



Reining in a bigot

Assam's CM's rhetoric is to divert attention from governance deficits

Assam is among the States scheduled to hold Assembly elections in the months ahead. The northeastern State is also one of India's laggards in many critical socio-economic markers – its HDI, per capita income, gainful industrial employment numbers, and enrolment rates in higher education are lower than the national average, while it has many poor health indicators. Any political leadership of such a State would face a clear and fundamental choice in governance. One path would be to identify systemic lacunae and bridge gaps in health, education, income and employment for every citizen, earning the goodwill of the electorate and seeking continuation in office on the strength of performance. The alternative path is more insidious – the creation of bogeymen through imaginary enemies and the stereotyping of entire communities. By doing so, demagogues seek to bypass the hard work of governance, inciting the electorate through polarisation and ensuring that political discourse remains mired in communal division. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of the BJP has chosen the latter path, deploying incendiary rhetoric that targets the Bengal-origin Muslim community, framing it as a "demographic threat" and a "matter of life and death" for the indigenous population, and escalating to what can be described as calls for economic persecution – urging citizens to underplay Muslim rickshaw-pullers so that "they suffer" and "leave Assam". He has accused the community of "fertilizer jihad", blamed them for urban floods, and coined a lexicon of manufactured hatreds, all of it in pursuit of what H.L. Mencken once described as the cynical art of politics "to keep the populace alarmed... by menacing it with an endless series of bogaboils, all of them imaginary".

In the CPI(M)/CPY's petition filed in the Supreme Court, Mr. Sarma's statements have been documented to demonstrate not isolated political rhetoric but a sustained pattern of communal targeting that is politically distasteful and constitutionally unlawful. As the petition rightly argues, his statements deserve scrutiny from two lenses. First, the constitutional framework that concerns the Chief Minister's oath of office, fundamental rights of all citizens and the Preamble's guarantees of secularism and fraternity. Second, that these statements are liable to prosecution on offences under the Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita and the Representation of the People Act. The Court has through its cumulative effect doctrine, in *Amish Devgan and Tehseen Poonawalla*, suggested that a CM's speeches carry the weight of the State's authority which makes communally polarising language in them even more damaging as it is used by someone who controls the police apparatus. The Court should not dismiss it as an election-eve political manoeuvre, and recognise it for what it is – a test of whether its own directions on hate speech carry any meaning when the offender holds the highest office in a State.

Young and Nabin

The Bharatiya Janata Party is effecting a generational change in its leadership

Nitin Nabin, born in 1980 and the youngest person to become the National Working President of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was elected unopposed. Mr. Nabin is not closely linked to the party's ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); at present, his legitimacy largely arises from the faith reposed in him by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. His selection is linked to Mr. Shah's plans for the next general election, but larger considerations may play cannot be ignored. As a xenial, Mr. Nabin is leading the largest party in one of the world's youngest countries. He began his political career through the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyal Parishad (ABVP), and steadily rose through the BJP ranks. Elected five times as a Member of the Bihar Legislative Assembly from the Bankipur constituency in Patna, Mr. Nabin was also a State Minister. He held organisational positions in the BJP, overseeing its work in Chhattisgarh and Sikkim. He made a difference in both States and also won the confidence of party workers. A Kayastha from Bihar, he is known to be collegial. Within the deeply contested caste landscape of BJP strongholds, his social location and demeanour would be considered benign, which works to his advantage.

The BJP has been effecting a demographic transition in its leadership, and Mr. Nabin's elevation marks a high point in that process. Mr. Nabin is from the Hindi heartland, where the BJP is already strong. Managing the strength of the party in its current strongholds while making it more acceptable to the peripheral regions of the country will have to be his priority. The party's strategy of Hindu consolidation has not only saturated but is also creating a legion of unguided actors. The BJP is riding a tiger on the issue of communal politics, and Mr. Nabin has the unenviable challenge of disengaging from it. He was chosen President after several months of negotiations between the RSS and the BJP leadership, in which the BJP got the upper hand. The relationship between the RSS and the BJP requires delicate handling. The new President, like his predecessor, would follow the cue of Mr. Shah in organisational affairs, but he is still expected to maintain an aura of autonomy. He will be required to share credit for any success but own responsibility for any slip-up. As a young leader who potentially has several decades more of active politics ahead, Mr. Nabin must reassure his senior colleagues but cannot afford to end up becoming inconsequential in the process.

Judicial drift in the Special Intensive Revision hearings

In the first week of February 2026, in an unprecedented event, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, appeared before the Supreme Court of India in the ongoing hearings around the conduct of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls, which has been taking place in multiple States across India.

The Chief Minister's arguments were focused on certain procedural infirmities that were causing hardship to the residents of her State. Her intervention led to the Court passing a slew of directions on February 9, ostensibly seeking to mitigate some of these hardships. However, in the course of the hearing, the Court also made a statement: that no impediment to the SIR would be allowed across any of the States.

Core constitutional challenge not decided
This statement is baffling, because in making it, the Court appears to have pre-judged the most fundamental issue before it – an issue that goes to the heart of the Court's own role as the primary organ of constitutional adjudication. Challenges to the SIR were first filed before the Court in July, when it was announced for the State of Bihar.

Among other things, these petitions questioned the constitutionality of the SIR itself. Months have passed, with SIRs announced in multiple States, and the challenges have multiplied. The Bihar election has come and gone (November 2025), with the Bihar SIR effectively having become a fait accompli. The Court has held multiple hearings, where it has, in effect, played the role of an administrator, passing directions on issues such as whether or not the Aadhaar card can be used as an identification document. However, the core constitutional challenge has not been decided, and as the Court's observations now show, the fait accompli seems to have become permanently enshrined, with any future judgment serving only to act as a retrospective validation of existing facts on the ground.

It is worth remembering that in a constitutional democracy, the Court's primary role is to ensure that other state organs comply with the Constitution, and not to transform itself into an administrator. However, the Court's conduct in the SIR case is not new; while the constitutionality of the Aadhaar programme was challenged in 2012, it was only in 2018 that a final judgment was passed, by which time Aadhaar



Gautam Bhatia
is a Delhi-based
lawyer

had effectively become a fait accompli, too big to be undone. In the intervening six years, the Court had passed various orders about where and how Aadhaar could be used or demanded, but had not touched the constitutional challenge before it. The repetition of this pattern in the SIR case reveals a normalisation of the Court moving away from its role as a constitutional court, and adopting the role of the administrator. This is unfortunate.

There are significant issues

Indeed, the SIR process has raised certain significant constitutional issues. Many of these issues turned upon the question of power: while the Representation of the People Act (India's umbrella election law) authorises the Election Commission of India (ECI) to conduct a special revision for "any constituency or any part of a constituency", and for reasons to be recorded, there is a fundamental question about whether this very specific power is also a carte blanche authorisation to conduct State and nation-wide SIRs. The wording of the section seems to imply that its purpose is a targeted and focused exercise meant to correct for distortions that might creep in in certain specific places. By contrast, the present SIRs are dragnet, large-scale revisions of the rolls that, in effect, turn them into citizenship determining exercises. Added to this is the fact that electoral rolls already exist. Thus the ongoing SIRs amount to an exercise where the entire populations of States are called upon to freshly establish their citizenship and their right to vote, without any pre-existing cause for suspicion. The constitutional question then turns upon whether the ECI can simply operate on this mass presumption of non-citizenship, and force people to prove their rights from scratch.

In 1995, in *Laal Babi Husain and Others vs Electoral Registration Officer and Others*, the Court had held that it could not. There again, the ECI had sought to effect large-scale removal of names from the voter rolls, acting on the suspicion that in certain constituencies there were many non-voters on the rolls. The Court struck down this exercise, and in the directions that it passed, made it clear that notices for removal from the rolls would have to be directed at specific individuals, and also a disclosure of the reason for suspicion that the individual in question was not a citizen of India.

As noted above, the present SIRs completely

invert that basic process. Instead of issuing notices to specific people that it reasonably suspects are non-voters, the ECI now requires everyone to come and prove that they are voters.

It is crucial to note that multiple reports have come in from various States about arbitrary deletions and of individuals having to run from pillar to post to prove that their citizenship does not exist in a vacuum. They are the product of this fundamental inversion of the state-citizen relationship. The other troubling impact of the SIR exercise is that the wholesale revision of voter rolls has brought into play the notorious Form 7, which allows any person to "object" to the inclusion of any other person in the electoral roll. There have already been widespread reports about the misuse of Form 7 to have people struck off the rolls, en masse, from multiple States.

An accentuation of disparities

Finally – and this was something highlighted by the West Bengal Chief Minister as well – in a country with vast material inequalities, and disparities in access to the State, documentation requirements operate asymmetrically, and, in particular, impact the vulnerable and the marginalised (people at the intersection of the axes of caste, poverty and gender). Indian Courts have long articulated an equality jurisprudence that is cognisant of material and socio-political discrimination: a process that accentuates, rather than mitigates, these disparities, violates basic constitutional principles.

It should be obvious that these are not mere "administrative" glitches that can be corrected by administrative tweaks, in the manner in which the Court has been doing for the past eight months. Rather, the specific problems of voter deletions and disenfranchisement that are being brought to the Court on a regular basis are symptoms. They are downstream from the actual issue, which is the manner in which the ongoing SIRs invert the relationship between the state and the individual, and leave the latter effectively at the mercy of the former. This is a question that goes to the heart of the constitutional order. It cannot be remedied through a mere administrative fix. Rather, it must be addressed from the perspective of a constitutional framework that genuinely affirms the dignity and participatory rights of every individual, refusing to reduce persons to mere cogs in the machine of state and administrative efficiency.

The CPI base revision exercise measures a slice of life

Inflation, one of the most closely watched macroeconomic indicators, is something that most people feel in daily life in their routine household expenses. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) captures this reality by tracking the prices of goods and services that households regularly consume, turning everyday experiences into an official measure of inflation. For the common man, the CPI is like a quiet mirror of daily life capturing, *inter alia*, the changing cost of basic needs such as food on the plate, rent for the roof over the head, and fuel for the journey to work.

More than a simple number

Though it appears as a simple number, it speaks for households, guiding income and social security adjustments so that life's essentials remain within reach. CPI-based inflation is also the primary indicator for the Reserve Bank of India to help guide it in decisions such as interest rates and inflation control. Therefore, when the CPI reflects reality, policies respond better to what people are truly experiencing.

Inflation is not just about prices going up. It is about how these price changes affect household budgets. That is why making sure that the index reflects current consumption patterns is just as important as tracking the prices themselves. This is the context in which India's ongoing CPI base update from the year 2012 to 2024 must be seen.

Since the last base revision, the economy has changed significantly, urbanisation has grown, services have expanded, digital platforms have changed buying habits, and household spending has diversified.

The CPI 2024 series has, therefore, been updated using the latest Household Consumption Expenditure Survey of 2023-24. As people's preferences and expense changed over time, the importance (weightage) given to different goods and services in the CPI has also been adjusted.



Saurabh Garg
is Secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

Items on which households now spend more have been given greater weight, with less weight for those that account for a smaller share of spending. This ensures that the CPI measures price changes that really affect household budgets. The consumption basket has also been updated to reflect emerging trends, such as growing spending on services, driven by rising incomes and changing lifestyles.

Updating the way that the CPI is calculated is just as important as updating what it measures. The revised CPI is more closely aligned with international standards while retaining features specific to India. This makes it easier to compare India's inflation with other countries. From the perspective of households, this matters because it helps policymakers understand how price changes in India fit into the global picture, without losing sight of what affects daily life.

Data collection for the CPI has been upgraded to keep pace with how people shop and spend. While traditional market surveys still track prices, particularly of food and other essentials, the 2024 framework has introduced that captures online prices for items such as telecom services, airfares, and certain other services.

A wider database

The adoption of computer-assisted price collection in the new series has reduced manual errors and allowed real-time checks, improving the quality and timeliness of price data. Quality and timeliness of the CPI matter because these shape decisions that touch everyday life, such as how high loans are, how much savings earn, and how rising prices influence household budgets.

In the new base year, the CPI draws more on official data from government sources, airfares, postal charges, fuel prices, and items sold through the public distribution system. This means that these numbers are captured with greater precision by mitigating the chances of

errors and biases that can occur in market surveys. This integration of survey data, administrative records and digital price sources represents a marked improvement over earlier practices and provides a more reliable picture of how prices are changing.

The massive institutional effort behind a base revision exercise of this scale is also worth noting. It involves coordination across field offices, statistical divisions and national and international expert bodies.

The process involves extensive scrutiny of methodology, testing of alternatives and consultation with economists and domain specialists. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) has engaged with expert groups, international organisations and stakeholders to ensure that the changes are transparent, easy to understand and methodologically sound.

Even with updates to the basket, weights, and data sources, the CPI keeps its core purpose, capturing how prices change from a household's point of view. This continuity matters because it lets us compare prices over time. In other words, the index is being improved without losing the connection to everyday life, so that it remains a reliable guide for policymakers.

In context

The CPI reminds us that behind every statistic lies the lived experience of millions, and that numbers, ultimately, are about people. It quietly traces how prices shape daily life and inform policy decisions. Through the ongoing base revision exercise, MoSPI has ensured that the CPI continues to be accurate, up-to-date, and consistent over time, so that it remains not just a number, but a true mirror capturing the realities faced across the country.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Parliamentary proceedings

The episode around the pandemic in Parliament arising from the Speaker of the Lok Sabha not allowing the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha to read extracts from an unpublished book and the subsequent move by Opposition MPs to submit a notice seeking a removal of the Speaker for allegedly conducting the business of the House (Inside pages, February 11) are unfortunate events. The Congress and other Opposition parties should have shown more maturity and sorted out the issue rather than resorting to such an extreme step. **K.R. Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru**

is also another issue –

of the Deputy Speaker presiding over the proceedings. Unfortunately, for some inexplicable reason, the House has failed to elect a Deputy Speaker. Will the ruling National Democratic Alliance at least now take the initiative to fill up the post? **K.R. Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru**

The notice of a no-confidence motion against the Lok Sabha Speaker marks a significant moment of institutional friction. The allegations levelled against him suggest a breakdown in parliamentary neutrality

that is essential for a healthy democracy. Parallel to this, the controversy surrounding an unpublished book raises critical questions about transparency and censorships. **Aanchi Verma, Rajkot, Gujarat**

Serious national issues should not be reduced to personal insinuations against tall political leaders. Matters such as the unresolved border dispute with China and the India-U.S. trade deal require transparent and honest discussion in Parliament. Curtailing debate weakens democracy; engaging with it

strengthens governance. **M. Jeyaram, Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu**

The conduct of Members of Parliament on the floor of the House and outside is cause for concern. There is a flouting of decency and decorum, a violation of rules and

aggressive placard parades. No party is above blame. The day is not far off when MPs may indulge in fits of **S.V. Venkatakrishnan, Singapore**

Corrections & Clarifications
In a report, "Opposition MPs submit notice seeking removal of LS Speaker" (Inside pages, February 11), a sentence was: "Under Article 94C of the Constitution, the Speaker can be removed by a resolution passed by the House through a simple majority." The procedure to remove the Speaker is through effective majority, which is absolute majority of the effective strength of the House (total strength minus the number of vacant seats). Article 94C says: "may be removed from his office by a resolution of the House by a majority of the then members of

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28578347/28576390; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

T20 World Cup match with India after parties with International Cricket Council officials is a political thriller played behind closed doors ('Sport' page, February 11). Backroom negotiations and the intervention of Sri Lanka Cricket along with financial implications and sanctions have resulted in Pakistan's 'U' turn. The price had become too high for recalibration, and politics had to give way to commercial interests.

Dr. Thomas Palocaren, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

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

The Constitution enters the sanctum

Two recent judgments of the Madras High Court – one concerning the Thirupurankundram Deepathooth and the other relating to the rights of the Thenkai sect to recite hymns at the Kanchipuram Varadaraja Perumal temple – have brought to the fore the role of the judiciary in adjudicating religious disputes. That these matters have reached the High Court is revealing on multiple levels. First, it tells us that courts have a constitutional role in deciding religious disputes. Second, it demolishes the argument that temples are private spaces where the court or the state cannot intervene. Given the growing number of such cases, the law around religion has taken centre stage like never before.

Shift from civil rights disputes

Over a hundred years ago, it was civil courts that dealt with temple disputes. In a case pertaining to entry into the Kamudhi temple in Kanchipuram, pitched battles around civil rights to enter temple premises were fought all the way up to the Privy Council in London. In *Sankaralinga Nadan and Ors vs Raja Rajeswara Dorai and Ors* (1908), the Privy Council was called upon to decide whether the Nadar community had a right to enter the Kamudhi temple. In the pre-constitutional era, such cases around temple entry and right to co-worship were primarily regarded as disputes concerning civil rights.

In 1927, the Madras Presidency government enacted the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act to govern temples and their endowments. A slew of legislative activity followed in the next two decades, which enabled setting up of local temple committees and the auditing of temple funds which enshrined the supervisory role of the Presidency government.

All this changed when the Constitution was adopted in 1950, which introduced fundamental rights to practise religion. The



Manuraj Shunmugasundaram

DMK spokesperson and advocate practising before the Madras High Court



Swetha Senthubaskaran

Advocate practising before the Madras High Court



Advocate practising before the Madras High Court

The growing number of religious disputes before constitutional courts reflects the role of the judiciary in ensuring that religious practices do not undermine constitutional principles

freedom of worship rights in Articles 25 and 26 to worship were made applicable to individuals as well as religious denominations. However, this freedom was tempered with the requirement that rights to practise or profess religion would be subject to public order, health, and morality. This allowed the state to further regulate worship when it offended public conscience or morality.

This period ushered in a critical shift in judicial thinking. From the earlier view that these matters were civil rights disputes, the courts began looking at them from the vantage of constitutional directives. By doing so, the judiciary asserted the rights of the individual to equality and religious freedom subject to public interest restrictions. This led to the blossoming of jurisprudence around temple entry, religious freedoms, and equality in the appointment of priests. It is now a matter of debate in constitutional courts as to if and how these rights should be limited.

Nevertheless, the southern States, which belonged to the erstwhile Madras Presidency, must be credited for bringing in this jurisprudence. It started with these States enacting legislation under the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act for better temple governance. These legislation and regulations, consequently, invited judicial oversight, as writ courts were called to adjudicate upon whether State intervention respected the rights of the religious denominations while safeguarding the constitutional rights of others. This led to the development of temple-related jurisprudence over the last 70 years.

The test used by courts
In developing this jurisprudence, courts have undertaken an inquiry into whether religious practices conflict with constitutional principles. For example, where there is a restriction of the entry of certain people or where a customary practice is in conflict

with fundamental rights, such matters can be brought before constitutional courts. The constitutional court then undertakes the task of finding out whether such custom or practice is protected by the essential religious practice test. A creation of the Supreme Court, this test is to determine whether a particular custom or practice is essentially integral to the religion. Those not essentially religious were, interestingly, deemed to be “secular” and open to judicial guidance. Therefore, if a practice fails this test, then the court typically proceeds to issue directions in consonance with settled constitutional principles.

Despite criticism regarding its inconsistent interpretation in subsequent judgments, the courts have continued to use this test to bring a measure of objectivity to decisions by focusing on the core tenets of the religion itself. In *Indian Young Lawyers Association and Ors vs State of Kerala (2018)* (Sabarimala temple case), this approach underwent a significant consolidation when the Supreme Court held that even those practices considered essential to the religion cannot be shielded from judicial scrutiny if they are inconsistent with constitutional morality. Therefore, the law of the land is that religious freedoms are subject to constitutional morality, which in turn is founded on the principles of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.

The growing number of religious disputes before constitutional courts reflects not only ideological polarisation within and across faiths, but also the enduring role of the judiciary in ensuring that religious practices do not undermine constitutional principles. Judicial review of religious disputes, therefore, cannot be seen as an aberration but a continuation of a long-standing constitutional engagement – one that seeks to harmonise faith with the foundational principles of the Constitution.

A battle over the title of *Jatipita*

The Congress and BRS spar over KCR's role in the Statehood movement

STATE OF PLAY

Ravi Reddy
ravi.reddy@thehindu.co.in

At the centre of a recent political controversy in Telangana is a symbolic but emotionally charged question: who deserves to be called *Jatipita*, or the Father of Telangana?

The immediate trigger for Bharat Rashtra Samiti (BRS) leaders and cadres hailing party president and former Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhar Rao (KCR) as *Jatipita* was the notice served on him by a Special Investigation Team, summoning him for questioning in connection with an alleged phone-tapping case during the BRS regime. The party saw this as an insult to their leader, who they claimed had single-handedly fought with the Centre and ensured the creation of Telangana in 2014. Calling him the architect of the State, they questioned how he could be treated like a criminal.

The repeated attempts by the BRS to bestow the title of *Jatipita* on Mr. Rao did not go down well with Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, who launched a scathing attack on the BRS chief. “KCR is not worthy of being called the Father of Telangana. He is only a self-proclaimed fatherly figure,” he said. Accusing Mr. Rao of corruption and mismanagement, Mr. Reddy said that he “looted the State and plunged it into debt.” The Chief Minister argued that if anyone deserved the title, it would be either Professor K. Jayashankar or Konda Laxman Bapuji, both of whom made genuine sacrifices for the cause of statehood.

Intellectuals who have closely observed the Telanga-



Telangana

na movement – from the early agitations in 1952 and 1969 to the final push led by Mr. Rao after formation of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) in 2001 – have a different perspective. Former Telangana Joint Action Committee Convener and ex-MLC M. Kodandaram, a professor who worked closely with Mr. Rao before their fallout, said that Prof. K. Jayashankar is widely regarded as the principal ideologue of the Telangana statehood movement. Jayashankar, a former Vice Chancellor of Kakatiya University, was active during the 1952 and 1969 Telangana movements. During the final stages of the movement, he was instrumental in bringing together all sections of society and offering clarity to the long-pending demand.

“He had an ability to unify the people and articulate the cause, so he was often referred to as the ideologue of Telangana, though he himself never claimed that title,” Prof. Kodandaram explained. The agitation for a separate Telangana had a violent past. During the 1969 movement, more than 360 people died in police firing. On the other hand, KCR’s stewardship in the final phase of the statehood stir was largely non-violent. Mr. Kumar said:

“While the BRS cadre may feel justified in honouring Mr. Rao with the title, history suggests that such recognition cannot be manufactured through party resolutions or political campaigns. Titles like *Jatipita* endure only when they are affirmed by a broad social consensus that transcends partisan loyalties. The current controversy appears less about history and more about present-day political positioning, with both the BRS and the Congress seeking to consolidate their support base ahead of the municipal elections. Ultimately, public memory will determine how Mr. Rao’s legacy in the Telangana movement is defined, or who gets to be called *Jatipita*.

Taxpayer base more than doubled in the last decade

Expansion of the base has coincided with an improvement in tax administration efficiency

DATA POINT

Chandrasekar K.

India's direct tax system has undergone a significant expansion over the last decade, marked by a sharp rise in the number of taxpayers as well as sustained improvements in administrative efficiency. Time-series data released by the Income-Tax Department indicate that this expansion has been broad-based and persistent, reflecting deeper formal participation rather than a short-lived compliance surge.

Between Assessment Year (AY) 2013-14 and AY2024-25, the total number of taxpayers, defined as persons who either filed a return of income or in whose case tax was deducted at source, increased from 5.26 crore to 12.13 crore.

This increase, which more than doubles the taxpayer base, represents a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of approximately 7.89% over 11 years, underscoring the sustained nature of the expansion. It marks one of the most important structural shifts in India's direct tax landscape since the wider adoption of the Permanent Account Number.

A disaggregated view of the data shows that individual taxpayers remain the primary drivers of this expansion. As illustrated in **Chart 1**, the number of individual taxpayers rose from 4.96 crore in AY2013-14 to 11.61 crore in AY2024-25, translating into a CAGR of about 8% over the period.

Growth was largely steady in the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, with year-on-year increases mostly in the high single digits. The contraction visible in AY2020-21, when individual taxpayers declined by nearly 9%, coincides with the disruption caused by the pandemic. This was followed by strong recovery, with growth accelerating to double digits in the most recent assessment years, indicating renewed momentum.

turn in the expansion of the individual tax base.

While individuals dominate the tax system in scale, the expansion has not been confined to households alone. **Chart 2** shows the combined trend for non-individual taxpayers, comprising firms, companies, Hindu Undivided Families, Associations of Persons or Body of Individuals, local authorities, artificial juridical persons, and other residual PAN categories.

In absolute terms, the non-individual taxpayer base increased steadily from about 0.29 crore in AY2013-14 to nearly 0.48 crore by AY2024-25, corresponding to a CAGR of roughly 5% over the period.

Growth among non-individual taxpayers has been more moderate than among individuals, but also more stable. Year-on-year growth rates generally remained within the 4% to 7% range in the pre-pandemic years.

The pandemic's impact is again evident in AY2020-21, when growth slowed sharply to below 1% before recovering gradually in subsequent years.

However, unlike individuals, the post-pandemic rebound among non-individuals has been measured, with growth stabilising at around 5% recent assessment years. This pattern suggests that formalisation has progressed across organisational and business entities, albeit at a steadier pace than individuals.

Cost of collection
The expansion of the taxpayer base has coincided with a marked improvement in tax administration efficiency. As shown in **Chart 3**, the cost of collecting direct taxes fell from 1.36% in FY2000-01 to 0.41% in FY2024-25 (provisional). The figure for FY2024-25 is provisional and may be updated later. This long-term decline has occurred despite a substantial increase in the number of taxpayers and total tax collections.

The temporary rise in the cost

ratio around FY2020-21 reflects pandemic-related disruptions rather than structural weakening. Since then, the ratio has fallen to its lowest level in the available data series, indicating sustained improvements in administrative efficiency.

Several institutional and technological changes help explain these trends. Over the past decade, the tax administration has increasingly relied on digital filing systems, pre-filled returns, faceless assessments, and expanded third-party information reporting. These measures have reduced compliance frictions and enabled the system to manage a larger taxpayer base without a commensurate increase in administrative resources.

Unlike headline filing statistics that focus on absolute counts, the evidence presented here draws on taxpayer-level data, year-on-year growth dynamics, and long-term CAGR trends to assess the durability of India's tax base expansion.

Taken together, the evidence from taxpayer levels, growth rates, CAGR patterns, and collection costs points to a structural strengthening of India's direct tax system. Revenues are being mobilised from a broader cross-section of taxpayers even as administrative efficiency improves, thereby reinforcing the stability and sustainability of public finances and embedding taxation more firmly within the formal economy. This transition has important implications for revenue resilience, equity, and long-term fiscal planning nationwide.

It is to be noted that growth rates are calculated on a year-on-year basis using taxpayer headcount data.

CAGR is computed for the period AY2013-14 to AY2024-25 using unrounded values, and figures for AY2024-25 and FY2024-25 are provisional.

The writer is with the Indian Statistical Service. The views expressed are personal

Rising numbers

The data for the charts were sourced from the Income-Tax Department, the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) and Time Series Data on Direct Taxes (FY 2000-01 to 2024-25)

CHART 1:
Number of individual taxpayers in the left-axis (represented as bars) and the year-on-year growth in the right-axis (represented as a line)

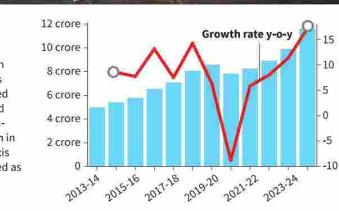


CHART 2:
Number of non-individual taxpayers in the left-axis (represented as bars) and the year-on-year growth in the right-axis (represented as a line)

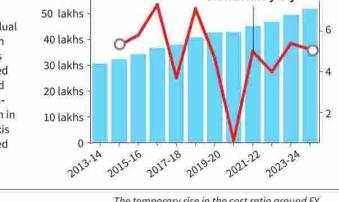
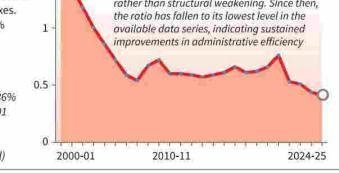


CHART 3:
Cost of collection of direct taxes. Figures in %



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 12, 1976

Attendance in offices: directive reiterated

FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Feb. 11: Following the special drive in Government offices to ensure punctuality by officials and the finding that there is still some absenteeism, the Department of Personnel in the Cabinet Secretariat has asked all the Ministries to take care that the earlier instructions about attendance in Government offices are fully complied with.

The Department of Personnel is heartened by the general improvement during the past few months in the “administrative ethos” of the country. Instructions are in fact being issued from time to time by the Ministry of Home Affairs regarding punctuality, promptness and integrity of Government servants. It is, however, considered essential that the improvement in administrative efficiency and the intensity of supervision should be maintained as a permanent feature of the administration.

It is brought to the notice of the staff once again that persons who hold supervisory posts will take all possible steps to ensure the integrity and devotion to duty of all Government servants under their control and authority. Smoking in the corridors by Class Four staff and playing cards outside Government offices and buildings after the lunch-hour by Government servants is declared undecorous practice “which detracts from the atmosphere of discipline”.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 12, 1926

Transmitting musical composition by code

REUTER'S SPECIAL SERVICE

London, Feb. 11: Owing to the demand for popular songs and the necessity of lightning transmission of them prevent smuggling between New York and London, a novel scheme for cabling melodies has been devised by the London music publishers. The method is based on an alphabetical code covering notes and time-beats which can be re-translated into music by means of a simple key. It appears that ships stowards and others recently smuggled into England new American numbers which were played publicly before they were published, while an enormous number of British tunes have still been orchestrated in America. These will now be cabled to professional orchestrators in New York.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The fine imposed on Telegram by a Russian court

11 in million roubles. A Russian court has fined the Telegram messaging app around 11 million roubles (\$142,210.73) for refusing to remove banned content which the authorities regard as extremist. The state communications watchdog said that Telegram would face further restrictions. REUTERS

Number of troops deployed by the U.S. to train Nigerian military

200 The United States will deploy 200 troops to Nigeria to train its armed forces in their fight against jihadist groups, as Washington increases military cooperation with the West African country. The additional troops will provide "training and technical guidance". AFP

Number of people suffering from cataracts as per WHO

94 in million. More than 94 million people suffer from cataracts, but half of them do not have access to the surgery needed to fix it, the World Health Organization said. Cataracts — the clouding of the eye's lens that causes blurred vision and can lead to blindness — are on the rise. AFP

Passengers handled by Dubai International Airport in 2025

95.2 in million. Dubai International Airport maintained its crown as the world's busiest airport last year, as officials said on Wednesday that a record 95.2 million passengers transited through its terminals, part of the emirate's continued economic boom. PTI

Polling stations considered 'risk-prone' in Bangladesh

50 in per cent. More than half the polling centres have been identified as "risk-prone" for the general elections in Bangladesh. Officials said 90% of them will be under CCTV surveillance, with many policemen deployed in the capital, Dhaka. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Have States gained from the 16th FC?

What have been the recommendations of the 16th Finance Commission? What taxes are shared between the Centre and the States? Why did the last Commission revise vertical devolution to 41%? What had industrialised States such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Telangana demanded?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan, R

The 16th Finance Commission under the chairmanship of Dr. Arvind Panagariya has submitted its report for the period of 2026-31. The Central government has accepted its recommendations with respect to devolution of funds from Centre to States.

What were past recommendations? The Constitution in Article 270 provides for the scheme of distribution of net tax proceeds collected by the Central government between the Centre and the States. The taxes that are shared between the Centre and the States include corporation tax, personal income tax, Central Goods and Services Tax (GST), Centre's share of the Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST) etc. This division is based on the recommendation of the Finance Commission that is constituted every five years as per the terms of Article 280. This divisible pool, however, does not include cess and surcharge that are levied by the Centre. For the year, 2025-26, it is estimated that the divisible pool constitutes only around 81% of the gross tax revenue of the Centre after excluding cess and surcharge.

Till the 13th FC (2010-2015), the devolution involved specific transfers for Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) with extensive conditionalities. The share of States in Central taxes (vertical devolution) was fixed at 32%. However, since the 14th FC (2015-2020), the specific transfers for CSS were discontinued and the vertical devolution was increased to 42%. It was revised down to 41% in the 15th FC (2020-2026) due to the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories.

The criteria for distribution amongst the States (horizontal devolution) since the 13th FC is provided in Table 1. As can



fix a cap on cess and surcharge or for their inclusion in the divisible pool. These instruments may also be needed to raise resources for the Union to meet any exigencies. Similarly, the FC recommended retaining the States' share in vertical devolution at its current level of 41% considering three main reasons — the States' share in total tax revenues of the country; that much of the spending of the Union in CSS is anyway ultimately routed to the States; and that the Union government needs increased funds for defence and infrastructure.

In its approach for horizontal devolution, the FC was guided by two principles. First, changes to each State's share in the portion of divisible pool should be gradual. Second, due recognition should be given to efficiency and especially the States' contributions to growth. Accordingly, a new criterion of State's contribution to GDP has been added. The weightage to this new criterion as well as other criteria has been assigned in such a way that it spells a directional change without causing a drastic shift in States' shares.

Considering all the above factors, the share of southern and western States has marginally increased while the share of big north and central States has marginally decreased. Hence, one may conclude that it is status quo as far as vertical and horizontal devolution is concerned with a directional change towards providing due recognition for efficiency. Additionally, the following observations of the FC should be borne in mind. The Centre should progressively reduce raising revenues through cess and surcharge. The States should make their subsidies efficient and targeted, actively pursue reforms in the power sector, and rein in the levels of their fiscal deficit and debt. The Centre and States should undertake various public sector enterprises.

Rangarajan, R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Policy Simplified'. He trains at Officers IAS academy. Views expressed are personal.

The share for States

Till the 13th FC (2010-2015), the devolution involved specific transfers for Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) with extensive conditionalities

Table 1: Criteria for horizontal devolution amongst States				
Criteria	13th FC 2010-15	14th FC 2015-20	15th FC 2020-26	16th FC 2026-31
Income distance	47.5	50	45	42.5
Population (1971)	25	17.5	-	
Population (2011)	-	10	15	17.5
Area	10	15	15	10
Forests	-	7.5	10	10
Fiscal discipline	17.5	-	-	
Demographic performance	-	-	12.5	10
Tax effort	-	-	2.5	
State's contribution to GDP				10
Total	100	100	100	100

be observed, higher weightage has been given for equity (income gap) and needs (population and area) when compared to efficiency (forests, demographic performance and tax effort).

What were States' demands? Firstly, as regards vertical devolution, 18 States had demanded that the States' share be increased from the current 41% to 50%. Few other States had demanded an increase of 45% to 48%. Many States had demanded the inclusion of cess and surcharge in the divisible pool as well as fixing a cap on cess and surcharge that could be levied by the Centre.

Secondly, as regards horizontal

devolution, many States had pitched for the continued dominance of equity parameters in the criteria. Equally, many States had recommended reducing the weight assigned to 'income distance' as a criterion. Industrialised States such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Telangana had recommended the inclusion of States' contribution to GDP among the horizontal devolution criteria.

What did the 16th FC recommend? With respect to the demands regarding vertical devolution, the FC opined that under the present constitutional scheme, it is neither permissible nor desirable to



Elections in Bangladesh: looking towards the future

Which are the two major blocs competing in the Bangladesh elections? What is the referendum for?

Tabshir Shams

The story so far:

The fate of the 'Second Liberation' of Bangladesh shall be decided on February 12, the day of its general elections. Around 12.7 crore voters are going to cast their vote for 300 seats of the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) and for a national referendum on the July charter.

Who is contesting in this election?

A total of 2,034 candidates, including 275 independents, are contesting this election. There are 80 candidates from the minority Hindu community and 85 women candidates. There were 17 Hindu MPs in the 2024 Jatiya Sangsad. Currently, there are 59 registered political parties in Bangladesh, of which 51 are participating in the elections. There are two major blocs — the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and a II party alliance which

includes Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party (NCP) among others. The BNP is contesting for 292 seats out of the 300, leaving the remaining seats for its coalition partners. Jamaat is contesting in 224 seats they have no women candidates, and only one Hindu candidate. The NCP, a youth party that emerged after the July Revolution, is contesting in 30 seats.

What is the Awami League's status?

The Awami League (AL), which was the party of the ousted former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina, has had its registration suspended by the Bangladesh election commission. In May 2025, the interim government headed by Mosharraf Hossain, a former government and also made chair of the interim government and also made chair of the national consensus commission (NCC). The NCC was to suggest structural reforms to the state which include constitutional, electoral, and judicial amendments. Of the 166 recommendations of the NCC, 84 were

Bahauddin Nasim, joint general secretary of the Awami League, told *The Hindu* on February 8, that the party has boycotted the election and instructed its supporters not to vote. Ms. Hasina has maintained that the elections are undemocratic, and that a large section of the population will boycott the polls.

What is the national referendum?

Apart from the general elections, citizens are also required to vote "Yes" or "No" on the July charter. After the ouster of Ms. Hasina, following mass protests against her government, in 2024, faith was reposed in Nobel Laureate Mosharraf Hossain. Mr. Hossain was appointed Chief Adviser to the interim government and also made chair of the national consensus commission (NCC). The NCC was to suggest structural reforms to the state which include constitutional, electoral, and judicial amendments. Of the 166 recommendations of the NCC, 84 were

taken up forming the "National Charter of July 2025". Major reforms in the charter are centred around making constitutional bodies more independent, proposing a bicameral legislature, and increasing women's representation in parliament. If the "Yes" vote prevails then the newly formed parliament will be bound to implement the charter's provisions within 180 days. If its "No", then the risk of one-party rule and weak institutions will loom over Bangladesh's future.

What have been India's observations? India was invited by Mr. Yunus as an observer for the elections. More than 330 international observers, double that of the previous controversial 2024 elections, have been invited as observers. India is yet to confirm this invitation.

India remains the largest trading partner of Bangladesh in South Asia. Many infrastructure and connectivity projects like the Koltakha-Khulna, Agartala-Akhaura, Haldibari-Chilahati as well as the 1,000 MW electricity export to Bangladesh and the Tripura-Comilla power link are the strategic pillars of this bilateral relationship. However, since the 2024 regime change, there has been a degree of ambivalence between the two nations. Only time will tell how the relationship will progress between the two neighbours.

Tabshir Shams is a postgraduate student from South Asian University, Delhi.

THE GIST

A total of 2,034 candidates, including 275 independents, are contesting this election.

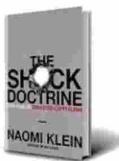
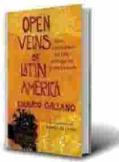
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BIBLIOGRAPHY



Under siege: Police officers stand guard during a protest in Caracas, Venezuela, on February 10. REUTERS



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of the expression "red carpet welcome"? (Prof. C. Venkataraiah, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh)

When you are given a "red carpet welcome" or the "red carpet treatment", you are given special treatment on your arrival at some place. You are treated as a guest of honour. As the expression suggests, a thick red carpet is usually rolled out when someone who is considered important visits a place.

When Nelson Mandela visited India, he was given a red carpet welcome. The famous film star was rather disappointed that he wasn't given the red carpet treatment. I was quite surprised that they gave me a red carpet welcome.

The question is, why a red carpet and not a carpet of a different colour? In the old days, the colour red was always associated with honour. Important people wore red robes. For example, the robe that a king wore was always red. The colour red was also associated with magic; fairies were always shown wearing red caps. This sense of red meaning something important is retained in the expression "red letter day". People often refer to important or special days as "red letter days".

Preethi says that 21 October is a red letter day because that's the day she arrived in America.

Scholars claim that it was during the French Revolution that red began to acquire a negative meaning. The people who killed all the nobles during the revolution called themselves "red republicans". Nowadays of course, communists are referred to as "red".

What is the difference in meaning between "stationary" and "stationery"? (Ankit R. Vyas, Chennai)

When an object remains "stationary", it does not move, it stands still.

The train remained stationary for several hours. The truck hit a stationary car. How did Promod manage to run into a stationary bus?

"Stationery", on the other hand, refers to items usually associated with writing – pen, pencil, paper, etc. The secretary informed me that we had run out of stationery.

Could you tell me where the nearest stationery shop is?

Both "stationery" and "stationary" are pronounced the same way. The first two syllables are pronounced like the word "station". The "e" and "a" in the suffix "ery" and "ary" are pronounced like the "a" in "China". The main stress is on the first syllable "sta".

What are goose pimples? (Santhana Krishnan, Vellore, Tamil Nadu)

The pimples that a teenaged goose gets are called goose pimples! Just joking! Do you remember the last time you got terribly scared about something? Usually when someone gets scared, the hairs on their skin stand up and the skin begins to develop small bumps. In fact, the skin begins to look like it is covered by a series of dots. These bumps that you get when you feel scared, excited or cold are called "goose pimples". They are also called "goose flesh" and "goose bumps".

Published in *The Hindu* on July 27, 1999.

Trump's Venezuela attack a footnote in West's history of imperial plunder

Writers argue why Latin American underdevelopment should be seen as a structural byproduct of western development, of mainly Britain in the 17th to the early 20th centuries, and the U.S. from the 19th century onwards

Suhit K. Sen

In even the most liberal western commentary, U.S. President Donald Trump's invasion of Venezuela presages the destruction of a rules-based international order, which itself presumes that nations are equal. It's actually a footnote in the bloody and barbarous history of the colonial subjugation and rapine of the world by the 'West'.

Latin America has been savagely pillaged for over half a millennium, beginning with Christopher Columbus's landing in 1492. What followed was a genocide in which the autochthonous were either killed or enslaved to work at extracting their own natural resources for the benefit of Europe.

Civilising' mission
The magnificent civilisations of the Mayans, Aztecs and Incas were razed as European 'civilisation' was transplanted in its place. In *A History of Venezuela*, Guillermo Morón recounts this history from an unabashedly Eurocentric perspective, lauding the theft of a country and a continent as a civilising mission in which well-intentioned priests and benevolent conquistadors brought the fruits of European enlightenment to savages stranded on the lowest rungs of the civilisational ladder.

There are references to cruelties, but those remain in metaphorical parentheses. There is a recognition that the native civilisations played some role in the shaping of Venezuela, through cultural intermingling and miscegenation. But Morón's perspective prevents him from recognising forced assimilation as just another face of barbarous extermination or banishment to the margins.

Morón's history of the 19th and 20th

centuries, independence from Spain and since, notes the preponderance of dictatorship over democracy in Venezuela. But since he can't see the structures of colonialism/imperialism and neocolonialism/neo-imperialism, he attributes this to the temperament of the people. Nor can he recognise, in the underdevelopment of the region, the structural role of colonialism and neocolonialism.

Indictment of colonialism
Eduardo Galeano makes up for these lacks in his searing indictment of colonialism in *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. Framed in dependency theory, Galeano's story sees Latin American underdevelopment as a structural byproduct of western development, of mainly Britain in the 17th to the early 20th centuries, and the U.S. from the 19th onwards.

But Galeano's is not a bloodless accounting of political economy. It is a rich history of peoples that takes readers on a journey from the barbarities of Francisco Pizarro, the illiterate pig-breeder who was given Spanish imperial licence to forge for empire, to the slick boardrooms in U.S. metropolises which provoked and financed coups and massacres every time a Latin American dispensation tried to forge a path to the development of its nations and peoples. Galeano notes with satisfaction the efforts of the Cuban revolutionaries to construct not just an independent economy that worked for all the people, but a just society that was bound by the ties of fraternity and cooperation. It also notes the manner in which U.S. corporate interests funded the coup d'état through which Augusto Pinochet overthrew the legitimate socialist government of Salvador Allende. The U.S. state

generously provided training to the putschists.

Coups, and aftermath
Naomi Klein provides agonising details of the manufactured coup in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. In its quest to subordinate and exploit Latin America, the U.S. propped up the bloodiest of dictators who were willing to do its bidding. The British did the same in the 19th century and till World War II destroyed its empire and made it a second-rate power.

The development of the core of the world capitalist system, based on the export of the infinitely squeezed surplus value of the peripheries, which is precisely what keeps them underdeveloped and immiserised, required draconian comprador regimes that would keep people – labour power – terrorised and industries denationalised. Galeano shows wonderfully through theory and human stories how metropolitan economic centres plundered natural resources and labour to first fire capitalism and then extend it.

The Venezuela story
Gregory Wilpert takes the Venezuelan story forward to 2006, providing a critical account of Hugo Chávez's attempts to break free of the stranglehold of the capitalist-imperialist system and build a national economy and society that worked for the poorest. In *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power: The History and Politics of the Chavez Government*, he concluded that while the 'Bolivarian' project was a beacon to the world on account of the possibilities of democratic socialism it contained, it was incomplete, and beset by internal contradictions and external besiegement, again stoked by the U.S. state. There was no unambiguous hope, Wilpert concluded presciently, that

the revolution would bear fruit.

There were three main arenas in which Chávez and his party promoted participatory democracy: politics, society and the economy. In trying to remould the political system as more people-centric, Chávez introduced a new constitution in 1999. It made provisions for more accountable governance by including two more branches for auditing, introduced referenda for legislation and recall, which were unsuccessfully deployed against him, and decentralised power to communities. In the economic sphere, the Chávez dispensation gestured at workers' role in managing industries, promoted the cooperative movement, nationalised some industries, including partially the oil sector, though he failed to curb the dependence on oil, which kept the economy vulnerable to sudden shocks. In the social and economic sector, the Chávez administration made a major break by providing constitutional guarantees for women and indigenous people. He also expanded urban and rural land reforms to give entitlements to the poor, buttressing these with reform of the state health and educational systems.

The failure of the Venezuelan way, as compared to the Cuban path, can be explained largely by geopolitics. Cuba had the benefit of a bipolar world and thus Soviet assistance; in Chávez's unipolar world of U.S. hegemony, there was just the unremitting 'enemy action' of the hegemon and its allies, and no source of succour. And fifth columnists like María Corina Machado at hand to derail the experiment. This prompted an authoritarian turn.

For the moment, though, another western capitalist assault has won another battle, hopefully not the war humanity must wage.

The author is a historian and journalist.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on the life of Abraham Lincoln on his 217th birthday

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Lincoln was elected from the newly formed Republican Party. To which party did he belong before that?

QUESTION 2

Lincoln was very good in a contact sport and is enshrined in the Hall of Fame for that sport. Name the sport.

QUESTION 3

What is the relevance of the phrase 'You sockdologizing old man-trap' in the life of Lincoln?

QUESTION 4

If the famous President's memorial is in Washington DC, where is his resting place?

QUESTION 5

Which national holiday did he establish in 1863 during the Civil War?

QUESTION 6

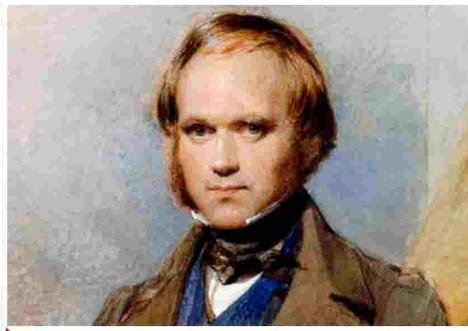
On May 22, 1849, Lincoln was given Patent No. 6469 and is the only U.S. President to have a patent. What did he devise?

QUESTION 7

Apart from Kansas, which two States were admitted to the Union during Lincoln's presidency?

QUESTION 8

What does the landmark 13th Amendment, passed by Congress shortly before Lincoln's death, deal with?



Visual question:
Name this legendary English scientist who was born on the same date and year as Lincoln.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. India won gold in this team sport in the first Asian games held in New Delhi. **Ans: Football**

2. Australia beat Germany in the final of this world cup held in India in 2010. **Ans: Hockey**

3. Name the player who won his first title beating Viswanathan Anand in 2013 in Chennai. **Ans: Magnus Carlsen**

4. This person won the race when India last hosted a Formula 1 race on this circuit. **Ans: Sebastian Vettel; Buddh International Circuit**

5. India is preparing to host the Commonwealth Games again here in this year. **Ans: Ahmedabad; 2030**

Visual: Name this Manchester City and England star. **Ans: Phil Foden**

Early Birds: Tamal Biswas Arun Kumar Singh; Abhirup Bose; Yeshu Pandey; Syed Sufyan Kirmani

Word of the day

Presentiment:

a feeling of evil to come

Synonyms:

fobbing, premonition
Usage: The lawyer had a presentiment that the judge would dismiss the case.

Pronunciation:

newsth.live/presentimentpro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/pri'zen.ti.mənt/

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

OUR VIEW



ISTOCKPHOTO

Can we police AI fakes in the age of whizzy tech?

Rules have been tightened to crack down on AI generated deepfakes and stamp out a rising menace on social media. Ensuring their success, however, may prove to be quite a challenge

In the absence of a dedicated law to police the abuse of fast-evolving AI and Generative AI—systems that can impersonate humans, fabricate reality and operate on their own—India's government had initially opted for calibrated restraint. Its AI Governance Guidelines and Digital Personal Data Protection Act were designed as 'techno-legal' frameworks to test corporate compliance, encourage innovation and nudge companies to embed safety into their systems. That phase seems to be giving way to a firmer stance. Under the amended IT Rules of 2026, online platforms must remove non-consensual sexual imagery (deepfakes included) within two hours of a complaint's receipt. Other unlawful content must go within three hours of a government or court order. AI-generated content must be clearly labelled. Platforms that offer AI tools must prevent the creation or spread of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), explosives-related content and fraudulent deepfakes. User complaints must be resolved within seven days.

India is not alone in tightening oversight. Germany's NetzDG gives platforms 24 hours to remove 'manifestly illegal' content. The EU's Digital Services Act demands expeditious action and immediate compliance with court or trusted-flagger orders, though without a clock countdown. Australia's eSafety regime allows 24-hour takedown notices in serious cases. India's deadlines are particularly strict. However, while their intent is laudable, the challenge lies in execution. While large platforms do use automated systems to detect CSAM and some synthetic content, our linguistic diversity, cultural complexity and sheer content volume make contextual judgement of fraudulent posts difficult. With just two hours to act, platforms

might drop stuff first and inspect it later; so false-positive cases could rise, even as restoration appeals lag removals. Second, labelling AI-generated content sounds straightforward, but much content is edited and re-posted across platforms; tools mandated to 'prevent misuse' must be able to tell legitimate satire, art or political commentary apart from malicious posts. Third, traceability is hard to achieve. Metadata can be stripped or altered. Basic 'Exif' data, like time-stamps and device IDs, can be snipped out or faked. Watermarks can be degraded through compression, cropping or pixel edits. Open-source models can be trained not to embed any detectable markers. That said, cryptographic provenance chains, platform monitoring and legal deterrence may raise the cost of deception. But as AI improves, these safeguards may not suffice. Moreover, a traceability device meant to catch fraudsters could be misused as a surveillance tool to expose whistleblowers or citizens sharing lawful but socially sensitive content. This is a big challenge in a country where what's satire to one user may look like blasphemy to another. We need a crackdown only on what's clearly unlawful—like CSAM, explicit non-consensual imagery, direct incitement to violence and outright fraud. Freedom of expression must not get squashed.

