisation and over-fishing. Forests thinned and fenced off. Family routines fragmented by migration and village-to-city shifting. Forms of speech and song falling out of daily use. Even faith-linked customs losing their everyday anchoring, while getting politicised.

In this context, steps in the GI. What does it mean? In simple terms: A geographical indication (GI) is a name or label used for a product to show that it

comes from a particular place. This label tells buyers that the product has special qualities, is made in a traditional way, or has a good reputation because it comes from that specific region.

If you look for online background (Wikipedia), you'll find that this is not a very new idea. It was used from the end of the 19th century, to ensure that a product comes from the very region that its name suggests.

In France, there have been laws over "appellations of origin" for items like Gruyere cheese (from Switzerland) and many French wines. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles, not less, forbade Germany from using names for its "cognac" and "champagne" industries. The French considered the terms as misleading references to places in France. Since then, the Germans have been calling it Weinbrand (brandy, roughly speaking) and Sekt (German for certain sparkling wines). There have been court cases over these names, what qualifies and what doesn't.

There are parallel issues too. In an online discussion, Prof Rafael pointed to a BBC report which said that Italian cooking has been awarded special cultural heritage status by the United Nations' cultural agency Unesco. In addition to this, an Egyptian snack, Icelandic pool, were, Cuban music and Albanian laulatu music also got the recognition. What Goa items, he asked, could possibly make it to the UNESCO special cultural heritage status list?

Interesting. Maybe the xitki-kodi-kismur rice cultivation, processing and cooking traditions; fishing-linked foodways (also covering the vanishing ramponkar and coastal communities); feast-day food systems; temple-linked ritual foods; veg fasting and festival food cycles; Ramzan and Urs-linked food practices; even the bebinca-dodhla traditions of Goa.

But is the GI and the heritage tag the solutions? Traditional Goan

products seeking the GI tag face a wide range of challenges. Getting the GI tag alone cannot magically undo these.

Many of these products are made in small quantities using labour-intensive methods, making them expensive and difficult to scale. Raw materials such as local rice varieties, cashew, fish, or coconut are increasingly scarce due to land-use change, environmental stress, and declining cultivation.

Skills across generations are transmitted only informally within families and are breaking down as younger generations migrate or choose more stable livelihoods. Markets are being distorted by cheaper imitations and industrial substitutes that meet demand but hollow out authenticity.

One dramatic case is that of the Moira banana, which, today, doesn't grow in the village of Moira itself. We continue with its name, and get lookalikes, but these are probably grown in some villages of Pernem, or even further afield, in distant Keralam.

Documentation is weak, so "traditional" methods involved here are often vaguely defined or contested. Producers lack collective organisation. They also have a limited bargaining power and access to finance.

For its part, GI tag can protect a name on paper. But, let's be no illusions, it does not guarantee fair prices, assured markets, quality control, enforcement against misuse, or livelihood security for producers.

What these products need so badly is parallel support. This has to go beyond subsidies alone (which seems to be the government favoured means of offering "support"). They need producer cooperatives, training, access to raw materials, marketing infrastructure and state-backed enforcement.

Let the GI not just a symbolic label, useful for branding and tourism narratives. We need to ensure that the actual traditions it claims to protect do not continue to erode quietly at the ground level

### THE INBOX >>

#### America's oil wars and handcuffs of empire

Captured, handcuffed, and paraded in a New York jail—Nicolas Maduro's fall is being trumpeted as another triumph of American might. But strip away the headlines and what remains is a familiar script: Washington flexing its muscles, rewriting international law at will, and cloaking raw resource grabs in the language of freedom. The United Nations and world leaders are right to condemn this as guerrilla warfare masquerading as justice. The seizure of Venezuela is not about democracy—it is about oil. The world's largest proven reserves sit beneath its soil, and history tells us that wherever oil flows, American boots follow. President Trump's warnings to Mexico, Cuba, Colombia, and Iran only underscore this imperial tone. This is not liberation. This is empire. It is the Rambo-style projection of power that has destabilised regions for decades, leaving behind fractured societies and smouldering resentment. The handcuffs on Maduro are symbolic: they are the handcuffs of empire, clamped on the principle of international law itself. And unless the world resists, those chains will tighten around us all.

ASSIS EVERETTE TELLES, Margao

#### Today it's Venezuela and tomorrow it may be Iran

If the past two years of genocide have taught us anything it is that international law is not a phrase that functions in cohesion. "International" merely refers to any event that occurs on a global scale, while "law" has come to mean whatever the world's biggest bullies decide is acceptable on any given day. We should not be too shocked by the news that the president of a sovereign country was literally smuggled out with his wife after

#### Removing abandoned vehicles from roadsides

As Chief Minister, the late Manohar Parrikar conducted a drive (with the Corporation of the City of Panaji) and shifted abandoned and unclaimed vehicles to Kamrabhat. In early 2013, he had assured the legislative assembly that within six months dozens of unclaimed vehicles cluttering police stations and bus stands would be disposed and also a one-time sale of the govt's scrap vehicles. In June 2013, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant directed that vehicles parked on roads for more than eight days will be considered abandoned and sent for scrapping. In Panaji itself about 250 vehicles were seized. In Sep 2025, the police began a state-wide survey to identify and remove all unattended vehicles along roadsides. Two cars of the Directorate of Panchayats (DoPs) were reportedly stolen from Kamrabhat (Caranzalem) area. This was noticed on Sep 2, 2025, complaint filed on Oct 3 and the police lodged the First Information Report on Dec 31. At the Kamrabhat storage yard, there are no security fencing? Hope the stolen vehicles were not refurbished and back on the road or ready to the DoPs.

SRIDHAR D YER, Caranzalem

a massive surprise strike. Think of Hind Rajab. Think of hospitals being bombed under the false claim that they were Hamas safe houses. Think of journalists being targeted with absolute precision. Think about everything that has happened since October 7, 2023, and ask yourself: what part of this madness should be even remotely surprising? Today, it's Venezuela. Tomorrow, it could be Iran. Who's to stop them?

VINAY DWIVEDI, Benaulim

#### Dark side of one of India's cleanest cities

In the Bhagirathpura area of Indore, sewage mixed with the drinking water supply line, leading to severe water contamination. As a result, a large number of people suffered from diarrhoea, vomiting, and fever. More than 1,400



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

people fell ill, and over 200 patients were hospitalized, with some receiving treatment in the ICU. According to official records, at least 6 deaths have been confirmed, while the local mayor has reported 10 deaths. Indore is known as one of the cleanest cities in the country. However, few had imagined that the reality beneath this image could be so horrifying. Currently, the local administration has shut down or restricted water supply in the affected areas. Inspection and cleaning of pipelines are underway, and citizens have been instructed to use only boiled water. Action is also being initiated against certain municipal officials for negligence. Indore has become just one example.

DATTAPRASAD SHIROKAR, Mumbai

#### Illegal overhead cables endanger public safety

Unauthorised overhead cables pose a serious threat to public safety, yet the menace of dangling wires continues unabated in parts of Panaji. Ugly knots of cables hanging from electricity poles are not only an eyesore but also a major hazard. Such disorderly networks make it difficult for electricity department staff to attend to faults efficiently. The recent crackdown on illegal cables in St Cruz, Panaji, was a necessary step following a reported accident in which a fibre cable got entangled in a moving motorcycle, causing the rider to lose control. Both a father and son suffered fractures. This incident highlights the grave dangers posed by tangled and long-hanging cables, which can be pulled down by vehicles, leading to accidents and even electrocution. The government must act firmly in the larger interest of public safety and give authorities a free hand to enforce the Cable Television Act strictly and without compromise.

KG VILOP, Chorao

## OPINION

## The Noriega Precedent

By Nicholas Creel

Critics calling President Trump's capture of Nicolás Maduro unprecedented and illegal have short memories. We've done this before, and the courts blessed it.

In December 1989, President George H.W. Bush ordered U.S. troops into Panama to capture Manuel Noriega, the country's de facto military dictator, on federal drug-trafficking charges. Like Mr. Maduro, Noriega had been indicted by a U.S. grand jury. Like the Venezuela operation, the Panama invasion occurred without congressional authorization. And like what will now happen with Mr. Maduro, Noriega was forcibly brought to the U.S. and prosecuted in federal court. Noriega was convicted and imprisoned.

The legal framework established in Noriega's case will directly govern Mr. Maduro's prosecution. Too bad for him that the arguments we can expect his lawyers to make have already been litigated, and rejected, by federal courts.

The factual parallels between these two cases are striking. Operation Just Cause began on Dec. 20, 1989. U.S. forces struck multiple targets across Panama simultaneously, seeking to capture Noriega and restore democratic governance. Noriega immediately went into hiding. After days of searching, the U.S. found that he had taken refuge in the Vatican's diplomatic mission. U.S. troops surrounded the building and, in a

famous psychological operation, incessantly blasted rock music to wear him down. On Jan. 3, 1990, Noriega surrendered and was flown to Miami to face charges.

Noriega had been indicted in February 1988 on charges of racketeering, drug trafficking and money laundering. Specifically, he was alleged to have allowed Colombian cartels to use Panama as a cocaine transit point and facilitated their laundering drug

**Trying a dictator has already been tried—and courts rejected all his legal defenses.**

money. The indictment further contended that he received millions in payoffs from the Medellín cartel for his assistance with their cocaine-smuggling operations.

Noriega's defense team mounted several legal challenges. The courts rejected all of them.

In what was arguably his strongest defense, Noriega's lawyers argued that he enjoyed head-of-state immunity. The courts were unsympathetic. They concluded that this immunity doesn't protect leaders who are engaged in criminal enterprises. They noted that the immunity exists to facilitate diplomatic relations and protect official state functions, not to shield drug traffickers. Noriega's drug trafficking was seen as

clearly private criminal conduct, not an official governmental act.

This distinction between official acts deserving immunity and criminal conduct deserving prosecution should sound familiar. The Supreme Court's decision in *Trump v. U.S.* (2024) established that American presidents enjoy immunity for official acts but not for private conduct. The Noriega court applied this same principle to foreign leaders decades ago.

Noriega also argued his forcible military abduction violated international law and the Panamanian government's sovereignty, thereby depriving courts of jurisdiction. This too failed to persuade the courts. In rejecting this argument, judges cited *Ker v. Illinois* (1886), in which the justices unanimously held that even forcible abduction doesn't strip courts of jurisdiction over defendants who are physically present in court. The judges refused to examine whether the military operation violated international law, declaring that a nonjusticiable political question.

Noriega tried to claim that drug trafficking was a "political offense" intertwined with his governmental role. The court dismissed this, holding that drug trafficking is universally condemned criminal conduct, not political activity. The political-offense exception to extradition applies only to acts committed to achieve political objectives, not crimes committed for personal profit while holding political office.

The defense argued the Posse Comitatus Act, which generally prohibits using military forces for domestic law enforcement, barred the operation. The court countered that the act doesn't apply to military operations in foreign countries.

All his defenses having failed, Noriega was ultimately convicted on eight counts of drug trafficking, racketeering and money laundering. He was sentenced to 40 years in federal prison and served 17 years before being extradited to France.

Like Noriega, Mr. Maduro faces federal drug-trafficking charges. Like Noriega, he was captured through military operations conducted without congressional authorization.

Like Noriega, he'll surely argue head-of-state immunity and unlawful seizure. But unless the courts are willing to upend clear precedent, none of these defenses will save him.

Mr. Maduro's prosecution is therefore legally unassassable not because it breaks new ground, but because it so closely follows a 36-year-old template the federal courts have already validated. Critics may object on policy grounds, but the underlying legal framework for Mr. Maduro's criminal prosecution is well settled. The Noriega precedent controls, and under that precedent, Mr. Maduro will stand trial.

*Mr. Creel is a law professor at Georgia College and State University.*

BOOKSHELF | By Steven Poole

## The Molecule And the Man

Crick

By Matthew Cobb  
*Basic, 608 pages, \$36*

In 1961 a new college of the University of Cambridge voted to approve the construction of an Anglican chapel, Churchill College, which admitted only men, had been modelled on MIT and was intended to contribute to Britain's scientific and technological improvement. As originally built it did not include a place of worship, but a large donation by a vicar and the agitation of some faithful fellows saw plans approved. At least one fellow, however, thought the addition represented a surrender to the forces of superstition and irrationality.

Francis Crick, a co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, was so enraged by the prospect of a religious space in his college that he wrote to Winston Churchill (after whom the establishment was named) to resign his position. As Matthew Cobb recounts in "Crick: A Mind in Motion," Churchill, who was by then 86, responded generally to point out that the chapel would "simply be an amenity for those who wished to use it." Mr. Crick

replied that in that case the college should also contain a brothel as another such useful amenity and offered to help pay for it. "Why should I support the propagation of error?" Crick asked. Wisely, Churchill did not write back, but he did return the check, uncashed, with his compliments.

Born in the rural midlands of England in 1916, Crick originally studied physics at University College London, and worked on the electrical circuits of shipping

mines during World War II. After deciding he would rather work on questions of the nature of life, he took up a research position at Cambridge. There, he met Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher, and went to all the lectures in biology and chemistry he could find. Eventually he was offered a post at the Cavendish laboratory—the site of the discovery of the electron in 1897 and the first experimental splitting of the atom in 1932—to work on X-ray crystallography, by means of which the structure of proteins could be investigated.

The molecule that really interested Mr. Crick was DNA. Everyone suspected it was central to heredity but no one knew exactly how. In 1951 there arrived in Cambridge, as Mr. Cobb describes him, "a tall, thin, bug-eyed American called Jim Watson," who began collaborating with Crick on the problem. Two years later, in what Mr. Cobb calls "one of the most significant moments in the history of science," the two men announced they had figured out DNA's structure.

Was it really the work of only these two men? Rosalind Franklin had been making X-ray images of DNA in a London laboratory, one of which was passed on by a colleague to Crick and Watson and provided a crucial clue. The idea subsequently arose that Franklin had been unjustly written out of the story, but Mr. Cobb argues that this is something of a myth: Crick and Watson credited Franklin explicitly in their earliest papers, and she remained very friendly with Crick, sharing ideas and results in their correspondence. Alas, Franklin could not share in the men's 1962 Nobel Prize because she died from ovarian cancer in 1958.

Why, in any case, was this discovery so important? As Mr. Cobb tells us, the explanation of the chemical structure of DNA made it possible, for the first time, to understand how it might replicate and direct the growth of life-forms. Crick and Watson had found the mechanism, long sought after, by which genetic information builds an organism. In subsequent years, Crick and others worked out the revolutionary implications of this idea, laying the basis for the entire field of modern genetics. One day, Crick thought, it might even be possible to transcribe the entire genetic code of a human being. This was completed in 2003 by the Human Genome Project.

### The revelation of DNA's chemical structure made it possible to understand how it might replicate and direct the growth of life-forms.

Quickly becoming a world-famous scientist and lecturer, Crick flirted briefly with eugenics and concocted a theory ("outlandish," notes Mr. Cobb mildly) of "directed panspermia," according to which the seeds of life were deliberately sent to Earth by an alien civilization. But his real scientific act was in the nascent field of neuroscience. Mr. Cobb, a professor emeritus of zoology at the University of Manchester and the author of "The Idea of the Brain" (2020), an excellent cultural history of ideas about how our minds work, is especially persuasive on Crick's hitherto underacknowledged influence here. In a 1979 survey for *Scientific American*, Crick discussed new methods in neuroscience, including mapping areas of the brain and using computers to model neural networks of the kind that now power AI systems. "The ideas and insights he outlined still dominate the field," observes Mr. Cobb, "even though most neuroscientists have no idea that Crick was the first to coherently articulate them." Crick went on to make influential contributions to the study of neuroanatomy, dreams and visual perception.

Meanwhile, Crick was living a colorful personal life. He and his wife, Odile, smoked marijuana, listened to Jimi Hendrix and hosted glamorous and risqué parties at their London house. She was also tolerant of his fondness for "pretty girls," with whom he could have "adventures." Unfashionably, for a modern biographer, Mr. Cobb makes only very brief and glancing reference to these peccadilloes. This is perhaps fair reciprocation for the fact that, soon after a conference in which he suggested putting a chemical in food to render people sterile (then giving the antidote only to those considered to be worthy breeders), Crick decided to cease making public statements about political questions. "As you know," he wrote to one correspondent, "I've tried to take an interest in problems concerning science and society but I've reluctantly come to the conclusion that I have little talent for them and no taste at all." If only more famous scientists were as self-aware.

*Mr. Poole is the author of "Rethink: The Surprising History of New Ideas."*

## Painting 'Animal Farm' Red



You can't hate Hollywood enough. Last month a trailer dropped for "Animal Farm: A Cautionary Tail," an animated retelling of George Orwell's 1945 book. It stars

Seth Rogen and his infectious chuckle as the pig Napoleon. What could go wrong? Everything, it turns out.

Orwell's original book was an allegory of the Bolshevik Revolution, communism and its inevitable descent into totalitarianism. I read it in high school. You probably did too. The allegory was pretty transparent: Napoleon was Stalin, Snowball was Trotsky, Farmer Jones was Czar Nicholas II, and Old Major was a combination of Lenin and Marx.

Forget all that. While a trailer is available, the film was reviewed after appearing at a festival last June. Remarkably, instead of Stalin, the antagonist is a tech billionaire who drives a Cybertruck knockoff. Really! She bribes Napoleon with fast cars and credit cards and, as one reviewer put it, her "methods mimic the hostile-takeover techniques of big banks and monopolistic companies." Hilarity ensues. Yes, capitalism is the villain. Hollywood strikes again.

Variety declares, "George Orwell's required-reading novella is ripe for reimaging." C'mon now, Is it? "Humans are inherently pigish," Variety

notes from the film. "Seizing the first opportunity to take more than their share." Like New York and Seattle mayors, socialism and communism are cool again!