None of this argues against regulation, since AI harms are real. Deepfakes can be ruinous and CSAM is depraved, whether it's AI-generated or real. Deepfake tools can clone faces and voices convincingly enough to perpetrate big frauds. No government can stand idle. But the success of the new rules will depend less on clock timers and more on the clarity of definitions, transparency of enforcement, independence of oversight and credibility of false-alarm redressal.

A photo last month of Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi wearing a bright electric blue outfit and playing the drums alongside Korean President Lee Jae Myung is only one of many of Japan's prime minister to go viral. The image is also remarkable because Korea and Japan have long had a strained relationship. The camaraderie between the two leaders playing a K-pop song radiated out of the photograph in a manner akin to speech balloons. Takaichi's hands were above her shoulders, as if she had just won a 100-metre sprint.

In a sense, the Japanese prime minister has. As the victor of an internal party vote to become prime minister in October, Takaichi lacked a popular mandate and was momentarily enfeebled after her, when she lost the support of a coalition partner of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Nonetheless, when she was asked in parliament in November what Japan would do if Taiwan was threatened by a blockade by Beijing, she responded by saying Japan would have to intervene.

This turned out to be both politically savvy and a forthright statement of her views. Takaichi began to climb in opinion polls. Beijing's usual playbook of intolerance and language and economic bullying in response played to her advantage as Takaichi refused to soften her statement even as China clamped down on Japanese seafood imports and sought to limit supplies of rare earths to Japan. The 61-year-old in January called for a snap election, well ahead of schedule, and led the LDP to a two-thirds majority, a margin never achieved in Japan's post-World War II history.

In a matter of months, Takaichi has seized the advantage from Japan's old guard of male politicians, in a manner not dissimilar to the way Indira Gandhi established control over the Congress Party in 1969. And her star quality with young voters is reminiscent of the cult that surrounded John F. Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy in the early 1960s. Takaichi has a 90% approval rating with those under 30. Everything she uses, from her unremarkable black handbag to a metallic pink pen, has started to sell out. The manager of the Hamano handbag factory in Nagano sounded somewhat baffled by the huge demand from young women. There is now a nine-month wait for that tote bag,

This is markedly an election victory, as with so many these days, determined in part by popularity fanned by social media. But Takaichi's challenges are likely to be old-fashioned. Her government must find a way to keep inflation in check and resist the urge to put pressure on the Bank of Japan (BoJ) to keep interest rates low.

Her promise to suspend a consumption tax of 8% on food for a couple of years could also boost consumption across the board. But it would amount to forgoing 6% of Japan's total tax intake at a time when there is concern about its fiscal position. On 20 January, the day after Takaichi called for the election saying she was also seeking a mandate for fiscal expansion, the Japanese bonds showed investors were getting concerned. Yields on 30- and 40-year bonds tightened.

Takaichi is also expected to move quickly to militarize Japan. This is long overdue, but it will inevitably add to Japan's fiscal deficit. While developed world debt has risen

sharply in the past few years, Japan's is the highest of them all as a percent of GDP. And, as *The Economist* noted in a recent article, it is no longer true that Japan's debt story is a domestic drama alone. The market segment that sold off bonds with 10-year to 40-year maturities in January is more than half owned by foreign investors, up from less than a quarter a decade before the covid pandemic.

The BoJ, meanwhile, wants to keep inflation in check by raising interest rates. This puts it and the prime minister potentially on a collision course. In a rare missstep since she took over, Takaichi opined that she thought raising interest rates would be 'stupid'. Befitting Japan, this will likely besettled decorously, but it ascented withouth

its bond market derailed, foreign investors will make their opinions count. Unlike her immediate predecessors whose tenures fell short of the four-year term of the lower house, Takaichi now has a full term ahead of her. This means she will need to carve out a working relationship

with Chinese President Xi Jinping. As its first attempt at intimidating Takaichi backfired spectacularly, Beijing will have to devise a different strategy. Responding to US President Donald Trump's warm congratulations this week, Takaichi praised the "limitless" alliance between the two countries. In another achievement, like Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in Italy, she appears to have built a stable and cordial relationship with the unpredictable US leader.

Meanwhile, corporate Japan is starting to transform itself in a manner akin to its politics. Major corporations are giving promotions based on ability rather than seniority and offering outsiders large pay hikes to join. Many are adding leverage says Jesper Koll, a former JP Morgan managing director who has lived in Japan for decades, and banks are forcing zombie companies to close. The country has been working around its rapidly ageing population by granting more than 1,200 work visas a day for the past couple of years, up 30%. Women are joining the workforce in larger numbers.

Taken together, this is a 21st century equivalent of the Meiji Restoration. And all the more remarkable because this potential turnaround is led by a leader who plays the drums and totes an iconic handbag.

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS

Rags-to-riches stories often have more to them than what we hear

Entrepreneurs are often from privileged backgrounds rather than supposedly humble beginnings



DEVINA MEHTA

is founder of First Global and author of 'Money, Myths and Mantras: The Ultimate Investment Guide'. Her X handle is @devinamehta

In hindsight, it is easy to call it loan or equity investment, but we know how much due diligence would have gone into these. Economists Ross Levine and Rona Rubenstein of the University of California at Berkeley did a study in 2013 that looked for shared traits of US entrepreneurs and found that most were Caucasian, male and highly educated. 'If one does not have money in the form of a family with money, the chances of becoming an entrepreneur drop quite a bit,' Levine said in an interview.

Nor is this a US phenomenon. A study by Israel's ministry of finance reported in *The Guardian* said, 'There is a strong connection between your parent's income and your chances of becoming a startup entrepreneur, with those from a strong financial background having a higher chance of becoming entrepreneurs.'

This study, which used demographic, academic and financial data from Israeli entrepreneurs aged 25-35 and their families, found that parental income was the most important factor determining the likelihood of starting a business. It also found that even those who scored lower on math tests but came from a family with higher income and wealth had a bigger chance of becoming entrepreneurs.

The 'merit' argument that anyone can make it always tries to downplay privilege because those who make it usually have it. How does privilege work? Let me count the ways.

The first obvious one is quality education. For example, Bill Gates' school was one of a handful in the world with a computer back in the 1960s. Who your parents are and what they can afford is usually also a determinant of the university you go to—never mind whether you won't be out on the streets if the venture fails. Musk comes to mind. 'Having strong financial support can help someone who is interested in setting up a startup and providing a financial safety net in the case of failure,' said the report.

Then there are networks. Gates' mother was on the IBM board, for example, which gave him his first big break with MS-DOS. Privileges are of many kinds and operate in many other fields too, including Bollywood. From Amitabh Bachchan's *Smoke and Ashes*, it is also apparent that most of the 'old money' in

the US, the so-called Boston Brahmin families, owe their initial fortunes to the opium trade of colonial times. There are many rags to riches stories about them. But while Americans going to China were by and large poor, they had something very valuable—wealthy relatives. They were mostly poor nephews and cousins of rich men ready to fund their adventures. That is not very different from venture capital networks today on the US West Coast, where it is nearly impossible for an entrepreneur to even get a proper hearing without 'knowing' somebody in the system.

Occasionally I see on Indian social media people recounting how their parents were poor and their education was funded by someone in the extended family or community. Almost all of them belong to the 'right' caste. And while many underline their lack of wealth, they mostly turn a blind eye to the big enabler in their lives—access.

Of course, not all those with privilege end up world class companies in competitive fields. Privilege may be neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for success, but it is doubtless a starting advantage, including in fund-raising.

Unfortunately most of us refuse to acknowledge our privilege, whether it is class, wealth, caste or gender. Attribution bias nudges us to attribute our successes to ourselves. Buffet has been one of the few exceptions who have acknowledged his birth lottery of being born 'white', American and male.

Even though I did not come from generational wealth, I certainly had enough cushions available when I started my own entrepreneurial journey three decades ago. An education ensuring I could get a job any time I wanted. Parents who would have been more than happy if I had given up working and gone off to do a doctorate. I had options many others did not. The very fact that I grew up as the child of two professors in a home full of books has given me a life-long advantage in a country where many are first generation learners.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

In theory we are all equal before the law. In practice, there are overwhelming privileges that come with winning the birth lottery.

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Japan is reinventing itself under Takaichi's leadership

RAHUL JACOB



is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

A photo last month of Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi wearing a bright electric blue outfit and playing the drums alongside Korean President Lee Jae Myung is only one of many of Japan's prime minister to go viral. The image is also remarkable because Korea and Japan have long had a strained relationship. The camaraderie between the two leaders playing a K-pop song radiated out of the photograph in a manner akin to speech balloons. Takaichi's hands were above her shoulders, as if she had just won a 100-metre sprint.

In a sense, the Japanese prime minister has. As the victor of an internal party vote to become prime minister in October, Takaichi lacked a popular mandate and was momentarily enfeebled after her, when she lost the support of a coalition partner of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Nonetheless, when she was asked in parliament in November what Japan would do if Taiwan was threatened by a blockade by Beijing, she responded by saying Japan would have to intervene.

This turned out to be both politically savvy and a forthright statement of her views. Takaichi began to climb in opinion polls. Beijing's usual playbook of intolerance and language and economic bullying in response played to her advantage as Takaichi refused to soften her statement even as China clamped down on Japanese seafood imports and sought to limit supplies of rare earths to Japan. The 61-year-old in January called for a snap election, well ahead of schedule, and led the LDP to a two-thirds majority, a margin never achieved in Japan's post-World War II history.

In a matter of months, Takaichi has seized the advantage from Japan's old guard of male politicians, in a manner not dissimilar to the way Indira Gandhi established control over the Congress Party in 1969. And her star quality with young voters is reminiscent of the cult that surrounded John F. Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy in the early 1960s. Takaichi has a 90% approval rating with those under 30. Everything she uses, from her unremarkable black handbag to a metallic pink pen, has started to sell out. The manager of the Hamano handbag factory in Nagano sounded somewhat baffled by the huge demand from young women. There is now a nine-month wait for that tote bag,

This is markedly an election victory, as with so many these days, determined in part by popularity fanned by social media. But Takaichi's challenges are likely to be old-fashioned. Her government must find a way to keep inflation in check and resist the urge to put pressure on the Bank of Japan (BoJ) to keep interest rates low.

Her promise to suspend a consumption tax of 8% on food for a couple of years could also boost consumption across the board. But it would amount to forgoing 6% of Japan's total tax intake at a time when there is concern about its fiscal position. On 20 January, the day after Takaichi called for the election saying she was also seeking a mandate for fiscal expansion, the Japanese bonds showed investors were getting concerned. Yields on 30- and 40-year bonds tightened.

Takaichi is also expected to move quickly to militarize Japan. This is long overdue, but it will inevitably add to Japan's fiscal deficit. While developed world debt has risen

sharply in the past few years, Japan's is the highest of them all as a percent of GDP. And, as *The Economist* noted in a recent article, it is no longer true that Japan's debt story is a domestic drama alone. The market segment that sold off bonds with 10-year to 40-year maturities in January is more than half owned by foreign investors, up from less than a quarter a decade before the covid pandemic.

The BoJ, meanwhile, wants to keep inflation in check by raising interest rates. This puts it and the prime minister potentially on a collision course. In a rare missstep since she took over, Takaichi opined that she thought raising interest rates would be 'stupid'. Befitting Japan, this will likely besettled decorously, but it ascented withouth

its bond market derailed, foreign investors will make their opinions count. Unlike her immediate predecessors whose tenures fell short of the four-year term of the lower house, Takaichi now has a full term ahead of her. This means she will need to carve out a working relationship

with Chinese President Xi Jinping. As its first attempt at intimidating Takaichi backfired spectacularly, Beijing will have to devise a different strategy. Responding to US President Donald Trump's warm congratulations this week, Takaichi praised the "limitless" alliance between the two countries. In another achievement, like Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in Italy, she appears to have built a stable and cordial relationship with the unpredictable US leader.

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MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

MINT CURATOR

India's inflation data is about to reflect real consumption better

An updated consumer price index will aid monetary policymakers but there's scope for even more accurate inflation readings



NIRANJAN RAJADHYAKSHA
is executive director at Artha India Research Advisors.

India will at last get a recalibrated inflation measure this week, part of a broader update of Indian economic statistics. The statistics ministry is scheduled to unveil a new consumer price index (CPI) that will replace the one in use for nearly 15 years. The weights in the new CPI will reflect changes in how Indian households allocate money in their monthly budgets to various items of spending such as food, housing, health-care and entertainment. These changes were revealed in the nationwide household expenditure survey conducted a couple of years ago. Shifts in the spending pattern are only to be expected as incomes have grown since 2012. The base year of the CPI will now be 2024.

The overdue move to a new CPI will have important consequences for Indian monetary policymakers, since their main task under the flexible inflation targeting framework is to keep CPI inflation within a range. The results of an earlier household consumer expenditure survey—which provides the statistical structure to measure inflation—due to be released in 2019 were held back by the government, which cited data quality issues. What the delay in updating inflation measurement meant is that Indian monetary policy has for several years been operating with an outdated inflation measure based on consumer spending data more than a decade old. The new series should therefore provide a more accurate picture of what the average Indian household actually spent money on in 2024 (compared to 2012) and give monetary policymakers a better sense of what the country's true inflation situation is.

The most significant change in the new CPI is that the weight assigned to food items will drop from 45.86% to 36.75%, a result of the fact that Indians are now spending a smaller portion of their household incomes on food. International experience shows that rising incomes mean households spend a smaller slice of their total income on food. Discretionary spending becomes more important than a relative sense.

This fundamental shift in the structure of household spending has two consequences for the conduct of monetary policy. *First*, headline inflation will now be more stable than earlier, since volatile food prices will be less important in the overall CPI. *Second*, it would allow the Monetary Policy Committee of the central bank to pay more attention to core inflation in its analysis of price pressures in the economy.

A look at inflation data over the past 10 years shows that headline inflation has moved in sync with core inflation in some periods, while the two have diverged in other periods. The correlation coefficient of these two inflation measures has been 0.71, which shows that both headline inflation as well as core inflation have been influenced



by common factors such as demand conditions, monetary policy, wage growth, profit markups and broader economic cycles. But there are still episodes of divergence (or the missing 0.29) because food price indices are subject to supply shocks such as heat waves or global food prices that are independent of underlying conditions in the domestic economy.

Volatile inflation in headline inflation over the past 10 years, measured in terms of standard deviation, has been almost twice the volatility of core inflation. Headline inflation has bounced about while core inflation has been more stable. Core inflation has broadly been in the range of 4-5% since 2016, while headline inflation has moved between 1.3% and 7.5%. A more stable headline inflation that moves in sync with core inflation will allow monetary policymakers to focus on the state of demand in the economy rather than respond to supply shocks. The structure of modern monetary policy is better designed to deal with the former than the latter.

In a recent paper, economists Ravindra H. Dholakia and Sri Virinchi S. Kadilyala make an interesting case for another measure of consumer price inflation based on the national income accounts used to calculate gross domestic product every quarter, rather than the current method of using data from the household expenditure sur-

vey that is conducted once every decade or more. (Which Inflation Should India Target? Rethinking The Monetary Policy Framework, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 January 2026). The two economists have calculated a "counterfactual CPI" based on the national income accounts in which food has an even lower weight than it does in the new CPI that is about to be launched: 31% as against 36.75%.

Dholakia and Kadilyala also argue that one of the advantages of using their alternative CPI would be that it enables government statisticians to move to a chain-based index of consumer prices, or one in which the weights assigned to various items move dynamically rather than get adjusted at one shot after a decade. In short, a chain-weighted CPI will update the basket of goods and their weights regularly, based on what consumers are actually buying at that time, rather than going by a fixed basket from a base year, as is currently done. This prevents the index from overstating inflation by accounting for consumers switching to relatively cheaper substitutes when prices increase.

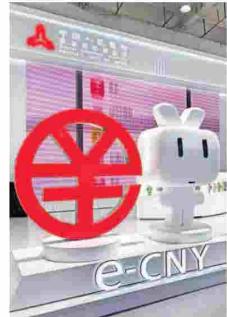
The switch to a new official CPI and discussions about how to measure inflation may seem like abstract statistical debates that interest only a few eggheads, but they have far-reaching consequences for the country's interest rate policy that affects consumers, borrowers, investors and companies.

Is China's yield-paying digital currency taking on the dollar?

Its cross-border linkages could stir a mutiny against the greenback



ANDY MUKHERJEE
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering industrial companies and financial services in Asia.



US dollar stablecoins cannot pay interest but China's CBDC now does.

The highest US tariffs in almost a century have had a muted impact so far on global growth, but Asian policymakers aren't lulled by the calm. They're taking their cues from jittery markets and plotting what appears to be a mutiny against King Dollar. Those searching for evidence of it in payment flows are looking in the wrong place. For years to come, de-dollarization will remain hidden in alterations to financial plumbing. The cumulative effects will take time to show.

With little fanfare, China's e-CNY, its official digital currency, has gone from being interest-free cash to a yield-bearing product of commercial banks. It's a profound change. Until now, the problem with e-CNY adoption was that even Chinese state workers who received their salaries as tokens in e-wallets could immediately swipe them into their bank accounts. Now they don't need to. For them and their banks, e-CNY is no different from a regular deposit account. Payment apps like Alipay and WeChat Pay work with both.

This move won't dent the greenback's dominance: The dollar is the preferred global payments currency with a 50.5% plus share, more than twice that of the euro and way ahead of the yuan's 3%. But an e-CNY that's more widely used in China lowers the threat of further dollarization in a scenario where local savers switch to digital stablecoins. Paying interest on e-CNY is a defensive step because last year's US Genius Act prohibits stablecoin issuers from offering yields. But a moat against stablecoins won't be enough. To take on the dollar's hegemony more directly, China will have to attack it overseas. But outside of Hong Kong, where banks are making yuan-denominated trade finance available to clients in Indonesia and Cambodia, there isn't a deep enough pool of offshore liquidity in the Chinese currency.

Enter mBridge. When I wrote about it 2022, it was just a pilot project of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) and the monetary authorities of China, Hong Kong, Thailand and the UAE. Some of their financial institutions had come together on a shared blockchain where they swapped prototype digital currencies issued by their central banks to settle cross-border claims of their corporate clients.

In 2024, Saudi Arabia joined the experimental payments platform. Yet, it hardly attracted any attention before Russian President Vladimir Putin identified the underlying technology as a tool to circumvent sanctions and potentially undermine the dollar. The BIS withdrew from the

project in 2023, but its partner countries ran with it. According to a recent Atlantic Council report, activity has swelled to more than 4,000 cross-border transactions since inception with a cumulative value of about \$55.5 billion, a 2,500-fold increase from 2022. The e-CNY accounts for more than 95% of the settlement value.

There are reports that mBridge could morph into something larger. India, which has developed its own central bank digital currency, is looking to propose linking the CBDCs of so-called Brics, a grouping of emerging markets, according to *Reuters*. That could be aathmatina in Washington. And since New Delhi has agreed to stop buying Russian oil to get out of the Trump administration's tariff prison, it's hard to say if its enthusiasm for a payments corridor that includes Russia and Iran will last.

Even if a viable anti-dollar coalition takes time to emerge, Beijing will keep pressing. A few years ago, China's President Xi Jinping's emphasis on its need to build a "powerful currency" that's "widely used in international trade, investment and foreign exchange markets, and attain reserve currency status" would have been dismissed by investors as empty boast.

That's no longer the case. Markets are already questioning the dollar's exceptionalism. Looking under the hood of what caused the unusual spike in US bond yields after US President Donald Trump launched his tariff war, New York University professors Viral Acharya and Thomas Laarits conclude that "investors lost confidence specifically in the long-term safety properties of Treasuries while still valuing their near-term benefits." They found evidence of a flight towards gold.

But gold cannot be a payments currency. In the \$9.6 trillion-a-day foreign exchange market, the greenback shows up in 89% of all trades. About two-fifths of this outsize share has been chalked up to its vehicle-currency status: Funds are first converted into dollars and then reconverted into whatever currency the payee's bank account will accept.

An interest-paying e-CNY, settling transactions within China and around the world, will bypass the dollar and Swift messaging entirely. Now that superior plumbing have been invented, it won't be allowed to gather rust.

MY VIEW | ACUTE ANGLE

The return of Dr Strangelove and MAD nuclear logic

SANJOY CHAKRAVORTY



is a professor of geography, environment and urban studies and director of global studies at Temple University.

last a nuclear attack. A survivalist ethos and culture took root. John Lennon sang *Give Peace a Chance*. Stanley Kubrick made the film *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

The first attempts to limit the growth of warheads were the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks that led to several small pacts about first-use and missile delivery capacity but had little impact on total warheads, which reached 38,000 by 1970, 55,000 by 1980 and peaked at 70,000 in 1986. Other agreements such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty to stop the spread of nuclear arms to countries like India, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty tried to prevent the arms race from careening out of control.

After 1986, as a result of the initial reforms in the Soviet Union (*perestroika and glasnost*), the global arsenal started to decline. This reduction took off after the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (Start-I) in 1991, when the Soviet Union became (or started to become) irrelevant. By 2000, total global nuclear warheads had declined to 34,000, a little under half their peak. Start-I expired in 2009 and was followed by New Start in 2010. It is New Start that expired on 4 February and there are few prospects of its revival in the foreseeable

future. Security experts believe that a new arms race is underway.

The world currently has about 12,000 warheads: 4,400 Russian, 3,700 American, 5,600 Chinese, plus sundries like about 170 each in India and Pakistan. To quote the source of this data (ourworldindata.org/nuclear-weapons): "The exact number of countries' warheads is secret, and the estimates are based on publicly available information, historical records, and occasional leaks."

It is tempting to blame the belligerence of specific leaders of 'great powers' for the demise of a process that seemed to be doing its job. But that may be simplistic. Rather, we should look at the conditions that led to the surge followed by its decline to understand what today's situation may imply for the future.

There are three logical foundations of the nuclear arms race. The core logic is what's known as the 'security dilemma', which is a version of concepts like 'cumulative causation' or 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. In a security

dilemma, any move by nation A to increase its weapons capacity is interpreted as aggression by its rival nation B and leads it to increase its capacity; this spurs nation A to further increase its weapons and nation B to make a corresponding move. This circular escalation can go on indefinitely. Second: with nuclear weapons, the logic of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) leads to the belief that if both sides can destroy each other, neither will initiate conflict.

Third:

the economically stronger nation (say, the US) believes that by overspending on weapons, it can bankrupt the weaker nation (the Soviet Union).

In this framework, the world rapidly de-escalated after 1991. A world polarized into two great powers and their camps became a bipolar system that inspired calculations about the 'end of history' (Francis Fukuyama, 1992), a coming 'clash of civilizations' between Christians and Muslims rather than capitalists and communists

(Samuel Huntington, 1996), and a 'new world order' (George H.W. Bush, 1990).

That unipolar world no longer exists. The Russian Federation is back, at least militarily, and there's a new kid on the block, China, whose arsenal is rising quickly. Using the same logic outlined above—especially the security dilemma and MAD—China does not intend to join any nuclear weapons control regime. It asserts its right to self-defence by catching up with the larger caches of its rivals. It is almost inevitable that this will be interpreted as aggression by its rivals and result in escalation of nuclear acquisition. Plus, technical innovations in accuracy, lethality and delivery systems (especially from under-water and space) combined with A.I. capabilities suggest that the world is on the cusp of a new era of nuclear arsenals expansion.

We are in a brand new world order of three great powers (which could become four if Europe is left to fend for itself by the US). Humanity's sustainable capacity for brinkmanship is set to face yet more tests. To mark this moment, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved its metaphorical Doomsday Clock closer to midnight: now just 85 seconds away. Thankfully there will always be tales of sexual morality and identity politics to distract us from existential questions.

{ OUR TAKE }

A manuscript and its discontents

The government should take a call on the publication of General Naravane's memoir

It is not every day that an unpublished manuscript paralyses Parliament for a week, prevents the prime minister from responding to a debate for the first time in two decades, even precipitates a rare show of no-confidence by the Opposition against the speaker. Yet, all of that has transpired in the Lok Sabha over the past week-and-a-half, courtesy former Army chief General (retired) Manoj Mukund Naravane's unpublished memoir *Four Stars of Destiny*.

The debate has played out at two levels. The first is where Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi used an excerpt from the manuscript, published in *Caravan Magazine*, to argue that the government's handling of China's aggression was botched, triggering a furious response from the treasury benches and prompting the Congress leader to brandish what he claimed was a copy of the book. The second is a controversy over how Gandhi accessed the unpublished manuscript, triggering a bizarre whodunit that has featured a police first information report (FIR) over copies of the manuscript circulating on social media and now the invocation of the Official Secrets Act. A clarification by publisher Penguin that no copies were "published, distributed, sold or otherwise made available to the public" either in print or digital form and a cryptic seven-word post by the former Army chief on the status of the book — without commenting on either the controversy or the content that has been quoted, and leaving many questions unanswered — has done little to quell the firestorm.

At the heart of the row is the two-year-delay by the Union ministry of defence in making a decision on Naravane's book, which was submitted for review in early 2024. This newspaper reported on Wednesday that the Army went through the book in detail, recorded its observations on the subjects covered in it, and sent it to the defence ministry to take the final call. Since then, the ministry has not announced its decision. This stance is unsustainable. The government should decide if the book is worth publication *in toto* or if certain portions need to be expunged in view of strategic concerns. Its delay has created a surreal situation where the police are probing the leak of an unpublished manuscript announced in 2023. The government often accuses the Opposition of being cavalier on matters of strategic importance. It must also understand that national security cannot be run by pocket veto.

Back to electoral democracy in Dhaka

Bangladesh is at the crossroads. The outcome of Thursday's election will decide not just who gains office in Dhaka but also influence the diplomatic balance in the subcontinent. Since street mobilisations ousted the Awami League government and paved the way for a caretaker administration under Muhammad Yunus in August 2024, Bangladesh has drifted into a phase characterised by political uncertainty and mob violence, especially against minorities. Yunus' appalling remarks against India, made in China, revealed his inexperience in statecraft and led to a downward spiral in relations with Delhi. The caretaker administration failed to usher in the political reforms but tried to erase the legacy of Sheikh Mujib and disband the Awami League and was successful in getting former prime minister Sheikh Hasina convicted of "crimes against humanity". All this has led to the mainstreaming of Islamist agendas and the return of revisionist history that obscures Pakistan's role in the 1971 genocide. The incoming government in Dhaka will have to negotiate this messy state of affairs and guide politics back to the middle ground and in step with the reality of its neighbourhood.

The pivot may be happening already. The Bangladesh National Party, the frontrunner to win the election, has moderated its views on India. On its part, New Delhi has indicated its willingness to do business with BNP: External affairs minister S Jaishankar's presence at the funeral of Begum Khaleda Zia, the matriarch of BNP, contained a clear message of outreach. Even the Jamaat-e-Islami has moderated its views and has reached out to the minority communities. But both parties are likely to maintain warm relations with Islamabad. The US is also keen to make its presence felt in Dhaka — the two countries have agreed on a trade deal — in view of the growing Chinese presence there. For New Delhi, the primary consideration will be to secure its strategic interests, considering the long border. History and geography demand that both countries maintain at least cordial relations.

People at the heart of Dhaka-Delhi ties

A sustainable reset is about insulating bilateral ties from partisan cycles and investing in the everyday networks of trade, transit, and people

The India-Bangladesh relationship is experienced before it is debated — in bus routes and border queues, families crossing for trade, and goods that travel across hundred kilometers rather than across oceans. It is rooted in shared history, language, and geography; and, something rarer, fighting together for an outcome that reshaped the region. In 1971, India's support for Bangladesh's Liberation War became a foundational reference point in New Delhi's neighbourhood diplomacy. That legacy matters, but it cannot manage today's expectations.

More than five decades of Indo-Bangladesh relations have been closely aligned with Sheikh Mujib's rule. The capture of 1975, following Mujib's assassination, changed the rhythm of relations. Under Ziaur Rahman (mid-1970s to 1981), Bangladesh pursued a diversified foreign policy, seeking wider strategic space, not hostility toward India, but less of the post-1971 reality.

Then, under the military ruler, general Hussain Muhammad Ershad

(1982-1990), an alumnus of India's National Defence College, ties were steadily built on pragmatism, engagement, and trust. In 1990, ushered in parliamentary democracy in 1991, but politics thereafter in Bangladesh became dominated by intolerant rivity and recurring disputes over electoral credibility. As successive governments rebranded foreign policy, relations with India increasingly became entangled in domestic political contestation.

India often read the Sheikh Hasina era as a predictable period of stability, particularly on security issues. Many in Bangladesh felt the Indian government, with one party came at the expense of their country. After the upheaval of 2024, that narrative turned combustible, illustrating how ties anchored to a party rather than to the people can become vulnerable to regime change, street anger, and misinformation. When Dhaka's politics become a zero-sum contest where "pro-India" and "anti-India" labels replace policy debate, bilateral relations tend to harden along partisan lines. Closeness to one regime is followed by strained ties under another.

Bangladesh will vote in a crucial election today. With the Awami League banned from contesting the elections, it is likely that either the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Tarique Rahman — the son of the recently deceased former PM, Khaleda Zia — or the Jamaat-e-Islami, led by Shafiqul Rahman, is likely to lead the next govern-

ment in Dhaka. The former is a more liberal, progressive, and centrist party, while the latter is more to the right, with an emphasis of family values" and a controversial history of opposing the War of Liberation in 1971.

A new government with a credible mandate, irrespective of identity and ideology, gives New Delhi a unique opportunity to reboot relations and start working towards a new era where relations are anchored in the people and policies as opposed to a person and one party.

Continuity in cooperation is as important to keep borders safe and secure. India's South and Northeast connectivity agendas should not become hostage to partisan swings. While a pragmatic, policy-focused nationalism can strengthen bargaining on both sides, both must refrain from grievance-based rhetoric that can turn diplomacy into permanent theatre.

While India has been emphasising "free, fair, inclusive and credible elections" in Bangladesh, many in Dhaka question the fairness of the elections. Addressing that perception does not require megaphone diplomacy but even-handedness.



A new government with a credible mandate, irrespective of identity and ideology, gives New Delhi a unique opportunity to reboot relations. AFP

Addressing that perception does not require megaphone diplomacy but even-handedness.

Ties need to be rebuilt once elections are over. The stakes are visible in everyday economic. Bilateral trade was at \$23.5 billion in FY24, with India exporting \$12 billion to Bangladesh. That interdependence is reflected in the shared infrastructure — the rail lines and passenger trains, bus services, inland waterways, and port arrangements that route cargo via Chittagong and Mongla, between India's Northeast and the rest of its territory.

Energy is another backbone of India-Bangladesh ties, with the latter importing about 1.60 MW of electricity from India. The connectivity has also expanded with cross-border services such as the Maitree, Bandhan, and Mitali Express trains, additional freight rail routes, and strengthened inland water transit and road links — developments that have deepened economic integration and strengthened people-to-people ties.

The same is true of the service sector, especially health care, which makes the relationship important for many Bangladeshi families. In 2024, around 482,000 Bangladeshis travelled to India for medical treatment, accounting for 50-60% of India's medical tourism inflow. This is a win-win: Bangladeshi families get access to care and services, and India gains revenue and demand for its hospitals, hotels, and local businesses.

A sustainable reset is not about Bangladesh being "friendly" or India being "generous". It is about insulating cooperation from partisan cycles and investing in the everyday networks of trade, transit, energy, and people that keep the relationship running. The election will decide who governs, but the harder test is what kind of relationship evolves in the morning after.

Neighbours sharing a 4,000-kilometre border can only do so on the basis of engagement. If New Delhi wants a partnership that does not sway with a change of government, it must invest where it lasts longest and put into practice what Indian officials have repeatedly underlined: "People are the main stakeholders" in India-Bangladesh ties.

Syed Munir Khasru, based in Dhaka, is senior director, IPAG India. A think tank. The views expressed are personal



Syed Munir
Khasru

Regulating responsibly for an AI-mediated world

India's digital public sphere is at a defining moment. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in the generation and manipulation of audio, visual, and audio-visual content, have become a major source of information that is manipulated, consumed, and created. While these technologies expand the possibilities of expression, creativity, and accessibility, they also introduce new risks that touch directly upon individual dignity, social harmony, and constitutional values.

Recognising this, the Union government has strengthened the legal and policy architecture governing digital intermediaries. Recent amendments to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, read alongside the India AI Governance Guidelines, 2025, represent a clear direction of travel. In November 2025, India will adopt a coherent ethical framework for AI — grounded in obligations to address concrete harms, supported by policy principles to guide responsible AI adoption. Together, these instruments signal a clear governing intent: Technological advancement must proceed within a framework that preserves transparency, accountability, and the dignity of the citizen.

The amended Intermediary Rules introduce, for the first time, a precise and operational definition of "synthetically generated information". The definition is not limited to content that is artificially manipulated or algorithmically created or altered in a manner that appears authentic or indistinguishable from reality, while expressly excluding routine, good-faith activities such as technical editing, accessibility enhancements, educational or research material, and legitimate creative use.

This definitional clarity performs an important legal function. By expressly bringing synthetically generated information within the scope of "information" for due diligence, grievance redressal, and intermediary responsibility, the law creates a clear legal framework that can be addressed within the existing statutory framework, rather than left to informal moderation practices. Equally significant is the explicit clarification that good-faith actions taken by intermediaries through automated tools or other reasonable technical measures, do not undermine statutory protections. This reinforces a compliance-enabling environment while preserving the right of such entities to be held responsible.

The most consequential shift in the amended framework lies in its movement from reactive moderation to ex ante governance. Intermediaries that enable or facilitate the creation or dissemination of synthetically generated information are now required to deploy reasonable and appropriate technical measures to prevent the circulation of unlawful content at the point of creation or dissemination. Where synthetically generated content is lawful, the Rules mandate clear and prominent labelling, supported by persistent metadata or other provenance mechanisms, to the extent technically feasible. The modification, suppression, or removal of such content or its expressivity is prohibited.

This techno-legal approach reflects a nuanced regulatory understanding. Rather than relying solely on takedown, it places less emphasis on framing strict transparency as a safeguard of dignity and trust. Citizens are empowered through the ability to distinguish authentic content from synthetic content in real time. It is a recognition of the right to know for citizens.

The amended Intermediary Guidelines also require the intermediaries to periodically and



S Krishnan

Importantly, the guidelines do not displace statutory obligations under the IT Act or the Intermediary Rules. Rather, they provide directional guidance to developers, deployers, and institutions, reinforcing the principles that AI systems, particularly those capable of generating synthetic content, must be designed and deployed with due regard to societal impact and public trust.

India's approach to governing emerging technologies is anchored in constitutional legitimacy and institutional capacity. While the present framework relies on calibrated rule-making and policy guidance, Parliament retains legislative competence to respond to evolving technological realities where required in the public interest. This is not an assertion of regulatory excess but a reaffirmation of democratic stewardship — that good-faith actions taken by intermediaries through automated tools or other reasonable technical measures, do not undermine statutory protections. This reinforces a compliance-enabling environment while preserving the right of such entities to be held responsible.

India's approach to digital regulation has favoured principle-based and proportionate governance built on consultation that preserves innovation while safeguarding rights. The evolving framework for synthetic media exemplifies this approach. By combining definitional precision, ex ante safeguards, mandatory transparency, and ex-post remedies, appellate oversight, and policy guidance for responsible AI, India is strengthening confidence in its digital public sphere.

The challenge posed by synthetic media is ultimately one of trust: That technology will not outpace rights, that platforms will remain accountable, and that institutions will respond effectively to citizens' harm. Empowering users through enforceable procedures, embedding transparency by design, and reinforcing institutional oversight are not competing objectives. They are the foundations of a resilient digital democracy.

anchored in these principles, India's response to synthetic media offers not only a domestic governance solution, but a globally relevant model for democratic, rights-respecting regulation in an AI-mediated world.

S Krishnan is secretary, ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY). The views expressed are personal

| MASOUD PEZESHKIAN | PRESIDENT, IRAN



The high wall of mistrust that the US and Europe have created through their past statements and actions does not allow these talks to reach a conclusion. At the same time, we are engaging ... in dialogue aimed at peace



HT



Religious rights, the courts, and the State

In recent months, Uttar Pradesh has been in the news for troubling reasons. The latest incident comes from Bareilly, where police detained 12 Muslim men for offering namaz (prayers) inside a private home, with the permission of the homeowner. Citing Section 170 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Shastra (which permits warrants on suspicion of a serious offence) the police justified the action on grounds of "public order" and a secret video of the prayer meeting on social media. Evidence pointing to intent or actual threat to public order, however, remained absent.

In September 2025, a controversy began in Kanpur, where police filed FIRs against citizens displaying banners reading "I love Muhammad", sparking widespread protests. The crackdown quickly spread to other districts, leading to a staggering 4,500 Muslims being booked under various charges. In Bareilly, the state escalated matters with violence, including beatings and firing. Most alarming, however, was the open defiance of judicial authority. Despite the Supreme Court's order in *In Re: Directions in the Matter of Demolition of Structures and clear Allahabad High Court directions expressly prohibiting punitive demolitions, properties linked to protesters were bulldozed. These are not administrative overreach; they are constitutional injuries that reveal a system that penalises group identity rather than individual culpability.*

The most prominent case is the one settled by the Constitutional Court in *Insan Faruq v. Union of India* (1993) judgment — a constitutional challenge to the demolition of a mosque non-essential to the practice of Islam — nevertheless conceded that *namaz* may be offered anywhere, including in the open.

And so, before we proceed further, we must ask: What is the role of the judiciary? The law on this settled, so this is not a case of legal ambiguity. Nor are these one-off breaches or the work of a few rogue officers. Treating each incident as an exception would be a mistake — it blunts us to the web of policies, incentives, and institutional silences that enable systemic violations, leaving undis-

turbed the conditions that made them possible in the first place. So, the broader question we must ask is why the system allows, and in some cases facilitates, the differential treatment of communities.

Because these systemic distortions are not theoretical; we see them play out clearly in daily enforcement. Hindu religious practices such as *kirtans, jagrans, Ganesh Chaturthi pandals* and *Kanwar Yatra* processions proceed with administrative ease and regular operation. By contrast, last year the Muzaffarnagar police publicly announced that people offering prayers in the open on Eid will be prosecuted and have their passports and licences cancelled — arbitrary penalties with no statutory basis. Such selective enforcement flouts natural justice and tramples upon key constitutional guarantees including Article 14 and 15 (equality and non-discrimination), Article 19 (fundamental freedoms), Article 21 (life and liberty), and Article 20 (protection against arbitrary punishment). While UP offers the starker example, backed by scale and political support, similar patterns are visible across the country.

When the rule of law is flouted, it doesn't just harm those specifically targeted, it erodes accountability across the board. Police act with impunity, administrations ignore rules, even courts risk being sidelined. And once this precedent is set, the genie cannot be put back in the bottle. When laws are bent against some, they will inevitably be bent against others. The arbitrary fines, permits or demolish properties, harassment that begins with one group will eventually cascade to affect all citizens. In time, freedoms become conditional and institutions lose their power to protect. Ultimately, the rule of law is the spine of modern civilisation; break it and the whole body collapses.

So, where do we go from here? Back to the pillars that always steady us when we falter: Our Constitution and the democratic values that define us. They are the heart of our Republic, a steel that must hold firm. And yet, they are not self-enforcing. They may measure our freedom but cannot endure unless we protect and stand guard over them. This work is ours.

Insirah Vahanvati is a sociopolitical writer and author of *The Fearless Judge*. Ashish Bharadwaj is ex-Dean at BITS Pilani and Jindal Global University. The views are personal



Insirah
Vahanvati



Ashish
Bharadwaj

Freedom from toxicity

Digital censorship has to walk the fine line

The Centre's newly notified rules, which compress social media takedown timelines, underscore the delicate tension between two objectives — the imperative to quash harmful online content swiftly and the risk that expanded enforcement powers could be misused to constrain freedom of speech. Government takedown orders must now be complied with within three hours, a sharp reduction from the previous 36-hour window.

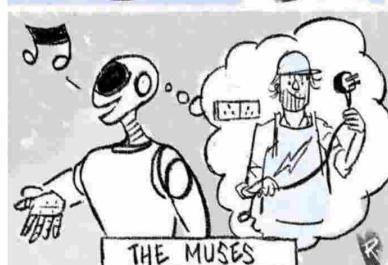
This urgency is not without cause. The recent misuse of Grok, the generative AI tool integrated into X, to create sexualised images of women without their consent exposed a deeply troubling faultline in the social media ecosystem. What made that episode especially disturbing was not merely the abuse itself, but the velocity with which it travelled from fringe experimentation to disturbingly normalised content on one of the world's largest platforms. So, it is difficult to argue against stronger safeguards. Tech platforms cannot assume that safe harbour protections are automatic or permanent. If they benefit from scale, they must shoulder proportionate responsibility.

Yet, the drastic compression of removal timelines raises profound concerns about due process and free expression. While the takedown obligations are meant to apply to content that violates existing laws, incites public disorder and sexual offences, the scope for interpretation remains wide. In practice, there is a legitimate concern that content exposing governance failures could be swept in if authorities characterise it as threatening public order or spreading misinformation. When compliance windows shrink to mere hours, platforms are likely to err on the side of over-removal. The risk of arbitrary enforcement, and the resulting chilling effect, is real. This tension sits uneasily with the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), which struck down Section 66A of the IT Act for being sweeping in scope. The Court affirmed that restrictions on online speech must be narrowly and clearly defined. Regulatory mechanisms that prioritise speed without adequate safeguards may inadvertently revive the very concerns the Court sought to remedy. At the same time, leaving content moderation entirely to private platforms has proven inadequate. Companies such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have repeatedly failed to act swiftly against toxic material.

India's regulatory challenge is therefore not whether to act, but how. The country undeniably needs stronger tools to combat AI-driven abuse and digital harm. But these tools must be anchored in clear statutory standards, transparent processes, and independent review. As India enters an increasingly complex digital era, the guiding principle should remain firm: strengthen protections against online abuse without weakening the constitutional right to speak, dissent, and participate freely in public life. Regulators must build a framework that commands trust from users, platforms, and the courts alike.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



CRR can be used to provide liquidity

WORTH A TRY. The existing liquidity tools at the RBI's disposal have their limits. Cash reserve ratio funds can be used as well. CRR's relevance has declined



MADAN SABNAVIS

One of the expectations from the credit policy was an announcement of a calendar for open market operations. This was against the backdrop of fluctuating liquidity over the last two months or so. True, there is a surplus right now but this can change again in March when the advance tax payments have to be made. The policy has assured supply of liquidity as and when needed, which also includes situations when the government's cash balances with the central bank increase. Such a situation may not arise as the government tends to expedite spending towards March to meet targets. The question to be addressed is: what are the options when it comes to supplying liquidity?

The RBI has several instruments that can be used. All of them have different objectives. The system surplus or deficit is denoted by the balances after RBI interventions through repo rate, VRR (Variable Repo Rate), SDF (Standing Deposit Facility), etc. The net outstanding amount reflects the net state of liquidity. These are the daily operations of the RBI under the liquidity framework. But there are also open market operations where government securities are bought and sold. Further, there are forex swaps which deliver similar results. The merits of each can be examined.

The first tool to be used is the overnight repo or VRR which can go up to 14 days. Their tenures provide clues on how the RBI views the liquidity position. These can be viewed as tools for temporary deficits.

Second, longer term VRR auctions of 90 days have been used which involve providing support for three months. This is more of a medium-term measure. This is something that has been done by the RBI recently, which is a novel move. Besides providing liquidity, it is an assurance that the RBI is notaverse to going in for these longer-term measures.

The issue with any kind of repo operation is that banks need to have excess SLR holdings that can be offered as collateral. In the absence of these securities, banks would be out of the running and have to access the call or the TREP's market.

OPEN MARKET OPERATIONS

The third measure used is open market operations. In 2025 the RBI made regular purchases either on need basis through a calendar, especially during critical times such as quarter-end. OMO purchases involve buying certain securities from banks and providing cash in return. The RBI could choose those securities which are less liquid or those which need to be drawn out of the system to balance the maturity tenures. This again works for banks which have surplus SLR securities to sell.

But the quirk here is not just the SLR ratio. The new regulations ask banks to prepare for the maintenance of LCR (liquidity coverage ratio) which when provided for would require banks to have SLR at least in the region of 24-26 per cent. The present SLR ratio for the

With an effective level of, say, 24 per cent SLR to be maintained, banks may not be able to sell securities to the RBI. Therefore, there can be limits to the use of OMOs.



system is around 26 per cent, and has, interestingly, come down from 28-29 per cent at the beginning of FY26. This is because there have been some aggressive purchases by the RBI.

The challenge really can be that with an effective level of, say, 24 per cent to be maintained, banks may reach the limit and will not be able to sell securities to the RBI. Therefore, there can be limits to the use of OMOs, especially for prolonged periods of time.

Fourth, forex swaps are now quite common where the RBI buys dollars from banks, say \$5 billion, which effectively supplies around ₹45,000 crore. These swaps involve banks buying them back after a period which can be one or three years, or any duration the RBI chooses. This has been effective for sure. There are, however, two considerations here. The first is that when dollars are sold, it can be disruptive, if there is currency volatility, too. The second is that when dollars have to be bought at maturity, liquidity conditions can be tight. In such a case the RBI may have to again provide liquidity through other measures. Therefore, a lot of calibration is needed while mixing these measures.

NOT USED THIS FAR

A measure which has not been used so far is the CRR. In 2006 the regulation which limited the CRR levels was done

away with, and the discretion lies with the RBI. Meanwhile, the relevance of CRR has come down over time. The fact is that no bank is ever allowed to fail in India and the credit goes to the RBI. Therefore, the case of using these CRR balances as a contingency for rescuing the bank is *passé*.

In fact the US, the UK, Hong Kong, Canada, New Zealand, Australia do not have this reserve. The justification is that there are several regulations in place like capital adequacy, LCR, SLR, NSFR (net stable funding ratio) which control banking operations. If this is in place, having the CRR can be debated, because this ratio came in when systems were rudimentary and the only reserve requirements were the CRR and SLR.

The CRR does not earn any interest from the RBI. For the ₹200 lakh crore of deposits outstanding the average cost is, say, around 5 per cent. The amount kept aside for CRR is 3 per cent of NDFTL and that is about ₹7.5 lakh crore. The interest cost incurred is around ₹37,500 crore which is quite high. Lowering this reserve will also help banks to lower their lending rates without a prod from monetary policy. It will be worthwhile to consider the lowering the CRR to provide liquidity, along with other instruments.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

What the PFC-REC merger means for investors

The merger could spawn a power financing behemoth with a loan book of ₹11.5 lakh crore

bl.explainer

Nishanth Gopalakrishnan

Recent news about the merger of PFC and REC has given rise to many questions in the minds of investors. Here's an attempt to address a few of them.

What is the recent announcement regarding the merger of PFC and REC?

On February 6, the boards of power finance PSUs — PFC and REC — accorded in-principle approval for the merger of REC with PFC, eventually liquidating REC post the merger. This follows a proposal by the Finance Minister in her Budget speech that the two NBFCs be restructured for scale and efficiency improvements.

Why is the Centre doing the merger? What are the expected synergies?

Both PFC and REC are identical in many respects. Both are Maharatna PSUs managing a loan book of about ₹6 lakh crore each. Loans to the distribution segment remain the mainstay of their loan books at about 40 per cent each. Both have 12-15 per cent exposure to the fast-growing renewable energy generation segment, and both have forayed into non-power finance such as financing infrastructure projects (ports, roads, etc.).

They are largely identical in the way they operate as well. They raise funds from the market (via bonds and term loans) and lend them to the power

ecosystem — generation, transmission and distribution. Their borrowing profile is also similar — about 55 per cent from domestic bonds, 15-20 per cent from bank loans, and 20-25 per cent from external commercial borrowings. Given the similarities, the combined entity could command a higher bargaining power.

How will the merger impact the business?

The merger could spawn a power financing behemoth with a loan book of ₹11.5 lakh crore. When broken down, the book would have 40 per cent exposure to distribution, 29 per cent to conventional generation, 14 per cent to renewables, 8 per cent to transmission, 6 per cent to infrastructure and logistics and 3 per cent to miscellaneous loans. Categorising the book based on the borrower, loans to state-owned entities and the private sector would make up 80 per cent and 20 per cent of the portfolio, respectively. The GNPA ratio of the combined entity would be 1.3 per cent. These numbers are based on Q3 FY26 financials. Return on assets on a trailing 12-month basis could work out to about 3 per cent.

What does it mean for the existing shareholders of PFC and REC?

The government is the largest shareholder in PFC, with a controlling stake of 56 per cent. PFC, in turn, has a controlling stake in REC. This, after it bought 52.6 per cent of REC's shares from the Government for ₹14,500 crore in 2019, since PFC controls REC, it



SYNERGIES. PFC and REC are largely identical in the way they operate

consolidates REC's books in its consolidated financials. This is the current structure.

The in-principle approval of the boards clearly states that post the merger, PFC would remain a government company (where at least 51 per cent of the paid-up capital is held by the government). However, with a swap ratio of 6 shares of PFC for every 7 shares of REC — worked out based on prices as of February 10, the government's stake in PFC post-merger would drop to around 42 per cent.

To avoid this situation, there are two options for the government. One, direct PFC to carry out a buyback wherein the government does not participate, ensuring minimum public shareholding of 25 per cent. Two, infuse such capital into PFC that its stake remains at least 51 per cent post the transaction. The possibility for the former is remote, as reduction in capital would mean an

adverse impact on the capital adequacy ratio, which in turn can strangle growth. If the government were to opt to infuse capital, it would have to infuse at least ₹32,000 crore to maintain 51 per cent of stake in PFC post the transaction. A third path where the government relaxes the definition of government component to a minimum stake of 26 per cent, for instance, cannot be ruled out.

At the above swap ratio, outstanding shares of PFC will rise by about 33 per cent without the government's capital infusion and will rise by about 56 per cent after such infusion.

Readers need to keep in mind that the above are just indicative numbers and that the final swap ratio can be different.

Do the stocks of PFC or REC become attractive buys after the announcement?

As of February 10, the stocks of PFC and REC trade at low price-to-book value multiples of about 1.1x each.

While there is no denying that valuation should factor in the high concentration to the power sector/state discoms and the lower loan growth in 9M FY26 versus FY25, the stocks still trade at relatively low multiples, considering their profitability.

PFC and REC have delivered RoA of 3 per cent and 2.8 per cent in the 12-month period ending September 2026 (when balance sheets are disclosed). Net NPAs, too, are contained at about 0.2 per cent. For context, SBI trades at 1.8x trailing book value for an RoA of 1.1 per cent (9M FY26 annualised).

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

AI safety rules

This refers to 'Platforms must label AI content, take down flagged material in three hours' (February 11). Harmful or illegal online content must be removed within three hours after it is reported. This helps stop harm from spreading fast. If platforms fail to act, they may face fines. They may also lose legal protection or be blocked. This pushes them to follow the rules. To avoid genuine posts being removed, the government plans appeal systems. It will also run small trial

projects before full use. Platforms must label AI-made content using secure digital tags. These protect user privacy. The rules are not meant to stop new ideas. Regular checks, user feedback and trial results will improve the system. This will ensure that small creators and businesses are fairly treated.

S Balasubramanian

Villupuram, TN

Japan's gusty PM
Apropos, 'A new Japan under Sannei' (February 11). Sannei Taekai's

landslide victory in Japan represents a rare moment of political clarity in an era of drift, reflecting a restless electorate choosing momentum over stagnation. In a political culture defined by caution and consensus, Japan has delivered an emphatic and transformative verdict. As the country's first woman prime minister, Taekai's rise is historic, shattering long-standing glass ceilings and challenging deeply entrenched male-dominated hierarchies. Voters were drawn to her relentless work ethic, modern

political instincts and a charisma absent from Japanese leadership since Shinzo Abe. For India, her leadership opens the prospect of stronger strategic convergence, and deeper defence and technology cooperation.

N Sudhasivam Reddy

Bengaluru

A resilient India Inc
Apropos, 'Good tidings' (February 11), India Inc's resilience in Q3 is encouraging, but the reliance on tax breaks and temporary relief

measures raises concern. Sustainable growth requires deeper reforms: easing compliance for small firms, ensuring timely credit to productive sectors, and investing steadily in infrastructure. Equally important is strengthening labour protections while helping industries adjust to new codes without sudden profit shocks. If policy support is balanced with fiscal prudence, the current momentum can translate into long-term stability.

M Barathi

Bengaluru

Uplifting women farmers

Land ownership, access to credit critical

BY Singh
Harsh Ranjan

The staggering and persistent gender gaps in agriculture and the allied sector globally have led the United Nations to declare 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF).

The gender gaps in the context of rural India are manifested primarily in three forms — land ownership, access to credit, and participation in collectives. Accordingly, the trend of feminisation of the agricultural workforce must be complemented with directed policy and executive focus on closing these gaps.

The exclusion of women from land ownership can be understood from the fact that while women make up more than 40 per cent of the overall agricultural workforce in India (Periodic Labour Force Survey), they account for only about 14 per cent of the overall land holdings and about 1.2 per cent of the overall operated area in the country (Agriculture Census 2015-16).

DEFINITION OF FARMER
How a farmer is defined in official practice has practical implications. It determines who benefits from farmer-centric government schemes, and who does not. To exemplify, as a consequence, women constitute only about 23 per cent of the direct beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN). In practice, those who cultivate or work on the land but do not own it are often excluded from access to agricultural credit, interest subvention for farm loans, and crop insurance. Further, access to subsidised crop inputs is difficult without identification as farmers. Besides, in the event of crop failure, compensation is only given to owners.

Therefore, feminisation of land ownership structure is critical. To this end, ensuring that schemes and programmes centered around 'record of rights' have a built-in gender component, so that names of both spouses can be included in land titles, can go a long way in addressing the gender gap in land ownership.

Further, as a natural consequence of under-representation in land ownership, women farmers tend to face difficulties in accessing institutional credit due to collateral-related limitations.

One approach for addressing



COLLECTIVES. The participation of women farmers is limited

the credit crunch among women farmers could be through catalysing credit appetite by way of capacity building. Initiatives like NABARD are working towards addressing financial literacy gaps through Financial Literacy and Awareness Programmes. The RBI through the Depositor Education and Awareness Fund (DEAF) is also working on bridging this gap.

There also needs to be a focus on credit intensification through skilling, technological enablement, and capacity building for women farmers. The Government is driving credit uptake via skill development through Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs), and schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana.

Further policy support may be explored in the form of enabling targeted and focussed credit delivery to make it more impactful.

The third critical gender gap relates to limited participation of women farmers in collectives. Collectivisation or aggregation of women producers will help in consolidating resources, boosting operational efficiency through economies of scale, while also adding to the bargaining power of the individual producer members. These goals can be met with the promotion of cooperative societies or farmer producer organisations (FPOs) or companies focused on women farmers.

As the feminisation of agriculture deepens, it is essential to complement this trend with institutional recognition and support. Only then can India unlock the full strength of its women farmers to drive a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable second Green Revolution. Let us harness the women farmers' dividend in IYWF 2026.

Singhal is Chief General Manager, and Ranjan is Manager, at NABARD, Ahmedabad. Views are personal



VISHNU VENUGOPALAN

In the seminal essay, *I, Pencil* an ordinary pencil is used to reveal an extraordinary fact that no single person on earth knows how to make a pencil entirely on their own. From the wood and graphite to the machines and transport, its creation relies on countless people's skills and decisions spread across countries, most of whom will never meet.

Over the modern industrial era, dominant ideas about how emerging economies should grow have shifted as global conditions changed. Import-substituting industrialisation dominated the post-war decades and delivered early industrial capabilities in countries such as Brazil, India, and Mexico, before running into scale, efficiency, and external balance constraints.

From the late twentieth century onwards, a different consensus gained ground involving attracting foreign investment, integrating into global value chains (GVCs), and relying on learning spillovers to drive scale and productivity. In a heavily globalised and relatively stable world order, this approach delivered substantial growth and employment.

As Richard Baldwin has argued, globalisation has unfolded in waves of unbundling. The first separated production from consumption, the second unbundled stages of production across borders and the current phase increasingly unbundles tasks rather than industries.

The implication is clear. The distinction that now matters is not whether a country participates in supply chains but which tasks it performs. Apple's supply chain tells a far larger story. Spanning 748 manufacturing locations across 28 countries and 188 supplier firms, Apple's supply chain did not include India in 2013.

Still, by 2023, India had entered the network, with more than 10 facilities in official disclosures and over 20 in the pipeline according to independent estimates.

This shift was driven not merely by cost competitiveness, but by the convergence of firm strategy, geopolitics, and policy intent.

Yet most of the value in this ecosystem still lies beyond assembly, underscoring how much upgrading remains to be done.

The Economic Survey of India 2025-26 offers insights into the way forward for India by highlighting strategic indispensability, which means occupying positions in global production networks that are difficult to bypass or substitute as a core principle. Moving up the value chain often requires building the capabilities that allow firms

How to move up the value chain

PATH AHEAD. India should occupy positions in global production networks that are difficult to bypass or substitute



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

to internalise higher value tasks over time.

This challenge has acquired urgency as supply chains localise under the pressure of geopolitics, technology controls and resilience concerns.

What then does it take to move up the value chain?

First, task focused industrial policy. Instead of targeting sectors in the aggregate, policy must adjust to a world where production is fragmented into tasks. Value now sits in specific functions that enable systems integration and form choke-points in global production networks.

The goal is not perfect foresight, but disciplined discovery, using export incentives, capability-linked procurement, standards to nudge learning and similar policy levers. Support and incentives must be conditional on firms internalising more complex tasks over time and not merely expanding output.

Second, deepening backward GVC participation. India's limited share in global manufacturing value added stems from weak backward linkages, particularly its limited role in importing intermediates and components for export oriented production.

India's industrial ambition will depend critically on how well economic and social infrastructure are planned together

Evidence shows that for labour rich economies, such integration initially raises foreign value addition but delivers higher domestic value addition and employment over time through scale effects. Integration, not insulation, is the pathway to upgrading.

Third, cluster-led scale. Knowledge intensive tasks thrive on proximity. International experience from China's Greater Bay Area to Vietnam's key economic regions shows that industrial success depends on concentration, connectivity, and dense ecosystems. For India, this means that industrial clusters cannot be treated as standalone industrial estates.

They require deliberate regional planning that integrates social infrastructure such as housing, transport, healthcare, and education. India's industrial ambition will depend critically on the strength and governance of its clusters, and on how well economic and social infrastructure are planned together, not merely on national or sub-national level fiscal incentives.

Fourth AI-services-manufacturing convergence. Modern manufacturing is inseparable from services such as design, logistics, finance, software, and data support. Moving up the value chain, therefore, requires treating services not as a residual sector, but as a core pillar of industrial strategy.

This is also where India's comparative advantage can be leveraged more deliberately. Logistics offers an illustrative case. Nearly 41 per cent of

India's total logistics cost is driven by material handling, storage, and warehousing, making these activities highly susceptible to automation and AI adoption.

The challenge is not only to upgrade capabilities, but to anticipate and manage the labour disruptions that this convergence will inevitably bring.

Finally, economic statecraft with institutional capacity. As the Economic Survey notes, reducing the cost of capital depends as much on productivity, exports and surplus generation as on finance.

That requires regulatory coherence, logistics efficiency, trade facilitation and sustained investment in R&D and skills. Industrial policy must therefore operate as a continuous problem solving function, anchored in a capable and adaptive entrepreneurial state capacity rather than as a one time policy intervention.

Moving up the value chain is neither automatic nor assured. In a global economy where production is sliced into tasks and value accrues unevenly across borders, power and influence, the challenge is first and foremost about producing the right things, and only then about producing them better and smarter.

For India, the real test is whether it can build capabilities that move it beyond participation and towards indispensability in global supply chains.

The writer is an IAS officer and former Fellow at Harvard University

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY

February 12, 2006

Dabhol dues: High-level team headed for Oman

With the erstwhile Dabhol project's dues to Oman threatening to derail fresh gas procurement for restarting operations at the station, the Centre has scheduled the visit of a high-level team to Oman next week to hammer out a settlement of the dues to the value of a fresh gas supply agreement.

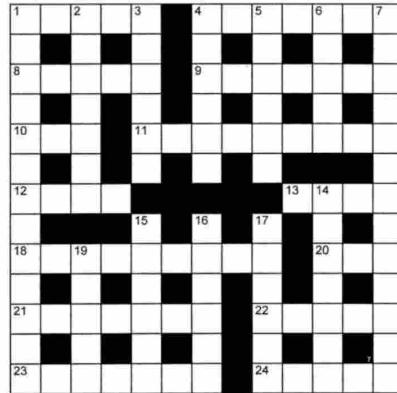
Cipla to raise ₹882 cr; acquisitions on its radar

Acquisition is possibly on the radar for the estimated ₹2,400-crore drug company Cipla. Cipla has received an in-principle approval from its board of directors to raise about ₹200 million (an estimated ₹882 crore) for capacity expansion and possible acquisition, the company's Joint Managing Director, Mr Amar Lulla, said.

Court allows SMS cricket updates

The Madras High Court today permitted SMS across the country on the One-day international cricket matches being played between India and Pakistan. The Court said if its interim injunction restraining the SMS on the ODIs was vacated, it would not affect the service providers or the firm which had acquired the restraint order.

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EASY

CROSS

- Correct (5)
- Released hold on (7)
- Circus entertainer (5)
- Of the Pope's cathedral church (7)
- To weary, disgust (3)
- Highly detailed, complicated (9)
- Separate article in enumeration (4)
- Dismissal, depressed (4)
- Globe or Jerusalem vegetable (9)
- Point of a lace (3)
- Point of time (7)
- Milk-container (5)
- Irritated, heckled (7)
- Get clothed (5)
- Squid (8)
- Rebuked (10)
- Athlete (11)
- Toying (14)
- Adverb (18)
- Bogus (19)
- Marxist (21)
- Reserve (23)
- Beech (24)
- Commentator (25)
- Barre (20)
- Robot (22)
- Sac (23)
- 24

DOWN

- Act of accusing in return (13)
- Summer visitor to holiday resort (7)
- Sore to the touch (6)
- Hundred-cents coin (6)
- Act of choosing (6)
- Shirt or coat with hood (5)
- Small auxiliary motors (6-7)
- Salad plant (7)
- Hasty, untidy handwriting (6)
- Sank billiard ball (6)
- Enclosed in paling (6)
- Flavour (5)

NOT SO EASY

CROSS

- It is one's entitlement to be on the conservative side (5)
- No longer in the team for having missed a catch (7)
- White-face left for the right symbol of monarchy (5)
- Subsequently, an appearance by the papal church (7)
- It will annoy one to be put among the shirkers (3)
- Enlarge on details of tale a bore might put about (9)
- Piece of news one came across in reverse (4)
- Somewhat obscene athlete at university (4)
- Chariot turning to half take Jerusalem perhaps (9)
- Label it a game children can play (3)
- Sort of coffee stain made by the National Trust (7)
- In one's mind turn over ideas of how to make butter (5)
- Goaded out of Eden, went ahead of the others (7)
- Put vinaigrette on 14 and get the lines straight (5)
1. Counter-charge makes minor react in one way (13)
2. Summer visitor might take last remaining locker (7)
3. For it to be legal a note must be readily chewed up (6)
4. Rod all that can be produced for a buck (6)
5. A choice of pin too awkward to make (6)
6. Father holding chest in garment with a hood (5)
7. Auxiliary motors with keys, in end, gone astray (6-7)
14. It wasn't this iceberg that sank the Titanic (7)
15. Hastily write out laws involving credit (6)
16. Being condensed, took a shot at it (6)
17. Played with the foil as one handled things that were hot (6)
19. Try a little breakfast as temptation to it (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2614

ACROSS 1. Munificence 8. Squid 9. Rebuked 10. Athlete 11. Lance 12. Toying 14. Adverb 18. Bogus 19. Marxist 21. Reserve 23. Beech 24. Commentator 25. Barre 20. Robot 22. Sac

DOWN 1. Miscalc 2. Naughty 3. Fudge 4. Carpet 5. Nobbled 6. Elk 7. Cadre 13. Nostrum 15. Evident 16. Butcher 17. Impede 18. Barre 20. Robot 22. Sac

The Editorial Page

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2026

♦ The Indian EXPRESS

— FOUNDED BY —

RAM NATH GOENKA

— IN 1932 —

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL.

No-trust is no answer, onus on Speaker

WITH OPPOSITION MPs giving notice for a no-confidence motion against Speaker Om Birla on Tuesday, the question is: Is this an answer? In a climate of polarisation, amid repeated adjournments of the House, the Opposition has a set of grievances that are legitimate. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi was not allowed to complete his speech on the motion of thanks on the President's address, the rulebook was waved to silence him when he tried to read from the unpublished memoirs of a former Army chief. Nor was this an isolated instance — even earlier, rules have been interpreted to discourage debate, rather than encourage it. This was followed by the Speaker suspending eight Opposition MPs for the rest of the session, even as he let BJP MPs get away with similar conduct. And then, Speaker Birla said he had advised the Prime Minister against attending the Lok Sabha because of "credible information" that Congress MPs would create an "unprecedented incident" after reaching the PM's seat — this, even by the standards of the current political exchange, stretched credulity. So yes, the Speaker's conduct has invited criticism. But no, a no-confidence motion is not a prudent response to it.

The no-confidence motion against the Speaker is an instrument sparingly used — only thrice so far in post-Independence parliamentary history, and it did not succeed in unseating the Speaker even once. No-confidence motions were more recently moved in the Rajya Sabha against Deputy Chairman Harivansh and Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar, but both motions were rejected. Of course, the numbers game favours the ruling party. But a no-confidence motion against the presiding officer is not an answer also because it signals a breakdown of the system for manoeuvre for both sides. In the current situation, the Opposition faces a government nearly two years into its third term, more than three years remaining. Having ratcheted up the threat, it needs to where it can go from here.

Has it done its own work in the House, has it used its space in Parliament effectively and wisely, coordinating with allies and presenting a united front? If it finds its voice stifled, if it finds that less and less legislation is being debated or being sent to standing committees for scrutiny, it needs to find a way out politically. Walking out or name-calling is no substitute for strategy. As for the Speaker, the onus is on him — and his office — to earn the confidence of those in the Opposition benches, motion or no motion.

Epstein files force a reckoning for Starmer

A SONG from the Labour Party's 1997 general election campaign in the UK, which would see Tony Blair storm to power with 418 seats out of 659, is still widely remembered: "Things can only get better." It captured a mood of optimism, a decisive departure from a scandal-ridden, 18-year-old Conservative government. One of the architects of the New Labour project was Peter Mandelson, who came with his own scandals that would force him to resign from the cabinet twice in the next four years. Fourteen years after New Labour's fall — after Brexit, a series of prime ministers fell like dominoes, there was economic stagnation, public services in crisis, and the return of "Tory sleaze" — Keir Starmer led Labour back to power on a promise of national renewal. In February 2025, Starmer appointed Mandelson ambassador to the US, even though it was known that he was close to the late child sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. As a fuller picture of Mandelson's association with Epstein began to emerge, he was dismissed in September 2025. And now, further revelations — including that Mandelson shared sensitive government information with Epstein — have shaken Starmer's government to its core and led to calls for his resignation.

The crisis comes amid global turmoil and possibly the biggest realignment in British politics since Labour rose to topple the Liberals 100 years ago. Now, the system's other pole, the Conservatives, face the prospect of being eclipsed by Reform UK. Starmer's own efforts to appear the right on issues such as immigration have only succeeded in alienating the left, already marginalised by factional warfare within Labour. While Starmer himself will lead the party into the next election, the latest YouGov data shows Labour polling at just 18 per cent, compared to Reform's 27 per cent; 48 per cent of British adults want the PM to stand down — less than two years after he won 400-plus seats.

The silver lining is that it shows a country where accountability still appears to exist, where powerful men — from Mandelson to the former prime minister, Andrew — face consequences for one of the world's most shocking scandals. There is no sign of a similar reckoning in the US, for instance. While the promised renewal seems a distant prospect, Labour still has that large majority and much that might be achieved, if only it can find a better politics.

Not reading emails? Government isn't amused

THERE ARE, in every workplace, two kinds of people. The first category consists of those who, either as a function of dedication or neurotic tendencies, check every email, answer every text and respond with an almost annoying alacrity on the office WhatsApp group. These front-benchers are, unsurprisingly, the blue-eyed boys and girls of upper management. More often than not, though, they are relative outliers. The majority of the bell curve has scores of unread emails, will often be reminded to check their messages and will, much to the chagrin of the powers that be, treat the job as work that ends with the workday. It is this second category that is causing a headache for the Delhi government.

Over the last three months, the Delhi government's IT department has been trying to nudge bureaucrats — including at the secretarial level — to read their official emails. It seems that despite the repeated advisories and notices, officials do not regularly log in. This is a major problem, not least because official instructions and notices are sent to the official address. (This begs the question of whether the notice to check the official email was sent on the official email.) Their official email is also linked to the portals of several government portals and services. If it is not checked for three months, the officers lose access to all that it provides.

There is no easy answer to the problem that plagues the government of Delhi. Bureaucrats, like so many people today, are inundated — on social media, personal WhatsApp groups, etc. But then, in every workplace, there is a price to be paid for not being up to speed — a nagging boss, an annoying HR missive. With every unread mail, the offending officer must ask herself: Is avoiding a bit of boredom worth the hassle, really?

US deal raises questions. PM must take a leaf out of Manmohan Singh's book

TRADE DIPLOMACY is a game of chess. The real world of trade negotiations rarely conforms to David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage where the French sell their wine to England and the British sell their cloth to France. Trade negotiations are also about asserting national power and security. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas Schelling famously told the United States Congress a half-century ago, "trade policy is national security policy".

It is, therefore, entirely understandable that President Donald Trump chose to weaponise tariffs in his quest to reassert American power. US allies in Europe and Asia quickly capitulated, but China, Brazil and India had held out. It would seem from the manner in which India has agreed to the deal that it has also capitulated.

In matters pertaining to national security, a government should not only be doing the right thing, but should also be seen to be doing the right thing. Mere assertion and ham-handed messaging can

not substitute for clear statements of intent and purpose. Since Parliament is in session, Prime Minister Narendra Modi ought to have made a statement in the Lok Sabha rather than allow a Tweedle-dum-Tweedledee buck-passing performance by the ministers of commerce and external affairs. On matters of international relations, economic or political, the buck stops with the PM.

Returning from his visit to Washington, DC, in July 2005 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh chose to address Parliament, of course, dedicated to the outcome of his discussions with President George Bush. On the matter

of energy security, the core of the US-India civil nuclear energy agreement, Prime Minister Singh told Parliament: "That India's quest for energy security is an essential component of our vision for our development was a significant theme of my talks. I elaborated the imperative need for India to have unhindered access to all sources of energy, including nuclear energy, if we are to maintain and accelerate our rate of economic growth. I am pleased to state that the US understood our position in regard to our securing adequate and affordable energy supplies, from all sources."

For three years, Parliament was allowed to discuss in minute detail all aspects of the nuclear deal. Despite that, opposition political parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party, voted against the deal. Many even in the Congress party were unhappy with the deal. It was Singh's transparency that earned him the trust of the Indian electorate and secured him a second term in office in 2009.

It is most unfortunate that the Modi government has fudged the issue on the final agreement with the US, with Trump making claims about a Russian oil conditionality that India has neither rejected nor accepted. It was left to the foreign secretary, Vikram Misri, to make a typically diplomatic statement that can be interpreted in various ways. Some have claimed that this was Indian tact and cleverness in the face of Trump's cowboy bravado. Unfortunately, it was counterposed as Indian duplicity and sophistry masquerading

Second, there is an implied assumption that policy design may have moved elsewhere. If thinking and direction emanate not from the constitutionally and statutorily established bureaucracies but from elsewhere — external advisory structures, political units, think tanks — senior civil servants quickly learn that their safest role is to step back from questioning and focus on meeting timelines and targets. The purpose for which the civil services were created could regress. The outcomes will weaken the foundation of the bureaucracy. Unless that is intentional.

Third, a system that rewards speed over scrutiny and compliance over counsel is unlikely to let inconvenient truths surface before things go awry. A competent bureaucracy is expected to play a preventive role to see that flawed proposals are changed, deferred, or quietly abandoned. This obviates the need for subsequent public withdrawal. When policies are centrally announced, or shaped top-down, they leave no scope to redesign things in-house. Treating this function as dispensable sacrifices one of the state's most valuable safeguards.

Fourth, devaluing the secretary devalues the entire edifice of governance. By giving the top echelon of the bureaucracy irrelevant, it dismisses the UPS's role in recruitment and the investments made in training senior officers to provide elevated and continuous support to governments.

None of this is to suggest that outcomes do not matter, or that senior officers should escape accountability. Without question, senior officers must be held accountable, but that is the responsibility of institutional watchdogs like the CAG, CVC, Public Accounts Committee, and the Estimates Committee.

The second adopts a corporate-style of prescribing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which privilege speed, output, and efficiency but only to promote business growth. The Union secretary instead has a duty not merely to accelerate decisions and their outcomes, but to interrogate them.

Systems do not fail for want of speed, but when judgement and dissent are treated as obstacles, not duties.

The writer is former chief secretary, Delhi, and former secretary, Ministry of Health



SANJAYA
BARU

as Chanakyan cleverness.

Rather than celebrate the trade deal as a great achievement, the Modi government ought to have stated honestly that this was the best it could do under the circumstances to safeguard livelihoods in export-oriented sectors. India walked out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) using the language of national interest when, in fact, it was defending livelihoods in sectors that were unwilling to expose themselves to global competition.

The same motivation shaped the trade deal with Trump. It is a different matter that the Modi government did not think about the livelihood of Punjab's farmers, small and medium enterprises and traders when it closed the gates on trade with Pakistan. But then, the merchants of Surat and the shrimp farmers of the Coromandel Coast seem to have more clout.

The India-US trade deal may be the best under the circumstances, but it is not a favour done to India. It is a price India has agreed to pay to keep the US on its side. That is how the world will view it. This is not the first time that India has had to bend under pressure from Big Powers. But this is the first time such bending is being portrayed as a great achievement

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What Trump has delivered to India is a reality check. After humiliating Indian political leadership with jokes and jibes and threatened like veiled threats

"I don't want to end his (Modi's) political career"

Trump has deliberately interpreted the trade deal as Indian capitulation by explicitly linking it to ending Indian purchase of Russian oil.

That the government has been able to orchestrate support from courtiers in the think-tank and diplomatic community is understandable. *Mea culpa*, it too has had to conduct that orchestration in my time in government. However, never during the negotiation of the civil nuclear deal did American leadership mock Indian leadership. Even when India temporarily turned off the taps on Iranian oil imports to please the American Jewish lobby, it was done voluntarily and was a temporary gesture aimed at securing a permanent benefit — the recognition of India as a nuclear weapons state.

Today there is no clarity on the longevity of the trade deal. Other countries, too, have been held on a short leash with uncertainty about the near future. Will Indian support to the US on various fronts and various causes be tested on a daily basis? If there is a war in the Gulf following an attack on Iran and if that disrupts oil supply to India from the Gulf, would India still be punished for accessing Russian oil?

There are still far too many questions about the deal and the government has understandably called it a "Framework for an Interim Agreement". It is best that the Prime Minister comes clean and offers his understanding of where India stands on its external economic policies vis-à-vis the US and BRICS countries rather than fudge issues and pretend to be Chanakyan.

Baru is a writer and former editor, The Financial Express

Scorecards forget civil service isn't only for disposing files



SHAILAJA
CHANDRA

THE INDIAN Express reported on February 9 that the Cabinet Secretariat has begun using performance scorecards for Union secretaries. This marks a major change in the evaluation process for senior civil servants at the Centre. The scorecard covers a dozen parameters and relies on quantifiable indicators such as file disposal rates, reduction of pending, expenditure control, and output delivery. Negative marks penalise lapses, while the cabinet secretary keeps a small discretionary part while awarding marks.

What is striking is not what these scorecards measure, but what they omit. At present, about 100 secretaries serve in the Government of India, with some 80 from the IAS. Those from non-IAS backgrounds — the Indian Foreign Service, other central services, engineers, scientists, economists — are like IAS secretaries, involved in policy formulation and offering strategic guidance to ministers. No less important is a secretary's ability to anticipate consequences by ensuring proposals are administratively workable, financially sustainable, and politically viable. None of the parameters seem to recognise these responsibilities — the hallmark of a permanent civil service in a parliamentary system.

The All-India Services — the IAS, IPS, and IFS (forests) — were not conceived as legacy mechanisms. Under Article 312, Parliament and the law created these services not to maximise file-processing efficiency, but to enable officers to think nationally, act impartially, and hold together a complex federality. The scorecard omits a secretary's responsibility for giving impactful policy advice and critically advising the progress and impact of projects and programmes. If the primary responsibility of secretaries gets confined to rapid and compliant implementation, it can have some consequences.

First, simplistic marking systems erode institutional memory. When every initiative is treated as a discrete project rather than part of a longer administrative continuum, institutional memory becomes dispensable. Policies that have endured for decades have survived because administrators adapted them over time, drawing on experience and prompt intervention. That is the bureaucratic kernel in any parliamentary system.

Second, there is an implied assumption that policy design may have moved elsewhere. If thinking and direction emanate not from the constitutionally and statutorily established bureaucracies but from elsewhere — external advisory structures, political units, think tanks — senior civil servants quickly learn that their safest role is to step back from questioning and focus on meeting timelines and targets. The purpose for which the civil services were created could regress. The outcomes will weaken the foundation of the bureaucracy. Unless that is intentional.

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None of this is to suggest that outcomes do not matter, or that senior officers should escape accountability. Without question, senior officers must be held accountable, but that is the responsibility of institutional watchdogs like the CAG, CVC, Public Accounts Committee, and the Estimates Committee.

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The writer is former chief secretary, Delhi, and former secretary, Ministry of Health

When your inner clock and outer timetable meet



GEORGE
JOHN

A CONFESSION to begin. I have been both the sanctimonious lark who quoted "early to bed and early to rise" and the defiant owl who bragged that real thinking only begins after midnight. Both versions believed they were virtuous. Both were wrong.

India loves binaries — science versus arts, vegetarian versus non-vegetarian, "morning person" versus "lazy owl". We turn a neutral biological difference called chronotype — the body's preferred sleep-wake pattern — into a moral referendum. In truth, what matters is not when you work, but whether your work, relationships and health are aligned with the clock inside your body.

As a retired psychiatrist who has listened to people in distress, and as a citizen who has watched children yawn through assembly, I have learnt what our public debate resists: Your circadian rhythm is a temperament of time, not a badge of character.

Look around. Our cities run on staggered tides of effort. Mumbai's *dabbawalas* move like clockwork in the late morning. Call-centre workers in Gurugram answer queries from customers who will never know their "good evening" is being spoken at 3 am. Nurses keep vigil while the rest of us sleep. Society needs different kinds of bodies to stay awake at different times.

The trouble begins when a single timetable is treated as sacred. Schools that insist every teenager must sparkle at 8 am are fighting adolescent biology, not building character. Offices that reward being seen at a desk at nine, regardless of productivity, confuse "face time" with performance. Families that shame the late riser for that late riser may have sat up with a sick child till dawn.

There is a spiritual argument, too. We are stewards, not owners, of the small patch of creation that is our body. Good stewardship includes listening to the rhythms written into our flesh. Prudence asks: "Am I living in a way that respects my honest clock?" Compassion adds a second question: "Does my community make room for bodies unlike mine?" Those questions belong together. In the best Indian tradition, they are matters of *dharma*.

What would a chronotype-friendly India look like? Schools that start slightly later for adolescents, or at least offer some flexibility. Workplaces that judge staff by output. Courts, hospitals and public offices that keep staggered windows so citizens who cannot manage mornings are not locked out of justice or care. A public health message that drops the moral tone: "Not 'wake at five or four,' but 'sleep enough and align your effort with your peaks'".

The payoff would be large. Better rested students learn more. Workers trusted to manage their energy give more. Partners who respect each other's rhythms quarrel less and live more. A nation that prizes itself on being truly awake might discover that wisdom is not about when we open our eyes, but how wisely we use them. So which life wins: The owl's or the lark's? The wrong question. The real victory is when your inner clock and outer timetable meet. May you discover your honest clock. May your loved ones honour it. And may India — restless, ambitious India — learn to make enough room in time that larks, owls and the vast, drowsy middle can all play in tune.

The writer is a retired psychiatrist

40 YEARS AGO

February 12, 1986



Karnataka CM resigns

RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE, heading Karnataka's Janata government, has resigned in view of the state High Court's judgment in the arrack bottling case delivered on January 31. The CM convened his decision to the Janata Party president, Chandra Shekhar, in a letter sent through a courier. He followed up with a resignation letter to the Governor, Ashoknath Banerji. The Governor is away in Dharmad. Hegde may cancel his proposed trip to New Delhi and meet him as soon as he returns. The Chief Minister, reportedly upset about the New Delhi "leak" of his letter to Chandra Shekhar, which was flashed by news agencies, dashed off his resignation letter to the Governor at 6 pm.

epaper.indianexpress.com

Bengal bandh violence

AT LEAST 13 people were injured in police firing and 400 rounds were fired by the police during the 24-hour industrial strike and 12-hour "Bandha bandh" called by the Left Front to protest against the rise in prices. The Congress (I), which opposed the bandh, claimed that the figure of those injured was higher.

Sarbat Khalsa venue shifted

THE SHIROMANI Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Akali Dal virtually conceded the militants' capture of the Golden Temple complex and shifted the venue of their February 16 Sarbat

Khalsa from the Akal Takht to Takht Sahib at Anandpur Sahib. The decision to shift the venue was taken at a secret meeting of the five Sikh high priests at Anandpur Sahib, and it was attended also by the Chief Minister and Akali Dal president, Surjit Singh Barnala, the Finance Minister, Balwant Singh, and the SGPC president, G S Tohra.

DU teachers' strike

THE DELHI University Teachers' Association (DUTA), at a well-attended general body meeting, resolved to continue the strike that began on December 10. Only four members voted against the continuation of the strike.



Why I introduced a Bill for a permanent framework for state reorganisation



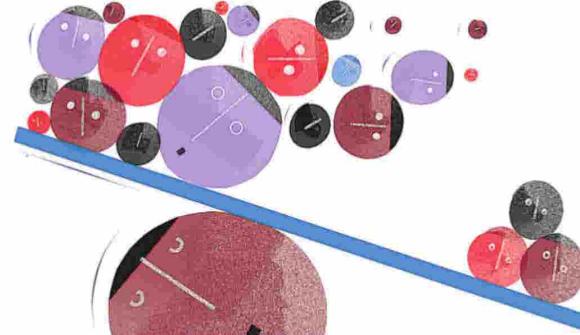
THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

INDIA IS not merely a country; it is an embodiment of civilisational diversity, a subcontinent defined by a breathtaking mosaic of cultures, languages, and topographies. Our Constitution vests the unity and strength of the nation in the promotion of individual interest, but promoting that interest in a country of 1.4 billion people living across states of vastly unequal size and complexity has become the central challenge of modern Indian governance.

It was in recognition of this systemic challenge that I introduced a Private Member's Bill in the last session of Parliament, seeking to establish a clear, objective, and permanent framework for the reorganisation of our states. My logic is simple: The time for ad-hoc, reactive decisions, like the messy creation of Telangana, has passed. We must now engage in a pre-planned, consistent study that replaces ad-hoc and responsive populism with administrative prudence.

The first and most pivotal wave of state creation was born out of crisis and vision. Following the tumultuous years of Partition, the task of nation-building required a strategy to reduce regional tensions. Under the guidance of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was constituted in 1953, with a mandate for an "objective and dispassionate" study to secure the welfare of the people. This led to the formation of states primarily on the basis of language (ironically, the first demand was to unify all Telugu speakers), a necessary measure that provided cultural cohesion and stability to the nascent republic.

The linguistic principle served its purpose admirably, by translating diverse identities into manageable political units and ensuring that education and administration could be conducted in the mother tongue. However, the linguistic map of the 1950s was merely the foundation, not the final administrative structure. Half a century later, the rationale for



the creation of new states has shifted entirely, from cultural integration to developmental and administrative urgency.

The creation of Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand in the year 2000, and the painful bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, were driven not by language (since each state actually has a unifying common language with the larger entity it was separated from), but by socio-political imperatives. These included the need to develop backward regions, address regional disparities, and respond to intense public demand rooted in feelings of neglect. These events confirm that the challenges of scale and governance have outgrown the administrative architecture inherited from the SRC.

The core of our contemporary governance crisis lies in the sheer scale of our largest states. In India today, several states are home to populations of 50 million or more. UP is over 240 million, Maharashtra and Bihar each around 130 million.

To put this in perspective, these administrative units are larger than most sovereign countries in Europe. While size might once have been viewed as a symbol of power, in the 21st-century administrative context, it has become a debilitating burden.

The hard truth is that such large states are often adminis-

The hard truth is that such large states are often administratively unwieldy. The distance between the capital and the lowest-level citizen becomes vast, both geographically and bureaucratically.

tratively unwieldy. The distance between the capital and the lowest-level citizen becomes vast, both geographically and bureaucratically. A collector in a small state might interact directly with the state's chief secretary or minister; a collector in a mega-state might find her voice lost in layers of bureaucracy. This unwieldiness leads to a tragic but predictable outcome: Government benefits do not always descend to the lowest levels. Policies crafted in the state capital, however well-intentioned, often fail to penetrate the hinterland. Development schemes suffer from implementation gaps, public services like health and education remain inadequate, and law and order become difficult to maintain across vast, disparate territories. The cry for a separate, smaller state is fundamentally a cry for better, more responsive governance — a desire to bring the seat of power closer to the people.

At one time, the UP Assembly discussed dividing the state into four. Long-standing complaints about the alleged neglect of regions like Vidarbha or "Gorkhanda" persist. Deeply held cultural identities and the genuine, widespread will of the people must be respected, along with administrative logic. But we cannot afford to keep addressing these demands

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through knee-jerk reactions driven by political expediency or last-minute compromise. State reorganisation is a matter of profound national consequence, impacting budgets, infrastructure, and federal relations for generations. It must be guided by a rational, comprehensive, and consistent national policy.

In saying this, I am not endorsing any specific demands. My Bill proposes to institutionalise a process for considering them, by establishing a permanent mechanism for reorganisation that moves beyond the single criterion of language and encompasses a holistic, evidence-based approach. Any future study must take into account a state's economic and financial viability; a new state must have a credible pathway to self-sufficiency. We must avoid creating entities that are permanently dependent on central grants, thereby distorting the national financial balance. Administrative efficacy must be another vital consideration. The purpose of division is to create a structure where the machinery of the state can function optimally, ensuring more efficient delivery of justice and services than at present. National unity remains paramount. Reorganisation must not fracture the federal fabric. It should be a tool to harmonise regional aspirations with national goals, not vitiate the latter.

By mandating a pre-planned, consistent process based on these diverse factors, we ensure that the decision-making process is informed, objective, and sustainable. This shift from a reactive mode to a proactive, policy-driven approach is the essence of good governance.

The reorganisation of states is not merely about drawing new lines on a map; it is about re-engineering the vehicle of democracy to make it faster, more responsive, and more effective. By adopting a modern, scalable, and multi-factor framework for state reorganisation, we will finally fulfil the founding promise of our republic, a commitment to the ultimate welfare of the people of each constituent unit, and of the nation as a whole. This is the mandate of my Bill — a vision for a stronger, more equitably-governed India.

The writer is Member of Parliament for Thiruvananthapuram, Lok Sabha and the author of India: From Midnight to the Millennium, The Battle of Belonging and other books on Indian nationhood

**In an AI world,
Global South
must assume
leadership**



S KRISHNAN

INDIA'S POSITION as a rising power in the sphere of technology and AI is becoming clearer by the day. We are no longer seen only as a hub for IT services or talent. We are now being recognised as a nation capable of building, deploying, and governing AI at a scale very few countries can match. This change has been led by a combination of targeted policy interventions, the introduction of large digital public platforms and the cultivation of a workforce that is technically capable.

Our early focus on society-wide technological integration has been key to this transition. Over the past decade, India created a strong foundation through its digital public infrastructure, which includes Aadhaar, UPI, Digitalocker and many others. These systems have generated a lot of data standardisation and interoperability that makes it possible to apply AI in meaningful ways across large populations. It has systems that can support AI-led innovation in governance, public services and commercial applications.

A major policy push came with the IndiaAI Mission launched in 2024. The Mission aimed to strengthen the entire AI ecosystem by investing in computing power, building high-quality datasets, research labs, empowering startups, and designing targeted skilling programmes. A national AI compute platform with more than 38,000 GPUs has been set up to support domestic research and model development. More than 22,000 GPUs have been allocated to a total of 291 end users, including state and central government departments, researchers, students, and MSMEs. This is important because access to compute has become one of the biggest barriers for countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America that want to build advanced AI systems. By alleviating this barrier, the Mission is helping Indian researchers and start-ups compete with global players on more equal terms.

India's talent and workforce continue to be our strongest advantage. The country ranked second in terms of talent in the recent Global AI Vibrancy Rankings published by Stanford University. It has one of the world's largest pools of engineers, coders and data scientists.

This scale has been crucial because AI adoption requires a broad base of people who can integrate AI tools into healthcare systems, supply chains, government processes and industrial operations. India's workforce gives the country a long-term structural strength that many advanced economies cannot replicate.

India's journey stands out because it applies AI to public-sector problems at population scale. It also stands out for the rapid growth of its startup ecosystem. Companies working in HealthTech, AgriTech, FinTech, logistics and education are building solutions designed for Indian conditions, where affordability, scale and linguistic diversity matter. Several Indian firms are now developing health diagnostic models, crop advisory systems, AI tutors and governance platforms that can handle millions of users. These solutions show that AI is not only a high-end technical solution but also a tool for improving public welfare outcomes, and are attracting interest from Southeast Asia, Africa and West Asia, where countries face similar challenges.

The way forward is to guide AI development in a responsible manner, where innovation is encouraged while avoiding misuse. Since AI brings both opportunities and risks, global regulatory frameworks must evolve to support innovation while also addressing concerns over misuse, bias, and safety. India aims to achieve trust without restricting progress.

As India strengthens its domestic AI ecosystem, it will have greater influence in global discussions on AI standards, safety norms and ethical frameworks. This influence will matter in a world where technological power is becoming as important as traditional economic or military power.

While India's journey is still underway, the direction is clear. Research intensity must increase. Domestic hardware capability needs to be developed. Data quality and cybersecurity need continuous strengthening. India is moving from being a consumer of global technologies to a contributor to frontier innovation.

These conversations on capability, governance and inclusion will increasingly find expression in global platforms such as the AI Impact Summit 2026, which aim to bridge policy, innovation and real-world deployment at scale. AI will shape the world's economic and political order over the next decade. The choices made by global stakeholders now will determine whether this transformation is limited to a few technology-advanced countries or extends to include large, diverse societies of the Global South. Let us make ours wisely.

The writer is secretary, MeitY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Economic policy

THE US-CHINA trade war, sanctions on Russia after the Ukraine invasion, and critical minerals export controls show how trade and technology are used as strategic weapons ("In the new world order, economic policy is also foreign policy," IE, February 11). India's dependence on imports for critical sectors like semiconductors and energy exposes similar vulnerabilities. Therefore, India's push for supply-chain diversification, FTAs, and domestic manufacturing is strategic. Economic decisions today shape diplomatic leverage tomorrow. Ignoring this reality would leave India economically exposed and geographically constrained in an increasingly coercive global system.

— *Sonia Rawat, Jammu*

Jimmy Lai

THE DEMOCRACY advocate's arrest and trial have raised concerns about the decline of press freedom in what was once an Asian bastion of freedom. Jimmy Lai's sentence, China's chilling message ("Jimmy Lai's chilling message," IE, February 11). The People's Republic of China has violated the rights of the people with respect to Hong Kong's self-rule. China's move reaffirms that the community government wants to maintain total control over what is supposed to be a semi-autonomous city. With President Xi Jinping at the helm, China is becoming more and more aggressive.

— *SP Paul, Noida*

THE WRITING on the wall was clear from day one after the transfer of Hong Kong from Britain to China ("Jimmy Lai's sentence, China's chilling message," IE, February 11). The deeper analysis must not stop at this incident alone. It must set alarm bells ringing at the desks of Indian officials developing India's China policy. Jimmy Lai's case clearly shows that when it comes to self-interest, Beijing will not cut any corners. We must remain vigilant.

— *Sanjeev Ralha, Greater Noida*



NARGIS GAUR

THE STORY of the Bahá'í in Iran begins with courage — and loss. From the earliest days of the faith's emergence in the mid-19th century, its followers were asked to pay a heavy price for believing in unity, justice, and the oneness of humanity. Ordinary men and women were the martyrs of the early heroic age, whose calm steadfastness in the face of brutality left an indelible mark on Iran's collective conscience. That legacy of sacrifice has never faded. Across generations, whenever fear or upheaval has shaken the country, the Bahá'í have found themselves pushed into the role of the "Other". Even in death, dignity has often been denied. Bahá'í cemeteries in Iran have been bulldozed, burial grounds confiscated, and graves desecrated, as if memory itself were a threat to be buried.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, persecution intensified and became systematic. Executions, imprisonments, and property confiscations spread fear through the community. Bahá'í institutions were dismantled. Access to higher education was denied. Generations of young people were told that belief alone disqualifies them from opportunity. What had once been sporadic violence hardened into policy. Among the most enduring symbols of this suffering is Mona Mahmudinizad, executed in Shiraz in 1983 at just 17 years of age. Mona's crime was not violence or rebellion. She taught moral edu-

Bahá'ís are the scapegoat in Iran, again

THE STORY of the Bahá'í in Iran begins with courage — and loss. From the earliest days of the faith's emergence in the mid-19th century, its followers were asked to pay a heavy price for believing in unity, justice, and the oneness of humanity. Ordinary men and women were the martyrs of the early heroic age, whose calm steadfastness in the face of brutality left an indelible mark on Iran's collective conscience. That legacy of sacrifice has never faded. Across generations, whenever fear or upheaval has shaken the country, the Bahá'í have found themselves pushed into the role of the "Other". Even in death, dignity has often been denied. Bahá'í cemeteries in Iran have been bulldozed, burial grounds confiscated, and graves desecrated, as if memory itself were a threat to be buried.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, persecution shifted. Mass executions gave way to quieter, grinding pressure. International observers documented what Iranian authorities themselves described as a policy aimed at the "quiet elimination" of the Bahá'í community. Arrests without cause, long prison sentences, economic strangulation, denial of education, and relentless propaganda replaced public violence. State media recycled false narratives that painted Bahá'í as traitors, spies, or moral threats — claims repeated so often they began to sound like fact.

Today, as Iran grapples with deep economic hardship, social unrest, and calls for justice, the Bahá'í are once again targeted. When public anger and grief are high, Bahá'í are repeatedly singled out as convenient scapegoats — falsely accused and publicly vilified to divert attention from deeper failures. Yet through nearly two centuries of repression, the response of the community in Iran has remained strikingly consistent. There has been no call for revenge, no resort to violence. Instead, there has been an insistence on dignity, service, and hope. Even when denied education, Bahá'í have created informal learning spaces. Even when excluded from work, they have sought ways to contribute to society's well-being.

Today, the current wave of inclemency is not only a threat to one community. It is a warning. History shows that when hatred against a minority is tolerated, injustice soon spreads beyond it. The stories of the early martyrs, of Mona, of desecrated graves, and of bodies withheld from burial are held up to the present. For Iran, the way it treats its most vulnerable communities remains a measure of its moral future.

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workplace culture without ever having to suffer through a hike. Always delegate. When trekking in Nepal, you can't afford your rucksack to a porter. This stellar service reminded me why it is important to delegate. As a middle manager, I need to have mindspace for strategic thinking. I cannot fulfil my potential if I'm bogged down by petty deliverables. So, I allocates all my direct reports and then urge them to finish it quickly. Illustratively: On the trek, I would engage in banter with the porters carrying my luggage and ask them why they took so many breaks. My leadership style ensured they always reached our destination many hours before me.

Lie without regrets: Trekking taught me that truth is overrated. Every day, after many

hours on Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. Human rights groups have repeatedly documented how confessions are extracted under pressure.

In brief remarks from Geneva, the Bahá'í International Community warned that this escalation fits a troubling historical pattern. When public anger and grief are high, Bahá'í are repeatedly singled out as convenient scapegoats — falsely accused and publicly vilified to divert attention from deeper failures. Yet through nearly two centuries of repression, the response of the community in Iran has remained strikingly consistent. There has been no call for revenge, no resort to violence. Instead, there has been an insistence on dignity, service, and hope. Even when denied education, Bahá'í have created informal learning spaces. Even when excluded from work, they have sought ways to contribute to society's well-being.

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hours spent climbing, we would ask our guide how much longer we needed to walk to reach our destination. Thirty minutes, he would say with conviction. It never ended up being less than a two-hour hike from that spot. The lies, he later told us, were meant to motivate. As a trekker, I wanted to poke his eyes with my walking stick, but as a leader, I applauded his policy. I, too, often give fake reviews to my subordinates. Our guide's comments convinced me that my actions are justified because my mendacity keeps the team on their toes.

Capitalise on opportunities: Even when you're in a remote village in Nepal, you are never too far from the internet. Teahouses with Wi-Fi cards, and the lure of connectivity helps them make a killing. Some people grumbled about the cost, but I admired the acumen of the local business folk. The internet is a basic human need. Without it, I could not have shared Instagram stories about being in touch with nature, or published a LinkedIn article about the importance of going offline, in the middle of my trek. It dawned on me that some things are so crucial as to be almost priceless — like, indeed, my expert views. I will, therefore, soon be introducing a paid subscription model for ex-

clusive access to my content.

Be humble: Lastly, the most vital thing the mountains teach you is humility. Standing before Himalayan peaks makes one appreciate the transience and triviality of human existence. The grandeur of the snow-capped ranges brought home to me the grandeur of my own mind. It also made me recognise that I may be many things, but I am not immortal. There is so much I have to teach all of you, so much gyaan I must dispense. I have resolved to double my LinkedIn posts and start a weekly newsletter. You will now see a lot more of me, and I know what you're thinking: It's okay.

You're welcome.

The writer is a lawyer



ROHAN BANERJEE

AS SOMEONE who is a thought leader (in my own thoughts, at least) and a productivity guru, I never let an experience pass me by without wringing some learning out of it. When I go to buy vegetables, for instance, I know how my interaction with the sabziwala honed my negotiation skills. If sharing such insights makes me an influencer-cum-philosopher, so be it.

It was this altruism that recently drove me to sign up for a trek. Now, you can learn all that the Himalayas have to teach about

workplace culture without ever having to suffer through a hike. Always delegate. When trekking in Nepal, you can't afford your rucksack to a porter. This stellar service reminded me why it is important to delegate. As a middle manager, I need to have mindspace for strategic thinking. I cannot fulfil my potential if I'm bogged down by petty deliverables. So, I allocates all my direct reports and then urge them to finish it quickly. Illustratively: On the trek, I would engage in banter with the porters carrying my luggage and ask them why they took so many breaks. My leadership style ensured they always reached our destination many hours before me.

Lie without regrets: Trekking taught me that truth is overrated. Every day, after many

• LEGAL

Why top court is revisiting its guide on gender stereotypes

Vineet Bhalla
New Delhi, February 11

THE SUPREME Court on Tuesday decided to move beyond the text of the "Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes", a guide issued in August 2023 under the tenure of former Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud. This marks a potential shift how the judiciary approaches gender sensitivity.

The current CJI, Surya Kant, found the text to be overly academic and disconnected from ground realities litigants face. For this, he has emphasised the need for practical training.

The observations came as it was hearing a suo motu case regarding an Allahabad High Court judgment from March 2025. The HC had ruled that acts such as "grabbing the breasts" and loosening the pyjama strap of a female victim constituted only a "preparation" to commit rape, rather than an "attempt" to rape. This distinction between preparation and attempt sparked widespread criticism for its apparent insensitivity.

The SC took cognisance of this judgment last year, ordering a stay and expressing concern. On Tuesday, a bench comprising CJ Surya Kant and Justices Jaymala Bagchi and N V Anjaria formally set it aside and directed the trial court to proceed against the accused under attempt to rape charges.