This is a classic Hollywood twisting of stories. Most animations are now antimarriage. I can't remember a cop movie without dirty cops. This year's Oscar bait is the beautifully made but irksome anti-border-enforcement film, "One Battle After Another." Leonardo DiCaprio plays a lovable revolutionary who blows things up. Sean Penn, best remembered as Jeff Spicoli ("All I need are some tasty waves, a cool buzz, and I'm fine") in "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," is the deranged and perverted Col. Steven J. Lockjaw. Get it? Sol diablos bad. Activists good.

Hollywood took note of actress Frances McDormand's 2018 Oscar acceptance speech calling for an "inclusion rider" to demand diversity in casting and crew. But as *OutKast* writer Bobby Burnak put it about the new "Animal Farm," "It's one thing to race-bend, cast genders in illogical roles, send messages about reimagining, or make all the white people evil. It's an entirely different offense when you take a historical piece of art and completely alter its message." Offensive, indeed Whitewashing.

No problem, everyone can read Orwell's original book, right? It's only 99 cents for the Kindle edition. Read a book? How quaint. According to recent surveys, less than a third of young people enjoy

reading in their free time, while more than three quarters watch videos on social platforms.

So instead, films and animations become the view of record for many, like the conspiracy theories in Oliver Stone's film "JFK." People believe movies instead of nasty facts. Add the Vietnam War trope derangement takeaway

### Hollywood strikes again, rebranding George Orwell's book as pro-communist.

from Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now." And man squashing in "Barbie," blasted into young brains with the "It is literally impossible to be a woman" monologue by America Ferrera. When someone uses the word "literally" in a fictional movie account of a beloved but anatomically incorrect doll, it's hard to take literally—except millions.

"Animal Farm's" distributor, though not its producer, is Angel Studios, which oddly also distributes films whose themes are religious ("David") and conservative ("Sound of Freedom"). It said, "While the title is the same as the classic book, updates were made to make it relevant to a broad-based, values-centric, family-friendly audience." What's next, reimagining "Schindler's List"?

Another review also says the film "delivers an emphatic

message celebrating equality and the power of the collective." Better red than accurate. So yes, with the film's PG rating, Hollywood is now indoctrinating impressionable 11-year-olds by making socialism and communism normative. And family fun!

Here's the list of comrades, er, voice actors: Seth Rogen, Kieran Culkin, Woody Harrelson, Laverne Cox, Glenn Close, Gaten Matarazzo, Kathleen Turner and Ina Ullman. I'm embarrassed for all of them.

The cartoon was produced and directed by Andy Serkis, who pioneered performance-capture acting and filmmaking—he was Gollum in "Lord of the Rings" and Caesar in "Planet of the Apes." Doesn't he remember Gollum's line in "The Two Towers"? "Yes, Precious. Once it takes hold of us, it never lets go." Same for manipulative ideologies.

Movie themes are often over my head, but I even know that "The Lord of the Rings" was about the corrupting nature of power. So why sugarcoat Orwell's greatest lesson now? Because despite growing budgets that artists think fall from the sky, Hollywood hates capitalism. All animals are equal, but Hollywood is more equal than others.

By the way, the release date for the new and depraved "Animal Farm" is May 1, 2026—International Workers' Day. That day was also celebrated as May Day in the now defunct Soviet Union with parades in Red Square. How Orwellian. How Hollywood.

*Write to kessler@wsj.com*

## Cubans Rejoice at Maduro's Ouster

By Gelet Martínez Fraga

*Miami*  
As Venezuelans celebrate the capture of Nicolás Maduro, Cubans across the island are watching for the same U.S. aircraft that restored freedom to Venezuela and waving, hoping America won't forget us.

I was 10 when I left Cuba in 1994 believing I would live to see my country free. As in millions of Cuban families, many of my relatives didn't. My grandfather, who was imprisoned for taking up arms against the Castro regime during the Bay of Pigs, died in 1989 without seeing the freedom he fought for. His story is far from unique—it is the Cuban story.

So as my fellow Cubans wake up to the news of Mr. Maduro's fall, it is impossible not to celebrate alongside our Venezuelan brothers and sisters. For decades we have shared the same enemy. Castro

regime cronies siphoned off Venezuela's oil wealth to finance repression, corruption and the Maduro regime. What was taken from Venezuelans, Havana used to sustain the dictatorship suffocating Cuba.

President Trump acknowledged what Latin Americans have long known: Cuban armed forces were embedded

in Venezuela. They died protecting Mr. Maduro. Rick de la Torre, a former CIA chief of mission in Caracas, described Mr. Maduro's vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, as a puppet of Cuban intelligence. That echoed what Cubans and Venezuelans have documented for

years: Cuba and other rogue actors hostile to the U.S. had captured Venezuela.

The consequences have been devastating. Privation and oppression forced more than eight million Venezuelans into exile, destabilizing the region. Cuba remains a prison nation—its people starved, surveilled and silenced—in the grip of the same intelligence apparatus that strangled Venezuela.

While much of the U.S. mainstream media condemns Mr. Trump's actions from comfortable studios, I hear something very different from journalist colleagues in Caracas—many of whom were detained or persecuted days ago. I hear joy from Venezuelans at the Cúcuta border in Colombia, packing their bags to return home. I hear cheers on U.S. streets from exiles who fled decades ago, stripped of their right to live freely in their own country.

*Ms. Fraga is editor in chief of ADN Cuba, a Miami-based news platform.*

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Trump's Regime Change in Venezuela

President Trump's capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro early Saturday is an act of hemispheric hygiene against a dictator who spread mayhem far and wide. Whether he admits it or not, Mr. Trump is now in the business of regime change that he'll have to make a success.

The stunning nighttime raid is the culmination of a showdown that was building for months as Mr. Trump sent a naval flotilla to the Caribbean. Mr. Maduro resisted U.S. offers to leave peacefully, and Mr. Trump followed through on his threat and ousted the despot. The U.S. President had to act or lose credibility with the world after choosing the face-off. Pulling it off without American casualties is remarkable.

\* \* \*

Mr. Trump said Mr. Maduro and his wife were headed to New York, where they will face trial for narco-trafficking. But Mr. Maduro's damage goes well beyond the drug trade. His socialist and authoritarian policies burdened the region with millions of refugees. He flooded the U.S. with migrants in an effort to sow political discord.

The dictator was also part of the axis of U.S. adversaries that includes Russia, China, Cuba and Iran. All were helping to keep Mr. Maduro in power. His capture is a demonstration of Mr. Trump's declaration to keep America's enemies from spreading chaos in the Western Hemisphere. It's the "Trump corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine.

All of this makes the military action justified, despite cries from the left that it is illegal under international law. Mr. Maduro stole last year's presidential election after he lost a run. He barred popular opposition leader María Corina Machado from the ballot, and the candidate who took her place won and then went into exile to avoid arrest. The critics want to praise Ms. Machado's courage while doing nothing to help the Venezuelan people.

As for gripes that Mr. Trump is acting without Congressional approval, the Constitution gives broad leeway to executive action on national security. George H.W. Bush deposed dictator Manuel Noriega in Panama in 1989 without a vote in Congress. Mr. Maduro is a greater threat than Noriega, and Venezuela is at least as important to U.S. security. Democrats are criticizing Mr. Trump so they can pounce if the operation runs into trouble.

All of which raises the stakes for what comes next. Secretary of State Marco Rubio stressed Saturday that this was at core a "law enforce-

## Toppling Maduro sends a salutary message to America's adversaries.

ment" operation to arrest the Maduros, which sounds like a dodge to avoid saying this is about regime change or a U.S. occupation. Mr. Trump boasted Saturday that "we are going to run the country now," but how he will do that without troops on the ground to enforce order isn't clear.

Mr. Trump is right that

simply snatching Mr. Maduro and leaving the country to fend for itself could produce Maduro 2.0. But we won't be the only ones to say the President owes George W. Bush an apology for his *ex post facto* criticism of U.S. intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr. Trump is pursuing the Bush freedom agenda, at least in the Western Hemisphere. Are we all neocons now?

On the near-term future, Mr. Trump was cagier. Perhaps that's prudent since there may be members of the Maduro military, backed by Cuba, who want to run a terrorist insurgency against U.S. forces or advisers in the country. Mr. Rubio may be trying to persuade a large part of the military to back a new government not run by Maduro henchmen.

But it is odd that Mr. Trump was so dismissive of Ms. Machado in his Saturday press conference. He said she lacks the "respect" or support of the people of Venezuela, but who else has more? She risked her life to challenge Mr. Maduro, organized and rallied the opposition to win an election, and bravely stayed in Venezuela where she risked arrest or worse.

Mr. Trump also talked about "the oil" far too much, which sends a message that the U.S. purpose is largely mercenary. Venezuela will benefit if U.S. oil companies modernize the country's decrepit oil production facilities. But the U.S. doesn't need Venezuelan oil.

\* \* \*

Sooner rather than later, Venezuela needs another election. The greatest benefit of a democratic, pro-American Venezuela is what it means for freedom and stability in the region. The left has had a 20-year heyday in the Americas that has done great harm to its people and allowed deep inroads by China. A reversal is under way in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Bolivia, and a right turn in Venezuela would continue the hopeful trend.