'Too Harvard-oriented'

During the hearing, the handbook's utility in preventing such judgments came under scrutiny. The bench opined that for various aspects of sexual assault, it offered "forensic meanings" - legally, a technical, scientific, or strictly clinical interpretation - which may not align with the lived experience or understanding of a survivor of sexual violence or a common person.

CJI Kant remarked that it was "too Harvard-oriented", suggesting it was too elite or theoretical for the Indian context. CJ Chandrachud rejected his master's and doctorate in law from Harvard Law School.

CJI Kant added that issuing a handbook to "sermonise" HC judges while sitting in the SC "serves no purpose".

The bench directed the National Judicial Academy in Bhopal to form an expert committee to frame new guidelines. Once finalised, HC judges should be trained in batches to handle the sensitivities of sexual assault cases.

What the 2023 handbook contained

The handbook is a 35-page guide intended to primarily address the language used in courts and the reasoning patterns of judges. In his foreword, then CJ Chandrachud wrote that "language is critical to the life of the law" and relying on stereotypes "distorts" the law's application to women in harmful ways".

The first part of the handbook contained a glossary that flagged "stereotype-promoting language" - labelled "Incorrect" - and provided "alternative language" - labelled "Preferred", noting that words often convey archaic, patriarchal ideas.

It also advised against using terms that judge a woman's morality. Regarding the terms "survivor" and "victim", both are applicable but the individual's preference should be respected.

The handbook also attempted to dismantle common assumptions made by judges, particularly in sexual offence cases. The handbook rebutted the idea that women are "overly emotional, illogical, and cannot take decisions", stating that a person's gender does not determine their rational capacity.

Regarding assumptions about gender roles, the handbook stated that the Constitution guarantees equal rights and that women are neither subordinate nor required to be submissive to men. The section on sexual violence addressed how evidence is appreciated in rape trials. It explicitly stated that a woman's choice of clothing or her consumption of alcohol or cigarettes does not amount to an invitation for sexual relations. It also countered the judicial tendency to disbelieve a victim if she did not physically resist, noting that the absence of physical injuries does not mean consent was given, as perpetrators often use fear and intimidation to overpower victims.

The 2023 handbook supported its directives on rejecting stereotypes by citing several SC decisions - such as *State of Punjab v Gurmit Singh* (1996), which established that a survivor's testimony is inherently credible, and *State of Jharkhand v Shailendra Kumar Rai* (2022), which banned the "two-finger test".

• ECONOMY

Pulses, tax: How US toned down its trade fact sheet



RAVI DUTTA MISHRA

THE US on Wednesday revised a fact sheet it had released on February 9 about the trade deal with India, softening its claims about the gains it had secured from New Delhi and entirely dropping a section on digital services taxes. It also made one change to the India-US joint statement of February 6, replacing the word "committed" with "intends" to reflect the non-binding nature of the provision.

The earlier version of the fact sheet said India had "committed to" buying more American products and purchasing "over \$500 billion of US energy, information and communication technology, coal, and other products". The updated fact sheet, as well as the joint statement, tempered the wording from "committed" to "intends".

Another section in the fact sheet included "certain pulses" among the agricultural products India had committed to reducing tariffs on. The joint statement had made no mention of pulses. The updated fact sheet drops the mention of pulses. It now reads: "India will eliminate or reduce tariffs on all U.S. industrial goods and a wide range of U.S. food and agricultural products, including dried distillers' grains (DDGs), red sorghum, tree nuts, fresh and processed fruit, soybean oil, wine and spirits, and additional products."

The section on digital services taxes said: "India will remove its digital services taxes and commit to negotiate a robust set of bilateral digital trade rules that address discriminatory or burdensome practices and other barriers to digital trade, including rules that prohibit the imposition of customs duties on electronic transmissions." This section, which has now been removed altogether, did not feature in the India-US joint statement.

The sections that have been modified had sparked criticism from Opposition parties and farmers in India. Here's a deep dive into the revisions the US has made.

Purchasing pulses

The US has removed the term "certain

• WHAT THE INDIA-US TRADE DEAL FACT SHEET SAYS



• US will lower reciprocal tariffs on India from 25% to 18%

• US and India will continue negotiations to address remaining tariff barriers

• US and India will negotiate rules of origin that ensure that the agreed benefits accrue predominantly to US and India

• India commits to stop purchasing the Russian Federation's oil

• US and India committed to strengthening economic security alignment to enhance supply chain resilience

pulses" from among the items India had "committed to" purchasing. While "pulses" were not mentioned in the joint statement, Commerce Ministry sources have said that market access to pulses is indeed part of the deal. The extent is not clear yet.

As per the latest data, India's pulses imports in the first nine months of 2025-26 stood at \$2.53 billion, down 33% from the same period last year. In all of 2024-25, India's pulses imports from the entire world rose 46% to \$5.48 billion. The US, however, was a minor source of India's pulses imports at just \$90 million.

India imports about a fifth of its yearly consumption of pulses to meet domestic demand, with key countries from where these importers are secured being Canada, Russia, Brazil, Myanmar, and African nations like Mozambique and Malawi.

The dropping of "pulses" from the revised fact sheet comes at a time when the Indian government is attempting to push for self-reliance in the segment. Just last week, Shriya Singh Chouhan, the Union Minister of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare, said that importing pulses was a "matter of shame for us" and that India will become an exporter of the same. While noting that the area under pulses is declining, Chouhan had said this needs to increase and that emphasis is being put on raising both productivity and profitability of pulse crops.

For India, market access to agriculture has long been a sensitive point in trade deal negotiations. Farmers have historically pushed for agriculture to be kept out of

multilateral and bilateral agreements, citing steep international subsidies in the West.

Following the trade deal announcement, the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, which represents several farmer groups, announced a nationwide general strike on February 12. Another farm group, the Rashtriya Kisan Mahasangh, said that the trade agreement was negotiated in secrecy and its terms were not disclosed. Only vague statements were issued as full disclosure could be politically damaging, the Mahasangh claimed.

While a section of Indian farmers have said the access for dried distillers' grains (DDGs) could prove helpful, some see it as a backdoor entry of genetically modified (GM) products in the country, as DDGs are derived from GM items. Farmer unions also fear that control over India's animal feed market could be monopolised by US corporations.

Pushback on digital services taxes

The elimination of the section on India committing to remove digital services taxes amid worries that New Delhi has agreed to refrain from imposing "equalisation levy-style" taxes on American technology companies even in the future, as India had already removed the tax during the Budget presentation last year.

An equalisation levy is a measure to "equalise" the tax treatment of resident and non-resident e-commerce companies.

On July 8 last year, *The Indian Express* had reported that legal advisers to the Min-

istry of Commerce and Industry had suggested that Indian negotiators should not accept Washington's proposal that prohibits India from reintroducing such taxes, popularly known as the "Google tax".

Experts said the US has also been forcing trade partners into accepting steep conditions that restrict them from imposing regulations mandating data localisation. However, India should not give up data sovereignty under a trade pact, they said.

Data localisation is the legal practice of storing and processing personal or critical data on servers physically located within the borders of the country where that data was generated. UN Trade and Development in a 2018 report had pointed out the benefits of data localisation, including encouraging foreign investment in domestic digital infrastructure, enabling enforcement of national laws, and safeguarding privacy and cyber sovereignty. Notably, India has a significant advantage due to its vast user base and data potential, and experts point out that the success of any digital product depends on its user base and with the help of robust regulation, India could replicate global digital products.

The \$500-billion target

In FY 2024-25, India imported \$45.62 billion in American goods and exported \$86.51 billion of shipments to the world's largest economy.

The US fact sheet earlier claimed that India had "committed" to ramp up these purchases to \$500 billion in five years, or \$100 billion annually.

On Wednesday, the fact sheet replaced the word "committed" with "intends".

The \$500-billion sum has left farmers worried over a sudden surge in imports of agricultural goods that has also begun affecting market rates of key agricultural goods. However, government officials have clarified that this figure is not legally binding as private companies are involved in placing orders, not the sovereign governments.

Similar phrasing has been used in trade deals in the past. For instance, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) under the India-EFTA agreement committed to investing \$100 billion in India over 15 years.

India is expected to purchase \$100 billion worth of American products annually for five years, which would largely include aircraft, technology items, precious metals, oil, nuclear products and agricultural goods.

• SCIENCE

India's new telescopes are set to be a game-changer for astronomy

Anjali Marar
Bengaluru, February 11

IN THIS year's Union Budget, the government sanctioned the establishment of two new telescopes to study the sun and the origins of the universe, besides the upgradation of an existing telescope in Ladakh.

Ladakh is already a major centre of astronomy in the country, being home to several big and small telescopes. The decision to set up these new telescopes is seen as a big boost to observational astronomy in India and the Global South.

The new telescopes

The one new telescope meant to study the sun, the National Large Solar Telescope (NLST), is a 2-metre aperture solar telescope, coming up in Merak near Pangong Tso lake. NLST will operate in the visible and near-infrared wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum. Even though all astronomers study the same light, the electromagnetic spectrum (radio, radiation including gamma, optical, infrared, etc.) they are looking at may differ. Also, not all light penetrates the Earth's atmosphere, so scientists have to carefully design observational facilities based on

their sensitivities. NLST will help solar physicists to study the fundamental solar dynamics and magnetism, energetic solar events, and map space-weather processes having a direct bearing on the Earth and space assets like satellites.

Once built and operational, which is estimated to happen over the next 5-6 years, NLST will serve as India's third ground-based solar observatory, after the Kodaikanal Solar Observatory (Tamil Nadu) and the Udaipur Solar Observatory (Rajasthan).

Along with ARI-LLI, India's first space-based solar observatory launched in 2023, data from NLST will help reinforce India's leadership in heliophysics.

The second telescope is the National Large Optical-Near Infrared Telescope (NLLOT), a 13.7-metre aperture segmented-mirror telescope to be built in Hanle. In a segmented-mirror telescope such as NLLOT, the 13.7-metre primary mirror will have 90 smaller segmented mirrors arranged in a fashion that they all collect light but act as one, large mirror. NLLOT is to be ready over the next decade. NLLOT will be one of the world's largest telescopes operating in the electromagnetic spectrum's optical-infrared wavelengths.

Due to the high altitude, cold and dry at-

Advantage India

• NLST will help study fundamental solar dynamics and map space-weather processes with a direct bearing on Earth and space assets

• Data from NLLOT will make research on exoplanets, stellar and galactic evolution, and supernovae possible, besides clues to the origin of the universe.

• The universe, and mostly clear skies in Ladakh, data from NLLOT will not suffer diffraction, which is common in other locations. Frontier research on exoplanets, stellar and galactic evolution, and supernovae will be possible, besides looking for clues to trace the origins of the universe.

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• GEOPOLITICS

US and Iran reopen talks, but pitfalls ahead: Escalation, red lines, Israeli pressure

EXPERT EXPLAINS
BASHIR ALI ABBAS
SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH, NEW DELHI

ON FEBRUARY 6, the US and Iran held fresh negotiations in Oman after months of hostile rhetoric. US President Donald Trump has said he believes Iran wants to make a deal on its nuclear programme. And Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was headed to the White House on Wednesday with a message to expand the talks to include Tehran's ballistic missile programme.

The run-up to February 6 talks was

marked by escalating tensions. Trump declared that the US would support the Iranian anti-regime protests. The US also moved a carrier strike group and other assets to the region.

In the event of a US attack, Iran has threatened to blockade the Strait of Hormuz, retaliating against US targets such as Al Udeid airbase in Qatar, the headquarters of the US Navy Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, US bases in Iraq, as well as targets in Israel.

Amid these developments, what can either side concede and where do the negotiations go from here?

Dual approach

Trump's conduct thus far and his willingness to go to war have been suspect. When he posted on January 2 that the US was "locked and loaded" to help protest, US military strength in the Middle East was at its thinnest in decades. Moreover, as Iran contained the violent protests, the US President changed his rationale for military build-up - the need to contain the Iranian

nuclear threat that he had asserted was "obiterated" in June 2025.

Continuing to use anti-regime demonstrations as Washington's rationale for an attack contained a significant risk. The US would either get bogged down in a protracted war or would have to exit early with, at best, accomplishing its maximalist goals.

Ultimately, for the US President, it is a deal on Iran's nuclear question that matters, especially if it can outdo the Barack Obama-era Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015. Trump's approach, however, is not to instil more good faith in the dialogue but rather coerce and weaken Iran's bargaining position through military encirclement to gain better concessions in the deal.

For Tehran, the inevitability of engagement with Washington to urgently secure sanctions relief has long been evident.

However, Iran is also keenly cognisant of a peculiar leverage. Thus far, Tehran's threats of retaliation have been similarly maximalist; that Iran will attack third states which

house US assets as well as Israel, even if the original US attack is symbolic. This zero-sum approach to the military theatre arguably helps Tehran push for non-zero outcomes in the diplomatic theatre.

Red lines and concessions

For Iran, there are two broad red lines. First, Iran's sovereign right to enrich uranium on its own soil is inalienable. Second, that negotiations on Iran's ballistic missile programme or its relationship with regional non-state actors are not on the table; these are nuclear negotiations only. For the US, Iran must forgo enrichment rights on its soil, give up its existing stock of 60% enriched uranium, halt ballistic missile development, and cease support to its regional non-state allies. The latter two demands are especially encouraged by Israel, whose Prime Minister is travelling to Washington on Wednesday to press this point.

Beneath these antagonistic positions, space for concessions theoretically remains. From Tehran's perspective, reli-

quishing its stockpile of 60% enriched uranium (especially to Russian hands) remains a possibility. In any case, Russia has long been the only foreign power to operate a nuclear power plant in Iran (Bushehr).

Additionally, Iran's long-term right to enrich uranium remains intact (with provisions for IAEA inspections). Tehran could characterise short-term restrictions as tolerable measure - especially if a multi-national consortium can supply fuel for Iranian nuclear plants. Similarly, on ballistic missiles, should Washington be amenable to regulation/restrictions on their use rather than their development, Tehran could view it as a long-term win.

The question of Iran's non-state allies, however, is open one. Even if Iran agrees to halt support to its Axis of Resistance, it is improbable that this is a verifiable demand.

Next steps

Over the last two decades, US-Iran talks have been infamous for their sluggish pace and dearth of good faith. Trust has only

eroded over the last 12 months. Given how both sides are poised, there is a real risk of inadvertent escalation.

The US has no defined war threshold (for Iran, it is any US attack). The US military buildup risks creating a commitment trap, forcing it into attacking Iran to save face. Regardless of the nature of the Iranian retaliation, Trump's choice of means may jeopardise the ends he seeks.

Both sides are aware of the dangers of their positions, even as they blame each other for it. On February 6, Washington and Tehran negotiated not only to de-escalate, but to also manage expectations and "set a framework for future talks". Both Washington and Tehran described the February talks as positive and committed to subsequent negotiations. But the negotiations over a two-decade-old issue can only be successful if a modicum of good faith is restored.

In its absence, both sides are likely to press for more time until they believe their respective bargaining positions are sufficiently strong.

A renewed peace test in Manipur

By installing a government in strife-torn Manipur, after a year of President's rule in the state, the Centre appears to have navigated a crisis point. An extension of the rule, imposed after N Biren Singh resigned as chief minister on February 9 last year, would have required Constitutional clearances. The past year did not take Manipur any closer to absolute normalcy. Violence erupted many times - the killing of a Meitei man who was visiting his Kuki wife in the Kuki-dominated Churachandpur last month points to persisting distrust and hostility between the two dominant communities. Most of the over 60,000 people displaced during the violence that started in May 2023 are still in rehabilitation camps. It is reported that a large portion of the arms looted from government armouries or police stations are still in circulation.

The new government under Yumman Khemchand Singh, a senior Meitei leader of the BJP, was sworn in last week with two deputy chief ministers - Nemcha Kipgen, from the Kuki community, and Losii Dilho, from the Naga People's Front (NPF), an ally of the BJP. The arrangement is intended to provide representation in the government to all three major communities of the state. Former chief minister Biren Singh had made his bias for the Meitei community clear before and during the unrest, aggravating the crisis. Khemchand Singh has sent out signals that he wants reconciliation between all the communities. He was among those in the party who wanted a change of leadership when Biren Singh was at the helm. In December, he visited a Kuki relief camp in the Naga-dominated Ukhul district. For the party, he was a consensus choice to lead the state.

As the new government takes charge, its primary task will be to establish trust between the two major communities. It will take more than symbolic gestures, such as fair representation in the government or public declarations of unbiased rehabilitation policies. The state remains divided along the lines of community; members of one do not enter areas controlled by the other. It is to be noted that many of the issues that triggered the conflict remain. Kuki organisations have stuck to their demand for a separate administrative unit. The Kuki-Zou Council has even warned MLAs of the community against joining the government, signalling a major challenge for the new dispensation. Only a political resolution can bring in lasting peace and normalcy. The presence of a democratic administrative structure is a start that needs to be built on with real intent.

The popular government must initiate concerted efforts to rebuild trust between divided communities

Saving students takes more than helplines

The statistic should shame any society into urgent action: 855 students ended their lives in Karnataka in 2023. Against this grim backdrop, the government's move to roll out a dedicated student suicide prevention policy is welcome. It signals a long-overdue acknowledgement that student suicides are not isolated tragedies but a systemic failure that demands a coordinated, State-led response. The policy's primary strength lies in its comprehensive approach, covering students across both government-run and private institutions. The mentor-parent-teacher initiative, where a single teacher is assigned responsibility for up to 25 students, is particularly significant. If implemented with sincerity, it can humanise rigid institutions and create early-warning systems in which students feel seen, heard, and supported. Regular counselling, multi-departmental coordination, and targeted interventions are imperative in hostels where homesickness and psychological stress are acute.

Importantly, the policy aligns with the National Suicide Prevention Strategy, which aims to reduce suicide mortality by 10% by 2030 through multi-sectoral action and integration of mental health into primary healthcare. Yet this is also where discomfort begins. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has set a far steeper benchmark: a one-third reduction in suicide rates by 2030. A conservative national target risks leading states to settle for slower progress rather than radical reform. Governments justify this caution by pointing to hard constraints. The country faces a severe resource crunch, with fewer than one psychiatrist per one lakh people, far below global recommendations.

Suicide prevention cannot succeed through helplines and circulars alone. It requires a holistic solution that goes beyond reactive care. It requires solutions that dismantle the pressure-cooker academic culture, aggressively erase the stigma of failure, and check easy access to hazardous materials like pesticides, commonly used in rural suicides. Every parent, teacher, warden, and administrator must be trained as a first line of mental health response, capable of recognising silent distress before it turns into a crisis. At the same time, institutions must be mandated to have qualified, full-time counsellors, rather than expecting undertrained, overburdened teachers to double up as therapists. Supreme Court guidelines already stipulate that any institution with over 100 students must have a qualified, full-time counsellor on-site. This policy is a step in the right direction. But saving lives demands more than incrementality. It requires ambition, resources, and the courage to rethink how we educate, evaluate, and care for our young. It is time to replace the mindset of managing decline with the courage to protect life at any cost.

Karnataka's policy pitch must be backed with resources and a rethink on prevention approaches

As Iran and the US reopen dialogue, military pressures and fresh sanctions leave the prospects unclear

R SWAMINATHAN

Iran and the United States reopened a diplomatic channel last Friday in Muscat, Oman, with two rounds of direct talks lasting five hours. Although both parties characterised the exchange as constructive, the negotiations continue to remain fragile, particularly with the presence of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and other US naval assets off Iran's coast.

The US side included, for the first time, the US Navy Admiral Brad Cooper, Head of Central Command, besides Middle East envoy Steve Wixoff and Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law. Cooper's presence, in full military uniform, at the talks was intended as a signal of US military strength and leverage in the region.

The meeting focused primarily on listening and clarifying positions rather than negotiating technical frameworks or specific concessions. Iran insisted firmly that the agenda be restricted to nuclear issues. Earlier, Tehran had successfully pushed to shift the venue from Istanbul to Muscat and resisted expanded regional participation. From the Iranian perspective, a broader format would have tilted the process towards US demands to include limits on Iran's ballistic missile programme and restrictions on its support for Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran's militias. For Iran, ballistic missiles are vital and non-negotiable, as these missiles are the security backbone for Iran's ballistic missile programme and its resistance against any US military attack.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi described the talks as a "good start" with a "positive" atmosphere and emphasised the importance of continued consultations. This fuelled the discussions "very good" and indicated the next round could take place as early as next week. Simultaneously, Washington reinforced pressure by announcing new sanctions and a tariff on Iran. US military assets were moving into position, while stressing that the US is "in no rush", but racing Iran of building a new nuclear facility.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to visit Washington this Wednesday for talks with President Trump. The trip, originally planned for

around the 18th of this month to attend the first meeting of the Board of Peace, was moved forward to focus specifically on the Iran issue amid Israel's concern that the US position may be shifting. Netanyahu's visit intended to press against any US-Iran agreement that is limited to the nuclear issue while leaving out Iran's ballistic missile programme and its regional security threats.

Netanyahu played a decisive role in persuading the first Trump administration to withdraw from the 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Programme of Action) nuclear deal and has consistently supported a hardline approach. He attacked Iran after the IAEA reported non-compliance of Iran with its safe



guards obligations, and later pressed for US strikes on Iran's enrichment facilities. From Israel's perspective, strategic confrontation with Iran remains unfinished business.

Because Israel does not share a border with Iran, it faces fewer immediate security threats from a renewed conflict or potential internal destabilisation within Iran. That geographic buffer significantly shapes Israel's threat assessment and policies for engagement. The Arab Gulf states, by contrast, operate under far greater geopolitical risk and, therefore, advocate more cautious strategic calculus. While they would welcome outcomes that degrade Iran's ballistic missile capability and constrain its support for Hezbollah and the Houthis, they are concerned that a large-scale US strike on Iran could trigger region-wide retaliation. Such escalation could threaten critical energy infrastructure, disrupt shipping lanes, and undermine macroeconomic stability.

Although several Gulf governments publicly stated that their air forces would not be available for offensive operations against Iran, they recognise that

strikes could be conducted from maritime platforms in the Arabian Sea or via alternative regional corridors. Iranian officials have repeatedly framed any direct attack as a trigger for broad regional confrontation.

These risk perceptions have been communicated to Washington by multiple regional partners, including Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman, emphasising the systemic costs of escalation. US domestic political factors also shape decision-making. Elements within Trump's political base have shown growing resistance to further Middle East military entanglements and are increasingly critical of what they see as an "Israel First" policy, especially with mid-term elections due next year. Military action against Iran would almost certainly be messy and prolonged, drawing the US into a never-ending war.

A shift in posture

At the same time, key technical uncertainties remain regarding Iran's nuclear programme despite claims of severe degradation following strikes on enrichment facilities. Outstanding issues include the disposition of the existing highly-enriched uranium stockpile of 408 kg, the enforceability of a permanent enrichment halt, and the restoration of comprehensive IAEA verification access beyond limited sites.

Economic pressure has altered Tehran's negotiating posture. Successive rounds of sanctions and resulting domestic unrest, including merchant-led protests that expanded into broader anti-government demonstrations, have increased regime vulnerability. This pressure has contributed to Iran's renewed willingness to engage in nuclear-focused talks.

The Muscat talks mark a breakthrough through a carefully managed re-opening of dialogue. Given the deep mistrust between the two sides after the 12-day war last June, when the US dropped bunker-buster bombs on Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities, the decision to continue the talks itself signifies progress. For now, both sides believe they hold leverage. Forward movement is likely to be slow and incremental. A deal is achievable if the US sticks to its original red line of nuclear weapons. However, if it is persuaded to adopt Israel's red lines, the negotiations are likely to collapse, potentially leading to military confrontation.

(The writer is a former Ambassador of India to Egypt and former Governor of India to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Vienna)

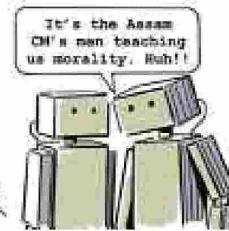
SPEAK OUT

They (Opposition) create a ruckus because they lack the capacity to hear the truth. Nirmala Sitharaman exposed it today... He (Rahul Gandhi) didn't utter a single word on the budget, it was a political speech... Nirmala Sitharaman responded to every point... Basavaraj S Bommai, BJP MP

I have selective hearing. Sorry you weren't selected. Anonymous

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IN PERSPECTIVE

India, EU forge mineral diplomacy

The scope extends across processing, recycling, and cooperation in meeting ambitious climate targets

SHOBHANITA REDDY

The concentration of critical minerals supply chains in a few countries has emerged as a strategic vulnerability in the world. To combat China's use of economic coercion, several bilateral and plurilateral partnerships are being explored.

It is in this light that the Joint India-EU Comprehensive Strategic Agenda, released following the conclusion of the free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations, assumes significance.

While acknowledging the current constraints, the agreement calls for cooperation aimed at "developing resilient, secure, and diversified critical minerals supply chains" as a key focus.

A deal is achievable if the US sticks to its original red line of nuclear weapons. However, if it is persuaded to adopt Israel's red lines, the negotiations are likely to collapse, potentially leading to military confrontation.

(The writer is a former Ambassador of India to Egypt and former Governor of India to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Vienna)

engagement is still relatively nascent, with no project-level outcomes as yet. Bilateral collaboration in this part of the mineral value chain should be doubled.

The EU has technical competence in processing, and several projects are currently under construction. Initiatives such as the European Battery Alliance, a public-private model, seek to build an integrated domestic battery value chain in Europe. The IREB, while still at an early stage, has been exploring partnerships for Europe's magnet production with South Korea and Japan. Recent reports suggest that India is looking to incentivise companies to set up nickel and lithium processing plants. The India-EU partnership can complement these efforts.

Furthermore, recycling offers a pathway to bypass China's processing capacity by prioritising e-waste stockpiles over mining. Europe has a strong focus on recycling and the circular economy, as indicated by the European Green Deal and the Circular Economy Action Plan. India has the potential to be a recycling hub despite being a late entrant, and it must collaborate with the EU on this.

Keeping pace with China

India and the EU are part of the Mineral Security Partnership; they must leverage their presence in plurilateral platforms to champion shared interests in long-term research towards rare earth substitutes and processing technology innovations, as well as blended finance and price-risk mechanisms.

Additionally, both parties have ambitious climate goals that include net-zero targets and the rapid expansion of renewable energy. As economies both concerned and overwhelmed by China's subsidy-linked overcapacity and dominating capabilities in solar panels, batteries, and electric vehicles, India and the EU have also been individually trying to advance their interests by adopting a pragmatic and transactional approach to China. The EU is considering mandating technology transfers and know-how from Chinese companies looking to invest and expand within its jurisdiction. India, too, is cautious about opening up to Chinese investments, including in government contracts.

India and the EU already work together in areas such as clean energy and water management. The India-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC), established in 2022, must be expanded in scope and ambition to include critical minerals as an area of focus. One way to do this is by instituting a separate taskforce reporting to the TTC working groups on clean energy and trade. As mentioned in the joint agenda, the partnership would also need to go beyond government participation and enable cross-border private sector engagement.

(The writer is a researcher in technology geopolitics at the Takshashila Institution)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Code crimson: Operation dinner

I savoured each spoonful as if it were dessert disguised as dinner

VIKRAM VISWANATHAN

As a child, I was known in the family for one unmistakable trait—an insatiable sweet tooth. My love for sugary treats was so intense that I often refused to touch regular meals. Breakfast, lunch, or dinner—it didn't matter. I would sit at the table, lips pursed, waiting for dessert instead. My mother's pleas and threats made little difference. For me, food was only what it was sweet.

But my mother, ever patient and inventive, refused to give up. If sweetness was what I longed for, she decided, then she would find a way to bring sweetness into everyday food—without actually turning it into a dessert. She began experimenting quietly in her kitchen,

testing how a touch of jaggery or coconut might coax me into eating. And then she discovered my one weakness: beetroot.

Unlike other vegetables, beetroot never met with my resistance. Whether it was a simple *poriyal* or a salad, I would eat it eagerly. My mother hesitated; my siblings giggled. But I needed no convincing. I dove into my plate, savoring each spoonful so as to satisfy the same craving that drew me to sugarcane or sweets. That small realisation sparked an idea that would become one of her most memorable creations—beetroot *sambar*.

Sambar, the quintessential South Indian stew of lentils, tamarind, and spices, is usually tangy and robust. But my mother's version was different. Into the simmering pot of *dal* and tamarind broth, she added chunks of beetroot—red, glistening like jewels. As they cooked, their colour spread through the dish, transforming it into a vivid crimson stew.

The aroma that filled the kitchen was both familiar and new: the warmth of spices mingling with the gentle sweet taste of beetroot.

When she first served it, the family was stunned. The *sambar*'s intense red colour looked almost otherworldly. My father hesitated; my siblings giggled. But I needed no convincing. I dove into my plate, savoring each spoonful so as to satisfy the same craving that drew me to sugarcane or sweets. The sweetness, subtle yet comforting, felt like a secret meal just for me.

From that day on, beetroot *sambar* became a fixture in our kitchen. No teasing or disapproval from the rest of the family could make my mother stop making it. For her, this dish was more than food—it was affection made visible, a mother's quiet way of saying she understood me.

Even now, when I see beetroot bleeding its colour into a pot, I think of her—stirring the crimson stew with love and patience. It reminds me that sometimes, sweetness isn't found in sugar at all, but in the small, tender gestures that fill our lives with warmth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Keep politics out of urban mobility

Apropos 'Not fair: Politics derails Namma Metro' (Feb 11), the fare revision controversy surrounding Bengaluru's Namma Metro has become a political contest between the ruling Congress and opposition BJP. The proposed 5% hike sparked blame-game, with the BJP blaming the Congress government and the Congress citing an independent committee's recommendation. When the hike was put on hold, the BJP claimed credit, while the state government insisted it had stalled the move. If the government could

stop the increase, why was it proposed in the first place? An unscientific and unjustified rise in Metro fares would burden commuters, discourage ridership, and defeat the objective of easing Bengaluru's road congestion. The state's transport policy appears paradoxical, defending free bus travel for women as empowerment while justifying higher Metro fares for cost recovery, exposing an illogical approach to urban mobility planning.

N Sadasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Be practical, not political The report on political interference in Namma Metro's fare revision is concerning for daily commuters. Farce decisions should be guided by transparent, independent mechanisms, not political calculations. Frequent reversals and disagreements create uncertainty and erode trust. Public transport is a lifeline for Bengaluru; the state government must prioritise commuters' interests.

Ivy Nandy, Bengaluru

Disappointing conduct Apropos 'Oppon moves no confidence motion against LS Speaker' (Feb 11), Speaker Oinam Birla's conduct has been disappointing, prompting opposition parties to table a no-confidence motion. He has decided to stay away from the House till the motion is resolved. While the TMC isn't part of the motion, other opposition parties are on board. The NDA has the numbers to defeat the motion, and with TMC likely abstaining, Birla will likely tide over the crisis.

CV Aravind, Bengaluru

Clear the air

The Naravane memoir row is becoming increasingly murky, with the government attempting to shoot the messenger rather than reveal the truth behind the former Chief of Army Staff's revelations. How long will the government hide the truth from the public without losing credibility?

N Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

From myth to reality: How Kashmiri youth perceive Pakistan today

DATELINE Srinagar

ZULFIKAR MAJID

For generations of Kashmiris, Pakistan has long existed as a distant idea, shaped by fascination, mythology, and imagination. In the 1980s and 1990s, that fascination had a particular tone: Pakistan was seen not merely as a neighbouring country but as a Muslim-majority nation that felt culturally and religiously familiar, yet geographically and politically removed.

Cricket matches against Pakistan were more than games—they were events that shaped young imagination, identity, and even belonging. Imran Khan's stride, Javed Miandad's last-ball heroics in the Sharjah final, and Wasim Akram's pace—these were heroic symbols that transcended sport, bringing the idea of Pakistan alive in the Valley's alleys and schoolyards. Stories of

Lahore's bazaars, grand streets, and distant relatives added texture to a country that felt both real and unreachable.

Letters, occasional family visits, and anecdotes reinforced this perception. Pakistan existed as a parallel world, tied to Islamic identity, cultural commonality, and heroic narratives. For young Kashmiris, it was exciting, aspirational, and part of a distant dream.

Today, that image has shifted dramatically. Smartphones, social media, and constant connectivity have compressed distance, bringing Pakistan into the daily stream of life in Kashmir. Pakistan is no longer a off-islamic country; it is visible, comparable, and surprisingly familiar.

Videos, campus vlogs, lifestyle posts, and news reports show bustling streets, ordinary youth, economic struggles, and political instability—scenes that make the country's society appear strikingly similar to India's own. Social media has broken the myth of difference, replacing exotic imagi-

nation with grounded observation.

"The country we imagined as children feels very different now," said Faheem, a businessman in his late 40s. "It's not about heroes or Islamic identity anymore. You see protests, inflation, universities, and markets—it's a society like ours, with problems and opportunities just across a border."

This realisation coincides with changing realities at home. Kashmiris note shrinking opportunities in the Valley, but economic instability, political uncertainty and terror attacks in Pakistan, widely circulated online, offer a comparative perspective. Youth now observe how society functions there and measure it against their own experiences—career prospects, education, and daily life.

Abdul Rashid, a shawl vendor from south Kashmir's Anantnag district, reflects: "When I was young, I imagined Lahore bazaars as grand and different. Now we see life there on social media—it is much like here. You realise people face similar strug-

gles and have similar routines. It's no longer exotic; it's real."

Yet this awareness is tempered by the Valley's own challenges in mainland India. Many Kashmiris travel to Hindi heartland states for work. There, they encounter harassment, suspicion, and occasional hostility, experiences widely shared online. Viral videos of Kashmiri workers facing abuse provide a sharp reality check: belonging and opportunity are not automatic, and social boundaries can shape experience as much as borders do.

Bilal, who works part-time in Delhi markets, sums it up: "We compare life here and there not out of fascination, but to see what works and what doesn't. And when you go to Indian towns and face discrimination, it reminds you that opportunity alone isn't enough—you need acceptance too."

This generational shift is striking. Elders retain nostalgia for cricketing heroes and cultural stories, but younger Kashmiris navigate a more pragmatic, observational

lens. Pakistan is no longer a distant symbol of Islamic identity or heroic imagination; it is a society like theirs, with struggles, aspirations and realities that can be compared, measured and understood.

Walking through Lal Chowk or Srinagar's old city, one senses this quiet recalibration. Youth are reflective, aware and discerning. Social media feeds provide clarity and contrast. Economic realities, political instability, and personal encounters shape how they understand society across the border.

For readers outside Kashmir, this shift is instructive. The fascination with Pakistan as a distant Islamic ideal has evolved into sober observation: the society, its youth, its economy, and daily life are surprisingly similar to Kashmiri's own. At the same time, harassment and discrimination in Hindi heartland states provide a tangible reality check about belonging and opportunity.

This generational recalibration is subtle but profound. Elders may still recall Imran Khan's stride or Miandad's Sharjah six with

emotion, but younger Kashmiris are shaped by different reference points. In playgrounds and on social media, many now follow Surya Kumar Yadav's innovation, Mohammad Shamji's discipline, and Jasprit Bumrah's precision more closely than Babar Azam's elegance. Mohammad Rizwan's grit, or Shaheen Afridi's pace. Sporting loyalties, once intertwined with larger narratives of identity, have become more straightforward and performance-driven.

What has changed is not just the perception of Pakistan, but the grammar of aspiration itself. Borders remain contested and politics unresolved, yet imagination has yielded to comparison. Pakistan is no longer a distant symbol; it is a society observed in real time, weighed against lived realities in Kashmir and across India. For many young people, identity is shaped less by inherited mythology and more by opportunity, dignity and acceptance. The shift is quiet, but it marks a decisive turn from symbolism to pragmatism. DHNS

Disclosures in documents released by the Trump administration have roiled the world, leading to resignations and the threat of legal charges far beyond American borders

MARK LANDLER

A French politician, famed as a cultural icon of the 1980s and 1990s. A Norwegian diplomat who played a role in the secret talks that yielded the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians. A well-connected Slovak former minister who served as president of the United Nations General Assembly.

Three prominent officials, tripped up by their associations with Jeffrey Epstein—and they are far from the only ones.

Epstein, the financier and convicted sexual offender, collected friends and associates in an astonishing array of places. Now, several of them are being brought down by the unsavoury details of their relationships—some after Epstein was convicted in 2008—which were revealed in nearly three million pages of documents released by the Justice Department in the United States.

Jack Lang, who once served as France's culture minister, announced on Saturday he would resign as head of the Arab World Institute, a prestigious cultural institution in Paris, after French authorities said they were investigating reports that he and his family had financial links to Epstein.

Monica Juul, who had been Norway's ambassador to Jordan and Iraq, quit after disclosures of financial dealings between her and her husband, and Epstein. Miroslav Lajcak, the national security adviser to Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico, stepped down following the release of emails between him and Epstein, in which the two men appeared to banter about young women.

"Clearly, he had a very extensive system," President Emmanuel Macron of France said this week, referring to Epstein's vast network of contacts. "This also fuels a lot of conspiracy theories and everything else."

The friendship between Epstein and Peter Mandelson, a former British ambassador to Washington, has kicked up such a firestorm that it initially threatened to sink Britain's prime minister, Keir Starmer, who appointed him.

Prominent figures have been name-checked in several other countries, costing them their jobs, their reputations and even the threat of legal charges. As with the leaking of offshore bank account holders in the *Panama Papers* affair, the case of Epstein has laid bare privileged political and social circles from Scandinavia to South Asia.

So many prominent names have surfaced, in fact, that major world figures have felt pressure to disavow links to him. After social media reports that Epstein met the Dalai Lama, a statement issued on Sunday on behalf of the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader said he had never met Epstein nor authorised anyone to meet him.

India's foreign ministry dismissed an email from Epstein, in which he appeared to take credit for the ingratiating approach of Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a landmark State visit to Israel in 2017. Epstein's claims, the statement said, were "little more than trashy ruminations by a convicted criminal, which deserve to be dismissed with the utmost contempt."

But the opposition Congress Party



A photograph provided by the US Justice Department shows Jeffrey Epstein, former US President Bill Clinton and Ghislaine Maxwell. Epstein collected friends and associates in an astonishing array of places. NYT

Epstein revelations stir chaos from Scandinavia to S Asia

seized on the reference to suggest that Modi was vulnerable to manipulation by foreign "monsters." Congress general secretary K C Venugopal urged the prime minister on social media to "personally come clean on these disturbing disclosures."

Political score settling has played a part in the reaction in other countries. In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu played up disclosures of emails between Epstein and Ehud Barak, a former prime minister who has been a vocal critic of Netanyahu.

"Jeffrey Epstein's unusual close relationship with Ehud Barak doesn't suggest Epstein worked for Israel. It proves the opposite," Netanyahu posted on social media on February 6. "Stuck on his election loss from over two decades ago," he wrote, "Barak has for years obsessively attempted to undermine Israeli democracy."

Speaking in December, Barak confirmed he attended lunches and dinners at Epstein's Manhattan townhouse, but said he did not witness or take part in any sexual abuse. "I now deeply regret having any association with him," he said.

In Slovakia, Prime Minister Fico portrayed the future over Lajcak as an attack on him, saying his adviser's resignation would deprive the country of "an incredible source of experience in diplomacy."

Lajcak told the Slovak Press Agency, "I was never offered sexual services, I never participated in any, I never witnessed any, and I never had any information about them."

Commentators in Slovakia said those

denials stretched credibility, given the locker-room tone of the emails between him and Epstein (in one, Lajcak told him that when it came to young women, "sharing is caring.") There was no response to a text message, seeking comment, sent to a neighbor that belonged to Lajcak.

In Norway, the police have begun investigating Juul and her husband, Terje Rol-Larsen, after media reports that the couple had been left \$10 million in Epstein's will. Norway's foreign minister, Espen Barth Eide, said Juul had "shown a serious failure of judgment." Her lawyer said in a statement that she "does not recognise the accusations made against her."

Few countries have been as shadowed by the disclosures as Norway. A former prime minister, Thorbjorn Jagland; the crown princess, Mette-Marit; and Borge Brende, an ex-economic minister who now runs the World Economic Forum, are all under scrutiny for their links. Norway's Parliament on Tuesday set up an independent commission to investigate those ties.

Kare R As, who served as Norway's ambassador to Israel, Afghanistan and the United States, said the disclosures had left diplomats in "sadness and anxiety." He said he expected Juul and her husband to face a reckoning in the courts.

"No mercy in Norway on corruption, and Norwegians in higher positions such as politicians and ambassadors are no exception," As said.

In France, Jack Lang's case will be a spurious test of the price of having dealt

with Epstein. In a prolific career, Lang is credited with creating popular cultural events and architectural landmarks. Now 86 and retired from politics, he has remained a respected figure in France through the Arab World Institute, which he has led since 2013 and which promotes Arab culture and values.

Lang is more a figure of folklore than someone who carries political weight, said Christine Ockrent, a Paris-based broadcaster. Still, she said, he "represents French culture, and Epstein probably thought he would get access to that through him."

Lang's name came up more than 600 times in the documents, with emails chronicling lunches, dinners, and business deals, dating back to 2012, when Lang said he and Epstein were introduced by a mutual friend, the filmmaker Woody Allen.

Epstein jointly owned an offshore fund with Lang's daughter, Caroline, that Lang said Epstein set up to support up-and-coming artists, according to a French investigative website, *Mediapart*. Epstein also left Caroline, a film producer, \$5 million in his will, according to *Mediapart*.

France's National Financial Prosecutor's Office said it had opened a preliminary investigation of Lang and his daughter for "laundering of tax fraud proceeds." Posting on social media, a defiant Lang said, "The accusations against me are unfounded, and I will prove this, despite the noise and fury of the media and digital courts."

The New York Times

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 1976

City site owners will have to plant trees

Bangalore, February 11 All house site owners in Bangalore will be required hereafter to plant a few trees before starting construction of houses. Chief Minister Devardip Urs declared in the Karnataka Assembly today. Repeating to the debate on the Bangalore Development Authority Bill, he assured the members to give due care to the aesthetic aspects of the City's development while planning its expansion. He was told that in Delhi the Development Authority had made it compulsory for all site-owners to plant trees before building houses. It would be necessary to adopt a similar rule in Bangalore also.

25 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 2001

NASDAQ hopes Indian firms will be its major component

Bangalore, Feb 11 NASDAQ expects Indian companies to become a significant component of its activities over the next 10 years, the US stock market's vice-chairman, Mr Alfred Berkley Jr III, said today. At a luncheon meeting hosted by Chief Minister S M Krishna in his honour, a day before the opening of NASDAQ's India office in Bangalore, he appreciated the Indian presence in NASDAQ since 1994. The NASDAQ office will be located at the IT Secretary's office in UINI building on Miller Tankbund Road. Mr Berkley said NASDAQ was coming here as a follow-up to the request made by the Karnataka CM a year ago.

This year Valentine's Day is followed by Shivaratri, a festival that marks the holy occasion of the celestial marriage of Shiva and Parvati. At first glance, they appear to be an odd pair, completely mismatched. Shiva leads an ascetic life in the mountains—ash-smeared, serpent-adorned, dwelling in cremation grounds and detached from worldly life. Parvati—graceful, cultured, raised in refinement and order, represents beauty, fertility, and domestic life. He is *anandai aja or ajani*, meaning without source or unborn; She—the daughter of King Himalayan and Queen Mainavati. Shiva was grieving the loss of his beloved wife Sati and not seeking a soul-mate. Parvati was Sati reborn with the sole purpose of becoming his consort to restore balance.

And yet, their marriage is celebrated as the ideal union because harmony in life does not arise from similarity, but from complementarities. Their attraction was not based on appearance, like-mindedness or social equality, but on spiritual alignment. The former practised meditation and silence while the latter, action and expression. Opposites complete each other, rather than compete. Relationships struggle because people seek sameness; similar tastes, backgrounds, and temperaments. But similarity alone does not create balance. Two forces intensely each other, two silences create distance. Balance comes when differences become

OASIS | RADHIKA D SHYAM

The power of opposites



supportive rather than divisive. Parvati brings warmth, family, and nurturing energy into Shiva's detached existence. Shiva brings stability, wisdom, and depth into Parvati's active nature. Neither dominates; neither diminishes. Kailasa becomes both a place of meditation and a home of affection, where *garus*, sages, and even animals coexist.

The story teaches that compatibility is not the absence of differences, but the presence of understanding. A successful partnership does not erase individuality; it protects it while creating unity. Shiva and Parvati prove that when respect replaces expectation and awareness replaces ego, even the most contrasting person-

aliates can form the most stable bond. Without Shakti, Shiva is pure potential—silent and unmoving. Without Shiva, Shakti becomes directionless energy. Together they form Ardhanarishvara symbolising equality of genders. They complement each other in every way. Shiva, who destroys ego, becomes a gentle householder in Parvati's presence—a father to Ganesha and Kartikeya, a protector of devotees. Parvati, though a royal princess, embodies austerity in Kailasa without losing warmth or compassion. She does not abandon her nature; she expands it. He does not abandon detachment; he softens it with affection.

Their union reminds us that true compatibility is spiritual, not superficial.

Social media rules

Negotiating tech offensive has its complexities

THE tightening of rules governing social media increases the responsibility of digital companies and platforms regarding deep-fakes and content generated through artificial intelligence. The latest changes in the law follow complaints of sexualised images produced by an AI bot. Effective from February 20, it will be mandatory to place prominent labels on AI-generated content. Major platforms will also have to get a declaration from users confirming whether the content being shared is AI-generated. It's a step in the right direction. Also, any illegal or misleading AI content will have to be removed or blocked within three hours. The time limit was 36 hours previously. The complex logistics of this mandate apart, the question of who determines what is objectionable online — or what passes muster and on what basis — remains a point of contention. There are legitimate concerns regarding suppression of free expression.

As artificial intelligence makes long and fast strides in digital domination, framing effective regulatory controls poses a tough task. For the AI industry itself, consistently upholding ethical frameworks as their technologies scale in a highly competitive market is a demanding ask. The resignation of a safety researcher at a leading company, citing his disagreement with the unchecked acceleration of controversial projects, points to the pitfalls of technological advancements. The moral dilemma is stark, and there are no easy answers.

In the US, a landmark trial has begun that is examining the mental health effects of Instagram and YouTube. The world's largest social media companies have been accused of creating addiction machines. 'We're seeing more and more young people who experience not just psychological distress, but physical distress, when their devices are taken away,' a leading expert remarked. The observation can find resonance across the globe. That's how challenging the tech offensive is.

Health blindsot

Joint regional strategy vital for cancer care

THE figure is unsettling: around 17 women die of cancer every day in Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. This statistic from 2021-25, shared by the Union Health Ministry in the Rajya Sabha recently, is an indictment of a system that continues to treat women's health as secondary and fragmented across state borders. Cancer mortality among women exposes deep gender inequities. Late diagnosis remains the norm, driven by social neglect, lack of awareness and the belief that women's health can wait. Preventive screenings for breast and cervical cancer are irregular, poorly communicated and largely inaccessible in rural and hilly areas. By the time many women reach specialised hospitals, treatment options are limited and outcomes grim.

Health policy has failed to recognise that women face barriers of financial dependence, caregiving burdens, stigma and mobility constraints. While schemes promise free or subsidised care, hidden costs such as travel, medicines and loss of income push families into distress. Primary healthcare centres remain ill-equipped and referral systems function unevenly across districts and states. What makes the crisis more troubling is the lack of regional coordination. Punjab, Haryana and Himachal share patient flows and overstretched tertiary hospitals, yet health planning remains siloed. Cancer does not respect state boundaries; policy responses should not either. Shared cancer registries, cross-border referral protocols, joint screening drives and pooled procurement of diagnostic services could significantly improve outcomes. Hill districts face access challenges, agrarian regions grapple with pollution-linked cancers and urban centres struggle with patient overload. These differences demand collaborative, region-specific strategies rather than one-size-fits-all programmes.

Reducing women's cancer deaths demands sustained screening and cooperative federalism in health. Until women's lives are placed at the centre of policy, this silent epidemic will continue to claim lives that could have been saved.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1926

Burma Expulsion Act

After the debate in the Assembly on Amarnath Dutt's resolution on the Burma Expulsion Act on Tuesday, the Government of India can have no difficulty in realising either the depth or the universality of the resentment caused in India by the passing of this Act. Pandit Motilal Nehru did not in any way exaggerate this feeling when he described the Act as "an atrocious and monstrous piece of legislation" and declared that "it was a disgrace for any Legislature to have passed it." Nor did MA Jinnah indulge in language of extravagance when he said that "the Act is not intended to deal with criminals but is like the sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of those Indians who desire to participate in the public life of Burma." The talk of criminals was nothing but the merest camouflage. As the mover pointed out, "Most of the sections of the Penal Code have been incorporated in the Act together with the security sections of the Criminal Procedure Code with a view to enabling the Burma Government to expel Indians from Burma." And who are these Indians? To quote the same speaker, they were the men who had made Burma what she was today. With poignant irony, he observed that "it was the fate of Indians that wherever they went and developed countries, their position was made intolerable." It has been in South and East Africa and it was now to be in Burma. But Burma does not stand on the same footing as South or East Africa, being a part not even of the British Commonwealth, but of the Indian Empire itself.

Trial by fire for Bangladesh

The trouble-torn South Asian nation must put its best foot forward in today's elections

VIKRAMDEEP JOHAL
DEPUTY EDITOR, THE TRIBUNE

NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST : A stable, peaceful Bangladesh is of immense importance to India. REUTERS

BANGLADESH goes to the polls today — for the second time in two years. The January 2024 elections were practically a sham presided over by then PM Sheikh Hasina, but there is some hope that things will be different this time. The last year and a half has been quite eventful for this vulnerable nation — the July 2024 uprising, Hasina's ouster and escape to India, her rival Khaleda Zia's demise, the homecoming of the latter's son Tarique Rahman after a long exile in the UK.

The February 12 parliamentary elections have been described as a "historic, decisive and future-defining moment" by Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate who is heading the interim government. After years of disputed polls, shrinking democratic space and deepening polarisation, Bangladeshis are being asked to decide whether their country can undergo a democratic revival and build institutions that serve all citizens, not just those in power.

At the same time, voters are weighing in on a referendum proposing significant reforms: term limits for the prime minister, stronger checks on executive authority and constitutional safeguards to prevent the consolidation of power. Taken together, these measures promise to herald *Naya* Bangladesh, if everything falls into place.

The challenge for the interim administration is to ensure free, fair, credible and peaceful polls. The presence of hundreds of international observers and foreign journalists shows that

Bangladesh is drawing global attention. Compared to previous elections since 2008 — some of which were boycotted or criticised as deeply flawed — this expanded international scrutiny is intended to reassure voters and investors alike.