Mr. Trump's willingness to depose Mr. Maduro is also another step in the revival of U.S. deterrence from its collapse under Barack Obama and Joe Biden. The overall message to our adversaries is salutary. If Mr. Trump can succeed in reviving Venezuelan democracy, the Castro coterie in Cuba may want to start looking for some other place to live.

## Don't Settle for Maduro 2.0

**A**s Sunday dawned in Caracas and Washington, a new reality was also apparent a day after the U.S. snatched dictator Nicolás Maduro in a daring raid (see nearby). To wit, the dictator's cronies are still running Venezuela, and they don't seem ready to give it up. Is President Trump willing to settle for Maduro 2.0?

Dely Rodriguez, the former vice president, is now the acting president. Like Mr. Maduro, she's been sanctioned by the U.S. and European Union. After Mr. Maduro's capture Saturday, she issued defiant public remarks. She's a hard-line socialist well known for her close ties to Cuban intelligence.

Ms. Rodriguez's brother, Jorge Rodríguez, remains in charge of the National Assembly. Also still in power is the notorious interior minister, Diosdado Cabello. He declared in Caracas that the U.S. had only partially succeeded in its mission and that the Chavista revolution will continue.

Does this worry the Trump Administration? Not that it is showing. Mr. Trump boasted Saturday that Ms. Rodriguez will do what the U.S. wants, or else. He threatened a "second wave" of military intervention if she doesn't.

But Mr. Trump didn't say anything about holding new elections as a U.S. goal. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Sunday that elections will need to be held eventually, though he didn't seem to think it's all that urgent. Mr. Rubio seemed confident that the U.S. embargo on Venezuelan oil exports will squeeze the regime enough that it will buckle to U.S. demands.

"We want drug trafficking to stop. We want no more gang members to come our way. We

## The dictator's cronies are still in power and vowing to resist the U.S.

don't want to see the Iranian and, by the way, Cuban presence in the past. We want the oil industry in that country not to go to the benefit of pirates and adversaries of the United States, but for the benefit of the people," Mr. Rubio said on CBS's "Face the Nation."

Those are important goals,

but Mr. Rubio's implication is

that the Maduro apparat can stick around if they heed these demands. This is a risky bet, especially since the regime's new leaders rely so much on aid from Cuba, Russia, China and Iran. It's unlikely these people will turn into pro-American democrats.

All the more so since the U.S. military left

Venezuela at the end of the Maduro operation.

Mr. Rubio said Sunday it was unrealistic to take more risks in the raid to decapitate more of the regime, which is fair enough.

But despite Mr. Trump's vow that the U.S. will "run the country," there is no one on the ground to do so. This may mollify MAGA critics who fear he is imitating George W. Bush's occupation of Iraq, but it reduces the U.S. ability to persuade the regime.

Much depends on whether the Maduro crowd fear a second U.S. military strike. Even more depends on whether the Trump Administration is willing to push for new elections. The U.S. needn't back any candidate. But a democratic government of the kind that won the 2024 election, only to have it stolen by Mr. Maduro, would be a more durable ally.

The Trump Administration talks about its foreign-policy "realism," but if Maduro 2.0 remains in defiant power in six months, its gamble on his henchmen won't look very realistic.

## Democratic Sanity on Rent Control

**W**ith socialism so much in fashion, the news these days is when a Democratic politician resists its nostrums. A welcome burst of sanity came recently when Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey said she opposes a referendum that would unleash rent control across the state.

Speaking on Boston Public Radio, Ms. Healey said she's concerned about housing affordability, but "rent control is not going to be the solution to how we get through this crisis. We need to build more homes." She said she'll oppose the ballot measure because the research shows rent control warps the housing market.

"[I]f you look at the studies, you effectively halt production," Ms. Healey said. "I will tell you that investors in housing have already pulled out of Massachusetts because they're concerned about rent control."

The ballot measure, which is close to qualify-

ing for the November ballot, would limit rent increases to the consumer-price index or 5%, whichever is lower. It would apply to "all dwelling units leased for residential, but not commercial, use."

Massachusetts tried rent control in the 1970s and 1980s to predictable effect. Landlords pulled units off the market or delayed or limited maintenance. State voters mostly banned the practice in 1994, requiring municipalities to file a home-rule petition to impose rent control. But the left wants to overturn that ban and let politicians impose rent controls that would make housing less affordable in the name of making it more affordable.

The real answer is to increase housing supply, but that requires reforming zoning laws and making construction rules less costly. Maybe Ms. Healey can give New York's new mayor a tutorial in housing economics.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## The Key to Making More Marriageable Men

American marriages have a pipeline problem. As William A. Galston notes in his column "America Needs More Husband Material" (Politics & Ideas, Dec. 24), college-educated women continue to say "I do," while those without degrees have trouble finding men who are marriageable. Improving men's economic prospects is part of helping young people form families, but the problem runs deeper.

In 10 years of surveying high-school seniors, the Monitoring the Future project has found that fewer and fewer young men and women expect they will be "very good" as a spouse. It's little wonder the share who expect to get married has plummeted in parallel.

Holding a stable job and being able to provide for one's family is part of what it means to be a good spouse, but it flows out of bigger questions of character and how one handles responsibility. If we want to see marriages rebound, it isn't enough to focus on expanding blue-collar work.

High-school seniors need to have more faith they can handle the duties of marriage and child-rearing. Giving them more lectures on how important marriage is won't do it—they think so highly of the institution that they judge themselves incapable of living up to it. Kids need more time away from adult supervision, pursuing projects of their own design, with the freedom to fail and to learn.

My husband was marriageable well before he landed his first job because he'd spent his homeschooling years organizing a student Shakespeare troupe. No adult would come to the rescue when "the show must go on"—it was up to him to find a solution or inspire a peer to step up. Young men need to take ownership of smaller projects before they're prepared to be good partners in marriage.

LEAH LIBRESCO SARGEANT  
Hyattsville, Md.

*Mrs. Sargent is author of "Dignity of Dependence."*

## An F-35 Sale to Turkey Won't Endanger Israel

Turkey was the seventh nation to join the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program in 2002 and the only one to be kicked out. And rightly so, Ankara was warned for years that its decision to purchase the Russian-made S-400 missile system would threaten the jet's secrets. Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid dearly for not taking America's threats seriously. The F-35 program promised Ankara valuable contracts for the jet's development and maintenance—all of which it lost.

President Trump has always been skeptical of this course of action. He is mercantilist at heart, questioning why the U.S. would opt out of colling billions of dollars in hardware to a willing buyer. Ankara has refused to compromise but has essentially agreed to keep the Russian system locked away.

Anat Segal warns that Washington's "Selling F-35s to Turkey Could Lead to War" (op-ed, Dec. 26), but that's far-fetched. Never mind that Israel has no need to worry about the jets' dogfight-

ing each other. As with other U.S. fighter programs, Jerusalem gets preferential treatment on avionic access, weapons integration and financing. It has the upper-hand with the U.S.

The saga, more than anything, is indicative of broken military procurements in Turkey. Ankara opted for the F-35 over a jet it paid to help develop. The government then looked on with concern as Greece and Israel purchased them, leaving its Air Force behind. It opted to buy Eurofighter Typhoons and then to lobby to buy the F-35—an outcome that would leave it with none of the industrial benefits for which it paid. Instead, Ankara may be on the road to operating three fighter types, which will further strain national budgets.

Turkey isn't on the verge of war. It has to figure out how to pay for years of military procurement incompetence.

Aaron Szym  
Foreign Policy Research Inst.  
Philadelphia

## Overprescribing Pills Isn't Much of a Problem

While your report "Pharmacies Flood Medicare Patients With Extra Drugs" (Page One, Dec. 27) asserts that the excessive refilling of prescriptions is a waste at taxpayers' expense that may harm older patients, the bigger danger is that people run out of life-sustaining medicine. In my 20-plus years as a pharmacist, I've often needed to remind patients to refill before it's too late.

Having a surplus on hand can be beneficial for other reasons too. Adverse weather conditions, challenging personal circumstances or even delays to the drug logistics supply chain can create unforeseen emergencies that could affect one's treatment if a personal supply of extra pills dries up. Backorders on drugs are much more common than the public realizes.

I believe having patients maintain a personal reserve of their medication is a worthy investment for both Medicare and private insurers. Our seniors

are especially vulnerable, and society

pays a small price to ensure they have access to the drugs they need.

Louis W. PIACENTINI  
Burlington, Mass.

If policymakers want to curb unnecessary dispensing while preserving adherence, they will need to rethink how the latter is measured and rewarded in the Medicare Advantage star ratings program. Plans are heavily evaluated—and financially rewarded by Washington—based on medication-adherence measures that rely on prescription-fil fill data. Because adherence is inferred from refill behavior rather than actual medication use, plans and their pharmacy partners face strong incentives to maximize refill rates. Automatic and early refills can therefore improve measured performance, even when patients accumulate medications they don't need.

This incentive structure doesn't excuse waste or poor patient experience. But it helps explain why refills keep coming.