For more than a decade, opposition parties and human rights groups accused the Hasina government of manipulating elections, silencing critics and narrowing political space. The Awami League's absence from the current contest and the death penalty awarded to Hasina in absentia over alleged crimes against humanity have turned the page on a controversial era. But these developments also raise an uncomfortable question: are these elections a genuine break from the politics of exclusion or simply old wine in a new bottle?

Encouragingly, election campaigning has seen visible efforts to enforce rules, particularly the distinctive black-and-white posters at public places across Dhaka. This symbolises commitment — however tentative — to procedural fairness.

If the poll mandate spurs transparency, accountability and genuine reform, it could mark the birth of a resilient democracy.

The re-emergence of dynastic politics has complicated the narrative of renewal. Bangladeshi politics has long revolved around two families/parties: Hasina's Awami League and the Khaleda Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), now helmed by Tarique Rahman. With the Awami League out of the picture, the BNP is the obvious frontrunner. Rahman has vowed to restore democratic

institutions and revive the economy. He has also sought the support of all stakeholders to build a prosperous and safe nation.

Islamist forces are also reshaping the political landscape, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami, which was banned under Hasina but has regained influence. Now part of a broader coalition, Jamaat is keen to expand its role in national politics. For a section of the voters, this phenomenon represents a legitimate expression of political diversity after years of repression. For others — especially women and religious minorities — it is a harbinger of greater anxiety and insecurity.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign is the importance of young voters. Nearly 5 million citizens are voting for the first time. Students had spearheaded the uprising that toppled Hasina's government. The question now is whether all that youthful energy can evolve into sustained democratic engagement. Public wrath can overthrow autocrats; rebuilding a democratic framework requires patience as well as compromise.

For the moment, Bangladesh must put its best foot forward. If the election mandate spurs transparency, accountability and genuine reform, it could mark the birth of a resilient democracy. However, if things go wrong, it will only deepen the divide and signal the start of another disturbing chapter for the trouble-torn nation.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We will go to the polling station with hope, not fear. — Muhammad Yunus

A full circle of democracy

OPINDER SINGH LAMBA

SOON after retirement, I took up legal practice. It was a departure from my career in public relations, largely spent in the Punjab chief minister's office. I started my second innings with optimism, which was later tempered by realism.

As a public relations officer, I was entrusted with ensuring credible media coverage of Cabinet decisions and sensitive deliberations — ranging from law & order and internal security to inter-state issues and administrative matters such as postings and transfers of IAS and IPS officers. Confidentiality was the hallmark of this responsibility. Mediapersons often sought off-the-record information, while we were duty-bound to exercise restraint. One sought to reveal, the other to conceal — both performing their roles. Enhancing the government's image with out-of-compromising propriety remained the guiding principle.

A colleague once took me to a village in the Malwa region. Our job was to collect feedback on the Mahatma Gandhi Sarbat Vikas Yojana. Spotting a labourer desilting a drain, I asked him whether he was satisfied with the scheme. His blunt response was revealing: "Uh ja yaar, apna kanna kar ja ke. Tu ki lena jaan ke, asi sukh haan ya dukh. Kise sarkar ne saadi baat nahin puchhi, te na puchhi aae. Asi gareeban ne tan narak hi bhoogia ae, bhaiven koi vi ja jawae." ("Go on, man, mind your own work. What will you gain by knowing whether we are happy or unhappy? No government has ever asked about us, nor will it ever do so. We poor are destined to suffer in hell, no matter who comes to power.")

That candid reply exposed what official surveys often miss. It captured the everyday struggles of ordinary people and sharpened my understanding of the executive.

My stint as a lawyer soon stripped away the idealism with which I had entered it. Courtroom life appeared driven less by argument than by adjournments — the notorious *tarekh-pe-tarekh* culture. Strikes, routine postponements, Bar abstentions and Bench reshuffles often stalled proceedings, slowing down the wheels of justice. Litigants — many of whom travelled from far-off places — waited anxiously, only to leave weary and disheartened.

Judges, I observed, carried an enormous burden with quiet dedication amid mounting pendency and rising expectations. Despite their diligence and perseverance, systemic constraints often impeded timely justice. In time, the weight of these realities led to quiet disillusionment, and I stepped away within months.

Around that time, I received a call from a senior advocate — under whom I had worked — asking me to spare my gown for a trainee. Perhaps I no longer needed it, yet I hesitated. Even today, my black coat and gown with a neck band hang in the wardrobe, bearing witness to a journey cut short.

Having engaged with the four pillars of democracy, the biggest takeaway for me was: governance fulfills its promise only when it truly serves the people, with accountability at its core.

The writer worked in the PR department, Punjab

paper.tribuneindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Saga of discarded devices

Refer to 'The wasted tablets of Haryana'; education cannot be reformed through procurement-driven interventions designed for political visibility. When teachers are excluded from decision-making and schools lack autonomy to maintain even basic equipment, digital initiatives are destined to fail. Vijaya Mulay understood that technology is effective only when embedded within strong institutions and confident teaching communities. Institutional strength has been consistently ignored. Unless policymakers move away from spectacle-driven reforms and invest instead in the fundamentals — infrastructure, teacher training and local ownership — India's schools will remain repositories of discarded devices rather than spaces of meaningful learning.

GAURAV BUDHWAR, ROHTAK

Reckless use of public money

Apropos of 'The wasted tablets of Haryana'; this is another example of reckless use of public money. The introduction of educational technology in schools is the domain of principals/headmasters working in tandem with teachers. Sadly, such decisions are taken by bureaucrats and politicians. Adequate administrative and financial autonomy should be given to school heads so that they can take decisions regarding the repair and maintenance of gadgets purchased to supplement the school curriculum.

VIK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Electoral integrity

Refer to 'Red lines on SIR'; the Supreme Court has attempted to balance electoral integrity with procedural fairness in the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in West Bengal. The order clearly underlines the limits placed on micro-observers and reinforces the importance of accountability within the Election Commission's framework. The focus on trust and transparency is timely in a politically sensitive environment, where public confidence in electoral processes is crucial. This should be strengthened by including specific constitutional provisions, relevant statistical data and references to past judicial precedents.

SIKANDAR BANSAL, SHIMLA

Let's stand firm with our soldiers

In a move that strikes at the very heart of our military ethos, a proposed legislation provides income tax exemption to only those defence personnel who are invalided out of service due to a disability. This change casts a dark shadow over a hard-earned right. The disability pension of soldiers who bravely continue to serve despite their injuries will now be taxed. This is not the first attempt to impose such a devastating tax. A similar bill was made in 2019, only to be halted by the Supreme Court, which understood that an administrative directive cannot override established pension rights. The new restrictions are painfully clear: exemptions will only favour those whose service was cut short by injury, effectively labelling those who remain in uniform with disabilities as secondary citizens in the eyes of their nation. This policy is not merely bureaucratic; it is toxic, regressive and fundamentally unpatriotic. Now more than ever, we must stand firm with our soldiers, ensuring that their valour is rewarded, not penalised. The time has come to ask the question: Will we allow this betrayal to continue?

BRID DS SARAO (RETD), CHANDIGARH

In sight to war heroes

Apropos of '2 Longewala heroes take on Border for killing them on screen'; movies based on wars fought by our brave soldiers should stick to the facts. Wrongly portraying living soldiers (Naik Jagdev Singh and Havildar Mukhtar Singh) as martyrs is an insult to them. Worsening their agony, Rajasthan and Punjab governments have not fulfilled their promises of allotting land to them. It is still not too late for these governments to do course correction.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Uphold the spirit of cricket

Refer to 'Back on track'; the decision to go ahead with the India-Pakistan match has brought relief to cricket lovers across the subcontinent. However, the entire episode has revealed how vulnerable cricket in South Asia remains to political tensions and diplomatic strain. While the ICC's mediation deserves appreciation, repeated disruptions damage the credibility of tournaments and the morale of players and fans alike. There is a pressing need to institutionalise clear protocols that protect sporting events from recurring crises and uphold the spirit of the game.

CHARU SHARMA, HOSHIARPUR

Why Parliament needs quiet conversations



DISRUPTION: Lok Sabha MPs who were suspended for 'unruly behaviour' in Parliament on Feb 4. PTI

THE disruption in the Lok Sabha that prevented a discussion on the Budget is over. A new chapter of bitterness, though, has begun, with the Opposition moving a no-confidence motion against Speaker Om Birla. All through this Lok Sabha session, the Opposition has targeted Birla for not giving sufficient time to it in the chamber's proceedings. Since the beginning of this Budget Session, the Congress has been particularly aggrieved that Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi has not been allowed to speak.

Gandhi wanted to focus on excerpts from the book *'Four Stars of Destiny'* written by a former Army Chief, General Manoj Mukund Naravane. The book is not formally in the public domain. It is yet to be cleared by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). General Naravane has said that it was sent for clearance to the MoD by the publishers. Gandhi has shown a hard copy of the work in Parliament's premises. Soft copies of the book are circulating on the internet. The Delhi police have lodged an FIR to investigate how the book is available on the internet if it has not been approved for publication.

The government has taken the position in the Lok Sabha that Gandhi cannot refer to a book which has not been cleared for publication. This may be technically correct, but the government would be aware that what General Naravane has purportedly written in the book regarding India-China clashes in Eastern Ladakh in 2020 is circulating among the public. This would inevitably lead to many people making up their minds on the issue without having the benefit of the government viewpoint.

With regard to memoirs, a point may be made. Military and civilian officers who have held sensitive and senior positions have to eschew the temptation of tread into the territory of confidential information while penning their memoirs. They also have to be conscious that their interaction with the political leadership, while they were in service, was always based on trust. It is a matter of honour and obligation that this trust between the military and civilian officers and the political leadership is always maintained while in service or after retirement. The system will be greatly impaired if details of meetings of Cabinet committees or the decision-making processes, especially on matters of national security, are revealed. Even if these officers feel that political leaders erred or that they were let down, they do not have the luxury or liberty to break that trust after their retirement.



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY,
MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

The absence of dialogue between the ruling dispensation and the Opposition is visible in Rahul Gandhi's reference to Naravane's work.

Senior military and civilian officers have to be conscious of their remit. Thus, civilian officers need to be conscious that decisions given to them have to be interpreted by them within their area of responsibility. And, military officers have to reflect decisions or advice of the political leadership strictly within the confines of their military responsibilities. They cannot view them from any other perspective. Thus, if a matter is left to their discretion, it is to be interpreted by them narrowly in the context of their military duties and not be extended to the diplomatic and political domains.

The absence of dialogue between the ruling dispensation and the Opposition is visible in Rahul Gandhi's reference to Naravane's work.

This is in contrast to what prevailed in the past. Former civil ser-

vants can recall that leaders in the government and the Opposition kept in touch with each other on issues of national significance. I remember occasions during my diplomatic career when the government briefed leaders of the Opposition before embarking on a major diplomatic initiative or when the nation faced a sudden crisis.

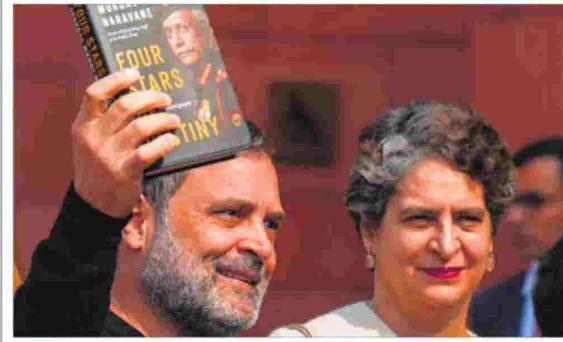
This was done not because such an outreach would prevent the ebb and flow of politics on the issues on which these briefings were done, but because they gave an understanding to all sections of the political class of the challenges and opportunities relating to these issues. In some instances, the leaders communicated directly with one another while in other cases, through trusted aides.

The bitterness, rancour and inventiveness now witnessed almost daily among the leaders of the ruling dispensation and the Opposition indicates that the tradition of being in communication with one another is either absent or not as much as it should be. This is particularly damaging to national interest because the country is facing grave strategic challenges.

The absence of dialogue between the ruling dispensation and the Opposition is visible in Rahul Gandhi's reference to Naravane's work. Once Gandhi had referred to it, the government could have told him that it could not agree to any discussion based on the work, but that it was willing to brief him on the reasons which have led it to not give clearance to the work. It could have briefed him in confidence about the important incidents in Eastern Ladakh, including those which have been purportedly mentioned in the work. After all, the members of the political class are all committed to the nation's interest. They all have a sense of what can be disclosed and what has to be kept secret.

I recall an incident which occurred in the Standing Committee on External Affairs chaired by former Prime Minister IK Gujral. It illustrated that the political class knows what can be disclosed and what has to be held back. Foreign Secretary K Raghunath was being questioned about India's assistance to the Northern Alliance. Members were getting impatient with Raghunath's sparse answers. Gujral stepped in to say that he knew what the MFA was doing and closed the discussion. No member protested.

When military leadership is put to the test



CONTROVERSY: A row has risen over former Army Chief Gen Manoj Naravane's unpublished book. PTI

Flat, there has been considerable debate and controversy over the book written by former Army Chief General Manoj Naravane, which is yet to be published. This piece is in continuation of the same debate.

But I need to make certain submissions. First, I have no political affiliations and the comments are based on my own personal experience of over 40 years as a military officer. In fact, ours was the last batch to pass out of the Indian Military Academy in June 1962, before the war with China started.

All officers of my vintage have served

in our active border areas, both on the western front opposite Pakistan and on the north-eastern front facing China. All possess a wealth of experience and knowledge gained from serving in these border areas.

Second, I have no comment to make on whether India lost any territory to China in 2020, as the Opposition claims, or that we did not lose any, as the government asserts. Also, not being knowledgeable about parliamentary rules, I cannot comment on whether a Member of Parliament can quote excerpts from a book that has not yet been cleared by the Ministry of Defence for publication.

It is well known that in the summer of 2020, there was a clash between Chinese and Indian troops in the Galwan Valley. This resulted in the death of 20 of our soldiers and an unknown number of the Chinese. This is important to remember since in late August 2020 — as the book refers to — although there was no open Indo-China war, there was a sense of war-like.

It is also well known that over 50,000 Indian soldiers are deployed in Ladakh to safeguard the territorial sanctity of the country. Additionally, it needs stressing that it is incumbent on every military leader to ensure the safety of the lives of his men under command. I have had the occasion of serving opposite the Chinese in Ladakh, in the central sector of Uttarakhand, and also of commanding a brigade that



L T GEN RAJ KADYAN (RETD)

EX DEPUTY CHIEF OF ARMY STAFF

could well have been taken at the level of the Corps Commander concerned even without any reference to seniors in the military hierarchy.

However, since the matter had been raised with the Army Chief, we need to focus on what happened thereafter.

Instead of taking a decision on a problem that at the time was purely of a military nature, the Army Chief chose to raise it with the political leadership. This amounts to a shifting of responsibility. At that instant, for the Army Chief to ask the political leadership what are my orders? is rather strange. Bluntly put, it amounted to abdication of his own responsibility. There should have been no need to seek any political clearance at that stage since the Chinese were reportedly about 500 metres away and the threat to the soldiers was imminent.

The Prime Minister's response to take action considered appropriate can only be lauded. It was a clear political direction with the implied acceptance of responsibility. No restrictions were imposed on action considered militarily necessary and appropriate.

The Army Chief's action to fire warning flares was correct as a de-escalating measure. But since that advice had not been heeded, opening fire would have been in order. For the Army Chief to say that he was handed a hot potato seems strange and misplaced. The honour of commanding one of the largest and finest armies in the world carries with it a corresponding degree of responsibility. It is not a ceremonial post of only perks and privileges.

Unfortunately, General Naravane has also reportedly mentioned his apprehension of the incident ending his career, or words to that effect. The occurrence of such a thought at a time when national security and lives of subordinates are at stake goes against the very ethos of the military.

History records and his confidants of the time confirm that Sam Manekshaw, as Chief, carried his resignation in his pocket for any eventuality. General Naravane hardly needs to be reminded that in the foundation of the National Defence Academy, every cadet wears a Service Before Self badge on his arm.

At that critical time, the Army Chief faced a bigger issue and even the very thought of his career can only be decried.

The Tribune

TWO VIEWS

NARAVANE BOOK ROW

Instead of taking a decision on a problem that at the time was purely of a military nature, the Army Chief chose to raise it with the political leadership.

was in eyeball-to-eyeball contact with the Chinese in the Doklam area of Sikkim.

While, as a matter of policy, we did not initiate hostilities, there did not exist any standing order that we were not to open fire on the Chinese even when they intruded in our territory. To my knowledge, firing in self-defence is never disallowed. This policy, as brought out in the reported excerpts of the book, seems a later addition and is open to question.

Let me focus on what reportedly happened on August 31, 2020. As mentioned, four Chinese tanks accompanied by the infantry were advancing on our position in Rinchen La. Since our troops were in occupation of the position, it is to be assumed that we were holding defences on our own side of the Line of Actual Control and the Chinese were not only making an intrusion but were also advancing very aggressively, posing a threat to the lives of our soldiers.

There is no denying that it was incumbent on the commanders to contest the Chinese action and take necessary measures to prevent any loss of territory or of human lives. In fact, such defensive action

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1 Complain whiningly (9)
- 8 Awaken (5)
- 9 Stipulation (7)
- 10 An emotional inhibition (4-2)
- 11 Trader (6)
- 12 Seeming (8)
- 15 Ominous (8)
- 18 For the most part (6)
- 20 Originate (6)
- 21 Brave (7)
- 22 Expand (5)
- 23 Have no takers (2,7)

Yesterday's Solution

- Across:** 1 Fascism, 4 Hitch, 7 Rout, 8 Brickbat, 10 More or less, 12 Eulogy, 13 Potent, 15 Fine-tuning, 18 Inundate, 19 Gist, 20 Brail, 21 Earthly.
- Down:** 1 Forum, 2 Squarely, 3 Marble, 4 Hocus-pocus, 5 Tuba, 6 Hatchet, 9 Long-winded, 11 Devilish, 12 Earlier, 14 Nestle, 16 Gutsy, 17 Dumb.

DOWN

- 2 Uncanny (5)
- 3 Exquisitely beautiful (6)
- 4 A summary of contents (8)
- 5 List of corrected mistakes (6)
- 6 Clumsy incompetent person (7)
- 7 Prevent from approaching (4,2,3)
- 11 To reprimand (5,4)
- 13 Spread through (8)
- 14 Enter uninvited (7)
- 16 An economy (6)
- 17 Means of subsistence (6)
- 19 First premier of Soviet Union (5)

SUDOKU

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	3	4	8					

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

2	1	5	6	7	8	9	3	4
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9	8	6	2	3	4	7	5	1
6	3	2	9	1	7	4	8	5
5	9	1	4	8	3	6	7	2
7	4	8	5	2	6	3	1	9
1	5	3	7	4	9	8	2	6
4	6	7	8	5	2	1	9	3
8	2	9	3	6	1	5	4	7

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 12, 2026, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Margshirsh Shaka 23
- Phalgun Parvishtha 1
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 10, up to 12:23 pm
- Harshana Yoga up to 3:06 am
- Jyestha Nakshatra up to 1:43 pm
- Moon enters Sagittarius sign 1:43 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET: THURSDAY 18:08 HRS

SUNRISE: FRIDAY 07:04 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	24	10
New Delhi	26	12
Amritsar	23	08
Bathinda	24	09
Jalandhar	23	08
Ludhiana	23	10
Bhawanipatna	24	11
Hisar	24	10
Sirsa	24	10
Dharamsala	22	06
Manali	15	01
Shimla	17	06
Srinagar	10	01
Jammu	24	12
Kargil	04	-06
Leh	02	-09
Dehradun	22	09
Mussourie	17	07

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Green transition

India needs better, long-term planning

New research published by the NITI Aayog this week has brought India's long-term climate strategy into sharper focus. It lays out pathways to a "Viksit Bharat" by 2047 while keeping the country on track to achieve net-zero emission by 2070. India's cumulative investment needs by 2070 are estimated at \$14.7 trillion under a current policy scenario and \$22.7 trillion under a net-zero scenario. This implies an average annual investment of roughly \$500 billion over the coming decades. By contrast, the current investment is estimated at around \$135 billion per year, leaving a large and persistent gap. Even under optimistic assumptions about domestic capital formation, the study estimates that India could mobilise about \$16.2 trillion by 2070. This still leaves a financing gap of around \$6.5 trillion, which would have to be bridged largely through international capital, concessionary finance, and grants.

The challenges identified are multilayered and structural. India's climate transition is constrained by a high cost of capital and the limited availability of long-term concessionary finance and grants, which weaken project viability, particularly for capital-intensive sectors such as energy storage, green hydrogen, and industrial decarbonisation. Global uncertainties, which are shaped by rising protectionism, geopolitical tensions, shifting global supply chains, and fragmented policy frameworks, also add to the concern. Investment is further held back by weak and uneven project pipelines across states and sectors, reflecting gaps in project preparation and implementation capacity. Sectoral readiness varies widely. While the deployment of renewable power has scaled up rapidly, progress in grid expansion, storage capacity, and clean industrial technologies has been slow. The report also flags rapid urbanisation, resource constraints, and growing demand for skilled human capital, which necessitate targeted investment in resilient infrastructure, green technologies, and workforce development to sustain this brown to green transition.

In this context, the Economic Survey 2025-26 underscored many such concerns. It noted that India's climate finance remained heavily skewed towards mature mitigation sectors such as solar and wind, while adaptation, urban infrastructure, financing for micro, small, and medium enterprises, and hard-to-serve industries remained underfunded. The Survey also highlighted that climate finance in India was still overwhelmingly domestic, with around 83 per cent of mitigation finance and 98 per cent of adaptation finance currently being from domestic sources.

The NITI Aayog study, therefore, places strong emphasis on institutional and financial reform. On the policy side, it stresses the importance of demand-side measures such as energy efficiency, behavioural change, and material circularity, including initiatives like Mission LIFE, which can deliver emission reduction at a relatively low cost. On the financing side, it calls for the creation of a "National Green Finance Institution" to aggregate and channel capital, reduce risks, and lower borrowing costs. Other recommendations include expanding blended finance facilities, adopting unified climate-finance taxonomies, and deepening markets for corporate and green bonds. Thus, India's net-zero ambition requires a credible financing architecture, and institutional reform. In effect, India requires long-term planning in a number of areas to get closer to its climate goals.

Augmenting mobility

Bharat Taxi will make the sector more competitive

Starting from the discount-fuelled rise of Ola and Uber in the early 2010s, app-based mobility has become essential for urban India. The sector is characterised by a few dominant platforms, frequent driver protests, and constant tension between affordability for users and viability for drivers. In this market, the launch of Bharat Taxi, a cooperative, driver-owned platform, adds competition to the ride-hailing market, which is, in principle, a positive development. It expands consumer choice in a market that has long been shaped by a near duopoly. Bharat Taxi's distinguishing feature is its cooperative model. It promises a zero-commission structure and surge-free pricing where drivers are not merely partners but members and co-owners. Thus, it promises to direct all profits to drivers. If implemented credibly, this could benefit both drivers and passengers. Drivers stand to gain from higher take-home earnings, a greater sense of ownership, and welfare-linked support such as retirement savings, and accident and health insurance. Users, meanwhile, may benefit from more predictable fares, fewer hidden charges, and a platform whose incentives are not solely driven by shareholder returns.

Importantly, Bharat Taxi enters a market that is already shifting away from the old commission-heavy model. Rapido pioneered the move in 2023 by transitioning from per-ride commission to a subscription-based structure, allowing drivers to retain the full fare in exchange for a small daily or monthly fee. This offered drivers cost predictability and reduced resentment around commission, which sometimes reached 30-35 per cent. The pressure created by Rapido's model, along with smaller experiments like Namma Yatri, pushed larger incumbents to respond. Competitive pressure is forcing business-model innovation so that platforms can no longer ignore driver dissatisfaction.

But it is not clear whether a zero-commission model can be sustainable in the long term. With a flat fee, the platform loses the incentive to boost ride volumes or pricing. It essentially decouples their revenue from market demand, limiting long-term scalability unless they find other ways to monetise their ecosystem. The entry of Bharat Taxi raises another critical policy concern. The idea of a cooperative model is welcome; but any kind of government support is not. The line between enabling a cooperative and the state becoming an interested party is thin. Private players may fear uneven enforcement, preferential access, or regulatory asymmetry. In a sector that requires constant technological investment and operational discipline, state backing can weaken market incentives rather than strengthen them.

In such cases, the Competition Commission of India must remain vigilant. If aggressive undercutting, implicit subsidies, or dominance by any player begins to undermine fair competition, regulatory scrutiny will be necessary. The goal should be a level playing field where cooperative and private models compete on merit. Thus, Bharat Taxi can strengthen India's mobility ecosystem by widening competition and experimenting with driver-centric ownership.



SNEHA PATHAK

Tatyasaheb: The Story of a Bombay Entrepreneur is the biography of Vaman Shridhar Apte, also known as Vaman Seth or Tatyasaheb, written by his granddaughter Tejaswini Apte-Rahm. Ms Apte-Rahm looks at the legacy built by Tatyा and gives her readers a story of his rise and growth in the business world. At the same time, she also paints a picture of the period in which he lived and worked, thus making it an account not just of the single life, but of an entire bygone era.

Ms Apte-Rahm begins the narrative with Tatyा's family background and also sets the scene of what Mumbai — then Bombay — was like in 1869 when Tatyा's father arrived there with his family. After a few years of initially moving away from the city, Tatyा returned to Mumbai in 1892, a period of boom in the textiles business. Ms Apte-Rahm devotes two chapters to his return and subsequent rise to prominence in the textile industry, starting with little capital and suffering initial losses.

The next two chapters detail Tatyा's other business ventures: Production of silent films under the banner of (mainly) Hindustan Film Company and later, in his 50s, his foray into the sugar industry. She also dedicates one chapter to the less successful ventures such as in the oil and paper industry.

Tatyा comes across as a man with an even temper who was not averse to taking risks and was a good judge of

character. He also had a knack for managing people and situations. This is reflected in his successful dealings with people from various walks of life, from Marwari and Gujarati businessmen to the Englishmen with whom he did business. His frayed but working relationship, and the ultimate break with Dadasabhe Phalke, the father of Indian cinema who was a genius with a mercurial temperament, also makes for an interesting reading experience in the chapter on silent films.

Ms Apte-Rahm broadens the scope of the biography by situating Tatyा in a world that was moving and changing alongside him. For instance, in the first chapter we get a sense of Mumbai as it was when Tatyा's father brought his family there — a bustling city with a population of close to 8,00,000, which could boast of railways and wide roads, but whose poor lived in congested and unsanitary conditions. The working of

cotton mills and the textile business as well as a substantially detailed history of silent films and how they were produced, especially by Hindustan Film Company in keeping with the limitations and restrictions of the time provide an immersive experience.

Because the primary focus of the biography is on Tatyा as an entrepreneur, chapters on his personal life titled "The Family" and "Tatyा and Kaku" (Tatyा's wife) — are placed towards the end of the book. In the vein of the previous chapters, these sections provide readers not just a portrait of his family members and family-life but also situate them within the wider socio-cultural contexts and practices, such as coveting a male child, the rigid ideas of male and eating

in an orthodox Brahmin household and so on. Choosing an entrepreneurial lens also means that the political currents of the time, including the Independence movement, stay in the background, converging only when they directly impact or shape Tatyा's work. This is reflected in Tatyा's decision to invest in Phalke's films only because of Lokmanya Tilak, or in the impact of independence and the subsequent merger of princely states with India on the Marathi Sugar Works.

The author has made use of many formal and informal sources of information about the subject of her biography. As she writes in "A Note on This Biography", her father translated many documents from Marathi to Eng-

lish and accompanied her to multiple locations where Tatyा had either lived or had business dealings. She also used old photographs, and researched at the National Film Archive in Pune and various libraries. She has provided a substantial number of photographs and also included two appendices at the end of the book. The first Appendix provides information related to Tatyा's textile business for a period of close to 20 years, while the second appendix provides a filmography of the Hindustan Film Company. This detailed research reflects in *Tatyasaheb*, elevating it from the status of the anecdotal story of a glorious relative.

In 2022, Ms Apte-Rahm published a novel, *The Secret of More*, which was inspired by Tatyा's life. While *The Secret of More* is as much a portrait of the business man as of the man and the people in his life, *Tatyasaheb* views Tatyा's life from the lens of his entrepreneurship with everything else providing a rich and layered background.

The reviewer is an independent writer and translator

Rebalancing federal transfers

The 16th Finance Commission's recommendations fall short of addressing structural inequalities across states



The Founding Fathers of the Constitution mandated the appointment of a Finance Commission by the President every five years to recommend a fair distribution of fiscal resources between the Union and the states, so that they can carry out the functions assigned to them in the Seventh Schedule. They could have written the share of each state into the Constitution itself but instead decided to have a neutral expert body assess the changing capacities and needs of states quinquennially, and recommend the devolution of taxes collected by the Union government and grants to be paid to the states. The report of the 16th Finance Commission, placed in Parliament on February 1, will determine the federal fiscal architecture for the next five years.

It goes to the credit of those who drafted the terms of reference (ToR) of the Commission that they simply reproduced the tasks specified in Article 280 and avoided muddles or directives to the Commission, unlike in the past. It also goes to the credit of the Commission that it has not rocked the boat, and that there is a strong measure of stability and continuity in its recommendations. The Commission has continued with the devolution of 41 per cent of Union taxes but discontinued the practice of recommending revenue-deficit grants.

For the horizontal distribution of devolved taxes, the most significant change in the formula is the introduction of the contribution of states' share in the national gross domestic product (GDP). It assigned a 10 per cent weighting to this factor by reducing the weighting of per capita income distance and demographic performance by 2.5 percentage points, and that of area by 5 percentage points. It removed the 2.5 per cent weighting assigned by the 15th Commission to the tax effort factor and added this to a 17.5 per cent weighting to population share.

The weight for demographic performance was reduced by 2.5 percentage points and instead of taking the inverse of fertility change, it took the inverse of population growth between 1971 and 2011 Censuses. Similarly, the forest cover variable was weighted by its density. The Commission discontinued the practice of recommending state-specific and sector-specific grants.

The vertical transfers are broadly based on the Commission's judgement about the relative capacities and needs of the Union and the states in carrying out

the functions assigned to them in the Constitution. However, in evaluating horizontal transfers, it is important to see to what extent the transfers are aligned with the rationale for transfers in a federal system.

The transfers may be for general purpose (unconditional) or for specific purposes. The rationale for the former is to "enable" every state to provide a comparable level of public services at comparable revenue effort, which implies offsetting the states' revenue and cost disadvantages and incentivising revenue effort.

The general-purpose transfer is unconditional and allows the states to provide services according to the varying preferences of the people residing in them. However, specific grants are given to "ensure" minimum standards of services considered "meritorious" or those that entail significant externalities, so that every citizen can have access to a pre-specified minimum of such services.

The tax devolution is a general-purpose transfer and is distributed to the states by the Commission broadly based on factors representing revenue and cost disabilities. The 16th Commission gives the rationale that using contribution to GDP serves the purpose of efficiency, as this is presumed to incentivise states to implement policies to maximise the growth of their GDP.

While, as a general proposition, this may be attractive, the introduction of this factor conflicts with the revenue disability factor, and its effectiveness will depend upon its electoral impact. More importantly, in a federalism marked by "competitive inequality", the states are not on a level playing field, and the capacity to respond to the incentive differs widely among them.

Those with better social and physical infrastructure and more responsive institutions perform better than others. The Commission's recommendations cannot be expected to fully offset revenue and cost disabilities, and infrastructure deficits in low per capita income states persist, as the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Acts restrict them to borrowing only up to 3 per cent of their GSDP.

Doing away with revenue-deficit grants also raises some issues. The devolution based on revenue and cost disabilities does not address the specific problems of individual states, and grants can help in better targeting. At the same time, the inability to make nor-

mative assessments objectively raises both equity and incentive problems, which I had described in my earlier writings as "tyranny of the base year" and "fiscal dentistry". Projections made on base-year numbers fail to address the service-level deficits in disadvantaged states, and filling in budgetary cavities by the Commission increases the size of cavities over time. Dispensing with revenue-deficit grants is one way to avoid this, but it rebalances the fiscal architecture.

The Commission is obsessed with the view that the 14th Finance Commission was unduly generous to the states in increasing tax devolution from 32 per cent to 42 per cent and repeats this assertion in several places in the report. It sounds most irresponsible of the 14th Commission to have done so! Ironically, nowhere does the Commission recognise the fact that the 14th Commission, unlike past Commissions, had to consider both plan and non-plan requirements of the states and had to subsume the Gadgil formula grants.

Besides, the Commission desisted from giving separate sector- and state-specific grants. It may be recalled that the 13th Commission recommended separate grants for environment, roads and bridges, governance, elementary education and many state-specific grants. If we consider only the tax devolution, revenue-deficit grants and the subsumed Gadgil formula grants, the difference is not that dramatic. The tax devolution and revenue-deficit grant share in the gross tax revenue of the Centre works out to be 38.5 per cent, which is marginally higher than the tax devolution, revenue-deficit grants and Gadgil formula grants given by the 13th Finance Commission. The marginal increase was because the Commission preferred the Union to confine Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) only to "critical" services and not make forays into several sectors in the State List.

This brings us to the view of the 16th Commission on the CSS. The Commission asserts, "The CSS have played a crucial role in the nation's development" (p.142). Have they really? As mentioned earlier, the specific-purpose transfers are required to ensure minimum standards of "critical" services. Do the "critical" areas extend to 29 umbrella schemes?

Many of the schemes are simple aggregations of more than 300 schemes that existed from the mid-1980s. In fact, the P V Narasimha Rao Committee was the first to report on the proliferation of schemes in 1988. These are mostly financed from cesses, thus eroding the divisible pool. Besides, is there any scheme in which the objective of achieving the minimum standard is specified? Even in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, there are 42 different interventions. The Action Agenda paper of the NITI Aayog released in 2017 stated that there are approximately 2,000 budgetary and the ultimate spending pattern of all the schemes are vastly different. Even in Mgnrega (now subsumed under GRAM), Tamil Nadu, a state with a lower poverty ratio receives a much higher allocation than Bihar. If the grants to these "critical" services are not designed and implemented to achieve minimum standards, what economic objective are they expected to serve?

The author was director, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, and member, Fourteenth Finance Commission. Views are personal

Readyng for the trade deals

With two consequential trade agreements in the bag, the received wisdom from officialdom is that India is in an economic sweet spot, or somewhere near it. Thanks to a maverick US States President's change of opinion (little data appears to inform his decisions), India will hopefully enjoy modest tariff cuts compared to competing nations such as Vietnam and Bangladesh when it comes to such labour-intensive manufactures as textiles, leather and marine imports — though the recent US-Bangladesh trade deal is causing misgivings among Indian apparel exporters. The bigger objective question, however, is whether India can maximise the potential embedded in these trade deals and meaningfully alter the economic landscape on jobs, exports, and growth.

If there are qualms it is mostly a ubiquitous one about the "doing business" ecosystem in India. It is worth noting that even before the Trump tariff attacks, India's merchandise exports had performed below par for at least the past decade and a half. India accounts for just 1.8 per cent of global merchandise trade, from less than one per cent at the start of the nineties. That was roughly the same as China at the time; today, the Middle Kingdom is the world's largest goods trading nation. Low productivity and cost competitiveness and the sheer challenge of following multiple compliances and variable policymaking at federal and state levels have been cited as the usual suspects for India's underwhelming performance in global markets.

Unexpectedly, though, businesses scouring the fast-growing Asia Pacific landscape for potential investment opportunities will find that India is not necessarily the most complex place to do business. According to the Netherlands-based consultancy TMF Group's 2025 Global Business Complexity Index, the nearest proxy

for Doing Business index that the World Bank jetisoned in 2021, that distinction goes to Mainland China.

The TMF index, which tracks business complexity chiefly in terms of the number and complexity of compliances in accounting and tax, global entity management and HR and payroll, works in reverse. The most complex jurisdiction is placed at No 1 (Greece, in this case) and the best at No 79, which happens to be tax and money laundering haven Cayman Islands. China stands at 10, down from 14 in 2023. Chinese laws, the report says, are frequently updated and often implemented swiftly and without extended consultation periods, requiring companies to "constantly align their compliance efforts with new requirements".

India by contrast weighs in at 18, which doesn't look half bad given that Indonesia is ranked worse at 14. But the point of concern is that India's latest ranking is a considerable drop from 33 in 2024. The report admits that India has introduced "a series of compliance reforms focusing on transparency and governance". But it suggests that these reforms, though potentially beneficial in the long term, have made the compliance regime more stringent and complex for companies to track. It also refers to a pet peeve of corporate India: Deficiencies in the education system that make it difficult to find adequately skilled labour.

The report makes no reference to the difficulties in obtaining critical mass of land for large projects or the unpredictability of policy, arbitrary notifications and unexpected court interpretations of economic law that have played their part in discouraging investors, domestic and foreign. Though policymakers cite the decriminalisation of many statutes and the codification and relaxation of labour laws as a key enabler, India Inc

seems less enamoured of them. But policy complexity and tickleness need not be absolute deterrents to investment if the opportunity for global investors to extract value is compelling enough. For instance, for all the emerging complexities of doing business in Xi Jinping's China, the country still figures at rank six in a T Kearney's 2025 FDI Confidence Index (though that's a drop from three in 2024). Indian ranks at 24, a sharp slip from 18 in 2024, mirroring the outlook of the TMF business complexity index. But the picture changes when you narrow the lens to foreign direct investment (FDI) in IT and services. India's FDI inflows for the year surged 73 per cent, the bulk of it flowing into global capability centres and data centres, leveraging the country's traditional competitive advantage.

Though analysts of a certain persuasion read in these numbers signs of India's impending economic greatness, the fact is that no nation has bootstrapped its way out of underdevelopment without establishing a robust manufacturing basis. Neighbouring Bangladesh is a case in point. In any case, India's notoriously poor record in delivering quality education at scale militates against the hoped for IT-driven economic revolution. It is impractical to expect India to churn out at short notice the critical mass of coders and specialists needed to miraculously transform the country into an IT powerhouse.

The US and the European Union trade deals, whenever they are signed, sealed and delivered, certainly offer the potential for India to re-open for business. But creating the groundwork for shovel-ready investment would require sustained hard work from the ground up to reverse all of India's deep-seated problems — from providing people with better access to health and education to sustaining a vibrant multicultural society, unswind red tape and diminishing the power of the bureaucrat and populist politician to hold entrepreneurs hostage to the whims of the state.

Ms Apte-Rahm begins the narrative with Tatyा's family background and also sets the scene of what Mumbai — then Bombay — was like in 1869 when Tatyा's father arrived there with his family. After a few years of initially moving away from the city, Tatyा returned to Mumbai in 1892, a period of boom in the textiles business. Ms Apte-Rahm devotes two chapters to his return and subsequent rise to prominence in the textile industry, starting with little capital and suffering initial losses.

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Editor's

TAKE

New digital rules: Policing the deepfake age

By mandating labels and traceable metadata for AI content, the Government's new IT Rules seek to protect citizens from deepfakes and digital fraud

Artificial Intelligence, or AI, is a double-edged sword, and it is cutting both ways for sure. Hundreds and thousands of complaints are filed every month by people duped by AI-generated content. From bank fraud to digital arrests, AI is being utilised by scammers like never before. AI has become such a powerful tool that it can mimic voices and make videos that are difficult to detect even with sophisticated detection systems, let alone by ordinary people. In this scenario, it is a welcome step that the government has finally woken up to the need for its regulation. With the notification of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2020, the Government has taken a firm step towards regulating digital media and codifying the ethics that would govern it. In the age of deepfakes, synthetic audio, and hyper-realistic visuals, truth itself has become fragile. Many people have watched a video of Nirmala Sitharaman promoting an app that appears realistic but is certainly a deepfake. For a gullible person, before such content is removed, the damage has already been done.

The new rules would precisely address these kinds of AI-generated content. The new rules would ensure that the source of such content does not remain hidden and is traceable through metadata. Indeed, people have the right to know whether what they are seeing or hearing is real or machine-made. By mandating that all "synthetically generated information" be clearly labelled and embedded with persistent metadata and unique identifiers, the Government is striving for a minimum layer of trust in online content. This is not censorship in the classic sense; it is disclosure. The aim is not to ban AI, but to make its use transparent. This is not an easy task, as a fine balance is essential. If it is banned completely, it would mean gagging creativity and punishing innocent content. From AI-assisted film dubbing to virtual influencers and automated news summaries, synthetic content is mainstream. But the problem starts when corporates, individuals, and even political parties start misusing it. This technology, if misused, can ruin lives and careers – impersonating politicians, blackmailing citizens, inciting violence, and framing people for crimes they did not commit. The new framework seeks to draw a legal line between legitimate creative or functional use and malicious content. The rules would be effective as they shift the onus to digital media platforms. Companies like Meta, Google, and YouTube will be accountable and will have to provide the trail of such content if required. They must now ask users whether content is AI-generated, cross-verify it with automated tools, and flag it if it is synthetic. If they are found violating or flouting norms, they risk losing their legal protection. However, it will not be easy, as in a short span of hours, a deepfake can reach millions.

Automated detection is imperfect. False positives may burden publishers. Besides, vague definitions of "misleading" content could be stretched in politically sensitive cases. Still, as a first attempt to bring order to AI content, it is a welcome step, though it may need more fine-tuning in the time to come.

PICTALK



Elephants graze in a tea garden on the outskirts of Guwahati, Assam.

PHOTO: PTI

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GOVERNMENT ISSUES GUIDELINES FOR VANDÉ MATARAM OBSERVANCE

In a significant move that has drawn attention across the country, the Union Home Ministry has issued comprehensive guidelines on the ceremonial observance of *Vande Mataram*, the national song, standardising how it should be played, sung, and respected at public and official functions. Under the new protocol, whenever *Vande Mataram* and the national anthem, *Jana Gana Mana*, are both performed, the national song should be rendered first, followed by the anthem. Those present are expected to stand at attention during both performances as a mark of respect.

The guidelines specify that a six-stanza version of *Vande Mataram*, lasting about three minutes and ten seconds, may be used at key official occasions.

BM BARATHI | BENGALURU

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

The spirit of Pariksha Pe Charcha

Through Pariksha Pe Charcha, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led a national effort to transform how examinations are perceived. At its core, this initiative affirms that education must nurture curiosity, resilience, and character, rather than merely reward high scores



SUKANTA MAJUMDAR

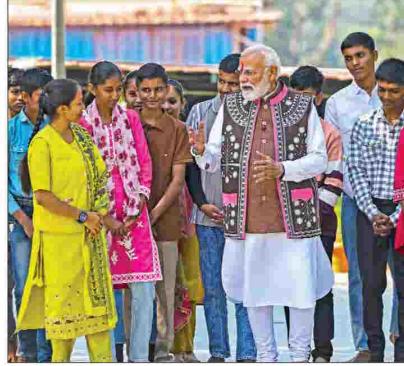
Achieving high marks remains the primary ambition for most students. In classrooms and households across the country, examinations are often seen as decisive moments that determine a child's future. In keeping with the vision of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who – through Pariksha Pe Charcha – has championed a student-friendly and stress-free education system, it is important to remind ourselves that examinations are not meant to be sources of fear, but opportunities for learning, reflection, and self-discovery. The Prime Minister's consistent message has been clear: marks should never define a child's worth.

The challenge of current perceptions

Unfortunately, society often interprets lower grades as signs of failure or personal inadequacy. This habit of judging a student's value solely through academic performance has distorted our understanding of what grades truly represent. Too often, a single score is mistaken for the total measure of a student's diverse abilities and potential. The emotional toll of this mindset is visible in disappointment, embarrassment, fear, and helplessness. Persistent academic struggle can even lead to what psychologists describe as "learned helplessness," where students begin to believe that effort no longer matters. At this stage, curiosity – the very heart of learning – slowly fades.

The evolution of Pariksha Pe Charcha

The spirit of Pariksha Pe Charcha seeks to correct this misunderstanding by placing the student's mental well-being at the centre of the examination process. It urges students, parents, and teachers to view examinations not as judgments on personal worth, but as milestones in a longer journey of growth. Since its first edition on February 16, 2018, Pariksha Pe Charcha has grown steadily in scope and participation. What began as a town hall-style interaction at Talkatora Stadium in New Delhi has evolved into a nationwide platform reaching millions of students through in-person, virtual, and hybrid formats. Participation has expanded from a few tens of thousands in the early editions to over 3.5 crore registrations in 2025. The initiative has rightfully earned a Guinness World Record for its widespread engagement.



reflecting a national commitment to making education more humane and supportive.

Understanding the meaning of grades

Grades are intended to measure a learner's current level of understanding, skill, and progress in a particular subject at a specific moment in time. They reflect performance, not permanent ability. While they may indicate classroom attention, reading habits, and preparation, they are never absolute measures. A wide range of factors – such as anxiety, health, personal circumstances, learning styles, teaching methods, and assessment formats – shape these outcomes.

Therefore, when a student performs poorly, there is always room for improvement. The right perspective is crucial. Grades are temporary indicators that highlight areas for growth. When treated as final judgments of ability, they damage self-esteem and weaken motivation. When understood properly as feedback, they become powerful tools for learning and development. In this sense, poor grades are not the end of the road, but signposts guiding students towards better strategies and deeper understanding.

Learning from failure: The role of teachers and parents

Poor performance provides valuable feedback about what went wrong and why. Failure allows reflection in a way that easy success often does not. By analysing mistakes, students can identify patterns in their errors and gaps in understanding. This

process strengthens learning and long-term retention. Lower grades remind students to reflect on their habits, time management, learning strategies, and priorities. A student may realise that distractions, ineffective revision, or last-minute cramming are limiting progress. Through reflection and experimentation, learners can develop study techniques suited to their own abilities and needs.

The influence of educators and families

Teachers play a decisive role in shaping how students interpret success and failure. When educators compare students with others or make negative remarks, they may unintentionally damage self-confidence. In contrast, when they explain mistakes clearly and offer guidance, they help students improve. By encouraging collaboration and valuing every learner beyond numerical scores, teachers can transform classrooms into spaces of growth rather than fear.

In many families, academic performance is closely tied to expectations and social status. When children underperform, parents may react with anger or comparisons, creating fear and pressure. Supportive responses, however, build resilience. By asking constructive questions and encouraging problem-solving, parents help children rebuild confidence and motivation.

Building resilience for life

Peers also influence how students cope with failure. By being understanding and offering help, students can support those who are struggling. Helping one another builds friendships and prepares students for real-life challenges.

Mindset ultimately determines whether poor grades become obstacles or opportunities. A growth mindset views challenges as chances to improve. We must adopt a mindset in which bad grades are seen as informative rather than discouraging. They point to areas for development, not the limits of potential.

In the end, what matters is not the grade itself but how it is understood and used. When seen as proof of failure, bad grades damage self-worth. When viewed as feedback, they become tools for improvement.

In this larger vision, Pariksha Pe Charcha stands as a transformative national platform that humanises examinations and restores confidence in young minds. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi has consistently reminded the nation that education is not a race for marks, but a journey of character, curiosity, and courage. When grades are understood in this spirit, they do not weaken our children – they prepare them to face life with strength and wisdom.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The writer is the Minister of State for Education and Development of the North Eastern Region

dr.sukantabjp
@DrSukantaBJP
dr.sukanta-majumdar

2ND OPINION

AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

It is quite normal in our lives to get into trouble. It may be a new problem or an old one surfacing. What is different, however, is the reaction of an individual. It depends on the individual's nature. One may lament what is happening to him, or get angry about it and blame someone for it, or fear the worst, or seek sympathy from someone, or go into denial; it cannot happen to me.

Very seldom does one take the blame for it or consider it as normally occurring. And it is really rare to seek guidance and help from God. Fortunately, I do. The mind goes into overdrive for almost all. Surely, seeking a solution is normal, as is thinking of avoiding or escaping the problem, but becoming obsessed about something is not wise at all.

And if we are devotees of God, having developed God consciousness, He helps us to overcome our problems by His "iccha shakti" (divine willpower), as promised by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, verse 18.58. God mostly uses a near or dear one to extend such help. Additionally, God makes a note of us for extending help in the future too. What should one not do when in trouble or faced with a problem? Freeze with fear, thinking of the

What should one do? There are three options. One is to think hard about what the best course of action is. However, it may not be so easy. Then, one should seek help from a near or dear one; ego should not be allowed to interfere. Thirdly, one should begin praying to God for guidance and help. Let us see what others can do. They can sympathise, be kind. Some may find fault with the person and make him feel guilty or foolish. Some may try to guide and help in their limited ways.

This is what God can do for us. Let me be very honest. God ignores most of our requests if they are not very sincere, which most are not. All our prayers for help must be in a humble mood. God will guide perfectly, being omniscient. Does God not know the past, present, and future as well? In short, God knows the Big Picture, which we are never privy to.

And if we are devotees of God, having developed God consciousness, He helps us to overcome our problems by His "iccha shakti" (divine willpower), as promised by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, verse 18.58. God mostly uses a near or dear one to extend such help. Additionally, God makes a note of us for extending help in the future too. What should one not do when in trouble or faced with a problem? Freeze with fear, thinking of the

worst, which seldom happens. If it were so common, how would anyone survive till ripe old age? Or lament one's bad luck, because all good or bad that happens to us is due only to our past 'karma's' (acts).

Seeking sympathy is also of no gain, because it does not address the problem. Giving up is another silly thing to do. Problems just do not go away, except some, like being stuck with bad company while travelling on a plane. Postponing action does not help if the problem is urgent, like a fever.

And one must be prepared to tolerate until the problem is solved; intolerance makes it worse. Just as happiness and misery are forever coming and going (2.14), problems will also come. And we must be prepared to deal with them.

Conclusion

Trouble is inevitable, but how we respond defines us. By combining thoughtful action, the support of loved ones, and sincere faith in God, we transform crises into opportunities for growth. Problems test our patience and character, but with humility and perseverance, they ultimately strengthen us.

The writer is a spiritual teacher

Regulating standards in home nursing

The rapid expansion of home care services has emerged as a response to gaps in post-discharge patient management. While many organisations claim to provide specialist nursing care at home, the reality in some instances appears deeply concerning. Several agencies reportedly recruit staff from rural areas, offering them very low wages while charging patients premium fees. This practice compromise the quality and safety of patient care.