SCAHIN H. JAIN, M.D.  
SCAN Group & SCAN Health Plan  
Los Angeles

## Students for Justice in Iran?

Your editorial "About the New Iranian Protests" (Jan. 2) made me think:

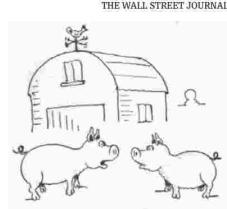
Where are all the social-justice warriors now? Remember the hordes of students who camped out on elite university campuses screaming "From the river to the sea"? Why aren't Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, the U.N., Greta Thunberg and her flotilla and others crying about the Iranian government's disproportionate response to protesting citizens?

Answer: They're nowhere to be found when they can't spew their vitriol against Israel.

SIDNEY MACHEFSKY  
St. Louis

## Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"You don't get it. Farm to table and cradle to grave are the same thing."

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# Maduro Is Gone. What's Next for Venezuela?



AMERICAS  
By Mary  
Anastasia O'Grady

**T**he skies over Caracas lit up early Saturday morning as the U.S. struck Venezuelan military installations and key infrastructure in a bid to remove dictator Nicolás Maduro from power.

The operation suppressed Venezuelan air defenses, then pulverized military targets including Fort Tiuna, a key stronghold of regime leadership, La Carlota military airport and communication towers. Power was knocked out in parts of the capital. As U.S. special forces penetrated the security ring around Mr. Maduro's quarters, sources say many Cuban guards were killed or injured.

**Trump says America will 'run the country' for now. A successful transition will require U.S. leadership.**

At 4:21 a.m. President Trump posted that Mr. Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, had been arrested by the U.S. and taken out of the country. A photo circulated of a humiliated Mr. Maduro, in a rumpled track suit and handcuffs, in U.S. custody.

Colombian President Gustavo Petro threw a fizzy at the news, as did the Communist regime in Havana, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and some congressional Democrats. How dare the U.S. deposite

a sitting dictator? Mr. Petro's plea for peace was especially rich given his history as an M-19 terrorist.

Millions in Venezuelan expat communities around the world erupted in celebration. For the first time in a quarter-century of authoritarian *chavismo*, a return to democracy and pluralism is possible. Venezuelans want to go home.

But the job isn't finished. Mr. Trump acknowledged as much on Saturday at a Mar-a-Lago press conference: The U.S., he said, "is going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition." That wasn't expected, and how it will work is for now a mystery. Yes, there were U.S. boots on the ground in this operation, but not nearly enough to enforce law and order. Where do we go from here?

The ambiguity is unsettling. Nevertheless, it's a good sign that Mr. Trump doesn't think Mr. Maduro's capture is the end of the task at hand. The transition needs U.S. leadership and the president said he's ready to provide it.

Caracas was quiet on Saturday afternoon and the opposition, which has been preparing for this moment for more than a year under the leadership of Nobel Prize Winner María Corina Machado, is in wait-and-see mode.

The regime has been decapitated. But some Maduro henchmen are digging in. Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, the most ruthless member of the top echelon, went into hiding, his reputation for cowardice intact. From there he called Venezuelans to the streets to protest against the U.S. His enforcers were spotted cruising Caracas slums. People mostly stayed inside. Unconfirmed reports say that some military higher-ups fled the country.

Next on the U.S. hit list is Delcy Rodriguez, Mr. Maduro's second in command. She has reportedly been sworn in as the new dictator and is therefore commander in chief.

Sources say the Trump administration is leaning on her to coordinate a negotiated transition.

Venezuelan democrats understand the importance of the Venezuelan army, navy and air force in establishing a peaceful handover of power and new elections. They learned from



A crowd in Buenos Aires celebrates Maduro's ouster from Venezuela.

Mr. Maduro had been given a chance to exit the country without violence. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said at the press conference, Mr. Trump said the Venezuelan had even considered the offer. His decision to decline left the U.S. president little choice but to deliver the shock and awe. Now Mr. Maduro and Ms. Flores will be tried in federal court in the Southern District of New York on drug-trafficking charges and face long prison sentences if convicted.

On the U.S. hit list is Delcy Rodriguez, Mr. Maduro's second in command. She has reportedly been sworn in as the new dictator and is therefore commander in chief. Sources say the Trump administration is leaning on her to coordinate a negotiated transition.

Venezuelan democrats understand the importance of the Venezuelan army, navy and air force in establishing a peaceful handover of power and new elections. They learned from

toward a peaceful handover of power. But according to Mr. Trump, a second "stage" of U.S. intervention isn't out of the question. That threat may require action. If the regime is left in place, the Jan. 3 mission will have been in vain.

The democratic opposition hasn't called its supporters to the streets for fear that they might be gunned down by Mr. Cabello's true believers. But it's notable the military hasn't mobilized in the capital. Normally, tanks roll and brigades march when a nation is under attack. Could it be the brass isn't sure the rank and file will engage in the repression the regime depends on?

Mr. Trump's candor in telling Colombia's Mr. Petro that he could be next, in a manner of speaking, was refreshing. Mr. Rubio's message to the Cuban regime that its bosses may want to sleep with one eye open also sounded right. But the president's claim that Ms. Machado isn't respected by Venezuelans was gratuitous and uninformed and made him look small. She's wildly popular and has unified the country.

And while Mr. Trump talked a lot about oil and American cocaine consumption, he never mentioned that some 900 political prisoners are rotting in Venezuelan jails and in danger. They could have used a presidential shout-out and even a warning to those who might harm them.

The argument in favor of democracy is built on evidence that Venezuelans want it. They voted for it in the July 2024 presidential election, choosing opposition candidate Edmundo Gonzalez with nearly 70% of the vote. Mr. Trump has the moral high ground on this one. He could do worse than plant a flag in it.

*Write to O'Grady at wsj.com.*

## The Scandal of American Welfare Goes Beyond Fraud



**LIFE SCIENCE**  
By Alyssia Finley

Economist John Maynard Keynes suggested that the government pay people to dig holes in the ground and then fill them up. This is an apt metaphor for progressive government these days: It creates social dysfunction, then shovels out money to correct it. Dredge, fill and repeat.

Healthcare and social assistance added more than 1.6 million private-sector jobs between June 2023 and June 2025, according to comprehensive data from employer payrolls published by the Labor Department in December. Yet the U.S. gained only 1.3 million private jobs during that period, meaning there was a net loss of jobs in other industries.

These two industries accounted for more than half of the new establishments (businesses and nonprofits) created over those two years. Minnesota's welfare-fraud scandal make you wonder: How many of these new entities and their employees are actually helping people, and how many are merely looting the government?

More than 90 people have been charged with setting up sham busi-

nesses and nonprofits in Minnesota that feasted on Medicaid, food, housing and other welfare programs. Defendants employed family members and others to provide autism "treatment" to kids who didn't have autism, to drive them to fake appointments, and to feed them while they were there. The fraudulent enterprises didn't provide legitimate public services, though they did employ people—in the service of bilking the government.

"Honest graft" may be a bigger scandal than outright fraud. America's all-you-can-eat buffet of health and social benefits—16 different federal food programs, Medicaid, housing support, child care and more—provides abundant opportunities for milking the government. Look further than California, where a vast welfare-industrial complex has enveloped around homelessness, drug addiction and left-wing identity politics.

The Golden State added roughly 188,000 jobs in social assistance between June 2023 and June 2025, yet only 4,900 private-sector jobs in total. During this period some 153,000 new establishments were created in social assistance. Every vagrant, drug addict and confused young person needs a social worker and "community support."

What do these youth-oriented outfits do with the state money they receive? The nonprofit Brotherhood of Elders Network instructs "system-impacted Black youth" in what it calls

taneously. As America's National Institute of Standards and Technology describes it, flashover occurs when a fire's gases become so hot—exceeding 1,100 degrees Fahrenheit—that the intense heat ignites exposed surfaces almost at once, suddenly engulfing an entire space. In a low-cell basement lined with combustible finishes—as Le Constellation seems to have been—a small fire can rapidly generate a superheated smoke layer near the ceiling that gradually expands downward. Once that layer reaches critical temperature, the entire room can catch fire in seconds, turning a crowd-control problem into an inescapable inferno.

Many Western countries allow bars and nightclubs to be built in exceedingly dangerous ways, through either weak building codes or lack of enforcement. Although we can't know whether Le Constellation complied with regulations and inspec-

Gov. Gavin Newsom's Elevate Youth California initiative claims to address substance use disorder "by investing in the leadership development and civic engagement for youth of color and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth ages 12 to 26 living in communities disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs." Grants are funded by taxes on marijuana.

**California spends billions on programs that enrich insiders and don't help the needy—and it's all legal.**

Maybe young people wouldn't struggle with substance abuse if the state hadn't legalized marijuana and effectively decriminalized other drugs. Or if union-run public schools educated them and molded good character, rather than manufacture left-wing culture warriors. Or if high minimum wages hadn't killed entry-level jobs for teens.

What do these youth-oriented outfits do with the state money they receive? The nonprofit Brotherhood of Elders Network instructs "system-impacted Black youth" in what it calls

the "Art of Being A Black Man." Its curriculum explores "African culture through rhythm, song, and dance." Another nonprofit, Asian Refugees United, sponsors "weekly Queer Youth Art Storytellers programming, which combines youth mentorship, leadership development, and creative skill-building" to reduce substance abuse.

The Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project fosters "community with 60 to 100 Indigenous youth from the Mixteco, Zapotec, and many other Diasporic communities throughout the Central Coast." The California Youth Empowerment Network sponsored a "youth-led bus stop campaign featuring vibrant, stigma-free posters that connected youth experiencing housing insecurity to essential resources, including food and shelters." In other words, the state gave money to sign young people up for government benefits.

We'll spare readers a long recitation of other examples of Mr. Newsom's splashing around money to left-wing groups, which can be found on the state's website. It's possible that work by some grant recipients is reducing recidivism, homelessness and substance abuse, but it's impossible to know because the state doesn't measure such outcomes.

The goal of the welfare-industrial

complex isn't to ameliorate social problems but to extract more money from the government. Social workers employed by a nonprofit—funded by hospitals and health insurers—spent recent weeks searching for undocumented immigrants to sign up for Medicaid before a deadline that would make them ineligible.

A story in the Atlantic this fall described how drug addicts and the mentally ill have been cycling in and out of California hospitals. Every emergency-room visit, typically covered by Medicaid, means more money for hospitals. It's no coincidence that hospitals are the loudest opponents of Medicaid reforms.

California's Medicaid spending—which pays for Native American exorcisms, music lessons, cooking classes and many other nonmedical services—has ballooned by nearly 50% over the last two years. "Healthy living starts with a chef in your kitchen. Paid by Medi-Cal," one company advertises. A state audit last month flagged it as high risk for fraud, waste and abuse. You don't say.

Say this for a union-backed ballot measure that aims to tax the wealth of billionaires to boost spending on Medicaid: It might awaken wealthy liberals to the welfare racket that masquerades as a public service.

## Lessons of Switzerland's Crans-Montana Fire

By Costas Synolakis  
And George Karagiannis

**I**n the early hours of New Year's Day, fire tore through Le Constellation, a basement bar near the Swiss resort of Crans-Montana, killing at least 40 people and injuring more than 110. Many victims were teenagers. Investigators say sparklers likely ignited flammable acoustic foam on the ceiling, and witnesses described flames racing overhead before many patrons understood the danger. Videos show young people, surrounded by fire, trying to put it out using their clothes. What exactly led to that tragedy will emerge in an investigation, but some lessons are already clear—as is the high cost of not heeding them.

The Crans-Montana fire bears the signature of flashover, the terrifying phenomenon by which a growing fire ignites much of a room nearby simul-

taneously. As America's National Institute of Standards and Technology describes it, flashover occurs when a fire's gases become so hot—exceeding 1,100 degrees Fahrenheit—that the intense heat ignites exposed surfaces almost at once, suddenly engulfing an entire space. In a low-cell basement lined with combustible finishes—as Le Constellation seems to have been—a small fire can rapidly generate a superheated smoke layer near the ceiling that gradually expands downward. Once that layer reaches critical temperature, the entire room can catch fire in seconds, turning a crowd-control problem into an inescapable inferno.

Many Western countries allow bars and nightclubs to be built in exceedingly dangerous ways, through either weak building codes or lack of enforcement. Although we can't know whether Le Constellation complied with regulations and inspec-

tions until there's a full investigation, the Crans-Montana fire carries urgent warnings for regulators around the world and raises questions about Switzerland's fire-safety regulations and enforcement.

The disaster's first blunt lesson is about egress. Reporting indicates that the only exit available from Le Constellation's basement space was a narrow door at the top of a single staircase. Media report Le Constellation had a second exit but that it was locked to prevent people from leaving without paying. Even under perfect conditions—i.e., in controlled research—the path of one exit is unforgiving. In a densely packed space, as is often the case in nightclubs, evacuation observations show that between 55 to 79 people a minute can pass through a 3-foot-wide exit. Clearing a crowd of 300—about Le Constellation's maximum capacity—would take four to six minutes. In a fire like that at Crans-Montana, there isn't that kind of time.

A second exit would have saved more lives, but it might not have been enough—especially with one exit at the top of unprotected stairs. Local conditions make all the difference. In real fires, with darkness, smoke, people in various states of injury impeding one another, falls on stairs, counterflows and heat release, theoretical egress capacities inferred from other evasions break down.

Crans-Montana's second lesson is about materials. Many nightclub fires share a common factor: flammable soundproofing foam and interior finishes that cover much of the space and can ignite easily.

In fire-engineering terms, many nightclubs contain the fuel load of an entire residential condominium, the

ignition sources of an industrial site, and the evacuation constraints of a submarine. From an emergency-management point of view, these situations can become deadly in about 90 seconds—far outpacing evacuation models. Codes try to break this chain by restricting interior finishes based on flame spread and smoke-development performance. Switzerland's likely need to be re-evaluated.

**Fire codes need tightening to protect nightclubs, which often have several dangerous characteristics.**

The third lesson is on the importance of layering passive and active fire protection. Passive measures include multiple remote exits, protected stair enclosures, smoke-tight doors and interior linings that resist ignition and limit heat release. Active measures include fire detection or alarms, emergency lighting and signs, suppression (notably sprinklers) and staff trained to stop entertainment, turn off lights and evacuate early.

Case studies by America's National Fire Protection Association of nightclub fires in Europe and the U.S. repeatedly show that sprinklers are absent and interior finishes are too flammable, rapid fire growth overwhelsms occupants before they can escape. The International Fire Code in 2018 added a sprinkler requirement for bars and nightclubs with occupancy over 300, but adoption varies across America and Europe. In Switzerland, cantonal fire

safety authorities may require sprinklers for occupancies of more than 300 people.

If investigators confirm the early reports of an apparent flashover, a lack of sprinklers and a difficult, single point of egress, Crans-Montana will join a grim list of fires that were foreseeable. These spaces were essentially engineered, by layout, materials and missing layers of protection, into tragedy.

Fifty years ago, scientists tried to limit fires by studying the results or pouring freshwater into scale models of rooms filled with saltwater, trying to mimic the interaction between smoke and air in a fire. Today, between the scientific reconstruction of fires and sophisticated modeling, we can understand fires with precision smoke and heat movements, ventilation effects and the interaction of sprinklers. Evacuation modeling can estimate how long it takes to get out, even taking into account the complexities of a real fire.

It's possible to do better. Patrons can protect themselves by locating exits whenever they enter a bar and noting their routes to them. Building and fire regulations need to catch up with technology and the lessons of preventable disasters like Crans-Montana, most notably the installation of sprinklers. Too often regulators and businesses don't think of the worst case scenarios. As a consequence, under real-world conditions, current safety measures can go up in smoke.

*Mr. Synolakis is a professor of civil engineering at the University of Southern California. Mr. Karagiannis is a disaster prevention expert at the Academy of Athens.*

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## EDITORIALS

# When it comes to growth, we wish all of Chicago hummed like O'Hare

At the end of 2025, American Airlines announced 100 new daily flights for the coming spring at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. To be clear, that's not 100 more than at the same point in the spring of 2025 (we wrote about that prior growth at that time), but it's *another* 100 new departures added to what already was on sale for 2024.

It's a significant and somewhat unexpected commitment to Chicago, American's third-largest hub, a huge turnaround from where American was in regard to Chicago in 2023, and pretty much confirmation that United Airlines has not forced American to retreat from Chicago, as United's leadership had reportedly bragged would be the case.

United, Chicago's hometown airline, is still bigger at ORD, of course. And some of what American has been doing here is returning service to prepandemic levels. But meaningful new growth from American at our big airport was announced last week, including new flights to Midwest airports like Erie, Pennsylvania,

and Lincoln, Nebraska, and more service to the likes of San Francisco, Las Vegas and Savannah, Georgia. Finally, American seems to have gotten over its obsession with Charlotte, North Carolina.

Benefits for Chicago are many. Since airline fares are determined by supply and what the market will bear, more capacity means lower fares. So, of course, does competition like this great fight between United and American at O'Hare. New convenient nonstops from smaller cities means more people will choose to visit.

Expanded service to Paris, to cite another growing route on AA, means more international tourism, since people flying through a city sometimes add a stopover. All of this means more money spent at airport concessions and the like, feeding the local economy and creating jobs. And more people eyeballing our beautiful skyline as they come in to land, ready to come back and stick around.

Add to this a very efficient holiday performance at the airport, despite a variety of ongoing construction projects, and it adds

up to the most effective department in Mayor Brandon Johnson's Chicago, notwithstanding our soft spot for Streets and Sanitation, which hauls away our Christmas trees.

The contrast is especially striking between the airport and the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, which should have ensured that national TV audiences saw a much more robust New Year's Eve celebration than actually was the case; it was, alas, a bit of a rinky-dink celebration that signaled worry and lack of ambition, neither of which are qualities that this city of broad shoulders and powerful artists needs to broadcast. We should grow the event next year.

In a city where discussions of growth are all too rare from our leaders (Johnson prefers to define those fighting for the city's future as "the oligarch class" who must be resisted), the airport really is the brightest spot and about as far from rinky-dink as an airport can be. We'd be in far bigger trouble without O'Hare. The place is not perfect. We

still think the international greeting area in Terminal 5 is a missed opportunity; the space is overwhelming, unwelcoming and confusing for those transferring to domestic flights, at least for the next several years.