In certain cases, individuals are allegedly given hospital-style uniforms and presented as experienced professionals despite lacking proper credentials or verified clinical exposure.

Hospitals must exercise due diligence before associating with or recommending third-party home care providers. Failure to verify credentials, licensing, and background checks could harm institutional reputation and potentially result in legal complications if substandard care leads to adverse outcomes.

Home care services are an essential extension of healthcare delivery, especially for the elderly and chronically ill. However, transparency, regulation, ethical recruitment practices, and strict credential verification are crucial to maintain trust.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Parliament must rely only on verified fact

Apropos, "No authorised copies exist: Naravane endorses publisher," Feb 11. The Lok Sabha witnessed unprecedented turmoil after Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi displayed a book titled *Four Stars of Destiny*, claimed to be written by former Army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane and published by Penguin Random House, and sought a debate on its alleged relevance to the 2020 Galwan clash.

Citing the book, Rahul Gandhi accused the government of mishandling Chinese incursions along the Line of Actual Control.

The controversy deepened when the Speaker disallowed discussion on the grounds that the book had not been officially published. If the publisher and the former Army chief are correct in distancing themselves from the book or its contents, the episode raises disturbing questions about the authenticity of the material presented in Parliament.

More alarmingly, it signals how Parliament risks being reduced to a platform for unverified claims, distorted narratives, and manufactured evidence, weakening democratic scrutiny, eroding institutional dignity, and diminishing public trust in responsible governance.

Corruption fight needs better reforms

This refers to the news report "India climbs up in corruption index" dated February 11, 2020. While India's improvement in rank in the Corruption Perception Index may appear encouraging, the larger picture calls for caution. A modest rise does not automatically translate into meaningful change on the ground. The fact that our overall score has improved only marginally shows that deep-rooted issues remain. Corruption affects daily life in subtle but damaging ways – from delays in public services to weakened trust in institutions. The report's mention or risks faced by journalists is also worrying.

Instead of celebrating small statistical gains, the focus should be on sustained institutional reform. Strengthening vigilance bodies, ensuring time-bound delivery of public services, and expanding digital governance can reduce discretion and curb petty corruption.

Equally important is protecting whistle-blowers and journalists who bring wrongdoing to light. Their safety must be guaranteed through firm legal and administrative measures. Greater transparency in political funding and public procurement would also go a long way. Regular social audits and citizen feedback can make governance more participatory.

SM JEEVA | CHENNAI

A P THIRUVADU | CHENNAI

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU



Pakistan – An Islamic nation or a hater of its own roots?

Pakistan today is home to more than 40 million Shia Muslims – nearly one-fifth of its population. Yet more than 4,000 Shias have been killed in sectarian attacks in the past two decades alone. These are not accidental casualties of instability; they are victims of a sustained ideological assault



BALBIR
PUNJ

The suicide bombing at the Khadija Ul Kubra Shia Mosque in Islamabad on February 6, 2024, which killed at least 36 worshippers and left over 160 injured during Friday prayers, was not merely another act of terrorism in Pakistan's troubled history. It was not an isolated tragedy either.

It was, in fact, part of a grim continuum. In November 2024, a Shia procession in Parachinar was attacked, killing 44 civilians, including women and children. In March 2022, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) bombed the Kucha Risalda Shia Mosque in Peshawar, killing over 60 worshippers.

In 2015, a Shia mosque in Shikarpur was targeted during Friday prayers, leaving 61 dead. Earlier still, the Hazara Shia community of Quetta endured near-genocidal violence, including the twin bombings of 2013 that killed over 200 people.

Pakistan today is home to more than 40 million Shia Muslims – nearly one-fifth of its population. Yet more than 4,000 Shias have been killed in sectarian attacks in the past two decades alone. These are not accidental casualties of instability; they are victims of a sustained ideological assault.

A state that cannot – or will not – protect such a large section of its Muslim population forfeits its claim to Islamic legitimacy.

Sectarian targeting has become a structural feature of Pakistan's internal life. Even more telling was the state's immediate instinct to deflect responsibility. Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif rushed to blame India and Afghanistan – without evidence or investigation.

But facts are stubborn things. Pakistan's sectarian violence is neither imported nor imposed. It is indigenous, ideologically motivated, and politically patronised.

The reasons for mass murders committed in the name of Islam lie not only in the theology but also in governance. Pakistan has failed to act as a neutral guarantor of religious plurality. Instead, it has repeatedly



aligned itself with extremist Sunni majoritarianism, allowing sectarian harred to harden into political currency.

Groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Ahl-e-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat (ASWJ), globally recognised for their virulent anti-Shia ideology, have been allowed to operate openly. In September 2020, more than 30,000 extremists marched through Karachi, openly calling Shias "blasphemers" and demanding their beheading. Similar rallies followed in Islamabad. These were not clandestine gatherings; they were public demonstrations of ideological impunity.

Legislative measures such as Punjab's Tahaffiz-e-Bunyad-e-Islam Bill (2020) further marginalised Shias by privileging a singular Sunni interpretation of Islam. Electoral expediency has repeatedly trumped constitutional responsibility. Extremists are not confronted; they are courted, because they deliver street power and votes.

The deeper question remains: how does such an ideology repeatedly find fertile ground in Pakistan?

The answer lies in the circumstances

leading to its birth and decades of state policy. A state that once distinguished between "good" and "bad" terrorists should not feign surprise when violence turns inward. Islam, reduced to an instrument of power, inevitably devours its own.

Pakistan's well-worn narrative, in which India is portrayed as inherently anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic, collapses under empirical scrutiny.

At the time of Partition, residual India had roughly 30 million Muslims. Today, that number exceeds 220-240 million, making India home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Over eight decades, Indian Muslims have grown demographically, participated politically, and lived under a secular constitutional framework that guarantees religious freedom.

India maintains strong relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, and other Islamic nations. Even under Prime Minister Narendra Modi – frequently caricatured by Pakistani propaganda – India's engagement with the Islamic world has deepened. Pakistan's accusa-

tion is not grounded in reality; it is an ideological necessity to sustain its founding hostility.

Contrast this with Pakistan, where non-Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims, including Ahmadiyas, have been reduced to statistical insignificance, treated as second-class citizens, and are virtually invisible in the country's public spaces.

Pakistan's antagonism towards India is less theological and more civilisational. Pakistan was conceived not as a cultural continuation but as a negation of the subcontinent's pre-Islamic past. Official Pakistani historiography traces its origins to Muhammad bin Qasim's invasion of Sindh in 712 CE. Islamic invaders who destroyed temples and erased indigenous traditions are glorified as ideological ancestors.

This civilisational rupture was not accidental. As documented by former Indian diplomat Narendra Singh Sarila in *The Shadow of the Great Game* and economist Prasenjit K Basu in *Asia Reborn*, the partition of India was deeply embedded in Britain's imperial strategy.

Classified British correspondence reveals that on May 5, 1945, Prime Minister Winston Churchill commissioned a secret report recommending that Britain retain a military presence in India's north-west – present-day Pakistan – to counter the Soviet Union. The report advocated detaching Baluchistan to safeguard British interests in the Gulf and the Middle East, highlighting its value as a military base, transit hub, and reservoir of "manpower of good fighting quality".

On June 3, 1947, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin candidly admitted that the division of India would help Britain consolidate its position in the Middle East. A 1947 British military report went further, stating that Britain's strategic requirements in the subcontinent could be met through an agreement with Pakistan alone, even if India refused cooperation.

As Prasenjit K Basu notes, Pakistan was integral to Britain's grand strategy of retaining influence over the oil-rich regions of Saudi, Iraq, and the Gulf. This logic seamlessly transferred to the United States during the Cold War. Pakistan joined SEATO and CENTO, became a frontline ally against the Soviet Union, and hosted CIA operations,

including from the Peshawar airbase.

The United States later used Pakistan as a conduit to China and, during the 1971 war, openly sided with Islamabad against India. America replicated the weaponisation of Islam that Britain had perfected – most dramatically in Afghanistan. To counter the Soviet Union, Washington built a global jihad ecosystem, with Pakistan as its ideological and logistical incubator.

Post-9/11, Pakistan became indispensable once again, even as it played a double game. Islam was never the objective; it was the instrument.

If Pakistan genuinely loved Islam, it would stand unequivocally with Muslim causes worldwide. Pakistan does not.

While Gaza burns and Iran faces sustained Israeli-American hostility, Pakistan's establishment maintains strategic silence – or worse, strategic collaboration. Reports of Pakistani facilities being used indirectly by US forces against Iran, and the Pakistani Army Chief's simultaneous engagements in Washington, expose the hollowness of Ummah rhetoric.

Nowhere is Pakistan's moral bankruptcy clearer than in its embrace of China. While Beijing systematically erases Uyghur Islamic identity – demolishing mosques, banning Quranic practices, and incarcerating over a million Muslims in "re-education camps" – Pakistan remains conspicuously mute.

A self-proclaimed Islamic state reduced to a surrogate of an empire committing cultural genocide against Muslims is a contradiction too grotesque to ignore: loans, corridors, and strategic relevance purchase Pakistan's silence.

Perhaps the most devastating indictment came from Shia protesters in Kashmir, who marched with the Indian tricolour, asking a simple but searing question, as media reported: "Shia Muslims are targeted in Pakistan. It is painful to see Muslims being killed inside mosques during prayers. What kind of jihad is this?"

Pakistan is contradiction personified. It is a declared Islamic nation that kills more Muslims than most non-Muslim regimes. It allies with powers that bomb or erase Muslims elsewhere and survives by playing the sidekick to global powers. It is an ideological construct consumed by hatred of its own pre-Islamic heritage, history, and civilisational traits, such as plurality.

Why India's energy transition may not end import dependency?



JAY GANESH
PANDEY



JAYANTA
MITRA



vehicles and clean energy infrastructure. In fact, the current uptake of renewables in India is supported by imports of the critical minerals needed to manufacture solar PVs, wind turbines and batteries. As per estimates, the demand for critical minerals in India would more than double by 2030, while domestic mining operations may take over a decade to start producing. Currently, India imports nearly all its lithium, nickel and cobalt, in addition to the majority of its copper and graphite requirements.

The geography of the critical mineral supply chain presents deeper challenges for India. Although lithium and nickel are mined in countries such as Australia, Chile and Indonesia, refining and processing remain heavily concentrated in China, an increasingly adversarial actor. This growing dependency necessitates urgent diversification and de-risking of India's supply chains.

De-risking measures
For a country still dependent on imported critical minerals, substituting oil dependence with mineral dependence is concerning, prompting government initiatives to strengthen the foundations of India's clean energy transition. The central plank of these efforts is the recently launched National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM), backed by an outlay of ₹34,300 crore to scale domestic exploration, mining, processing and refining. In addition, India has also overhauled its mining and regulatory framework to fast-track critical mineral leases and attract private and public investment into extraction and value addition. Material circularity has also entered the policy mainstream, with growing emphasis on recycling and recovering minerals from end-of-life batteries, solar modules and electronics. The ₹1,500 crore incentive scheme under the NCMM aims to build 270 kilotonnes annual recycling capacity and produce 40 kilotonnes of critical minerals. The

introduction of the ₹7,280 crore Rare Earth Permanent Magnet scheme, as a first-of-its-kind initiative, also marks a significant push for self-sufficiency in the renewable space. These initiatives signal long-term intent, but a key question looms large: can they meaningfully reduce India's import vulnerability, or will mineral dependence merely replace fossil dependence in the decades ahead?

Reducing that vulnerability will require going beyond domestic reforms to reshaping India's global positioning in the critical minerals landscape. In the near term, diversification of supply chains through targeted bilateral partnerships and resource diplomacy ought to be a priority of foreign policy to mitigate exposure to concentrated processing hubs. Over the longer horizon, import substitution through deeper global cooperation is the way forward.

These challenges highlight the need for deeper global cooperation as India pursues a secure and resilient energy transition. Such questions will be central to discussions at the World Sustainable Development Summit 2026, where energy transition, alongside climate finance, multilateralism, nature-based solutions and more, will shape pathways towards a low-carbon and strategically secure future.

These challenges highlight the need for deeper global cooperation as India pursues a secure and resilient energy transition. Such questions will be central to discussions at the World Sustainable Development Summit 2026, where energy transition, alongside climate finance, multilateralism, nature-based solutions and more, will shape pathways towards a low-carbon and strategically secure future.

The writer is a Research Senior Fellow at The Energy and Resources Institute. They work on people-centric transition, energy justice and sustainability

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Farmers turning climate adaptation into opportunity



CHANDRAKANT
KUMBHANI

Climate change is often described as an unfolding crisis for Indian agriculture. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, declining groundwater levels, and increasing weather extremes have placed unprecedented pressure on smallholder farmers. These risks are real and immediate. Yet, when climate adaptation is framed only through the lens of loss and damage, we risk overlooking a powerful and necessary shift: adaptation can be a pathway to rural prosperity, not just survival.

Across rural India, farmers are already adapting – not in abstract ways, but through practical decisions taken season after season. Where these efforts are supported by the right knowledge, infrastructure, and institutions, adaptation is beginning to show clear economic returns. Improved water management practices are increasing water productivity and stabilising cropping cycles. Soil and moisture conservation techniques are reducing input costs while improving yields. Diversified livelihood models – combining crop cultivation with allied activities such as livestock, value addition, and micro-enterprises – are helping farming households spread risk and strengthen incomes in an increasingly volatile climate.

Seen this way, climate adaptation is not simply about cushioning the next shock. It is about building agricultural systems that perform better under uncertainty. When farmers are equipped to manage scarce resources more efficiently, respond to changing conditions, and invest in complementary income streams, resilience becomes productive rather than defensive.

A critical factor in this transition is the strengthening of local institutions alongside physical infrastructure. Climate resilience cannot be built through assets alone. Investments in decentralised water systems, climate-resilient farming practices, and soil and crop management must be matched with investments in community-led governance. Farmer collectives, water user groups, and village institutions play a central role in enabling informed decision-making – when to plant, what to grow, how to manage water, and where to invest scarce capital.

Over time, these institutional capabilities reduce dependency and foster self-reliant rural economies. Farmers move from reacting to uncertainty to planning around it. Communities

begin to manage shared resources collectively, reducing conflict and improving sustainability. Importantly, this institutional strength allows adaptation efforts to last beyond individual projects, embedding climate resilience into everyday agricultural practice.

Strategic partnerships between civil society organisations, government programmes, corporations, philanthropic entities, and other like-minded stakeholders are essential, playing a pivotal role in accelerating this shift. Climate adaptation requires patient, long-term engagement – not short project cycles driven by annual targets. Place-based investments that respond to local agro-climatic realities are far more likely to generate sustained economic value. When corporate resources are combined with grassroots implementation expertise and community ownership, adaptation initiatives are better designed, better adopted, and more durable.

This approach also allows climate action to align more closely with national priorities – from improving water security and agricultural productivity to enhancing rural livelihoods and employment. Sustainable agriculture, when viewed through a climate lens, becomes not only an environmental imperative but also an economic one.

At the heart of this transition lies a fundamental truth: India's climate response will only be as strong as the agency we place in its farmers. Farmers are not passive beneficiaries of climate action. They are the primary actors shaping outcomes on the ground. Their lived experience – of land, season, risk, and resilience – is invaluable. Trusting farmers, investing in their skills, and strengthening the institutions they participate in is essential to building effective climate solutions.

When farmers lead adaptation, the results extend far beyond individual fields. Livelihoods stabilise. Rural economies become more resilient. Communities gain confidence to plan for the future rather than react to crisis. Climate adaptation, in this context, evolves into an opportunity – one that secures incomes, protects natural resources, and supports a more sustainable agricultural economy.

India stands at a critical moment. The challenges of climate change are undeniable, but so is the opportunity to rethink how agriculture grows, adapts, and prospers. By placing farmers at the centre of climate adaptation – as decision-makers, innovators, and leaders – we can move beyond managing risk and begin building a more resilient and prosperous future for rural India.

The writer is COO, Community Development, Ambuja Foundation

Chandrakant Kumbhani

The new imports

The transition to non-fossil-fuel-based energy sources may reduce traditional energy imports, but newer forms of dependency would arise in the form of materials, technologies and inputs needed for renewable power, storage, electric

grid infrastructure, and batteries. The writer is a Research Senior Fellow at The Energy and Resources Institute. They work on people-centric transition, energy justice and sustainability

The writer is COO, Community Development, Ambuja Foundation

Chandrakant Kumbhani

Chandrakant Kumbhani



INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.
— Rammath Goenka

SPEAKER MUST BE SEEN AS NEUTRAL, USE OTHER TOOLS TO ENSURE DECORUM

HOWDOWNS at the highest institutional echelons are not a trifling matter, nor must they become the new normal. But India's parliamentary system is struggling to cope with an absolute breakdown of consensus. A motion has been submitted by opposition MPs that aims to unseat Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla over perceived partisanship. The cause of their chagrin: his refusal to allow Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi to quote from an unpublished book by retired army chief General M.M. Naravane. The same debate, on the motion of thanks to the President's address, saw another odd turn when Birla wrapped up proceedings without the customary reply from the Prime Minister. The Speaker, not without a sense of drama, cited a physical threat to the PM through an "unprecedented act". However, videos of opposition women MPs surrounding the PM's chair with banners—while he was absent—suggested nothing more sinister than perhaps the chance of thunderous sloganising. If they were deemed to hold the menace of an advancing army, it was within Birla's remit to hold territory and ensure decorum.

Naravane, presented with another chance to make a bat-tiefled decision on his own, has also chosen the side of caution. After police was deployed to investigate the case, publisher Penguin Random House said his memoir has not been put on shelves since the defence ministry barred it from doing so in 2023. It stated that no copies—in print or digital format—have been published, distributed, sold or otherwise made available to the public. When Rahul sought to go by Naravane's 2023 tweet that said the book was "available now", the general preferred to lean on the publisher's official position.

Asking how Rahul got a copy of the book sidesteps the real question. Free expression of thought is a *sine qua non* for a mature democracy. The government ought not to have sat on the book for three years without indicating why. That said, Rahul could have moved on after Birla's discretionary ruling but chose not to. No Lok Sabha Speaker has been impeached so far and the government has the numbers to comfortably defeat the motion. But as Birla himself has emphasised in the past, speakers must not just be neutral, they must also be seen to be so.

LEADERS MUST UPHOLD CONSTITUTIONAL ROLES

A chief minister serves not only as a political leader but also as a representative of the constitutional relationship between the State and its citizens. When such an office-holder, either directly or symbolically, targets a minority community for humiliation or threat, the harm extends to the constitutional order itself. Therefore, the now-deleted video posted on the official social media account of the ruling party in Assam, which shows Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma miming a point-blank shooting of men clearly identifiable as Muslims, merits examination beyond standard political criticism. This incident is not isolated; it follows a series of statements by him about Muslims he calls "Miyā", referring to Bangla-speaking Muslims in Assam with Bangladeshi roots.

This episode cannot be dismissed as mere campaign rhetoric or partisan provocation. The distinction is significant: these images were spread not by fringe actors, but by the official party apparatus linked to a sitting chief minister. Also, the incident cannot be excused by pointing to regional fears, migration across borders, or past conflicts in other parts of the subcontinent. Effective governance requires clarity and fairness, not hints, threats, or mixing citizenship with religious identity. Terms such as "infiltrator", when used repeatedly without a clear legal basis, lose their official meaning and create suspicion about entire communities. This practice hides the differences between refugees escaping economic hardship, long-settled citizens, and those who may have broken immigration laws. In the end, it weakens constitutional protection.

The risks associated with such actions are cumulative. When a chief minister repeatedly presents a certain community as suspicious, unworthy, or disposable, it normalises everyday discrimination and encourages vigilantism. Such an approach signals to the broader public that constitutional impartiality is optional. While political disagreement is essential to democracy, dehumanisation weakens its foundations. India's constitutional framework provides governments with considerable authority to address migration, law and order, and national security. However, it does not sanction using these concerns to create a climate of hostility towards an entire community. Ultimately, the issue at stake is not merely one of electoral strategy, but of constitutional integrity. Opposition leaders have now petitioned the Supreme Court, which has agreed to list the matter. Although it would have been significant for the court to address the issue *suo motu*, its prompt review may help clarify the constitutional boundaries.

QUICK TAKE

THE BRIDGE OF LANGUAGE

LUENCY in Hindi recently became an unexpected topic of contention on the other side of the planet when Guyana's agriculture minister Vikash Ramkisson defended his proficiency in the language in parliament. Last month, Somalia's Deputy Prime Minister Salah Ahmed Jama sprang a surprise by breaking into polished Hindi in Davos. While waging language battles at home, we ignore the global bridge-building potential of some of the world's largest languages. Apart from Hindi, Tamil and Bangla are officially recognised in several countries. We can prevent linguistic outreach efforts by the mouthbreathed Indian Council for Cultural Relations and give more support to Delhi's South Asian University and Bihar's Nalanda University, institutions set up with transnational cooperation in mind. Cultural diplomacy can win hearts and minds at a time geopolitical alignments are getting redefined.

HERE is a new buzzword on India's petroleum and gas landscape: trilemma. It is meant to convey the rationale behind actions by the government and fuel companies to balance energy availability, affordability and sustainability in the country.

India's energy trilemma has been at the front and centre of policy decisions since US President Donald Trump demanded last year that India should stop buying cheap Russian oil. In August, Trump followed up this demand with Executive Order 14329 raising duties on Indian exports to the US to a whopping 50 percent. The punitive tariff caused pain when workers across India were laid off, factory floors turned idle and exporters ceded painstakingly-built markets in the US to global competitors.

Trump's pen actions were the culmination of a process that was in the making since India switched to Russia as a major source of crude oil after Moscow offered huge discounts to fund its war in Ukraine. And for increased purchases of Russian defence equipment such as the S-400 missile system. Only the Indian public was largely unaware of the resentment that was building up in Washington, caught up as they were in illusions of a special relationship between India and the US.

The energy trilemma was addressed when Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri and External Affairs Minister Jaishankar visited Mozambique within six months of each other a year after the Ukraine war began, triggering anxieties globally about another "oil shock". Mozambique is a gas and coal producing country and an aspiring crude producer. Who would have imagined before this new threat to energy security that Puri and Jaishankar would be followed by a minister of state and a secretary for economic relations in the external affairs ministry to this otherwise neglected outpost? Or that red carpet would be rolled out by India's defence minister, National Assembly speaker and secretary of state for trade?

In July 2023, Puri prised open the doors of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries cartel and addressed a meeting at the organisation's headquarters in Vienna. There, he pursued expansion of energy ties with Nigeria and Kuwait in separate meetings with the former's minister of

The balance between energy availability, affordability and sustainability is tough at the best of times. Who will fill the void being created by the retreat from Russian oil purchases?

NEW FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS INDIA'S ENERGY TRILEMMA

K P NAYAR

Strategic analyst



A few achievements were reactive to offers by new friends of Modi among oil producers like the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia, rather than the result of proactive policies.

The Covid pandemic was a challenge as well as an opportunity. Uncertainties and fears of an all-round chaos prompted the government to heavily concentrate on the affordability factor in the trilemma. Aggressive cuts in central excise on petrol and diesel in 2021 and in 2022 were followed by reductions in value added tax by several states. Price charts provided to by petroleum marketing companies during the two post-Covid years show that diesel price rises in India were much smaller than the ones in the US, Canada, Spain and the UK.

Fears of the Covid period have ebbed, prompting the government's treasury managers to tighten the purse strings. Price rises have occurred and opinion is divided on whether these higher consumer costs are within the range of affordability. There have been no protests over fuel prices like those that characterised Modi's first term and any outcry on this score has been muted. This situation may have been partly influenced by a feeling of energy security. Russian oil supplies in the last three years have definitely contributed to this sense that India shares with China, Hungary and Slovakia.

However, the new year has brought new challenges with the government willing to say very little about buying oil from Russia. But the economy with words on this issue for strategic reasons cannot hide the realities on the ground.

At the India Energy Week in Goa last month, for example, Russian presence was scant. At the same event last year in New Delhi, Russian was the *lingua franca* in conference lobbies and at bars in hotels where the delegates were put up. For sure, Russia is in retreat on India's energy platform.

Who is taking the place being vacated by Russia? Prime Minister Mark Carney's visit to India next month is yet to be officially announced, but Canada unequivocally signalled in Goa that big deals will be signed during that visit not only for oil and gas, but also for uranium and other minerals. The other country that will step up to compensate for the Russian void is the UAE. Which is why Mod's aim is to ensure the not-so-easy goal of energy independence.

(Views are personal)

ANOTHER WAY TO PROTECT & ATTRACT

PROSENJIT DATTA

Former editor, commentator on economic issues

INCE 1991, when a new generation of economic reforms were initiated, Indian policymakers in successive governments have tried to strike a balance between attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and protecting domestic businesses, especially small firms in many sectors. Unsurprisingly, this approach has not worked particularly well, though that has not prevented the government from persisting with this approach.

The retail industry is a good sector to understand why this approach typically fails. In the initial reform years, the government worried about what would happen to small neighbourhood retailers, especially grocers, if big-box formats of the kind that were popular in the US, Europe and Southeast Asian countries were to be allowed a free rein in the country.

Therefore, policymakers grudgingly allowed global single-brand retail players to enter the country—calculating that they posed the least threat to small Indian shopkeepers. Big multi-brand players such as Walmart or Carrefour were not allowed to sell directly to customers. Big-box retailers could only come in via the cash-and-carry route, where they sold to smaller shops. The reasoning was that this would be a win-win situation with FDI in retail coming in, while small grocers benefited by buying from the cash-and-carry giants and selling to consumers.

As it turned out, the final outcome has not been quite what the policymakers thought would happen. Domestic companies ushered in big-box retail though the global companies were kept off. Not every homegrown player succeeded. Some expanded quickly but eventually went bust. They were replaced quickly by others. Today, Reliance and the Tata Group are big players in big-box retail in several multi-brand formats. Others have also built a significant presence. Radhakishan Damani's DMart in the groceries space is a good example. There are many others justing for a slice of the pie.

In all of this, the small mom-and-pop grocery stores have not been protected. Indeed, they face their biggest threat at present from the homegrown quick-commerce players who are setting up "dark stores" with fast-moving inventory and offering a service that a small grocery often cannot. Between domestic players like Big Bazaar and quick-commerce

players such as Blinkit and Zepto, small Indian grocers are facing exactly the kind of competition that the government thought it would protect them from.

Take the case of e-commerce. Here, the government has had multiple policy flipflops. Flipkart, started by domestic entrepreneurs, grew rapidly until capital requirements ensured that the founders sold to Walmart. Meanwhile, US giant Amazon set up and scaled up quickly. This has attracted big Indian groups such as Reliance and Tata to start their own online businesses.



The retail industry shows why India's foreign investment policy is faltering. Though policymakers haven't allowed global players to sell directly in the country, mom-and-pop shops are facing intense competition from homegrown giants. A consumer-first approach with a capital push can be a way out

The government has been unable to decide whether players such as Amazon or Flipkart are beneficial to smaller players or are competitors. In a bid to protect small Indian sellers, the government has said that Amazon and Flipkart cannot follow an import-duty-led or hybrid model, and should act only as platforms for domestic and other sellers. It also developed the Open Network for Digital Commerce or ONDC, an open platform that is supposed to offer an alternative to Amazon and Flipkart. But so far ONDC has not quite taken off to the extent where it can challenge the big players. Meanwhile, by not allowing Amazon

and Flipkart to stock their own inventories and restricting global multi-brand big-box retailers from setting up physical outlets that can sell directly to consumers, the government has essentially throttled FDI in retail. Thus, only a fraction of the potential FDI is trickling in now.

Nor have the small players been protected. It is hard to argue that a Blinkit or a Reliance Smart Bazaar poses less of a threat to small players than an Amazon or a Walmart.

Instead of trying to strike a balance between FDI and protecting small domestic players, neither of which it has managed to do particularly well, the policymakers should perhaps focus on one area they have ignored—the final consumer. Taking a consumer-first approach would lead to investments and technology flowing in while letting the market evolve, as it has in other countries.

By focusing on the consumer, the government would realise that physical big-box formats and online players are not two separate categories—they are both serving the same customers, as are small-format domestic players. This would lead to regulations that are fair to all players.

If the government really wants to help and protect small players, the ideal way is not by creating artificial distinctions in retail or a regulatory maze for global players, but by offering small businessmen the one thing they lack—easy access to cheap capital.

The real battle between small mom-and-pop shops and modern retail formats lies in the amount of capital that can be deployed in offering customers the best deal. Whether it is a big business-conglomerate like Reliance or Tata, or venture-capital funded startups such as Blinkit and Zepto, the threat they pose is the same. The only way smaller traditional players can compete is if they can also access capital cheaply. This could mean incentive or special plans while keeping overall retail regulations the same for every player. This would be a win for customers, as well as for the government and players.

(Views are personal)
(datta.prosenjit@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Temple conservation

Ref: Odisha elephant burial points to systemic rot (Feb 11). Temples in Hindu culture played a major role protecting animals, especially cows and elephants. Both the Centre and the states have left animals unprotected from poachers and temples from governments.

S A Srinivasa Samra, Hyderabad

Science headliners

Ref: Icons for future scientists (Feb 11). We need to promote outstanding performers in all the fields with due recognition. In India, where prominence is given only to politicians and sportsmen, top scientists—irrespective of gender—rarely make it to headlines. More felicitation functions must be announced to include their contributions in syllabuses.

Rajrao Kumar, Bengaluru

AI's purpose

Ref: Dream bigger and act faster on AI to secure future (Feb 11). The life of the country's common man is still largely untouched by the AI phenomenon, except for fabricated videos floating on social media. Even spiritual masters are subjected to distortion. As the author hints, India needs to explore AI for health and economic policy.

P Mangalachandran, Kannur

Board's future

Ref: Board of Peace not for India (Feb 11). In facing a Hamletian dilemma arising out of Donald Trump's invitation, India could follow the lead of China and Russia. Anyhow, the long-term continuance of the board, which is no substitute for the UN, is anybody's guess.

N Rama Rao, email

Equal treatment

Ref: No arrest yet in Kanpur case (Feb 11). It's a wonder to know how a person suffering from a seizure-related disorder is permitted to drive a high-end car by his parents. The accused must be booked irrespective of his status. All are equal in the eyes of the law.

N R Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Impractical deadlines

Ref: Tadka! time cut on AI abuse (Feb 11). Reduction of the time to take down a post to less than a month of the earlier time is illogical and looks like an indirect attempt to muzzle criticism. The time of the notification also needs to be taken into account.

Jayachandran C, Chennai

PAMPERING PAKISTAN, ICC SHOWS THE WAY

Suddenly everything seems to be working right for cricket, which was in the throes for over a week. Right now, all the stakeholders, who appeared to be at loggerheads, are heaving a sigh of relief following a 'gentlemanly' end to the deadlock that was bringing dispute to the sport. Quite possibly, all Boards and the ICC must be rejoicing over the near coup they achieved following closed-door meetings on Tuesday. The smile is back on the faces of fans from India and Pakistan as the latter has agreed to keep its tryst with destiny. The arch-rivals will indeed take guard at each other in their T20 World Cup 2026 Group 'A' league match in Sri Lanka on February 15. Over the last one week, the game's

administrators were caught in a pinquent situation after first the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) and later their Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif publicly stated that the country would boycott the India match in a tizzy. After all, an India-Pakistan match even in the league stage spells megabucks for the organisers and high-voltage action for the fans apart from guaranteed record-breaking viewership much to the delight of the broadcasters and sponsors, while cricket would be the toast of the world of sports.

Trouble started when Bangladesh refused to play in India due to 'security concerns' following nationwide furore over killings of Hindus in and around Dhaka. In a swift

replaced the team with Scotland so that the show would go on, which, ironically, was to boomerang on it. They did not reckon with the stand that PCB was to take. It fumed at the decision to replace Bangladesh; expressed solidarity with the 'victim' and outright refusal to play against India. Intense efforts by the organising committee, ICC and others did not cut ice with Pakistan.

Ironically, the change of heart came courtesy of a passionate plea by the PCB boss M Najmul Islam, who urged Pakistan to 'take the field for the greater good of the game'. In an equally emotion-filled statement, Pakistan took umbrage in the spirit of cricket' for its decision to end the

boycott threat. Meanwhile, a body-blow comes from Asif Nazrul, sports advisor to the Bangladeshi government, who said that the decision to skip the mega event 'was taken by the BCB and the players and not by the government'.

Meanwhile, one should note that in its bid to win over the Pakistan government's nod for the *crème da la crème* showdown, the ICC and its mandarins, who brokered the deal, seem to have completely forgotten the existence of Bangladesh, whose decision not to play in India had triggered the crisis. Today, no one is talking of Bangladesh, when, in the name of fairness and the spirit of the game, the organising committee should have gone all out to im-

press the BCB on a rethink. In terms of sportsmanship, which is more unethical, withdrawing from the championship for whatever reason or refusing to play against only one opponent in the championship? Alas, the obsession for an India-Pakistan match that translates to millions into the coffers of the ICC, and perhaps a handsome amount diverted to PCB accounts, has belittled BCB. Rather than offering a major future event and magnanimously assuring not to penalise them for the decision to skip the event, the ICC should have ensured its participation by shifting their matches to Sri Lanka. There are such precedents. That would have marked a victory for cricket in the truest sense.

MEDLEY



LETTERS

Whither temple of democracy?

THE recent developments in Lok Sabha, including passing of the Motion of Thanks to the President's speech without the Prime Minister's presence, the alleged silencing of the Leader of the Opposition, the Speaker's advice to the PM to skip a session due to concerns about women MPs, and the opposition's move for a no-confidence motion against the Speaker collectively suggest a worrying deviation from constitutional provisions and established parliamentary norms. Furthermore, it seems like the temple of democracy is no longer functioning as it once did. The absence of healthy debates and constructive cross-discussions, replaced instead by constant disruptions, members 'jumping into the well', and an increase in suspensions, indicates an erosion of democratic principles within the legislative process.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad

Naidu must nip the laddu row in the bud

THIS has reference to the article 'Restoring sanctity'. The Tirumala laddu controversy must end forthwith by Nomula Srinivasa Rao. Millions of pilgrims from all corners of the globe reach Tirumala to have peaceful and devotional darshan and revere sacred prasadas like laddus and vadas. We humbly urge the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh N Chandrababu Naidu to direct his officials to catch the culprits and punish them under the three criminal laws to end the controversy on laddus, once and for all. This will put an end to the adverse propaganda against the famed laddus, which is hurting the sentiments of devotees spread across the globe.

G Murali Mohan Rao, Secunderabad-11

Electoral malpractices continue unabated

DEMOCRATIC values and ethics have no place in the battle of ballots in our country, as mobsters and crooked politicians pervade the electoral arena and loot public money. This scene gets exposed during every election, and Telangana is no exception. The report that 'Parties luring political rivals with hefty sums' makes for a disturbing read, as all political parties are vying with one another in circumventing the democratic process just to score over their political opponents. Once elected, electoral promises of development and people's welfare take a back seat leaving the common man in the lurch. Unfortunately, although a good number of politicians are educated, poll malpractices occur unabated as winning is the only criteria.

Govardhana Mynedu, Vijayawada

Centre must rewrite the anti-defection law

A proposal "Telangana defection case is litmus test for Tenth Schedule (TH) Feb 10". Legislative Assembly Speaker Gaddam Prasad has rejected eight petitions seeking disqualification of MLAs who have defected, while the petitions against Damodar Naga and Kadiam Srihari are kept in limbo. The Supreme Court has reprimanded the speaker for his inaction and issued a dictat for taking a decision on the petitions within three weeks of face contempt of court. The writer has rightly said that the outcome of the speaker's decision would be a litmus test for the tenth schedule of the constitution. There is a need for a strong anti-defection law to punish the turncoats. If the BRS succeeds in the Supreme Court, the apex court ruling will become the law of the land and compel the Centre to rewrite the anti-defection law.

Dinanath Shenolkar, Hyderabad

Avoidable controversy over 'Four Stars of Destiny'

THE dramatic attempt by the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi to invoke Gen M M Naravane's purposed book 'Four Stars of Destiny' in Parliament has invited avoidable controversy after the former army chief clarified that no printed or digital copies have been released. Raising national security concerns demands responsibility and verified evidence, not theatrical gestures that risk misleading public discourse. Credible opposition politics requires fact-based scrutiny rather than symbolic confrontations that ultimately diminish its own effectiveness.

K R Parvathy, Mysuru

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Decision on cricket matches at Chinnaswamy Stadium to be taken today: HM

BENGALURU: HOME Minister G Parameshwara on Wednesday said that a meeting will be held on February 12 to discuss and decide on the possibility of providing clearance to host cricket matches in the city's M Chinnaswamy Stadium.

He said that the meeting will discuss and decide based on the Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA), which manages the stadium, complying with its safety and security requirements.

Matches were stopped at the Chinnaswamy stadium after a stampede had occurred outside it during the Royal Challengers Bengaluru's (RCB) IPL victory celebration on February 4 last year, in which 11 people died. The Justice John Michael Cumha's Commission was constituted to probe the incident.

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

TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

All the existing regulations notwithstanding, enforcement of age restrictions can pose significant challenges. Imposition of such restrictions on the activities of adolescent children needs to be done in a benign and non-invasive fashion. Once the purpose has been served, withdrawal of the restrictions should be gradual, to ensure that the impact caused is lasting and sustainable.

Abrupt introduction of any new regimen, as well as its sudden withdrawal, can both be dangerous. The idea is that as children enter the youth age, they acquire the ability to appreciate by themselves about what is good for them and what is not.

A legal age limit might instead of discouraging children from using social media, may prove counterproductive, and lead to their accessing them secretly.

Experts advocate that a far better approach is to invest in education and parental guidance, to ensure safe and responsible navigation.

When all has been said

and done, there is little gainsaying the fact that the responsibility of ensuring adolescent children are allowed restricted access to social media, rests primarily with parents and, to some extent, with educational institutions.

The role of parents and communities, in guiding and supporting the use of social media by young people, can hardly be overstated. By being active participants in their children's online world, parents can better understand the challenges and opportunities that social media present. Such involvement can also help to bridge the generational gap in digital literacy and will ensure that the age restrictions are not overly stringent.

The appeal of a 'forbidden fruit' stems from a deep-seated human quality of curiosity, and the weakness for the thrill of the taboo. When something is declared 'off-limits', the urge to desire increases, and a psychological phenomenon known as the 'forbidden fruit effect' kicks in.

When freedom is restricted, people experience an unpleasant emotional state to escape, in which they tend to engage in forbidden behaviour. What is more, the innate drive to explore the unknown, triggers the release of 'dopamine', a pleasure chemical in the brain, which

reinforces the attraction to forbidden activities.

The issue is somewhat akin to the certification given to movies, such as 'U' or 'A', imposing a restriction on viewership by people below a certain age. Such systems tend to be somewhat subjective and prone to sharp variations across cultures and regions. The age, upon reaching which young people



The issue is somewhat akin to the certification given to movies, such as 'U' or 'A', imposing a restriction on viewership by people below a certain age. Such systems tend to be somewhat subjective and prone to sharp variations across cultures and regions. The age, upon reaching which young people may be allowed to view movies, or websites with certain types of content, are matters which lend themselves to varying interpretations in different countries, such as, say, India, Japan, or the Caribbean

may be allowed to view movies, or websites with certain types of content, as well as the appropriateness of that content, are matters which lend themselves to varying interpretations in different countries, such as, say, India, Japan, or the Caribbean.

The whole issue, therefore, needs to be discussed treadbare across regions and countries. The age, upon reaching which young people

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The whole issue, therefore, needs to be discussed treadbare across regions and countries. The age, upon reaching which young people

Ethical leadership can ensure corruption-free governance in India

NAYAKARA VEERESA

Francois Valerien, the Chair of Transparency International, says that "Corruption is an evolving global threat that does far more than undermining development – it is a key cause of declining democracy, instability and human rights violations".

In India, corruption is rampant as reported by the Corruption Perception Index, published in February 2025. It ranks 96th among 180 nations with a score of 38. As per this report, 89 per cent of the people think that corruption in the government is the biggest problem, while 39 per cent of citizens stated that they had paid bribes for a public service in the last 12 months. It specifically pointed out that 'India (38) is embroiled in a US indictment of a clean energy business due to more than \$250 million paid in bribes to Indian government officials to obtain solar energy contracts worth billions of dollars'.

On January 13 of this year, the Supreme Court delivered a split verdict in the Centre for Public Interest Litigation Vs. Union of India (2026), which examined the legality and constitutionality of Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1989. This section was introduced through Section 12 of the PCA (Amendment) Act, 2018 following the re-

commendations of the Law Commission of India in its 254th report on Prevention of Corruption (Amendment) Bill, 2013. It mandates that "No police officer shall conduct any enquiry or investigation into any offence alleged to have been committed by a public servant under this Act, where the alleged offence is relatable to any recommendation made or decision taken by such public servant in discharge of his official functions or duties, without the previous approval".

The core issue is whether prior approval is required or not to investigate public servants in the matters of corruption.

The competitive authorities for the prior approval are the Union Government and any other person, respectively. The petitioner challenged the constitutional validity of Section 17A on the grounds that it violates Article 14 and 21 of the Constitution and the provisions of the Lokpal Act and Lokayukta Act, 2013. The division bench, comprising Justice B V Nagaratna and Justice K V Viswanathan, provided different, yet opposite, rulings in this instant case. The former struck down Section 17A of PCA as it violates Article 14 of the Constitution, whereas Justice Viswanathan upheld Section 17A of the PCA (Amendment) Act, 2018 following the re-



pal/Lokayukta recommendation. The Court ordered that the matter be placed before the Chief Justice of India (CJI) for 'constituting an appropriate Bench to consider the issues which arise in this matter afresh'.

Justice Nagaratna highlighted that "in substance, the classification based on the nature of duties is illegal and therefore violates Article 14 of the Constitution of India" She also pointed out that "prior approval being required for the purpose of protecting honest officers is not a valid reason for saving the provision from being declared unconstitutional as a regime of prior approval is unconstitutional".

The point of 'policy paralysis' brought out by Justice Viswanathan merits value. However, the political economy of institutions like Lokpal and Lokayukta and the lack of robust functioning of the same does not enthuse confidence either in these institutions or the political regimes that govern them.

The reasons provided by both the judges seem to have their own validity in terms of arguments. However, the political economy of institutions like Lokpal and Lokayukta and the lack of robust functioning of the same does not enthuse confidence either in these institutions or the political regimes that govern them.

regimes that govern them. Need for ethical leadership:

Given this peculiar scenario, the court's order of approaching the Chief Justice of India for the constitution of a larger bench to decide the matter is inevitable; however, due to the prolonged appeal and counter appeal the very purpose of Section 17A of the PCA gets defeated in the process of judicial adjudication.

Any statutory law is enacted to serve the purpose of the legislative intent and if an Amendment (2018 PCA) significantly reduces the legislative intent and purpose then the validity of such an amendment is questionable. It is here that Justice Nagaratna's contention finds merit as a separate clause or provision in the name of protecting the honest officers is an exclusionary principle rather than inclusiveness in governance. By striking down the Section 17A as unconstitutional and the issue

is placed before the larger bench the issue is back to square one and makes for justice delayed is justice denied for citizens seeking a corruption-free governance.

The corruption-free governance is a citizen's right; providing good governance is an obligation of a democratic government. The question shall be asked here is that is the constitutional fidelity of the political regimes and administrative machinery rather than focusing on the constitutional validity of the PCA. The transparent governance is of ethical nature which in turn directly correlates to the ethical political leadership to deliver good governance to the citizens. India on this account has a long way to go.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune. Views are personal)

The dramatic attempt by the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi to invoke Gen M M Naravane's purposed book 'Four Stars of Destiny' in Parliament has invited avoidable controversy after the former army chief clarified that no printed or digital copies have been released. Raising national security concerns demands responsibility and verified evidence, not theatrical gestures that risk misleading public discourse. Credible opposition politics requires fact-based scrutiny rather than symbolic confrontations that ultimately diminish its own effectiveness.

K R Parvathy, Mysuru

thehansreader@gmail.com



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Digital arrests need swift action

It is surprising, and deeply disturbing, that the Supreme Court's evident anxiety over the rapid rise of so-called "digital arrest" frauds is not matched by a similar sense of urgency on the part of the Central and state governments. The gravity of the problem was underlined by a report cited by a three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant. Bank customers have lost an astonishing Rs 52,000 crore to such fraudulent transactions in four years. The figure is staggering—so large that, as the court itself noted, it exceeds the annual budget of several states. Yet, despite the enormity of the losses and the devastation caused to individual lives, little appears to have been done to prevent these crimes. As in many other areas of public policy, prevention has been neglected in favour of post-facto lamentation.

It is telling that a standard operating procedure (SOP) to deal with digital arrest frauds was formulated only in early January, and that too under the initiative of the court. If the authorities concerned were genuinely alarmed, the SOP should have been implemented without delay. Instead, bureaucratic inertia has prevailed, forcing the court to step in once again and direct that the SOP be put in place within a month.

Alerts to branch managers and accounts departments for suspicious transactions should be mandatory.

The court's sharp criticism of the Reserve Bank is also significant. Merely advising banks to "be more vigilant" is an abdication of responsibility. Banks respond not to sermons but to accountability. Unless responsibility is clearly fixed and negligence attracts financial consequences, exhortations will remain meaningless. At present, banks suffer no loss when a customer is wiped out in a single fraudulent transaction. That moral hazard explains their indifference. The victims are often retired, lonely, and vulnerable individuals who lose their life's savings overnight. Fraudsters exploit a basic human fear: the dread of arrest, which becomes more acute with age. Despite repeated public warnings, many still do not know that one can be "digitally arrested" and are coerced into paying money for release. The criminals thrive on this ignorance and fear.

Law enforcement agencies, though equipped with cybercrime units, also appear reluctant to pursue cases aggressively, especially when fraud networks use layered systems to move money across accounts and jurisdictions. What the court has sensibly suggested is a preventive mechanism: If a pensioner, who usually withdraws a modest monthly sum, suddenly seeks to transfer several lakhs, the system should raise a red flag, delay the transaction, and alert both the customer and bank officials. Banks already possess detailed customer profiles. Incorporating such safeguards is neither technologically difficult nor prohibitively expensive. Alerts to branch managers and accounts departments for suspicious transactions should be mandatory. Banks have a duty to protect their customers' interests, and no cost incurred in that effort is too high.

The road to the summit

After long debates on fine-tuning the rules governing the Union Public Service Commission's Civil Services Examinations, restrictions have been announced on the re-appearance of candidates who want to improve upon their earlier results. There is valid criticism of the earlier system of repeat attempts allowed for those who had already entered service on the ground that it merely selects for examination technique mastery over any superior administrative potential. Now, the new rules say that IAS and IFS officers appointed through an earlier examination and remaining in service cannot take CSE-2026. Similarly, after IPS recruitment, taking the forthcoming examination would mean the candidate cannot hope to enter the same service again; those who secure an IPS or a Group A service can make another attempt next year only after getting a one-time exemption from training. In general, candidates can take a shot at the central services six times, except for those from SC/ST who get unlimited appearances and OBC/persons with disability who get nine. Much as the civil services, especially the IFS, IAS and IPS, remain the pinnacle of achievement for many because of their outsize influence in society flowing from colonial foundations, they remain a distant target for the few hundred thousand aspirants; this year the vacancies are of the order of a mere 930. The remoteness of success does not prevent them, however, from making repeat attempts and spending the prime of youth preparing for them. In the future, with fewer service candidates competing, the door may open just a little wider.

In 2024, the five attempts that it took the CSE topper to succeed led to a debate on whether she had exhausted six of her best years in coaching. A year earlier, amidst the euphoria of the exam results, one candidate's story of making 12 attempts, attending the selection interview five times, and scoring a blank struck a chord with thousands. A former RBI governor, Duvvuri Subba Rao, proposed that the number of CSE attempts be reduced to three and the upper age limit to 27 (now 32). This would avert the relentless pursuit of the top services across several years, with heavy investments of time, energy, and funds. On the other hand, advocates for a liberal scheme argue in favour of multiple attempts to benefit rural and less privileged candidates. The latter continue to get more opportunities when they belong to the reserved categories. In a country with many asymmetries and weak accountability systems, the civil services provide the right candidates with an opportunity to execute the national vision of post-colonial development. Sardar Patel's steel frame idea of the bureaucracy today calls for modernisation of the service to harness domain expertise, eliminate politicisation, and deepen the rule of law. With a growing population and a complex economy, there is a case for an expanded and responsive administrative framework.



Unfiltered

Deepak Sancheti

SEBI has recently unveiled a consultation paper proposing a significant overhaul of the "fit and proper person" framework governing market intermediaries, such as brokers, merchant bankers, and others, as well as persons associated with them. The consultation, open for public feedback until late February 2026, seeks to address long-standing concerns around regulatory uncertainty, procedural unfairness, and the unintended consequences of automatic disqualifications. If implemented meaningfully, the proposals could reshape how eligibility and integrity standards are applied in Indian capital markets.

There is clear internal recognition within SEBI that the existing fit and proper criteria—particularly the sudden adverse changes introduced in 2021 without adequate consultation—had become increasingly vulnerable to legal challenge. These changes generated sustained unease across the market, especially in the aftermath of litigation arising from the National Spot Exchange Ltd (NSEL) episode. Certain disqualification triggers, especially those linked merely to the filing of criminal complaints or charge sheets in economic offence cases, were difficult to justify on first principles. This formed the backdrop to the consultation paper now placed in the public domain.

The current regime requires the applicant, the intermediary and a wide universe of related persons—including directors, key management personnel, and persons in control—to satisfy standards of integrity, reputation, and financial soundness. While conceived as a safeguard for market integrity, the framework gradually acquired a punitive and mechanical character. In practice, it often functioned less

as a considered test of suitability and more as an automatic trigger for exclusion, with little regard to proportionality or context.

Over the past five years, the framework has operated with a severity that can fairly be described as extremely disproportionate. The mere filing of an FIR, a charge sheet or a complaint—long before any judicial finding—was sufficient to invite disqualification. There was no explicit assurance of a prior hearing before declaring an entity or individual "not fit and proper", even though such a declaration can cripple or extinguish a regulated business. Severe civil and economic consequences were thus imposed at a preliminary stage of the legal process, in tension with settled principles of natural justice and the presumption of innocence.

These infirmities became most visible in the NSEL brokers' litigation. The affected entities approached the Bombay High Court, arguing that the framework inverted the presumption of innocence and imposed irreversible consequences without adjudication or meaningful opportunity of being heard.