Airport transportation remains weak. At the car rental and bus center, we watched several shriveling people follow a promising sign to Metro's "O'Hare transfer station" around the corner, assuming that meant actual train service to downtown beyond the one train a day after about 10 a.m. Not the case, alas.

And we're perplexed that the international terminal has almost no commercial advertising, despite the huge number of affluent travelers passing through the sterile areas. The art is all very nice, but most airports use that space to make money and the city owns this one.

But while there is work to do, you can also see that work being done. Concessions have markedly improved, the TSA operation is typically smooth compared with other airports and you can even

drive to the airport by car now without massive delays, thanks to the end of the Kennedy Expressway construction. That will get even better with the building of the proposed western entry point to the airport, long another weakness. Somehow at O'Hare, things that anguish elsewhere get fixed.

But what matters most here is the choice and frequency of flights, both domestic and international. In that regard, O'Hare is booming with more international destinations likely to come from American once it takes more deliveries of its lower cost Airbus A321XLR, including (we've been tacitly promised) the return of at least one daytime flight to Europe.

Most Chicagoans feel proud when their flight attendants say, "Welcome to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport," as a big bird touches down and well they should. It's a world-class operation thanks to effective management and to two of America's most famous corporations, United and American Airlines.

May they battle on here in 2026!

## A positive change for Venezuela, but a diminishment of US moral authority for years to come

No sooner had the new year dawned than President Donald Trump introduced a new level of stress to the world, grabbing the leader of a sovereign nation without congressional approval, hauling Nicolás Maduro, the president of Venezuela, off to a New York jail cell and installing Secretary of State Marco Rubio to the de facto viceroy of Venezuela. All while trapping well-heeled American elites on Caribbean beaches as weekend, return-to-work flights from the region were mixed by the Federal Aviation Administration, citing safety concerns.

What a year. And it's only

Jan. 5, yet.

Predictably, America's left-wing mayors howled in protest at the weekend actions. New York's Zohran Mamdani expressed concern for the Venezuelans in New York and accused Trump of violating international law. Mamdani let it be known he had called Trump to register his opposition to this actions, the honeymoon between those two men apparently having come to a swift conclusion. That was, of course, purely a performative act, as was the Chicago Teachers Union's weekend "stop the bombings" rally with various socialist co-sponsors and Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson's state-

ment that "the illegal actions by the Trump administration have nothing to do with defending the Venezuelan people; they are solely about oil and power."

The problem the socialist mayors faced immediately was that many of the Venezuelans they claimed to be defending looked pretty happy to see the former bus driver and oil tycoon leader go, not least because of the illegitimacy of his election in the first place, not to mention his presiding over a corrupt government known for its human rights abuses and diminishment of press freedoms. All that and grinding poverty, too. No wonder there was dancing in the streets and talk of a free Venezuela.

Moreover, it looks pretty clear that Trump's notably clean removal operation was something of an inside job. The Miami Herald reported that the Venezuelan Vice President (and supposed Maduro loyalist) Delcy Rodriguez, had "reached out" (so to speak) to the Trump administration, suggesting she might just be a more acceptable leader when it comes to U.S. interests.

Reportedly, there were secret talks held in Qatar, with a member of the UAE's ruling royal family in the room, along with Rodriguez's brother. One can

assume the U.S. interest in Rodriguez, at least in the short term, was to leave someone in power who could manage the "transition" without totally blowing up and rebuilding Venezuela, not to mention getting more useful information on the seemingly nonchalant but actually increasingly paranoid Maduro's whereabouts.

"She's essentially willing to do what we think is necessary to make Venezuela great again," Trump told reporters of Rodriguez. Translation: She will do what we want because she knows who is in charge. Rodriguez, however, is already showing signs that she won't be so easily controlled.

Purely observational, the events in Caracas offer yet another lamentable reminder of how much the liberal, old world order has disintegrated in the age of Trump and Putin. We now live on a planet dominated by raw, authoritarian, executive, centralized power, with national figures like mayors (not to mention members of the U.S. Congress and European leaders) all reduced to bleating inconsequently on the sidelines.

Simply put, Maduro was deemed by Trump to be incompatible with U.S. interests, which

naturally includes the extraction of oil and the disruption of the supply of illegal drugs, so the administration simply unleashed the power of the U.S. military to go in and remove him. This will appeal to those who believe in American exceptionalism; there are similarities with Trump's interventionist plan for a Gaza model, one with U.S. and Israeli (and UAE) interests.

Tacitly, the action sends a message to other nations with similarly incompatible governments that the U.S. won't hesitate to take invasive action. How one feels depends really on how benign one feels U.S. interests to be, globally speaking.

If that were not enough, Trump openly stated a desire now to "run" a sovereign nation of some 28 million people, although Rubio walked that back some on Sunday morning.

Aside from being yet another example of Trump's inconsistency, seemingly going from isolationist to interventionist over the Mar-a-Lago bubble bath, any such "running" requires a confidence in the wildly impulsive Trump that we simply do not have, and nor should those who won't miss the Venezuelan status quo. Congressional approval for this kind of action exists for good

reasons, including the need for a clear plan for the aftermath.

We don't lament Maduro's exit for a moment and we'll even allow that the removal action, if those are the right words, was impressive and reasonably light on collateral damage (although some 40 lives were lost). But the consequences likely will extend far into the future and far beyond Venezuela.

What moral authority does the U.S. now have if, say, China, removes the Taiwanese leadership, deeming it incompatible with Chinese interests? Not much. And this action surely weakens the moral argument against Vladimir Putin, though Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is now hoping Russia's leader is the next authoritarian Trump takes out.

Howling in protest does little, of course. Elections have consequences. Maduro is gone from Venezuela and he will not be missed. We will have more to say as events unfold but, at this juncture, we urge the Trump administration to stop this hubristic talk of running things, involve the U.S. Congress in its plans for the future of Venezuela and focus on empowering the Venezuelan people and their democratically elected leaders.

### ON THIS DAY 41 YEARS AGO A LAND IN AGONY

Five hundred years ago, an aged monk penned a chilling prophecy for Cambodia.

"A holocaust will sweep across the land and godless men will enslave the people," said the 15th Century prophecy known as the Puth Tomay. "There will be cities, but no one will live in them... and there will be so few Cambodians that they will be able to sit in the shade of a single tamarind tree."

It is understandable if Cambodia's present survivors feel that this prophecy came true for them. Almost consumed by Pol Pot's killers who came to power in 1975 after a five-year civil war, Cambodia's survivors now once again are the victims of an outburst of violence. This time the attacks come from Vietnamese troops. But as has been the case in Southeast Asia for the last four decades, the new violence is abetted by great powers through their surrogates.

Last week, Cambodians were being slain and driven from their country by Moscow-backed Vietnamese entering their seventh year of warfare against rebel foes of the Vietnamese-installed Heng Samrin regime. The latest Vietnamese offensive against four primitive Cambodian resistance camps near the Thai border sent more than 100,000 civilians fleeing their bamboo and thatch shacks into Thailand.

The Vietnamese warfare is aimed at defeating the anti-communist rebel factions of former Cambodian Prime Minister Son Sann and Prince Norodom Sihanouk—which are backed by the United States and other Western nations—and the China-backed Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot, whose government took the lives of more than a million Cambodians between 1975 and 1978.

As long as the major world powers continue to support the endless conflicts that have kept Southeast Asia in turmoil since before the Second World War, the devastation of Cambodia will not abate.

Tribune editorial board, Jan. 5, 1985

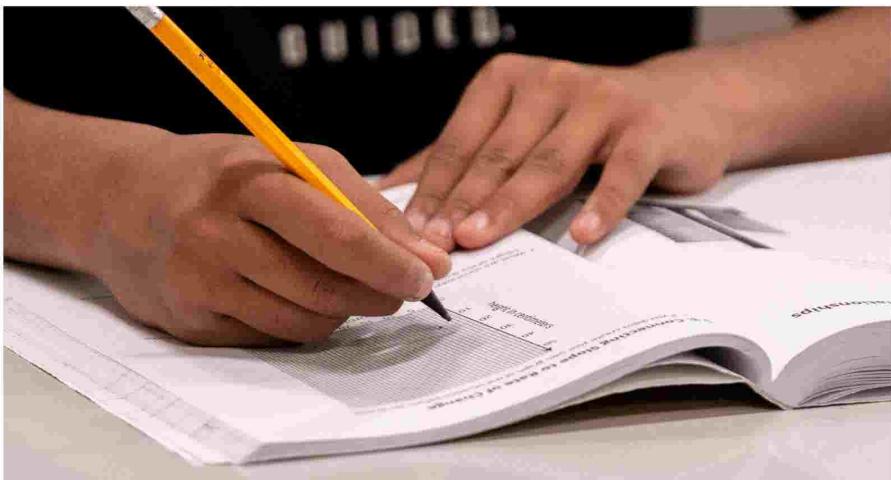
### EDITORIAL CARTOON

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DREW SHENEMAN/TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

# OPINION



A student plots points on a graph during an eighth grade math class on Oct. 30 in Wheaton. DOMINIC DI PALERMO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

## Admitting unprepared students into college isn't equity

By David Blobaum

As the regular application deadlines approach this month, getting into college is top of mind for many high school seniors. But students assume that if a college admits them, it means the school has accurately assessed that they can handle the work. That is hardly the case anymore.