During these proceedings, SEBI informed the High Court that it would review the relevant provisions and, if it understood, would not insist on enforcing disqualifications while the matter remained under judicial consideration. This stance reflected an implicit acknowledgement that the framework, as applied, risked regulatory overreach and lacked adequate procedural safeguards.

It also underscored the need for regulatory action to remain aligned with broader principles of Indian jurisprudence when civil and economic consequences are involved.

Against this backdrop, the consultation paper represents a conscious

and welcome course correction, and SEBI deserves all credit for it. The most consequential proposal is the removal of automatic disqualification arising solely from the filing of a criminal complaint, FIR or charge sheet. Under the draft framework, disqualification would arise only upon conviction or a final adverse finding by a competent authority. This restores alignment with the foundational principle that individuals and entities are innocent until proven otherwise.

Equally important is the explicit codification of the right to a hearing before any declaration of "not fit and proper". The absence of such an express safeguard in the existing regulations was shocking, given the gravity of the consequences involved. By embedding procedural fairness into the regulatory text, SEBI acknowledges that suitability determinations cannot be reduced to mechanical rule application.

The consultation also removes several automatic and open-ended consequences that had caused prolonged uncertainty. Initiation of winding-up proceedings would no longer trigger disqualification unless an order is finally passed.

The practically default five-year bar on fresh applications, even where no such period was specified, is proposed to be removed. Time limits for keeping applications in abeyance after issuance of show cause notices are proposed to be shortened, reducing periods of regulatory limbo.

On group entities and persons in control, the paper adopts a more proportionate approach. Disqualification of associated persons would affect an intermediary only where SEBI formally declares such persons not fit and proper. While disqualified key management personnel would need to be replaced within a defined timeframe, persons in control would not be forced into im-

mediate divestment. Instead, restrictions on voting or control rights could be imposed. This approach addresses governance risks without causing unnecessary destruction of economic value.

As important, and often overlooked, dimension is the need for SEBI and stock exchanges to act in close and real-time alignment in regulatory matters like this. In the past, divergence in interpretation or timing between SEBI and exchanges has exacerbated the pain, with exchanges acting mechanically on regulatory triggers even as issues were under review. Exchange regulatory officials have too often behaved like clerical enforcers of outdated dogma rather than as thinking regulators, applying rules without context, judgement or accountability. This institutional inertia, bordering on regulatory indifference, has repeatedly blunted the impact of SEBI's own course corrections.

Experience suggests that when SEBI's regulatory thinking evolves, that evolution percolates to exchange-level regulatory officials excruciatingly slowly. The handling of illiquid options, "reversal trades" cases, provides a cautionary parallel. Around 2015, SEBI adopted an aggressive enforcement stance, treating such trades as manipulative by default. By around 2018, it became evident to SEBI that these cases did not result in investor harm or market distortion. By 2023, SEBI introduced extremely lenient consent schemes, seeking to close many cases that should never have been initiated. Yet, exchanges continued to levy harsh penalties in similar matters, often equivalent to 100 per cent of alleged profit or loss adjustments, applied mechanically and without application of mind. Such actions achieve no regulatory objective, undermine ease of doing busi-

ness and amount to an abuse of the exchanges' dominant position over brokers who depend on them for their licences. There is a real risk that well-intentioned reform at the SEBI level will remain illusory at the operational level unless this disconnect is urgently addressed.

Taken together, the proposals are widely viewed as pragmatic. They do not dilute SEBI's authority or compromise investor protection. Instead, they replace blunt, automatic triggers with calibrated and defensible regulatory responses. This reduces litigation risk, improves regulatory credibility, and brings the framework closer to constitutional norms of fairness and proportionality. There remains, however, a legitimate debate on scope. Many stakeholders argue that fit and proper criteria should apply primarily to the intermediary and its ultimate beneficial owners, rather than extending deep into chains of ownership and indirect associations. Over-extension risks recreating uncertainty and compliance burdens without materially advancing market integrity.

The consultation paper signals a meaningful shift in regulatory philosophy. It recognises that strong regulation must also be fair regulation. After several years in which the framework was perceived as unfor-giving and premature in its consequences, the proposed changes offer a long-awaited sigh of relief. SEBI would, however, do well to also introspect on the institutional decision-making that produced the earlier framework and to identify why recurrent episodes of regulatory overreach continue to necessitate painful and public course corrections.

The writer is a retired IRS officer and Ex-Chief of Surveillance at SEBI. Advisor to corporates, market participants and tech entrepreneurs.



Niti Sutra

PROF HIMANSHU RAI

Chanakya believed that among all instruments of power—wealth, armies, alliances, intelligence—time was the most decisive. In the Arthashastra, he repeatedly cautioned rulers that victory is not determined only by strength or intent, but by timing. A wise king, he wrote, knows when to advance, when to wait, and when to withdraw.

Modern statecraft, despite its technological sophistication, continues to be governed by this ancient truth. Nations that misread time lose wars they might have won and miss opportunities that might never return.

THE RHYTHM OF POWER

Time in strategy is not merely chronological; it is rhythmic. Every political, economic, and military decision unfolds within cycles—of growth and recession, stability and volatility, escalation and détente. The strategic mind must recognise these rhythms.

History offers countless examples. Revolutions succeed when they align with social exhaustion. Economic reforms succeed when societies are prepared for change. Military campaigns succeed when adversaries are disengaged, overstretched, or isolated.

Chanakya described this as kala-jana—the knowledge of time.

Without it, even the strongest ruler becomes reactive. With it, even limited resources can achieve disproportionate impact.

THE COST OF IMPATIENCE

In an era of instant communication and electoral urgency, impatience has become a structural weakness in governance. Leaders are pressured to deliver immediate results, to respond rapidly to crises, and to demonstrate visible strength.

■ Yet strategy rarely rewards haste. ■ Premature reforms can trigger backlash. ■ Untimely escalation can convert manageable tensions into enduring conflict.

■ Delayed response can embolden adversaries.

Chanakya warned that action taken too early or too late produces identical failure. The art of statecraft lies not only in deciding what to do, but when to do.

TIME AS A FORCE MULTIPLIER

India's strategic history reveals the value of patience.

■ India's economic transformation unfolded gradually through layered reforms rather than abrupt upheaval.

■ Its global diplomatic presence expanded through sustained engagement rather than dramatic realignment.

■ Its technological rise—from

space to digital infrastructure—emerged through decades of incremental capacity building.

This reflects a civilizational instinct: progress as accumulation rather than disruption.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna advises disciplined action detached from anxiety about immediate outcomes. This is not fatalism; it is temporal clarity. The wise act with urgency, but not with panic.

TIMING IN DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy is as much about sequencing as substance. Agreements fail when societies are unprepared. Alliances fracture when expectations outrun trust.

Chanakya advised rulers to negotiate when adversaries are receptive, confront when they are vulnerable, and consolidate when they are distracted. He emphasised that time shapes leverage.

India's diplomatic evolution illustrates this. The country has expanded partnerships without abandoning autonomy, deepened regional engagement while strengthening global presence, and positioned itself as a bridge between developed and developing worlds. Each step reflects timing aligned with national capacity and global context.

STRATEGIC WAITING

Waiting is often mistaken for inaction. Chanakya rejected this misconception. He described strategic waiting as preparation disguised as stillness. During such phases, kingdoms strengthened logistics, intelligence, alliances, and internal stability.

The strategic mind understands that waiting is not passive; it is anticipatory.

A nation that prepares quietly during calm periods responds effectively during crisis.

In military doctrine, economic planning, and technological innovation, this principle holds constant. The nations that invest during peace dominate during disruption.

THE STRATEGIC CALENDAR OF THE FUTURE

- The coming decades will test temporal wisdom profoundly.
- Technological revolutions accelerate change.
- Climate disruptions compress response timelines.
- Geopolitical shifts create windows of opportunity that open and close rapidly.

■ The strategic mind must therefore cultivate both speed and patience—speed in execution, patience in judgment.

THE SUTRA FOR OUR TIMES IS THIS:

Chanakya's greatest insight remains profoundly relevant: power is not exercised in moments, but across seasons. Nations that align action with timing convert limited strength into lasting influence. Those that ignore time squander advantage through either haste or hesitation.

THE SUTRA FOR OUR TIMES IS THIS:

Act with preparation, wait with purpose, and move when time ripens—for in statecraft, time is not a constraint; it is the strongest commander.

The writer is director of Indian Institute of Management, Indore

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Beyond Naxal Claims

Claims of eliminating Naxalism invite another question: when will corruption, exam irregularities, VIP culture and judicial delays be eradicated? Governance success must extend beyond security narratives to systemic reforms ensuring accountability, safety and justice for citizens.

Avinash Godbole, Dewas

Manipur Needs Peace

Recurring violence in Manipur reflects governance

failure and deep mistrust. Curfews alone cannot restore peace. Neutral intervention, strict action against armed groups and inclusive dialogue are essential to break the cycle of ethnic conflict and rebuild public confidence. Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Parliamentary Norms Eroding
Adopting the motion of thanks without the Prime Minister's reply weakens parliamentary convention. Citing security concerns to silence debate undermines accountability. Parliament

must remain a dignified forum for reasoned discussion, not mistrust or disruption. Democratic norms deserve protection. Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Aston Martin Reveals
Aston Martin's 2026 livery unveiling in Saudi Arabia completed the Formula 1 grid lineup. Blending iconic racing green with modern design, it signals ambition under new regulations. Fans now await the season as teams prepare for a competitive campaign.

Karunya Merchant, Indore

Read to lead

I strongly believe newspaper reading remains essential for school and college students, as it naturally builds vocabulary and improves comprehension, keeps young minds aware of important global and local events, sharpens critical thinking through exposure to different perspectives, fosters empathy by presenting diverse viewpoints, and cultivates the priceless habit of lifelong learning. Newspaper-based quizzes, with prizes, can inculcate the reading habit among students, making them realise that "today's reader is tomorrow's leader".

T.S. Karthik, Chennai

HASANZAIDI



The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India founded 1818

Neighbour's Shadow

The slogans on Dhaka's walls are not just the aftershocks of a student uprising; they are signs of a deeper political realignment. A generation that forced open Bangladesh's closed political system is now turning its gaze outward and much of its anger is directed across the western border. This is not a sudden emotional spasm. It is the cumulative result of years in which many young Bangladeshis came to associate their own democratic suffocation with the preferences of a powerful neighbour.

For over a decade, stability was the organising principle of India's Bangladeshi policy. It was a defensible instinct: security cooperation deepened, connectivity expanded, and trade flows grew. But stability, when pursued through the unscrupulous backing of one political force, carries a moral and strategic cost. In Bangladesh's case, that cost is now being paid in public sentiment.

For students who came of age amid disputed elections, shrinking civic space, and violent crackdowns, the memory that lingers is not of bilateral achievements but of an external patron who appeared more comfortable with predictability than with pluralism.

The flight of a hardened leader to Indian soil after bloodshed at home has hardened this perception into something more personal and more symbolic. It has fused older grievances - over border deaths, water sharing, trade barriers, and rhetorical excesses - into a single narrative of hierarchy and disregard. In that narrative, India is no longer just a difficult neighbour; it is seen as an enabler of an unjust order.

What is striking, however, is what this anger is not. It is not a civilisational rejection, nor a cultural one. Many of the most vocal critics draw a clear line between the Indian state and Indian people, between policy and society. Family ties, language, and everyday cross-border familiarity still exert their quiet pull. The rupture is political, not social - and that distinction keeps the door to repair open.

For India, the warning is generational. Diplomatic ties can be mended by new governments and new understandings, but generational attitudes, once set, tend to endure. A cohort that has just tasted political agency is unlikely to forget who it believes stood on the wrong side of its struggle. If Delhi's image among these young citizens hardens into that of a patronising or intrusive power, the consequences will outlast any single electoral cycle in Dhaka.

A reset, therefore, cannot be tactical or cosmetic. It requires abandoning the habit of managing Bangladesh primarily through preferred intermediaries and accepting the messier reality of a plural, post-uprising polity.

It also demands a more careful calibration of rhetoric at home, where causal contempt travels faster and deeper than official clarifications.

The paradox is that geography ensures India and Bangladesh cannot drift apart, but politics will determine whether they remain partners or uneasy cohabitants. Respect, reciprocity, and a visible distance from one-party intimacy are no longer idealistic slogans; they are strategic necessities. The anger of Bangladesh's youth is a warning - but also an invitation to build a more equal, if more demanding, relationship.

Japan's Wager

Japan's election has delivered something rarer than a market rally: a sense of political finality. Sanae Takaichi's sweeping mandate does not just settle a leadership question; it also the ruling Liberal Democratic Party; it resets expectations about what the Japanese state can attempt after years of drift, scandal fatigue, and cautious half-measures. Investors have responded with euphoria, pushing equities to record highs, but the deeper story is not about a single trading day. It is about a wager on decisiveness in a country long trapped between demographic gravity and fiscal caution.

The scale of the victory matters more than the personality at the top. A government that does not need to negotiate every major bill changes the policy calculus overnight.

For markets, this translates into speed: faster stimulus, quicker regulatory tweaks, and a clearer path for sectoral bets in areas like defence and artificial intelligence. The rally in shares reflects confidence that policy intent will now face fewer political roadblocks. In this sense, the surge is less about optimism and more about relief.

Yet relief is not the same as resolution. Japan's economic constraints are structural and unforgiving. An ageing society, a shrinking workforce, and ballooning social costs form a triangle that no election can wish away.

The promise to cut taxes while spending more may soothe households feeling the pinch of rising prices, but it also sharpens an old and uncomfortable question: who pays, and when? With public debt already towering, fiscal activism is not a free lunch, however popular it may be.

This is why the divergence in market reactions is telling. Equity investors are voting for growth, narrative, and momentum. Bond and currency watchers, by contrast, are quietly asking about arithmetic.

They are not impressed by slogans; they want a funding plan. That tension will define the next phase of Japan's economic story. If growth accelerates convincingly, today's doubts may look overly cautious. If it does not, today's celebration could go quickly.

Politically, Ms Takaichi's rise also signals a shift in how the ruling establishment presents itself. By blending conservative themes with a more contemporary public persona, she has widened the party's appeal at a moment when many democracies are struggling to bridge generational divides. That may prove as important any fiscal package, because legitimacy is the real currency of reform.

Still, authority is only potential energy. Converting it into durable momentum will require choices that are not as crowd-pleasing as campaign pledges. The temptation will be to lean into stimulus and postpone the harder conversations about productivity, labour, and long-term sustainability. The risk is not that Japan does too much, but that it does only the easy things.

This election has bought Japan clarity and time. Markets are betting that both will be used boldly and wisely. The verdict will not be written in index levels, but in whether confidence can be turned into a growth story that outlives the honeymoon.

Action prevents tragedy

The Good Samaritans Rules, 2020 protect individuals from civil or criminal liability when they voluntarily come forward to provide immediate assistance or emergency care to an individual injured in an accident, crash, or any other emergency medical situation. They may leave after admitting the victim to a hospital and are not required to disclose their name, phone number, address, or any personal details, unless they wish to act as a witness.

"Rah-Veer" scheme even offers cash rewards of Rs 25,000 and certificates of appreciation.

Hospitals are required to display these provisions at their entrance

“Road accidents kill more people than any war,” Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari told Parliament, noting that 485 lives were lost every day on Indian roads, leaving 1,268 people injured or disabled in 2024. Unlike leaders who stop at rhetoric, Gadkari has operationalized a “5Es” framework: Engineering, Enforcement, Education, Emergency Care, and Empathy - to tackle this serious challenge to the country’s social, economic, and legal systems.

On the legal front, the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019, introduced stiff penalties to counter the culture of non-compliance. Cashless Treatment of Road Accident Victims Scheme, 2025 ensures victims receive immediate medical care up to Rs 1.5 lakh. National Road Safety Month (January) saw the ambitious announcement of Vehicle-to-Vehicle (V2V) communication system that allows vehicles to “talk” to each other within a 300-meter range, alerting drivers to sudden braking or blind-spots.

Although India has only 1 per cent of the world’s vehicle population, it accounts for nearly 11 per cent of global road accident deaths - about 1.77 lakh fatalities annually, costing the nation nearly 3 per cent of its GDP. The Law Commission states if proper medical treatment is provided during the “Golden Hour” (the first 60 minutes), up to 50 per cent of these deaths can be prevented. However, ambulance response times in India range from 8 to 35 minutes.

A study from Iran by Mohammad Jafar Sepahvand et al shows that in 85-97 per cent of accidents, ordinary citizens are the first to reach the spot. However, only 11 per cent provide first aid, while 68 per cent merely stand and watch. Some time ago in a remote town in Andhra Pradesh, a mother knelt on a blood-stained road, pleading with passers-by to save her dying son. No one



helped. The young man died before her eyes. Incidents like these create despair that society has become increasingly irresponsible. Fortunately, this is not entirely true. The reasons why people at accident sites fail to respond can be grouped into three categories: Psychological factors; 2. Legal misconceptions; 3. Lack of first-aid knowledge. Understanding and addressing each is critical to transforming bystanders into life-savers.

The most complex psychological barrier is the “bystander effect.” When many people are present, each person tends to think, “Someone else is more capable will help.” As a result, no one steps forward.

Consider another tragic road accident a few days ago in Andhra Pradesh, where a private travel bus collided with a truck after a tyre burst, setting both vehicles ablaze. Shaik Mehra, a passing local driver, assisted by his nephew, did not hesitate despite the absence of many bystanders. By breaking the bus windows, he saved 36 passengers. He was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation on Republic Day.

Similarly, in the road accident involving cricketer Rishabh Pant in Uttarakhand, although it was night and only two passers-by - Rajat Kumar and Nishu Kumar - were present, they broke the car windows before it caught fire, rescued him, and rushed him to the hospital. These examples show that when fewer people are present, the likelihood of help actually increases. Almost magically, once young people are made aware of these invisible barriers, they overcome them and step forward to help; all it takes is a reminder.

The Good Samaritans Rules, 2020 protect individuals from civil or criminal liability when they voluntarily come forward to provide immediate assistance or emergency care to an individual injured in an accident, crash, or any other emergency medical situation. They may leave after admitting the victim to a hospital and are not required to disclose their name, phone number, address, or any personal details, unless they wish to act as a witness. “Rah-Veer” scheme even offers cash rewards of Rs. 25,000 and certificates of appreciation.

Hospitals are required to display these provisions at their entrance.

The law is stronger in some countries. Under the French Penal Code, failing to help a person in danger is a criminal offense, carrying a potential five-year prison sentence. Similarly, under German law (Section 323c), stopping to help is mandatory, if safe. Bystander intervention is significantly higher in these nations.

Some people even freeze due to the intense pressure of making high-stakes decisions. With proper first aid training and awareness, young people can develop the confidence to take initiative.

Until an ambulance arrives, bystanders can take the following nine critical first-aid actions:

1. Ensure your own safety first. Watch out for other vehicles, electric wires, and fire hazards.

2. Call 112 or 108 (Ambulance). Do not assume someone else has already called. It is better if multiple people call than if no one does. If there are two people, one should call while the other helps.

3. Talk to the victims, reassure them, and try to keep them conscious.

4. Stop bleeding. If blood is flowing from a wound, press firmly with a clean cloth until bleeding stops.

5. Tie a bandage firmly (but not too tight). If fingers turn blue, loosen the bandage slightly.

6. Clear airway obstruction. If breathing is obstructed (snoring or gurgling), gently tilt the head back by placing one hand on the forehead and lifting the chin with the other. Remove visible blood or mucus from the mouth using a finger.

7. Recovery Position: If the victim is breathing but unconscious, gently turn them onto their side. Place the upper hand under the head for support, bend the upper leg at the knee, and tilt the head slightly backward to allow fluids to drain.

7. Suspected spinal injury: If there is neck pain or inability to move limbs, do not move

the victim. Keep the head and neck aligned. Incorrect movement can cause paralysis.

8. CPR (if the heart stops): If the victim is unresponsive and not breathing (or breathing abnormally), place both hands at the centre of the chest and press hard and fast at 100-20 compressions per minute.

9. Stay until the ambulance arrives.

In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, First Aid training for driving licence applicants is mandatory. Germany mandates a 9-unit “Erste Hilfe” course.

Australia and New Zealand implement Graduated Driver Licensing, with a three-tier hierarchy: learner, Provisional, and Permanent Licence system. Provisional licensed drivers cannot drive without peers or during night. This reportedly reduced crash rates among the youth.

The “112 India” app (Emergency Response Support System) includes tools called “Volunteer” and “Shout.” Any citizen can register as a volunteer. When a person in need touches the “Shout” button, an SOS message with location is sent to the control room and nearby volunteers. This system enables quick help until ambulances arrive.

The next goal should be using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to prevent accidents. A recent bus accident near Kurnool that claimed 20 lives occurred when a bus hit a motorcycle lying on the highway after its intoxicated rider had fallen earlier.

CCTV footage later showed the biker riding dangerously shortly before the accident. Despite widespread CCTV coverage, cameras are largely used only to reconstruct events after lives are lost.

Though real-time monitoring of thousands of feeds is beyond human capacity, AI systems can analyse live CCTV feeds to detect drunk or erratic driving, wrong-side movement, and dangerous speed patterns, and trigger instant alerts to police. Australia has deployed AI-driven real-time CCTV analytics to alert police during ongoing risks, and China's “City Brain” project uses large-scale AI surveillance to identify hazardous driving behaviour.

Under Article 51A of the Indian Constitution, abjuring violence and showing compassion towards fellow citizens are Fundamental Duties. Saving accident victims is a vital part of this duty.

CHINADAILY

Aluminum feels the heat of EU carbon tariff

The European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism began functioning on Jan 1. It is a policy tool that encourages cleaner industrial production in non-EU countries by putting a price on the carbon emissions caused to produce goods entering the EU. The development is worrisome for China's aluminum industry, one of the sectors covered by the EU CBAM because it would mean higher costs at the border. But what is driving the anxiety across the entire non-ferrous metals industry is not merely the higher cost but the uncertainty about the future path of the EU CBAM. Three questions dominate industry discussions: First, whether the indirect emissions of aluminum products will be included in the accounting scope. The EU gives subsidies for electricity prices, allowing some of the indirect emissions of aluminum products within the EU to remain unregulated. It would be unfair to include the indirect emissions of aluminum products, when there is a subsidy on electricity.

Whether indirect emissions are eventually included in the EU CBAM accounting scope depends on whether the EU ends its subsidies for domestic electricity prices. But given the complexities of those subsidies and the EU's need to maintain industrial competitiveness, completely abolishing the subsidy system is not practical. Though reforms are gradually being implemented, it is unlikely that the

account for roughly 80 percent of the overall emissions of the products. However, under the EU CBAM policy, indirect emissions are not included in the accounting scope. The main reason for not including indirect carbon emissions is that the EU

gives subsidies for electricity prices, allowing some of the indirect emissions of aluminum products within the EU to remain unregulated. It would be unfair to include the indirect emissions of aluminum products, when there is a subsidy on electricity.

Whether indirect emissions are eventually included in the EU CBAM accounting scope depends on whether the EU ends its subsidies for domestic electricity prices. But given the complexities of those subsidies and the EU's need to maintain industrial competitiveness, completely abolishing the subsidy system is not practical. Though reforms are gradually being implemented, it is unlikely that the

indirect emissions of aluminum products will be included in the accounting scope.

It is not clear whether the EU CBAM will cover other non-ferrous metal industries. It is important to understand the EU CBAM's legislative logic here. The EU CBAM is built on the foundation of the European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), its operational mechanisms and decades of industry emission data.

The EU ETS has clear criteria for sector inclusion: enterprise-level emissions, total sector emissions, emissions intensity and exposure to international trade. Apart from aluminum, other non-ferrous metals have not been included because of the particularities of each industry. Copper smelting was not included because copper smelting capacity in the EU is limited, and the carbon intensity per unit of output is relatively low. Magnesium smelting was left out because the EU has limited domestic production capacity. The EU CBAM largely

follows the same framework. Therefore, whether it will cover other non-ferrous metals depends on the industrial development in the EU and whether those industries meet the ETS criteria for inclusion. Given the relatively stable development of industries in the EU, it is unlikely that the EU CBAM will cover other non-ferrous metal categories in the short term.

The EU CBAM allows companies to use the carbon pricing mechanism to offset the carbon costs already paid on the products in the country of origin. If an aluminum manufacturer has paid a certain cost in China's national carbon market, that amount can be adjusted against the EU CBAM charges. Many enterprises therefore consider this a practical way to reduce costs.

However, carbon prices in the EU ETS are nine times higher than in China. In 2025, the average carbon price of the EU ETS was €75 (\$88) per ton, while the price in China's national carbon market was around 70 yuan (\$10) per ton.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Caste barriers

Sir. This refers to the news report, “Fear division less, embrace unity: RSS chief to nation”, published in *The Statesman* today.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat has reportedly urged Indians to shed fears of the country's further division and instead nurture the resolve to see a reunified and strong India by 2047. He has stressed about caste elimination and has called for collective effort and social integration in order to achieve the same. “We must live together to end caste divisions”, he said.

The effort by Mr. Bhagwat to address this sensitive issue is indeed commendable and welcome. However, the ground realities are



unimaginably bad. Caste divisions apparently exist in almost all parts of our country. Extreme discrimination and lack of harmony in society due to caste divisions are prevalent almost everywhere.

It is highly important that this regressive and meaningless system is done away with so as to enable our nation to prosper on the back of a strong egalitarian society. For that, religious institutions will have to take the

lead in close coordination with the administration. Yours, etc., Anupam Neogi, Kolkata, 9 February.

Governors

Sir. The recent developments involving Governors walking out of legislative assemblies or refusing to deliver the customary address in Opposition-ruled states, particularly in the South, have sparked a debate on the constitutional obligations and the relevance of this practice.

Even though Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has recently sought a constitutional amendment to abolish the mandatory governor's address, the fact is that the

problem lies not in the institution, but in the politicised misuse of the power by governors. A governor's customary address should be retained, with strict adherence to constitutional limits on gubernatorial discretion. Walking out, omitting portions, or refusing to read cabinet-approved texts is presented as a breach of constitutional morality and convention, even if the textually explicit sanction is limited.

The address sets the legislative agenda, outlines policy priorities, and enables accountability of the executive to the legislature. It is an integral part of parliamentary democracy, not a colonial relic.

Yours, etc., Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai, 9 February.



Reimagining revival of the textiles sector

SHEHZAD POONAWALLA AND NISHANT KUMAR HOTA

If the India-EU trade deal was being hailed as the 'Mother of all deals', then the India-U.S. trade deal is being considered as the 'Father of all deals', especially for the textile sector. The US is one of the largest markets for textiles, with exports valued at around USD 1.8 billion, and it buys around 28.33 per cent of Indian textile and apparel exports. For such a large market, cutting effective tariffs from 50 to 18 per cent is a significant development, giving India an advantage over competing countries.

India's textile sector has always been more than a manufacturing industry. It is a lifeline for farmers, a source of mass employment, and a bridge between rural India and global markets. With their well-integrated supply chains and labour-intensive nature, textiles play a central role in India's development journey and in our ambition to build an inclusive, export-driven economy. In recent years, this sector has been tested by global trade disruptions. One of the most significant challenges came with the imposition of high tariffs by major markets on a range of textile and apparel products. Instead of reacting defensively or resorting to short-term controls, India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, chose a calibrated and strategic response by scaling up and upskilling through the PM MITRA (Mega Integrated Textile Region and Apparel) Parks and SAMARTH scheme, through which 5.4 lakh people have already been trained with industry-relevant skills.

This was a rapid response, but it has not always been like that. During the UPA decade, the government

watched from the sidelines as other competitors stitched up market access and duty-free regimes in the European Union. While others moved aggressively to secure preferential entry into key markets, India lost valuable time. The consequences of this inaction were visible for years. Exporters operated at a disadvantage, price competitiveness suffered, and opportunities in high-value markets remained underutilised.

It is precisely to address this gap that the trade deals with the EU and the U.S. matter a lot. The European Union, along with the U.S., is one of the world's most significant and valuable textile and apparel markets. Under the proposed India-EU FTA, the objective is clear: to secure phased or zero-duty access for Indian textiles and apparel.

This will directly neutralise the long-standing advantage enjoyed by competitor countries that have benefited from preferential regimes, restoring a level playing field for Indian manufacturers. The proposed Free Trade Agreement with the EU and the trade deal with the U.S. will deliver its most substantial gains in India's core textile-producing regions.

States such as Tamil Nadu, which form the backbone of the country's textile and apparel exports, stand to benefit significantly. In particular, the tri-city cluster of Coimbatore-Erode-Tirupur - a globally recognised hub for spinning, knitting, and garment manufacturing - will gain from improved market access and enhanced export competitiveness. The U.S. trade deal can double Tirupur exports to U.S. markets from Rs 44,000 crores to Rs 88,000 crores in three years.

Reinforcing this momentum, the Union Budget 2026-27 has announced the creation of a City Economic

Region for the tri-city cluster. This move integrates trade opportunities with regional industrial planning, enabling infrastructure upgrades, logistics efficiency, and coordinated urban-industrial growth. Together, the trade deals and the City Economic Region framework ensure that global market access translates directly into local jobs, stronger MSMEs, and sustained industrial expansion in one of India's most critical textile ecosystems.

The National Fibre Scheme announced in the budget anchors this approach by promoting self-reliance in silk, wool, jute, and artificial fibres. By reducing import dependence and strengthening upstream supply chains, it positions India as a more resilient and integrated textile ecosystem. Complementing this, the Textile Expansion and Employment Scheme focuses on upgrading traditional clusters to retain their labour-intensive character while becoming technologically modern and globally competitive.

Anouncement of capital support for machinery upgradation, testing, and certification facilities will directly improve productivity and ensure compliance with quality standards. For exporters, this means easier access to demanding international markets. For workers, it translates into safer workplaces, higher productivity, and better wages. For rural and semi-skilled labour, it creates stable employment opportunities closer to home.

The launch of SAMARTH 2.0 strengthens this framework by aligning skills with industry needs, ensuring that workforce availability keeps pace with export-grade manufacturing requirements. Handloom and handicraft schemes have also been brought under a unified framework, ensuring that



artisans and weavers remain integral to India's growth story rather than peripheries to it.

A key emphasis of this budget is the modernisation of traditional textile clusters, which have long underpinned India's textile economy. While these hubs have historically generated large-scale employment, many have remained technologically outdated. By addressing this gap, the government is not only enhancing competitiveness but also preserving the employment-intensive nature of these clusters.

Taken together, the recent series of Trade Agreements and the Union Budget mark a fundamental shift in governance philosophy. The Union Budget 2026-27 offers a strong and coherent roadmap for the textile sector. The allocation of Rs 5,279.01 crore to the Ministry of Textiles reflects a clear shift towards building long-term competitiveness rather than relying on short-term relief or fragmented interventions.

Under Prime Minister Modi, India's textile strategy has moved from defensive reactions to a coordinated

trade-industrial policy. The objective is clear - that India is here not just to catch up with competitors, but to outgrow them through scale, sustainability, and strategic trade alignment. The export base of textiles and apparel stood at around USD 37.75 billion in FY25, more than double the 2013 level. The Ministry of Textiles' Vision 2030 aims to scale India's textile exports to Rs 9 lakh crore (about USD 10 billion) by strengthening domestic manufacturing and systematically widening global market reach.

India's textile industry stands at a critical inflection point, backed by solid production fundamentals, rising exports, and sustained policy support, positioning it as a competitive, reliable, and future-ready global textile and apparel hub. Textiles are supported by strong production fundamentals, expanding international market access, and sustained policy backing, positioning it as a competitive, reliable, and future-ready global textile and apparel hub.

(The writers are Birla, and a public policy analyst.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 12 February 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE essential purpose of the Non-Burman Expulsion Act is without doubt the exhibition of an unmistakable gesture of dislike to India. It is in effect a blow for separation, and its endorsement by the Governor-General somewhat complicates the protest which is being made by the Government of India in the matter of the anti-Asiatic legislation now upon the South African anvil. True the Burma Act only deals with persons who have been convicted, or have been required to furnish security for good behaviour, while the South African Bill is directed against citizens whose chief offence is the colour of their skins. But here is a specific instance of a British dependency ridding itself in summary fashion of those who may be British subjects and are most likely to be natives of British India, and it does raise the question of the moral right of any dependency to take such a course. For, assuming, as we may with fair safety assume, that these people are undesirable, is it in accordance with Imperial comity for Burma to get rid of them at the expense of other portions of the Empire? This, of course, was not the line taken during the Assembly debate on the Act a few days ago; criticism on that occasion, as was inevitable, was directed solely towards its effects upon political agitation—a point which will leave the non-political public stone cold.

News Items

MOROCCAN WAR WEATHER HINDERS FRENCH OPERATIONS

(SPECIAL CABLE)
LONDON, FEB. 10.

A RABAT message states that owing to bad weather the French partisans occupying the Bibane heights have been obliged to fall back without fighting.

Information has reached headquarters that a number of dissident tribesmen of Beniourighel have returned to the district.—Copyright.

LEAGUE ENTRY

GERMANY AND TREATY OF VERSAILLES

PARIS, FEB. 10.

THAT Germany's admission to the League precludes a fresh offensive against the Treaty of Versailles is argued by Le Journal, which draws attention to the forthcoming meeting between M. Briand and the Belgian Foreign Minister, M. Vandervelde, when, it is said, besides Customs tariffs they will discuss general policy. The newspaper further says that Belgium is bound to side with France in demanding 'essential safeguards.'

The Gauls thinks that the Reich will appear in Geneva as the perpetual plaintiff and claimant.

The Figaro urges that since Germany is to have a permanent seat in the League Council, Poland should have the same.—Reuter.

CAPE TO CAIRO

WOMAN'S PART IN MOTOR CAR EXPEDITION

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS)
RUGBY, FEB. 10.

The arrival in London yesterday of Major and Mrs. Court Treatt who recently completed the journey from Cape Town to Cairo in Crossley motor cars was the occasion of a demonstration of welcome at the Royal Automobile Club.

The expedition, which started in the autumn of 1924, took sixteen months to complete, and it is the first time the journey has been made by motor car.

Although many adventures are recorded by the tourists, and, in some parts, Mrs. Court Treatt was the first white woman to enter them, no great difficulties were encountered during the journey, and, apart from being on one occasion submerged in a river, there were no insuperable mechanical troubles.

MARRIAGE FORBIDDEN

FIRST DECISION UNDER NEW ACT

(FROM OUR SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE)
LONDON, FEB. 10.

IN the first decision under the new Infants Act the magistrate at Surbiton upheld a mother's refusal to consent to the marriage of her nineteen-year-old daughter.

The mother said it would mean poverty, with which the magistrate agreed, expressing the opinion that the suitor's earnings of £2 a week were insufficient.

Narratives that have faced little scrutiny

KAMAL AHMED

Now that campaigning for the February 12 national election has officially ended and the manifestos of all major parties are before Bangladesh, this is the moment before the country heads to the polls to pause and reflect on whether the plans and pledges we have heard have been adequately scrutinised.

By global standards, this election so far appears to have relied almost entirely on competing "narratives" crafted and sold by parties and their leaders. Campaign strategists have been largely successful in pushing their respective narratives and counter-narratives, leaving the voters with little choice but to judge personalities and rhetoric rather than policies and substance.

In a democracy, elections are meant to be the ultimate test of politicians, rooted in public accountability. Town hall meetings and meaningful engagement with the media - including interviews and press conferences with question-and-answer sessions - are central to that process. Unfortunately, none of the party leaders offered the opportunity to be examined by their constituents or by journalists acting on constituents' behalf.

The late unveiling of manifestos by all major parties, whether by choice or due to poor planning, meant that the campaign largely devolved into a contest of personalities rather than a comparison of policies. This was further compounded by negative campaigning marked by name-calling and demeaning labels, more reminiscent of sledging than serious political debate.

Had there been town hall Q&A sessions, citizens could have asked probing questions who is financing costs, helicopter rides between rallies while one party accuses another of extortion? Or, why is a political alliance once deemed untamable now being used as grounds for ostracism based on past allegiance? There could be myriad other questions about both politicians and their policies that remain unanswered - not because constituents failed to ask them, but because candidates and party leaders failed to create sufficient space for those questions to be raised, tested, and answered in the first place.

Tailored election messages are undoubtedly important, but they are often vague, making the accompanying pledges difficult to assess. While it is true that the two leading contenders - the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami - published policy papers ahead of their manifestos,

there was little substantive public discussion of those documents. As a result, there was no real pressure to address criticisms or incorporate new ideas into more realistic, measurable action plans. Unsurprisingly, many experts now view these manifestos as laden with overambitious and hollow promises.

These concerns are amplified by the current global economic climate. US President Donald Trump's weaponisation of tariffs and shifting geopolitical dynamics across Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia have made export growth more difficult, imports more uncertain and expensive, and the prospects of attracting investment or aid increasingly bleak. Economists have rightly pointed out that the political pledges or projections - job creation, accelerated growth, and expansive social security - are unlikely to be realised during the next parliamentary term.

On the political front, while the manifestos broadly reflect commitments made under the July National Charter, sharp differences remain in interpretation and emphasis. As the Charter forms the foundation of a post-authoritarian transition, disagreements over its future trajectory have intensified. Islamic parties see it as an opportunity to establish moral governance, while

liberal forces emphasise the values and ideals that shaped the birth of Bangladesh.

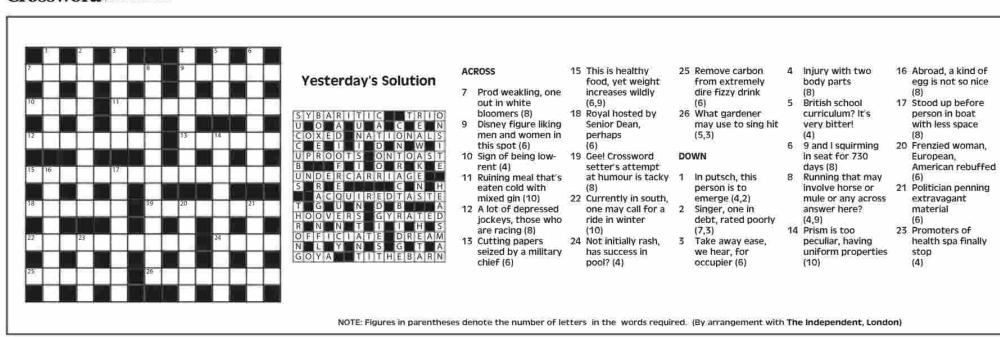
There is also disagreement over the agenda of the referendum that is taking place alongside the general election. The Jamaat-NCP alliance has questioned the BNP's sincerity in implementing the Charter, citing its note of dissent on certain provisions, despite BNP leader Tarique Rahman's call for a "yes" vote. These accusations underscore the need for deeper probing of leaders across both camps.

A particularly disturbing late development in the campaign was the vague and unexplained warnings from top leaders of multiple parties about "conspiracies" to steal the election, without naming any alleged conspirators. These claims may simply be rhetorical attempts to undermine opponents, but they have nonetheless generated fears of potential violence. Such fears discourage voter turnout, which would be the most undesirable outcome of all.

Alternatively, if these apprehensions are based on credible intelligence, particularly given the risks posed by a segment of the supporters of the fallen Awami League regime, the public has a right to know. Clearer public messaging and greater interactions with the media could

The Daily Star/ANN.

Crossword | No. 29373



OPINION

EDITORIAL

HK must not waver in fight to safeguard national security

Safeguarding national security does not come to an end with the jailing of former media boss Jimmy Lai Chee-ying. A timely reminder came yesterday as Beijing published a white paper warning of zero tolerance of any offences in its "unrelenting fight" to defend national security.

The State Council's document expounded on the responsibility of the central government for national security, the achievements of the local government in fulfilling its constitutional duty in safeguarding national security, the city's transition from disorder to stability and prosperity, and efforts to ensure a high standard of security to facilitate high-quality development of the "one country, two systems" policy. Coming a day after the founder of the now-defunct Apple Daily was jailed for 20 years for conspiracy to collude with foreign forces and publishing seditious articles, the message is clear. The document reviews efforts to safeguard security and the experience and insights gained in the process, aiming to clear up misunderstandings around the issue and build consensus, and to ensure the high-quality development of one country, two systems with high-standard security.

"Safeguarding national security is a long-term and enduring task," the paper says. "Practice has proven that security is not an inhibition, but rather a safeguard and a booster," it adds.

That national security protection is an unceasing process has long been the official position. The white paper is the clearest and strongest warning yet against violations of national security. Beijing's liaison office in Hong Kong said the paper marked a new starting point in safeguarding national security, while Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu pledged to implement the white paper's requirements.

Noting the complex environment facing the country and the city, Beijing called for improvements in risk monitoring and early-warning systems to defuse major risks. "Greater attention should be given to security in unconventional areas such as finance, shipping, trade, and the protection of overseas interests," it said. "Intervention and sabotage by hostile external forces must be guarded against, and the systems and mechanisms for countering foreign sanctions, intervention, and long-arm jurisdiction should be further improved."

The commitment to maintain "a safe Hong Kong that is free, developed, open, and vibrant" as this "aligns fully with the one country, two systems policy, serves China's fundamental interests, benefits the residents of Hong Kong, and meets the interests of external investors" is to be welcomed. The paper reaffirms that enactment of the national security law aims to make sure that the city, while fulfilling its constitutional duty to defend the country, can continue to foster development and growth beneficial to itself and the nation under the unique governance model.

New scheme will help ensure teacher quality

Teachers can serve as the best examples for students by embracing lifelong learning themselves. They also face a steep learning curve in adapting to reforms as the city's education sector undergoes a critical stage of consolidation in the face of an increasingly challenging social environment.

The latest proposed requirement for teachers to obtain a practising certificate every three years, instead of the original registration for life, comes as yet another controversial but justified shake-up to enhance education quality and management. It is important that the measures be implemented sensitively, taking into account the concerns of teachers and schools.

To qualify for the certificate, educators must meet six criteria: hold a valid certificate of registration as a teacher or a permit to teach; be employed by a school as a teacher; declare any criminal convictions in the past three years; declare their willingness to uphold professional standards and abide by laws, including China's constitution, the Basic Law and the national security law; live in Hong Kong and attain 150 hours of continuing professional development in three years. The criteria are not too stringent.

The government plans to amend the relevant ordinance in the second half of this year. While the scheme will take effect thereafter, officials said teachers and schools would be given time to fulfil the requirement under a one-year transition period. The flexible approach makes sense in light of the training hours threshold and the expected large number of applications.

There are some 70,000 teachers in publicly funded schools, private schools, international schools and kindergartens. The new scheme is not meant to purge those who do not meet the requirements but to enhance quality. However, it would not be surprising if some do not qualify or walk away for different reasons.

It is incumbent upon teachers to enhance standards and professionalism. The authorities must also proceed with care so that the reform is embraced by the profession. With trust and partnership, the education sector can rise to the challenge and maintain a quality workforce that nurtures students for future development.

CONTACT US

Tammy Tam Publisher

Chow Chung-yan Editor-in-Chief

Zuraidah Ibrahim Executive Editor Yonden Utato Managing Editor

Zhang Jun Chief Technology Officer

Editorial office: 19/F, Tower One, Times Square, 1 Matignon Street, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong

Editorial feedback, general inquiries: 2566 2222, advertising@scmp.com

Advertising inquiries: 2565 4333, advertising@scmp.com

Place a classified or recruitment ad: 2565 8822, classified@scmp.com

Subscription and delivery: 2560 8820, subscription@scmp.com

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Events and conferences: 2565 2438, live@scmp.com

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HARRY'S VIEW ON AN INCREASE IN THE MINIMUM WAGE > A3

SO, I'M EXPECTING GREAT RESULTS
NOW YOUR WAGES HAVE GONE UP

YEP...WE'LL CERTAINLY BE
GOING THE WHOLE EXTRA
DOLLAR...I MEAN, MILE



The price of success

Winston Mok says as migrant workers head home for the Lunar New Year, it is a good time to reflect on the loneliness that has gripped Chinese society

As the Year of the Snake ends, more than 9 billion passenger journeys will unfold during China's Spring Festival travel period, the greatest annual human migration on earth. For some, these are the only few weeks in the year when families are together.

For many, this is a period when they can find temporary relief from loneliness – from the strivings and adjusting, even if not yet assimilating, in the cities where they work, far from their hometowns. The lucky ones, who can make ends meet and are not weighed down by economic pressures, can enjoy a moment of community before returning to a burdensome reality.

According to Gallup research from 2023, the prevalence of loneliness in China (23 per cent) was comparable to South Korea (21 per cent) and India (25 per cent), but higher than Japan (14 per cent). Building on Gallup's data and referencing a World Health Organization analysis of 23 data sets, The Economist recently highlighted China as an exceptionally lonely place.

In the international context, further research is needed to ascertain if China is distinctly lonely. However, there is little doubt that loneliness is an important social issue in China.

China's one-child policy has been singled out as a cause of this wave of loneliness, but that might not hold in light of international comparisons. Japan, which has a comparable total fertility rate to China, is less lonely.

China's grueling 996 work culture – working 9am to 9pm six days a week, leaving little time for social life – is another commonly cited culprit.

However, Japan was once famous for *karoshi* – death from overwork – but is less lonely. In addition, both Japan and South Korea have introduced legislation that puts restrictions on the maximum hours for workers since 2018.

Japan and South Korea are much smaller countries than China, so the family displacements during their modernisation could be more manageable. Many of the least lonely countries tend to be small, such as Singapore and Switzerland.

That said, geographic scale alone cannot explain

loneliness. Russia, with its vast territory, is far less lonely than China.

A better explanation for the phenomenon of loneliness in China could be found in the role of migrant labour and the country's hukou household registration system in China's industrialisation. Until their gradual automation and the widespread adoption of robots, China's factories on the coast were powered by migrant workers from inland provinces.

Given China's hukou system, where migrants do not have access to essential social services reserved for locals, these workers move alone, leaving their parents and children behind. Even married couples might not stay in the same city. Driven by job opportunities, they can end up in separate cities or even different provinces.



Perhaps more important than how China is situated in the world loneliness map is the pattern within the country

China's loneliness crisis is the social price of rapid modernisation in a still-developing country which has a relentless drive for success but lacks the corresponding institutional development of more developed economies. China is growing old before it gets rich.

As a result of China's fragmented system, Shanghai hukou holders, for example, enjoy a high standard of healthcare while the levels of care provided in most rural regions are much lower.

Perhaps more important than how China is situated in the world loneliness map is the pattern within the country. In a complex society spread across a vast territory, there is likely to be a wide spectrum of loneliness.

First, what is the trend of loneliness over time? Is loneliness getting better or worse? Has it returned to

pre-pandemic levels? Importantly, what is the pattern by age group? Even if the situation may be reportedly improving for the elderly, what is the trend among youth?

According to Gallup's research, China's young people feel lonelier than their seniors. Are there other key drivers at work beyond the usage of social media?

Third, what are the variations across regions? Compared with affluent coastal provinces, is loneliness more prevalent in inland provinces? Is the pattern in the Greater Bay Area different from less-developed regions which tend to have fewer migrant workers? Is migrant-dominated Shenzhen a lonelier place than, say, Foshan?

Perhaps more important than regional variations are the identities of the residents. Are migrant workers in Guangzhou lonelier than those who have a local hukou?

Even after obtaining a local hukou, are new migrants lonelier than the local inhabitants who have lived in the province for generations?

Finally, how does loneliness manifest across class lines? Globally, those who struggle financially tend to be far lonelier than those who are comfortable economically.

Effective social policies targeting different segments of the population can only be developed with a granular understanding of the multiple dynamics at play in these layers.

While institutional reforms covering healthcare, labour regulations and the hukou are important in mitigating loneliness, comprehensive solutions might be beyond the capabilities of the state.

Civil society – from churches in South Korea to community volunteer organisations in Japan – has played a key role in providing community support.

Even in Nordic countries with established welfare policies, there is high participation in voluntary organisations such as sports clubs, cultural associations and hobby organisations.

Addressing China's loneliness requires not just top-down policy reforms but bottom-up empowerment that allows civil society to flourish as a complement to state governance.

Until then, travellers will carry the weight of loneliness that no reunion dinners can dispel as they embark on the Year of the Horse.

Winston Mok, a private investor, was previously a private equity investor

Lai ruling shows HK's resolve to uphold rule of law

Cui Jianchun says no smear tactics or coercive sanction from his supporters or Western benefactors will weaken city's resolve to protect national security

On Tuesday, the rule of law and justice scored another victory in Hong Kong when a local court sentenced Jimmy Lai Chee-ying to 20 years in prison for violating the national security law. This sends a clear and resounding message to the world that Hong Kong is a society rigorously governed by law, and any lawbreakers will be brought to justice.

Lai reaped what he sowed. The evidence of his crimes is irrefutable. He relentlessly pushed for cross-border political lobbying, went to great lengths to meet US politicians to plead for foreign sanctions against China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

He even continued his anti-China activities after the Hong Kong national security law had come into effect.

He had not the least qualms about being called a traitor for openly declaring that he was fighting for the United States and inviting the US and other foreign forces to interfere in Hong Kong affairs. These were not isolated incidents but a true reflection of his numerous crimes endangering Hong Kong.

National security must not be violated, and the sentencing of Lai is a welcome decision.

Lai's trial has fully demonstrated the independence and fairness of Hong Kong's judiciary. Since the trial began, the court examined 2,220 pieces of evidence, reviewed more than 80,000 pages of documents, heard testimonies from 14 prosecution witnesses and saw Lai himself testify for 52 days.

All along, the trial has been closely observed not only by the Hong Kong people and the media but also by a number of foreign officials based in Hong Kong. The whole trial process remained free from any external pressure, was procedurally fair, factually clear and based on hard evidence. The verdict, delivered in strict accordance with the law, underscores the professionalism, transparency and impartiality of Hong Kong's legal system.

However, certain Western politicians have consistently disregarded the facts and the law, resorting to any means to mislead the public and interfere with this case. They have tried everything: calling the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's lawful

prosecution a "political trial", threatening Hong Kong judicial officials with so-called sanctions, shielding Lai under the guise of being a journalist or democracy advocate and even exploiting his health to stir up sympathy. The playbook is all too familiar.

Let me be clear: no amount of staged pity or manufactured glory can cover up Lai's crimes. No smear campaign or coercive sanction will weaken Hong Kong's resolve to defend the rule of law. Justice will ultimately prevail through the law.

The Chinese central government firmly supports the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in punishing criminals in accordance with the law and resolutely safeguards national security.