Even though COVID-19 lockdowns no longer prevent students from taking the SAT or ACT, most colleges have remained test-optimal, many citing that requiring the tests would diminish their ability to compete for applicants. Yet we are seeing the consequences of these admissions policies: Less-informed decisions lead to worse decisions. And the data proves it.

After San Diego stopped using SAT and ACT scores in admissions beginning in 2020, the percentage of students who placed into remedial math jumped from 1% to 12%. Even worse, the school had to redesign a remedial math course, Math 2, and teach students not just high school or even middle school math but also elementary school math — meaning what students learn in first to fifth grade. Yet, despite UCSD's best efforts, the report shows that these students never catch up to their peers — and suffer the consequences.

Nearly one-third of students who take Math 2 are unable to complete their degrees in psychology and biology because they drop, withdraw from or fail the final calculus course required for graduation in these majors. Worse, it appears that "few, if any students who place into Math 2 have successfully completed an engineering degree."

Admitting underprepared students hurts those students, who complete all the credits leading up to math courses they then cannot pass. Their dreams of graduating in their chosen profession are crushed, and they then have to switch majors, spend additional time in college, take on more debt and often earn less in life. For instance, students who graduate with degrees in science, technology, engineering or mathematics have, on average, 50% higher incomes than those of other college graduates.

Compounding the problem, even the remaining information that college admissions officers use (grades) is less reliable. According to the Higher Education Research Institute, in 2024, 84% of students in its survey of freshmen at four-year bachelor's degree-granting universities had A averages in high school. When almost everyone has an A, then no one does because grades cease to accurately communicate the academic preparedness they did before.

This is exactly what the UCSD researchers found as well: "Grades achieved in high school math classes are not helping UCI to evaluate math skills much more either." In 2024, over 25% of the students in remedial Math 2 had a math grade average of 4.0.

That's stunning. One-fourth of the students who could not do elementary and middle school math had perfect grades in high school math. Their high school math grades were essentially meaningless, rising even as their actual math skills declined. In 2024, the National Center for Education Statistics found the same trend: The vast majority of 12th grade students are not

proficient in reading and math.

In fact, 12th grade students have the lowest ever recorded proficiency in reading and math. But inflated grades hide the problem from parents: 90% of parents in the U.S. believe that their children are at or above grade level proficiency.

The situation is not hopeless. While I don't think high schools will return to grading based on academic preparedness — the students would have lower grades and likely face lower chances of getting into colleges — both high schools and colleges can use long-established, statistically valid standardized measures of academic preparedness.

For instance, the College Board is already expanding its Advanced Placement exams to cover a broader range of topics. Students, parents, high schools and colleges don't have to wait until students get an A in, for example, pre-calculus to know the student actually learned pre-calculus; they can now look at the AP exam score to more accurately understand how much pre-calculus a student knows. Recognizing this, Caltech and Stanford recently became the first colleges to require that students submit their AP exam scores. All stakeholders need to know how well-prepared a student is.

The colleges remaining test-optimal or test-blind should follow the lead of a majority of the nation's most prestigious institutions (and plenty of middle-of-the-road ones as well): Return to using standardized measures of academic achievement. As the UCSD report notes, "the single best predictor for math placement has been the SAT (math section) score, with the ACT

score being an equally good predictor."

This echoes what other schools, such as Yale, Brown and Dartmouth, have publicly stated: SAT and ACT scores are the best predictors of success at their institutions. A 2024 multi-institution study found that SAT/ACT scores are 3.9 times better predictors of success at Ivy and Ivy-plus colleges than are high school grades.

When students are not academically ready for a major or a college, they have lower rates of completing their desired degrees, take longer to graduate (and are less likely to do so), and take on more debt. In fact, according to National Student Clearinghouse data, the six-year college completion rate in 2024 was only 61%. That means nearly 40% of college students fail to graduate within six years or at all.

But students are not aware that they are not being fully vetted. Like a buyer who takes a look at a house, they assume the professionals did their job to determine whether they can actually afford it. As nonprofits, colleges are supposed to serve a public benefit; admitting underprepared students, taking their money and watching them fail is the opposite of that.

Colleges should immediately return to fully vetting applicants to ensure that they are enrolling students who are prepared for the coursework in their desired major and will graduate without taking on excessive debt from additional years of college.

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## Why success of gay romance series 'Heated Rivalry' matters

By Jennifer Obel

I am a 56-year-old woman who loves romance fiction, so I fell for "Heated Rivalry." My daughter introduced me to the streaming adaptation. She texted me about it with the confidence of someone who knew I would understand why it mattered. I raised my daughters to believe sex can be a source of connection and pleasure, something to claim without embarrassment or shame.

We loved "Heated Rivalry" first as readers and later as viewers, when the story moved from page to screen on HBO Max. It surged into the cultural mainstream. What began as erotic fantasy deepened into something else: a public story about intimacy, courage and what love is allowed to look like.

Part of the draw is obvious. The series is sexy and unapologetically physical. Viewers are pulled in by desire, by chemistry and by bodies on-screen. That isn't incidental. Sex has always been one of the ways people cross lines they are told must remain fixed. What matters is not the novelty, but keeps them watching.

In "Heated Rivalry," a confident Russian professional hockey player named Ilya is drawn to his quieter rival, Shane, who is still

coming to terms with his sexuality. What begins as attraction slowly becomes attachment, then commitment. By the time another player, Scott Hunter, stands before a national championship crowd and kisses the man he loves, the moment feels earned rather than provocative.

Fans watched that scene unfold in sports bars, a place long associated with rigid ideas of masculinity, yet here it left them to look away. The show's fifth episode, titled "I'll Believe in Anything," earned a 9.9 out of 10 rating on IMDBs and drew widespread attention for its emotional depth.

Watching the show, I felt a flush then curiosity, then attention. Two men inhabited their bodies with confidence as their relationships took shape. What held me wasn't the spectacle but clarity. That kind of portrayal still feels rare. Once again, it recalibrates what viewers expect to be allowed to witness.

None of this occurred outside today's political moment. It unfolded squarely within it.

When President Donald Trump banned transgender Americans from serving in the military, he did more than reverse a policy that told capable service members that their willingness to risk their lives for their country was irrelevant — that their identity alone rendered

them disposable. It was a misuse of state power to declare that some Americans count less, even when they serve with honor.

At the same time, his administration moved to weaken federal protections for gay and lesbian Americans. Safeguards in health care, housing, employment and education were eroded. Equality was no longer treated as a right. Civil rights became provisional, dependent on policies rather than principles.

Against that backdrop, a sport long coded as immutably masculine was transformed, without controversy, into a setting for tenderness and love between two men. Viewers accepted that inversion without hesitation.

Who embraced "Heated Rivalry" matters. The series didn't break through because heterosexual men suddenly came around. Most did not. It became a shared cultural touchstone among women and the LGBTQ+ community. Research has consistently shown that heterosexual women are more comfortable with homo sexuality than heterosexual men, whose acceptance drops sharply when intimacy involves other men. For viewers already practiced at reading emotional nuance, watching two men love each other openly — even in locker rooms or

on the ice — felt honest.

"Heated Rivalry" doesn't argue with skeptics. It moves past them. Cultural change often begins by deepening the convictions of those already willing to see.

No one mandated that choice. There was no policy, no program, no government directive. Cultural acceptance matters politically because once people recognize a life as similar and real, it becomes harder for the state to treat that life as disposable.

It is often said that politics follows culture. If that's true, then culture becomes political the moment people decide who belongs and whose lives are worth defending.

Trump depends on exclusion — the idea that people may belong only if they conform to a narrow definition of who counts. Inclusion becomes something to manage, not a right to assume.

In communities ravaged by Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, concealment has become a survival strategy. Living through Operation Midwest Blitz in Chicago, I gave my dearest friend a yarmulke. He is a light-skinned Hispanic man; in Trump's America, he was safer looking Jewish than Hispanic. I begged his mother to wear a blond wig to hide her dark hair. The

family now leaves their home only for work. Visibility has become a risk.

When audiences fall in love with "Heated Rivalry," they are signaling whose lives deserve care and whose futures remain imaginable — including those pressured to shrink their lives.

Scott Hunter did not just win a championship. He carried his trophy around the rink, then did something braver. He brought the man he loves onto the ice and made his private life public, refusing to let success require silence or shame.

That moment illustrates what resistance can look like — against an administration that thrives on fear and against the lie that some love must be hidden to be acceptable.

Trump offers a smaller country, defined by boundaries rather than belonging. But Americans keep making a different choice. Long before laws change, people decide collectively who they are willing to stand beside in public. Increasingly, they choose an America larger than fear and stronger than the exclusion being sold to them as a restoration.

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