It is the responsibility of Western politicians to respect the facts and the law, as well as to view the sentencing objectively and fairly.

Under the guidance of the "one country, two systems" principle and the spirit of the rule of law, I am confident that Hong Kong is poised to sustain its long-term prosperity and stability. The city will continue to contribute significantly to the development of both the country and the world.

Cui Jianchun is Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

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OPINION

Collusion is a crime

Ronny Tong says Jimmy Lai was tried for a clearly defined offence against national security

After 156 days of hearings, Jimmy Lai Chee-ying's case finally came to a close with the former media boss sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment. Western media and critics will no doubt say, what a harsh sentence for a "democracy advocate" and "freedom fighter".

However, Lai was not accused of fighting for freedom or demanding democracy in Hong Kong. His crimes were not even about his avowed hatred of the Communist Party. Western critics may be surprised to hear that hating the Communist Party is not a crime in Hong Kong. It merely provides a motive to commit certain clearly defined crimes against national security.

Lai was convicted on a count of conspiracy to spread seditious articles and two conspiracy counts of collusion with foreign forces.

The sedition charge was brought under a law enacted by the British during Hong Kong's colonial days. The charge has nothing to do with any criticisms of the Hong Kong government but specifically required proof of an intention to incite the public to "bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection" against the central and Hong Kong governments.

Few will disagree that freedom of speech is not limitless. The law on libel is a good example.

It is universally accepted that freedom of speech should not extend into realms of doing harm to the reputation of others, let alone promoting hatred.

In Lai's case, any discussion of this

charge must be viewed in the light that under the sedition law, the maximum punishment of a first offender is two years. Lai's sentence is set to last longer than two years, so in that sense, the sedition charge is the least relevant.

The collusion charge is very different. It is a far more serious offence carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Under the Hong Kong national security law, collusion includes seeking help from or calling on a foreign power to sanction one's own country.

Regardless of one's view, it is hard to argue that such an act is not treasonous in nature and hence plainly falls within the internationally well-recognised concept of national security.

Different countries view their own security differently. Some may regard national security as a proper justification for unilaterally annexing a piece of land open for the taking, while others may regard foreign sanctions as harmful to its national interest.

Plainly, if there is harmful behaviour, there is a legitimate reason to curb such conduct to prevent national harm. This is well accepted.

Just to put the matter in context, under the United Kingdom's national security law, the offence of foreign interference involves any unlawful conduct or conduct causing harm to property or another person's right or reputation on behalf of a foreign power.

So, considering the specific crime of calling on a foreign power to impose sanctions on one's own country, one would

have thought the national security laws that govern Hong Kong are hardly exceptional.

In the well-publicised criticisms of Lai's case, one finds few discussions of the nature of the collusion charge. Moreover, no one seems to suggest there is no evidence that Lai had not called for foreign powers to impose sanctions on China and Hong Kong. Effectively, the best they can say is, "well, the evidence is flimsy".

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The harm brought about by any sanction on mainland China and Hong Kong is without a doubt a very serious matter with far-reaching consequences

The law, as we all know, looks at the substance and intention of the accused's conduct. One cannot argue that as long as the call for sanctions was implicit or conducted from behind a front, one can escape the full force of the law. This is not just legal knowledge. It is common sense.

In the case of Lai, is his crime a serious one? Hong Kong's national security law states that whereas the sentence for a collusion charge is not more than 10 years, the sentence for a more serious offence can be between 10 years and life.

The court categorised Lai's case as a serious case of collusion. There was no argument otherwise at the mitigation hearing. That meant that Lai agreed that the minimum sentence should be at least 10 years.

This is hardly surprising. Lai is not just any man on the street. He was a tycoon and owner of a widely read newspaper and media empire. By any metric, he was a person with powerful and wide influence. His personal relationship with high-ranking and influential officials and politicians in the United States is without equal among most well-connected persons in Hong Kong. His views and words matter.

Moreover, the harm brought about by any sanction on mainland China and Hong Kong is without a doubt a very serious matter with far-reaching consequences.

We are talking about national and local interests which affect the livelihoods of most people in mainland China and Hong Kong.

Such conduct must not only be openly condemned but also scrutinised under the law as a measure of deterrence.

Very few people would disagree that calling for sanctions on one's own country is seeking to do harm to the national interest on a grand scale and hence treasonous in nature.

Such conduct unarguably is the very kind of behaviour that national security laws the world over seek to prevent. Punishment for such conduct is often severe. Lai found out the hard way. Let us hope others will see this crime as it is and not pretend it's something it's not.

Ronny Tong is a senior counsel and member of the Executive Council



US-led minerals bloc renews pressure on Asia to pick sides

Imran Khalid says rivalry over rare earths will define the balance of power in the 21st century

For decades, the global economy has operated on a simple premise: efficiency above all else. We built a world where goods flowed to wherever they could be produced at the lowest cost, creating a vast, interconnected web of supply chains that ignored geography in favour of the bottom line.

That era is coming to a close. Events in the past week in Washington underline the emergence of a more muscular age of geopolitics where the flow of the world's most essential materials is being reordered by the visible hand of the state instead of the invisible hand of the market.

On February 4, the United States hosted a Critical Minerals Ministerial, bringing together representatives from 54 nations. Led by Vice-President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the Trump administration proposed the creation of a preferential trade zone for critical minerals – a minerals belt designed to bypass the traditional global market. By introducing enforceable price floors and adjustable tariffs, Washington would build a fortress around the rare earths, lithium and cobalt that power the modern world.

The logic behind this move is straightforward. Today, China controls roughly 70 per cent of global rare earth mining and more than 90 per cent of its processing. For Washington, this is a profound national security vulnerability.

As Rubio noted, such concentration allows a single country to use supply chains as a "tool of leverage in geopolitics". The new grouping, dubbed the Forum on

Resource Geopolitical Engagement (Forge), is the most aggressive attempt yet to break this stranglehold by "friendshoring" the life cycle of these minerals among a coalition of like-minded partners.

However, for Asian nations, this initiative presents a potentially painful dilemma. The global green transition – the massive shift towards renewable energy and decarbonisation – requires a vast amount of minerals. By moving to a closed loop of allied supply chains, the US is effectively asking Asian economies to choose between two competing systems.

Consider the position of Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. These countries are not just observers; they are central players. Indonesia is the world's largest nickel producer, while Malaysia has long been a hub for rare earth processing. For these middle powers, the US proposal offers a tantalising opportunity: access to American capital, technology and a guaranteed price floor that protects local projects from being undercut by cheaper Chinese exports.

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For a city like Hong Kong and a region like the Asia-Pacific ... this fragmentation is a systemic challenge

However, there is a catch. Most of these countries have spent years integrating their economies with China. Their processing facilities, infrastructure and investment flows are deeply intertwined with Chinese industry. To join the US-led minerals bloc that aims to exclude China is to risk significant economic disruption. If the global market splits into two, these nations could face a world where the cost of raw materials rises as the efficiencies of a single global market disappear.

Furthermore, there is the question of the green transition itself. Decarbonisation is a race against time, and China provides the cheapest, most efficient route to technologies required to achieve it. By prioritising security over efficiency, the Forge initiative could inadvertently slow down the global energy transition. Building new mines and processing plants takes years, maybe decades. If the West cuts itself off from Chinese supplies before its own capacity is ready, the result will be higher prices and a slower roll-out of green technology.

The US-led minerals summit is a high-stakes negotiation, testing that the world is willing to pay a "security premium". This is shown by the simultaneous launch of Project Vault, a US\$12 billion strategic reserve backed by the US Export-Import Bank. The idea is to create a buffer against supply shocks, ensuring that American and allied manufacturers are never again at the mercy of a single supplier's export controls. It is a return to a form of industrial policy that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago but now seems like a necessary defence.

Even so, as we look at the map of the 54 nations that attended the Washington summit, a deeper shift is visible. We are seeing the world fragmenting, which will be called fragmented globalisation. The world is not globalising so much as it is reglobalising into distinct silos. For a city like Hong Kong and a region like the Asia-Pacific, which have thrived as connectors between East and West, this fragmentation is a systemic challenge.

The success of the Forge grouping will depend on whether Washington can sustain the political will and the financial commitments required to keep 54 diverse nations aligned.

Midde powers such as India are already showing how to play both sides. Even as External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar welcomed the US initiative, New Delhi continues to maintain its stake in the Brics grouping. This transactional autonomy could become the standard operating procedure for nations that refuse to be locked into a single bloc.

Ultimately, the minerals summit in Washington signals that the era of treating critical resources as mere commodities is over. They are now the high ground of international politics.

The struggle for control over the elements of the periodic table will define the balance of power in the 21st century. For the economies of Asia, the challenge will be to ensure they do not lose the openness that made their past prosperity possible in the rush to secure the supply chains of the future.

Dr Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor based in Karachi, Pakistan

LETTERS

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'Animal-friendly' should become a default setting

Hong Kong's urban identity is at a turning point. The expansion of pet-inclusive parks and the pilot scheme for pet-friendly restaurants are welcome steps towards becoming an animal-friendly city – but they sit uneasily alongside a largely animal-hostile framework.

The Tai Po fire, in which dozens of animals died, showed that many Hongkongers see their companion animals as fair game. The public grief that followed ran deep, and this disenfranchised grief is starting to be recognised by many in the community.

As someone who has channelled the grief of pet loss into studying the human-animal bond, I have seen how powerful this bond can be as a force for social good. Our animal-assisted social-emotional learning programmes in primary schools show that guided interactions with animals foster empathy, emotional regulation and resilience. Our work with socially withdrawn young people demonstrates that therapy dogs can be non-judgmental bridges back to society.

Hong Kong needs to embrace a "one welfare" approach, recognising that the well-being of humans, animals and the environment is interconnected. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance should be updated to include a proactive statutory duty of care, so that neglect is prevented rather than punished after the fact.

The capture and killing of wild boar that enter urban areas has highlighted how wildlife is framed mainly as a nuisance. A modernised approach would prioritise coexistence through education, habitat planning and non-lethal management, allowing humans and animals to share space with wildlife safely and respectfully.

The illegal pet trade continues to harm animals and risk public health. Repeated seizures of smuggled puppies and exotic animals at our borders, many kept in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions and some arriving sick or dying, show how porous regulation remains.

A transparently regulated pet trade with strong enforcement is essential to protect both animal welfare and human health.

If Hong Kong is to become genuinely animal-friendly, owners must uphold high standards of responsibility, hygiene and respect for others in shared spaces.

In return, public policy should move towards animal-inclusive design as the norm – from housing estates planned for multi-species living to allowing well-behaved pets on the MTR and buses.

At HKU, I have developed a course on "one health, one welfare" and the human-animal bond to help train future leaders, urban planners and policymakers to see animal-inclusive design not as a luxury but as a basic requirement for a compassionate city.

Unlocking the often-overlooked power of such a bond and viewing pet loss as a legitimate form of bereavement would not only align Hong Kong with international best practice but could also lead to economic growth.

If we invest in one welfare, law reform and public education, "animal-friendly" need not be a special label. It can become the default setting of an inclusive, civilised and compassionate Hong Kong where social belonging does not stop at species boundaries.

Paul W.C. Wong, associate professor, Department of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Hong Kong

Easing rules on dogs in eateries is a step in the right direction

As dog lovers ourselves, my wife and I certainly welcome the relaxation of rules for canines in restaurants.

Yoho Mall in Yuen Long, which we frequently dogs in trolleys and boards quite a few pet-friendly restaurants on its upper levels, is a welcome respite in a relaxing environment. Passers-by look on, with some asking to take pictures or pet the furry friends. Only occasionally would you hear some barking when dogs come close to one another, but this tends to stop when owners intervene swiftly.

The opportunity to interact with dogs instantly brings a smile to most people's faces amid the hustle and bustle of urban life. Pet dogs are usually quite friendly and happy to interact with strangers, including children. The presence of dogs in the mall not only adds to the convivial mood, but also enables children to have close encounters with animals, essentially teaching them to respect different forms of life and show empathy when petting or approaching them.

As with humans, dogs have diverse personalities, with some being more sociable and others appearing timid. Children learn to observe the dog's mood, approach it with care and know when to back off if the animal appears uncomfortable or stressed.

In the initial phase of pet-friendly regulations, understandably some customers who are not used to seeing dogs in restaurants may need time to adjust, but as time goes by, I'm confident that customers and dogs can coexist harmoniously in such premises. Of course, that depends on owners' willingness to abide by the relevant regulations such as keeping their dogs on a lead and their ability to manage their pets' behaviour.

A pet-friendly city would implement pet-friendly policies with determination, educating the public about animal rights and welfare and capitalising on the pet economy. Hong Kong certainly has a pet-friendly population that allows it to stand out in those aspects.

Jason Tang, Tin Shui Wai

Opinion

Lebanon needs help with recovery, not more destruction

NADIM SHEHADI

The 20th-century poet Nadia Tuwei wrote of Lebanon: "I belong to a country that commits suicide every day while it is being assassinated." One of the symptoms today is that when I recently enquired about a promising youth movement I had not heard from for a while, I was told that, out of the 82 members, only two remained and 80 had left the country. This is the brain drain that Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan described as better than brain in the drain.

We are getting all the help we do not need — the impression is that the International Monetary Fund wants to kill the banks and the US government wants to kill the cash companies and add sanctions to the toxic mix. In addition, we are told that we will get help, not for recovery but for the army if it will fight Hezbollah. As if Lebanon needs even more destruction. This will not fix the

drain; it will only make it worse.

Lebanon does need help, but the figures just do not add up in the government plan to return people's deposits. I do not understand the logic myself. In the attempt to decrease the gap, large depositors are considered the enemy, but in any economic recovery they should be allies, the investors you want to attract back. There is an attempt, of dubious legality and practicality, to declare a significant portion of deposits as illegitimate in order to decrease the gap. This will make it certain that nobody will ever trust the country or invest in it again. The age of governments taking over private property is gone forever, let alone in Lebanon. This is not the way to regain trust.

A recent House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on US policy toward Lebanon and obstacles toward dismantling Hezbollah's grip on power offered several recommendations. Among them



Nadim Shehadi is an economist and political adviser.
X @Confusezme

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was the US supporting the Lebanese army and government. There was also the dismantling of the cash economy used by Hezbollah to launder funds, sanctioning the cash companies and Lebanese politicians and supporting Lebanon's recovery. While the intentions are good, there are many ways in which such moves could also do more harm.

There is no military solution in Lebanon. If Israel could not disarm or destroy Hamas in a war that lasted more than two years, the Lebanese army cannot wage an internal war against Hezbollah to disarm it.

Also, any expansion of the army's role would have an economic cost as well as a political one. The object of achieving peace on the Israeli border should be to decrease military spending, rather than the military budget becoming unsustainable. Politically, the fact that we have had four presidents appointed, not elected, from the army is a sign of the failure of the political process.

Reviving the economy and the political process means a careful recalibration of the power and cost of the army.

The solution is a political one, not a military one; it is a fight for the constituency of Hezbollah and not against it.

But what about the cash economy and the cash companies that are now under attack? The story is that, while the government, the IMF, the central bank and the banks exchange blame for the crisis and bicker over the solutions, all have a long way to go before they regain people's trust.

In a country where the state is captured and society taken hostage, the objective is to liberate them and help them recover, but some of the solutions discussed for Lebanon may finish them off or make them even more reliant on Hezbollah. Lebanon, with its history of building consensus and coexistence, is where a solution can succeed and become a model for others.

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The agreements
with Saudi
Arabia are a
clear statement
of confidence in
Syria's potential
to rebuild,
reintegrate
and grow

HANI HAZAIMEH



Hani Hazaimah is a senior
editor based in Amman.
X @ghazaimah

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reconstruction, are a clear statement of confidence in Syria's potential to rebuild, reintegrate and grow.

The strategic symbolism of this engagement cannot be overstated. By choosing to invest heavily in Syria, the Kingdom is signaling a significant shift in regional policy: long-term stability cannot be achieved by isolating states, even those emerging from years of devastating conflict. Economic integration, rather than exclusion, is the pathway to sustainable peace.

The agreements announced on Saturday also communicate a clear message to the region: Syria is no longer a pariah state but a partner whose recovery is in the collective interest of its neighbors. Such engagement may help reframe regional discourse, moving away from narratives of punishment and isolation toward collaboration and reconstruction.

The implications of Saudi Arabia's initiative extend far beyond Syria itself.

Neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, which have borne the social and economic brunt of Syria's war through refugee flows, disrupted trade and strained public services, stand to benefit significantly from revitalized cross-border commerce and improved infrastructure connectivity.

Beyond the economic and political ramifications, these agreements carry a human dimension. Syria's prolonged conflict has displaced millions and destroyed livelihoods, leaving families vulnerable and communities fragmented. Investments in energy, transport and urban infrastructure will directly impact ordinary Syrians, offering access to basic services, restoring a sense of normality and creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. By prioritizing projects that intersect with the daily realities of the population, Saudi Arabia sets a precedent for reconstruction that is people-centered, rather than merely symbolic. This

emphasis on tangible human impact is essential if postconflict stability is to take root and endure.

The challenge now lies in execution. Success will depend on careful coordination, transparency and an inclusive approach that ensures reconstruction benefits reach the Syrian people and not only political elites. It will also require ensuring that projects align with local needs and that investments are implemented efficiently, with accountability mechanisms that prevent corruption and mismanagement.

The Saudi-Syrian agreements are a tangible demonstration that engagement, investment and shared responsibility can produce meaningful outcomes.

The coming years will be crucial: if implemented wisely, these agreements could serve as a blueprint for regional cooperation, proving that economic integration, rather than isolation, is the most effective instrument for long-term stability.

Integration not isolation the best way forward for Syria

Syria's new multibillion-dollar agreements with Saudi Arabia mark a historic turning point in the Levant's geopolitical and economic landscape. After more than a decade of devastating conflict, international sanctions and widespread isolation, Syria is gradually reemerging as a viable partner for regional trade, investment and diplomacy. Saudi Arabia's decisive engagement signals not merely a recalibration of economic relations but a broader strategic vision: leveraging reconstruction and economic partnership to stabilize the region politically, socially and economically.

For more than a decade, Syria's economy has been in a state of near-collapse. Foreign investment has been scarce, leaving the country dependent on fragmented aid programs and informal economic networks. In this context, the agreements with Saudi Arabia, which cover critical sectors including energy, transport and urban

reconstruction, are a clear statement of confidence in Syria's potential to rebuild, reintegrate and grow.

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Opinion

A path to universal prosperity by 2100

MARC CANAL NOGUER, NICK LEUNG AND CHRIS BRADLEY

New geopolitical and planetary crises seem to dominate news headlines, deepening a sense of pessimism about the state of humanity. But looking back over the past century, a very different picture — one of unprecedented human progress — emerges.

A hundred years ago, life was fragile and insecure. Now, the global average life expectancy is 73, less than 10 percent of the global population lives in extreme poverty and nearly 90 percent are literate. Living standards have been transformed.

But what if progress is measured by the ability to live securely and with options, as opposed to just subsisting? In that case, there is much more to be done, as about 4.7 billion people still live below what we call the empowerment line.

In short, the world has made amazing progress and we need much more of it.

With that in mind, our new book, "A Century of Plenty: A Story of Progress for Generations to Come," presents an ambitious vision: by 2100, the world's poorest can live as well as people in Switzerland do today. With its high

incomes, longer lifespans, quality education and robust social support, Switzerland is perhaps the best example of a country with "plenty."

Making Switzerland the floor may sound radical. It isn't. Global gross domestic product per capita would have to increase by 2.6 percent annually — only slightly faster than the 2.3 percent annual average growth over the past quarter-century.

Beyond strategies to boost productivity, achieving the next economic leap requires putting in place certain nuts and bolts, with energy being the most essential. To increase economic opportunity, we need a decarbonized energy system that is significantly larger. This

can be done by building and deploying existing technologies at scale while continuing to innovate.

Another important fuel — albeit for people — is food. We show that a population as large as 12 billion can eat a protein-rich diet without using more land and with far more modest increases in agricultural yields than have been achieved since the 1960s.

Nor is a century of plenty limited by geography. The Earth has enough natural resources to support this expansion. For

example, we estimate that delivering a plentiful 2100 would require 134 billion tonnes of steel. Known sources of useable iron content (steel's main input) total 230 billion tonnes today, with 88 billion qualifying as economically extractable reserves. And these reserves have grown by about 1 percent per year over 30 years.

The same is true for other main materials: none would need to exceed historical growth rates to make our vision a reality. And our estimates are conservative — it is highly likely that new materials and techniques will be developed during this period.

Some argue that the planet cannot bear the externalities created by such growth, not least

the increase in greenhouse gas emissions. We take a different view. A world of plenty is better positioned to tackle climate change and other environmental issues like air pollution because growth spurs investment in the clean energy transition (such as grids, renewables and batteries), adaptation tools (like air conditioning and irrigation systems) and research and development. So long as the fruits of growth are used to accelerate the process of decoupling emissions from GDP, like most of the world is already doing, global

warming could be limited to about 2 degrees Celsius while improving living standards for millions of people.

In sum, there are no insurmountable physical barriers to universal prosperity. We are not saying, however, that our vision of plenty will be easy to deliver. The limitations may not be physical but they could be social and political: in hearts

and minds. Most notably, many people in advanced economies — which by definition have reaped the benefits of growth — no longer believe in material progress. In a recent survey, only 9 percent of respondents in France said that the next generation will be better off and no advanced economy, other than

Singapore, scored above 30 percent.

This highlights the need for a new narrative that discards zero-sum thinking. Growth is the solution, not the problem. Over the past century, it has delivered higher incomes and longer lives, while empowering millions of people. Looking ahead, we cannot allow one person's gain to become another's loss. Instead, we must dare to imagine a world where everyone thrives. Such a world is within reach, so long as the focus remains on economic progress.



Achieving the next economic leap requires putting in place certain nuts and bolts, with energy being the most essential

Marc Canal Noguer is a senior fellow at the McKinsey Global Institute.

Nick Leung is a senior partner at McKinsey & Company and a director of the McKinsey Global Institute.

Chris Bradley is a senior partner at McKinsey & Company and a director of the McKinsey Global Institute.

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Back to space for India

SHASHI THAROOR



For decades, the Indian Space Research Organization, known as ISRO, has been the crown jewel of India's scientific establishment. In the global space community, the ISRO is a David that regularly surpasses the world's Goliaths. With the Mars Orbiter Mission, known as Mangalyaan, India became the first country to reach Mars orbit in its maiden attempt. And with the Chandrayaan-3 mission, it became

the first to land a lunar rover on the moon's south pole. It did all this with budgets that would barely cover the marketing for a Hollywood space epic.

But over the past year, the ISRO's storied record has been overshadowed by three high-profile mission failures, including two consecutive launch failures for the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle. For a program built on the twin pillars of "frugal innovation" and "unshakeable reliability," this is more than a technical setback — it is a reputational crisis that threatens India's position in a crowded commercial market.

The mishaps might partly reflect a growing gulf between the ISRO and its original mission. At its inception, India's

space program was grounded in the needs of India's people. By harnessing satellite technology for development, the logic went, the program would transform lives, power the economy and redefine India's place in the world. The ISRO delivered on this vision, building a robust system of satellites that became a lifeline for millions of Indians.

India's space program was advancing

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's

"Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Self-Reliant India) vision long before Modi rose to power. By developing its own launch vehicles, like the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle, India reduced its dependence on foreign technology. This spurred broader innovation, helping to create a thriving ecosystem of startups, private companies and research institutions.

Moreover, launches of foreign satellites by the ISRO's commercial arm, NewSpace India Limited, have generated significant revenue and showcased India's space-faring prowess. India has emerged as a reliable, cost-effective player in the global space market, proving that frugality and excellence can go hand in hand.

India's achievements have given it diplomatic leverage, enabling it to engage with

superpowers as an equal partner in space exploration and research. As missions like Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan-3 elevate India on the world stage, they also inspire a generation of young Indians to dream bigger, to believe they can compete with the best and to pursue careers in science and technology.

But recent stumbles suggest that the ISRO's growing ambition — including the pressure to commercialize innovations rapidly, advance prestige

programs and send Indian astronauts into space — is straining quality control and supply chains. The problem partly comes down to resources: the budget with which India managed to deliver its past achievements was impressive precisely

because it was a major constraint. As space — once a theater for scientific curiosity or a platform for advancing development objectives — becomes the ultimate high ground for national security, this constraint is becoming impossible to ignore.

The figures paint a stark picture. Today, India spends about \$2 billion annually on space, compared to China's \$16 billion and the US' \$25 billion.

Low launch frequencies and long

turnaround times have also been undermining India's competitive advantage. India's share of the launch market for small satellites stood at 35 percent in 2017 but plummeted toward zero by 2024, as more agile international players captured burgeoning demand while the ISRO was distracted by prestige projects.

A strategic reset is urgently needed. The ISRO must conduct a thorough review of production quality and testing protocols

for the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle to ensure that India remains the launch provider of choice. There is also a need for enhanced clarity on space policy, including the pursuit of defensive military space capabilities.

India's space program is not a luxury, it is a critical tool for development, a

catalyst for innovation, a pillar of security and a source of national pride. Fortunately, the ISRO has overcome challenges before and its technical depth remains indisputable. By honing its focus and bolstering its resources, India can ensure that its "eyes in the sky" remain sharp and the ISRO's hard-earned glory is restored. Space might be the final frontier but, for India, it is also the next chapter in a story of national transformation.



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JEDDAH: Tel: +966 12 21283-6200; Fax: +966 12 21283-6228. RIYADH: Tel: +966 12 21283-6200; Fax: +966 12 21283-6258. RIYADH: Tel: +966 12 21283-3635; Fax: +966 12 21283-0489. ABU DHABI: Tel: +971 2 6961-5999; Fax: +971 2 6961-5999. CAIRO: Tel: +202 3749-2775; (202) 3749-2796; (202) 3749-2855. MOROCCO: Tel: +212 3527-6262; Fax: +212 3527-6264. JORDAN: Tel: +962 6 595-7301; (962) 6 595-7102; (962) 6 595-9409; Fax: +962 6 595-7301; (962) 6 595-7102; (962) 6 595-9409. LONDON: Tel: +44-207 631-7310; Fax: +44-207 631-7310. KUWAIT: Tel: +965 463-4922; Fax: +965 463-4719. MANAMA: Tel: +973 37677770

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KSA: +966-11-2304 0500

UAE: +971 4 3916500

E-mail: revenue@srmg.com

Website: www.srmg.com

DISTRIBUTION AGENT: TOLL FREE: +966 800-244-0076

Head Office (Riyadh): P.O. Box 2334, Riyadh 11495

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TOLL FREE: +966-800-244-0076

E-mail: info@arabmedia.com

Web: www.arabmedia.com

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OPINION

Elon Musk Lands on the Moon



Emanations and intimations hinted last week that we should turn our attention to space and, boy, has Elon Musk obliged.

First he tied up his world-leading rocket company with his artificial intelligence company; now both are rolling down the runway to the largest-ever U.S. initial public offering. In a tweet, Mr. Musk also reversed himself dramatically, setting aside his longstanding Mars goal in favor of a lunar colony, in line with Trump priorities.

His own company SpaceX, he now says, despite previously deprecating the moon, will focus on developing a "self-growing city" there "in less than 10 years." Wow.

His protégé who runs NASA, Jared Isaacman—yes, whose ascent was marred by Mr. Musk's brief falling-out with President Trump—testified as recently as April that the moon should not be allowed to get in the way of Mars. What will Mr. Musk tweet next? Of special interest, will he full-throatedly endorse NASA's Artemis II launch, expected in the next month or so?

Artemis II is the fly-by of the moon with a NASA-sponsored rocket and capsule, built respectively by Boeing and Lockheed Martin. It will have four astronauts aboard serving mainly

A putative race with China

as guinea pigs to validate life-support systems and collect biomedical data.

But wait. If lunar development is urgent and practical, why pave the way with extremely expensive manned missions for jobs that can be done at a fraction of the cost by robots? Especially when AI is advancing by leaps and bounds, as exemplified by Mr. Musk's merger?

In every way, it seems too

early in the engineering and learning curve to risk humans.

From rocket reusability, to

cryogenic fuels, to the need

and desire to preserve large

masses through all phases of

the mission, this isn't Apollo.

The necessary robotic work

on the way to developing a

continuous lunar presence

means also plenty of opportu-

nity for learning before astro-

nauts have to enter the picture,

bringing with them the risk of a human tragedy that

could damage the program's

sustainability.

Mr. Trump was all over the map before making a lunar landing his new administration's centerpiece. Even so he intends to abandon the current NASA-centric Artemis approach once the landing is achieved. Yet he also effectively ended any debate about

humans vs. robots, pointing to

human-led exploration for rea-

sons of national prestige, geo-

politics and law. Law? Yes,

in developing norms and precedents for moon exploitation

that other nations (China)

might respect, putting Ameri-

cans on the surface is deemed

a requisite.

A putative race with China

is driving such choices. Yet we may be gaslighting ourselves about the likelihood of either nation meeting its deadline for putting humans on the lunar surface—China in 2030, the U.S. in 2028. Besides, Apollo already won the race to the moon 57 years ago. Apollo was geopolitically driven; now the U.S. is presumably more project-driven, toward a permanent, productive and cost-effective presence on the moon.

Whatever caused his reversal, the lunar project would benefit from more AI.

ready knew about.

Whether he thinks more positively about the moon now or sees a political need to steer close to a Trump priority (and share some of the political risk of the upcoming launch), Mr. Musk is visibly onboard. He could help by pushing for a more business-like approach, relying more on AI, less on fragile humans. Multiple unmanned missions using ever-advancing AI could teach a great deal about making space travel safer and healthier for the people who must eventually follow.

Of course, questioning a

NASA launch just weeks away

isn't a political act to be un-

dertaken lightly. NASA's bil-

liions are already spent. Mr.

Trump's prestige is invested.

Astronauts and ground-con-

trol folks have trained out

the wazoo. Mr. Musk's anten-

nae are acute. Pay attention,

instead, to the tone of any-

thing he chooses to tweet (or

not tweet) about the pending

Artemis II launch.

Finally, completing a circle,

last week we juxtaposed the real advances in space tech-

nology with a discrediting of

the energy-transition fallacy—

green technology doesn't actu-

ally point to lower emissions.

Now compare Tuesday's

media hysteria over Mr.

Trump's repeal of a U.S. cli-

mate "funding" with the actual

uninterrupted track of global

CO₂. Only one conclusion is

possible: the climate debate

has been entirely a contest

for social power and status,

without the slightest impact

on climate.

BOOKSHELF | By Arthur Herman

Deadly Accuracy

The Warhead
By Jeffrey E. Stern
Dutton, 416 pages, \$35

In past eras, the perfect weapon was one that would inflict maximum damage on an enemy. A bigger cannon, a more explosive shell, a better strategic bomber—a B-52 instead of a B-29—or a hydrogen bomb instead of an atomic one.

Today, in a supposedly more humane age, the perfect weapon is one that does minimum damage, sparing the innocent by targeting the guilty with maximum precision and surprise.

In "The Warhead" Jeffrey Stern—a journalist whose books include "The Mercenary" (2023), about the war in Afghanistan—traces the evolution of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) over the past half-century. By Mr. Stern's account, the PGM represents a technological breakthrough that has changed history and the way wars are fought. It's an absorbing tale of scientific and technological achievement, political and military hubris, and the story of ordinary people being caught up in other people's bad decisions—and dying as a result.

In Mr. Stern's reading, all war—even a precision-guided one—is hell.

The central actor here is Texas Instruments, the electronics firm best-known for its hand-held calculators. But it was also Texas Instruments that showed the Pentagon how bombs using an electronic guidance system could hit their targets precisely, instead of being dropped en masse, as they had been previously, in the hope that enough bombs would hit their targets to justify the effort—and excuse the inevitable "collateral damage" along the way.

The time was the Vietnam War, when the U.S. Air Force was dumping thousands of tons of ordnance, World War II-style, with little or no strategic result. Over the course of seven years and 700 sorties, 29 planes had been lost in a fruitless attempt to take out a single bridge across the Song Ma river, dubbed the Dragon's Jaw. Using the era's integrated circuits, Texas Instruments put together an onboard guidance package for each bomb. It called this first PGM Paveway. Using Paveway against targets in North Vietnam, Mr. Stern tells us, "proved two hundred times more effective than conventional bombs." In four months, the Air Force took out more targets than it had in four years—and destroyed the Dragon's Jaw with a single strike in 1972.

By war's end, Texas Instruments had delivered 100,000 Paveways to the Air Force. As Mr. Stern notes, the company had "ushered in a revolution in warfare" but also pioneered "market for the chips" that would be used "in a growing line of devices capable of basic 'thinking.'" Texas Instruments and Paveway put America on the threshold of the modern digital revolution.

For the U.S. military, Paveway opened an important and entirely new vista for attacks from the air. This was the possibility of truly "surgical strikes" that would blow up a target and kill the enemy while leaving others—including the innocent—untouched. In 1986 President Ronald Reagan used PGMs to devastating effect against Libya's Muammar Gadhafi in Operation El Dorado Canyon.

Early PGMs relied on laser signals, sent by special operators hidden on the ground, to pinpoint a target. With the advent of the Global Positioning System, a signal could now be obtained from miles above the earth's surface.

The Challenger space-shuttle disaster delayed the turn to space for PGM guidance. Then the Gulf War accelerated a demand, already on the rise since the end of the Cold War, for smaller, less-expensive but also more-effective weapons. Texas Instruments was a specialist in both.

Precision-guided munitions revolutionized the art of war. Moving targets could now be tracked and collateral damage minimized.

The Clinton administration would deploy third-generation Paveways, with their kill-by-remote-control option, in its mission to end the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo. Along the way it built a legacy for relying on PGMs to do America's dirty work—a capability enhanced by a new and advanced guidance system that could track a moving target and then use drugs to deliver steel on steel without risking a single American life.

What happened to non-American lives was another matter.

This is the other, dark side of "The Warhead." Through eyewitness accounts Mr. Stern reveals, in harrowing detail, what really happens when PGMs take over the battlefield. It turns out the innocent still die—even by the thousands—or are made homeless, as the world learned in the bombings of Serbia and Iraq.

The reliance on death by remote control also breeds a certain hubris among policymakers, detaching themselves from the consequences of bad decisions or rash miscalculations, whether it's the invasion of Iraq or President Obama's kill list of drone strikes on Islamic terrorists, which helped to destabilize the frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Of course, not all of those civilian deaths were due to PGMs. The numbers are still preferable to those who died in the bombing of Tokyo or Dresden. But Mr. Stern's point is made: The effort to sanitize warfare doesn't succeed, no matter how advanced the technology becomes.

Mr. Stern doesn't discuss artificial intelligence, the next stage in the perfect-weapon calculus. Facial-recognition software, for instance, could bring further precision to bomb strikes, allowing attacks to target a single person sitting in a vehicle—a capability the Pentagon is developing right now.

Mr. Stern may insist that this technology can still backfire, and he could be right. No matter how good the technology is, people will still make bad decisions and innocent people will still die. The ultimate irony underlying "The Warhead" is that the desire to reduce suffering sometimes produces the opposite result.

Mr. Herman's next book, "Founder's Fire: From 1776 to the Age of Trump," will be published in April.

Even Trump Can't Go Back to the Future



POLITICS & IDEAS
By William A. Galston

from which

MAGA devotees think we have declined? The

answer has become clear

during President Trump's second term—the 1950s.

America was a healthier society, they believe. There was no feminist or environmentalist movement as we now understand them. The civil-rights revolution was in its infancy. Immigration was at a low ebb, and nearly all Americans were born here. Most folks went to church every Sunday. Men were men and women were women, with no gray area. Men went off to work while women stayed home to raise 3.5 children. Hierarchies were stable; people knew their place. And Americans (the ones who mattered, anyway) were unabashedly patriotic because they knew that their country was a good and virtuous nation.

The economy was great as well. The U.S. bestrode the world like a colossus, and manufacturing was central to our dominance. Americans made things, and prospered in the making of them. Industrial workers moved into the middle class by the millions, with reliable jobs, rising incomes and secure pensions.

Manufacturing employment

has followed a similar trajectory.

Since peaking at nearly

40% during World War II,

manufacturing as a share of

total employment has declined

steadily and now stands at

8%. And despite the enormous expansion of the U.S. labor force in the past half-century, the number of manufacturing jobs has fallen from a high of 19.4 million in 1979 to just 12.7 million today.

Mr. Trump believes that aggressive tariff regime can reverse this trend. So far, it hasn't. Manufacturing employment has fallen even more since he announced his "Liberation Day" tariffs in April, representing a decline of 72,000 jobs in the past eight months.

To MAGA, the 1950s were a better time. But the White House can't restore that era.

The longer term could be different, of course. It is likely that some firms will respond to tariffs by investing in their U.S. manufacturing capacity, and changes in the tax code

allowing firms to write off investments

in plant and equipment more rapidly could accelerate this process.

At the same time, there are forces pushing in the opposite direction. Tariffs create winners and losers, helping some U.S. manufacturers while hurting others. Large corporations are much better positioned to lobby for exemptions from costly tariffs than small businesses are. And to remain competitive, new manufacturing facilities are likely

to be highly automated. If so, manufacturing output will rise faster than manufacturing employment.

There are also supply-side constraints on manufacturing employment. According to the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank, more than 400,000 manufacturing jobs went unfilled at the end of 2025. Manufacturers report persistent shortages of machine tool operators and technicians who can repair complex new equipment, skills that take time and training to learn.

This isn't to say that Mr. Trump's concerns are wholly without merit. The decline of U.S.-based manufacturing created risks, many of which became apparent during the Covid pandemic. While autarky is both undesirable and unachievable, dependence on foreign suppliers in key areas such as medical supplies and advanced computer chips can generate dangers to the economy and national security. Doing what we can to reduce these vulnerabilities makes sense.

Still, the yearning for a vanished past is never a good guide to public policy. Making even the most optimistic assumptions about the demand for and supply of manufacturers over the next decade, Mr. Trump won't bring back the economy of the 1950s. Improving the well-being of hard-pressed working-class Americans, a central challenge of our time, must rest on more realistic assumptions.

Texas' Self-Defeating H-1B Pause

By Collin Levy

Some states are obstructing the Trump administration's immigration agenda, while others are cooperating—perhaps a bit too much. Take Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott recently required public universities and state agencies to suspend H-1B visa applications statewide.

In a letter to the heads of state agencies, Mr. Abbott wrote that the visa program, which allows U.S. employers to hire foreign workers for high-skilled specialty jobs, "was created to supplement the United States' workforce—not to replace it." He asserted that "bad actors" had "exploited" the program by not trying hard enough to hire foreigners.

Yet the claim that work visas take jobs from American citizens doesn't hold up. The Texas unemployment rate was

4.3% as of December, and in Austin—where high-tech jobs cluster—it was just over 3%.

Foreign workers in the U.S. typically fill gaps in the labor market that aren't met by American citizens. A 2020 study by the National Foundation for American Policy

found that an increase in H-1B visas within a profession was associated with a decrease in the unemployment rate in the profession.

Mr. Abbott's visa ban directs the heads of state agencies and public universities to inform the Texas Workforce Commission how many H-1B petitions they submitted in 2025—as well as "documentation" that Texas candidates had a "reasonable opportunity

to apply for each position." It also asks for the "countries of origin of all H-1B visa holders the entity currently sponsors." When I asked the governor's office why it is asking for countries of origin and if there are particular countries of concern, I was directed back to his press release and letter, which didn't address the questions.

President Trump issued a proclamation in September to restrict the number of H-1B visas nationwide unless employers pay \$100,000 for the privilege of hiring foreign workers for a job opening. But even if he recognizes there is sometimes a shortage of workers for high-value jobs, he said in 2019 that "we need people in our country because our unemployment numbers are so low." That's true in Texas today.

Ms. Levy is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Trouble With MedPAC

Democrats are the party of government, and one thing they do well is build institutions that favor the expansion of government. One example is an obscure but influential outfit known as the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, or MedPAC, which advises Congress on payment rates. It's been co-opted by progressives who dislike private markets and the Medicare Advantage program for seniors.

MedPAC lacks regulatory authority, but its recommendations carry weight on Capitol Hill. Progressives are now using a recent MedPAC report to push for bigger cuts in Medicare Advantage (MA) that would undermine that program's demonstrated popularity.

MedPAC last month estimated the government will spend \$76 billion more this year for seniors on Medicare Advantage than if the same seniors were covered by traditional Medicare fee-for-service. It estimated excess payments to Medicare Advantage plans at \$84 billion in 2025 and \$88 billion in 2024. That's a lot of money, but its estimates are based on faulty assumptions.

Congress established Medicare Advantage in 1997 with the aim of using market competition to improve care for seniors and reduce spending growth. The idea is that private insurers would have a greater incentive than government to police waste and abuse. The government makes risk-adjusted payments to insurers based on how sick patients are.

Plans compete based on price, provider networks and benefits. They can use savings from reducing spending to offer supplemental benefits like dental and vision care. The program has been growing fast and now covers more than 50% of seniors. But Democrats dislike that it frustrates their ambition for government-run healthcare.

Enter MedPAC, which is dominated by academics and physicians employed by hospitals. MedPAC claims Medicare Advantage savings are a mirage because the plans enroll healthier seniors than traditional Medicare, and insurers "code" them as being sicker than they actually are to obtain bigger payments.

Hijacking Trump's Religious Liberty Council

A hearing of the White House Religious Liberty Commission is usually a staid affair. But enter Commissioner Carrie Prejean Boller, who came Monday spoiling for a religious fight.

Her fellow commissioners arrived to discuss antisemitism. Ms. Prejean Boller came wearing a Palestinian flag pin, with an ally who was recording her remarks against Israel and in defense of podcaster Candace Owens. Ms. Prejean Boller demanded to know whether she could be called antisemitic because her Catholic faith supposedly precludes her from supporting Zionism and tells her the Jews killed Jesus.

"Are you willing to condemn what Israel has done in Gaza?" Ms. Prejean Boller asked a witness who had personally experienced antisemitism at Harvard. "You won't condemn that? Just on the record."

The subject turned to the ravings of Ms. Owens, which run from Holocaust denial and medieval blood libel to claims that Israel assassinated John F. Kennedy. "I listen to her daily," Ms. Prejean Boller said. "She's not an antisemite. She just doesn't support Zionism."

That's the left-wing dodge, but Ms. Prejean Boller is coming from the right. She briefly rose to prominence in 2009 by opposing gay mar-

A federal advisory board tries to undermine Medicare Advantage.

MedPAC estimates that this has increased insurer payments by some 14% to 21% in recent years, amounting to some \$76 billion this year. "It's hard not to be shocked at the total amount of money going into MA rebates, the coding issues, the lack of data on extra benefits and recognizing how much those are costing the taxpayers," says MedPAC commissioner Stacia Dusetzina.

Ms. Dusetzina's ideological preferences are clear. The Vanderbilt medical school professor backed the Inflation Reduction Act's drug price controls and has advocated a single-payer model for gene therapies that would give the government more control over treatment coverage. Such anti-private healthcare biases infect MedPAC's study on MA.

MedPAC claims that seniors in Medicare Advantage are healthier than those in fee-for-service because they incur less spending. Ergo, insurers must be coding them as being sicker than they are. Maybe, but that's hard to square with the fact that Medicare Advantage enrollees are also more likely to be low-income and have poor self-reported health status.

A more likely explanation is that plans do a better job of ensuring conditions are diagnosed and treated, thereby reducing unnecessary spending and hospitalizations. In a new study published in *Health Affairs Scholar*, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services officials found excess risk-adjusted payments on the magnitude of 1.5% to 2%, about \$5 billion to \$6.6 billion a year—far less than MedPAC's estimates.

The finding is notable because it calls into question MedPAC payment recommendations and black-box models. MedPAC's members are appointed by the Government Accountability Office's Comptroller General with input from Congress. The GAO is now considering candidates for new MedPAC appointments, and Republicans ought to wake up and ensure that progressives don't stack the commission again.

Even better, defund MedPAC. Why does Washington need one more government health policy shop lobbying for more government control over American healthcare?

A White House commissioner assails 'Zionist supremacy.'

Zionism, Catholics do not embrace Zionism, just so you know," she said Monday. "So are all Catholics antisemites?" And so on with the death of Christ.

Ms. Prejean Boller converted to Catholicism in April but lectured witnesses, including a priest, as well as fellow Catholic commissioners on their faith. One commissioner,

Ryan Anderson, read her excerpts from the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra aetate* and Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI in rebuttal. But what do they know?

Zionism, it bears repeating, entails no theological commitment, only an acceptance of the Jewish state, an established fact. To try to undo that now is dorm-room theorizing that would deliver half the world's Jews into the hands of the death squads of Oct. 7, 2023.

One popular definition of modern antisemitism includes the use, in discussions of Israel, of Christ-killer and blood-libel imagery. This is no conspiracy to silence Christians; the Catholic Church itself condemns both.

Ms. Prejean Boller has since taken to social media to denounce "Zionist supremacy in America." The controversy has already gained her online followers, which may have been the point. The question is why the Trump Administration chooses such dingbats.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Where's a 'Florida Man' When You Need One?

Your editorial "Mass Deportation and Florida Jobs" (Review & Outlook, Feb. 7) sensibly notes the lack of evidence that undocumented immigrants are taking jobs from Americans, but then it unfortunately concludes that the work authorization of new hires shouldn't be mandated since "businesses can't grow if government takes away their workers."

E-Verify mandates may have painful effects, but the solution isn't to limit businesses' responsibility to verify workers' legal status. Rather, it's to improve legal frameworks for immigrants to enter and work in the U.S. You direct readers to the wrong policy conclusion.

CHRISTOPHER TOWE
Bethesda, Md.

Your editorial highlights the economic damage that results when immigration policy ignores reality.

I've seen this firsthand. I work in the landscape industry, which depends heavily on seasonal labor. We operate as a 100% E-Verify employer and follow the law strictly. We're only able to do that because we use the H-2B temporary worker program—a legal pathway to hire foreign workers. It works. But it's far too limited.

Because H-2B visas are capped far below demand, many otherwise honest businesses face an impossible choice: turn down work and shrink, or hire unauthorized labor. The problem isn't unwillingness to comply; it's that there aren't enough legal workers.

The solution is to expand the number of temporary work visas and pair them with a clear, employer-sponsored path to permanent residency. Workers who enter the U.S. legally, pass vetting, hold steady jobs and pay taxes should in several years be able to earn green cards.

When people have a workable legal option, they take it. Immigration policy should reflect that common sense.

JOHN WALTOK
Brentwood, Tenn.

KEITH ROTOLI
Mandeville, La.

Foreign Countries Bear the Burden of Tariffs

In your editorial "Are Trump's Tariffs Winning?" (Review & Outlook, Feb. 5), you claim that President Trump's tariffs "raise relative prices" and that prices on many goods "would be lower" without them. These assertions rest on a basic error in tariff-influence analysis—one echoed in the Harvard and Kiel Institute papers your editorial cites.

Paying a tariff and bearing its economic burden aren't the same thing. While the importer of record, such as a U.S. company, writes the check to Customs, which party carries the tariff's true economic burden—its "incidence"—is determined through the adjustment process: via upfront price cuts by foreign exporters, margin compression, volume changes, souring shifts and currency movements.

China illustrates this most clearly, but it's hardly unique. Many major economies—across East Asia, Europe and the developing world—depend heavily on exports to the U.S. market for growth and employment. In such export-dependent systems, the U.S. has considerable leverage, and tariffs force exporters to adjust.

That adjustment often begins with price cuts at the factory gate, but

with foreign countries eating a portion of the costs to keep prices low and ensure Americans keep buying. Even when prices don't visibly fall, exporters still lower their effective prices through rebates, discounts, extended payment terms or by absorbing costs internally to remain competitive.

Volume effects reinforce the burden. When tariffs raise landed costs, U.S. buyers reduce orders or diversify suppliers. Fewer units shipped means lost revenue, idle capacity and layoffs abroad—forcing further price concessions over time.

Currency dynamics amplify this process. Tariffs tend to strengthen the U.S. dollar, reducing exporters' local-currency revenues while domestic costs remain fixed. Supply-chain diversification compounds the loss: once buyers move, they rarely return.

Tariffs have imposed far more pressure abroad—and far less inflation at home—than critics predicted. Until economists measure the full adjustment process rather than a single price, they will keep getting the Trump "economic miracle" of tariffs wrong.

PETER NAVARRO
Washington

Mr. Navarro is White House senior counselor for trade and manufacturing.

Schools Don't Teach Personal Responsibility

In Tunku Varadarajan's Weekend Interview "The Psychiatrist to the Underclass" (Feb. 7), Anthony Daniels laments the widespread abdication of personal responsibility. While the author focuses mostly on Britain, he could as easily be writing of the U.S. Along with shifts in parenting and family structure, I'd argue that American public schools have played a large role in this downfall.

U.S. public schools in recent years have underperformed academically and pushed harmful ideas. Curricula used to include stories like those by Horatio Alger about people pulling themselves up from poverty. Now students read books centered on victimhood, in which people aren't accountable for their lives and trajectories because of their circumstances. Instead of demonstrating how people overcome adversity, we sit in adversity.

Schools have also become much more lenient in disciplining students. Students' behavior in classrooms today would never have been tolerated in years past.

EILEEN CORR
Brewster, Mass.

How Memories of a Chinese Massacre Became a Crime

Regarding "A Tiananmen Memory Crime in Hong Kong" (Review & Outlook, Jan. 31): It's tragic that three Hong Kong citizens could face up to a decade in prison for holding a remembrance of what happened at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

If widely publicized in China, these harsh sentences will surely serve as a reminder to forget Tiananmen Square.

To prevent future violations, Chinese authorities should use TV, radio, internet and street posters to remind their citizens that it's a crime to remember certain unnamed events at Tiananmen Square.

JEFF SOUREEK
Belleair, Fla.

Trump's Misplaced Priorities

The only thing missing from your editorial "Guan Heng Gets U.S. Asylum" (Jan. 29) is a mention of President Trump's long list of egregious pardons (such as that of Juan Orlando Hernández) in contrast with letting Guan Heng, a true freedom fighter who risked his life for American values, sit in jail for months.

JAMES MILES
Houston

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Press '4' if you'd like to join a support group for people who are on hold."

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Science

The shingles vaccine may have a dementia upside



Anjana Ahuja



In 2013, Wales rolled out Zostavax to those aged 70-79 on September 1. The cut-off meant that anyone turning 80 after that date could get jabbed but everyone older, even by one day, never became eligible.

As Goldsetzer puts it, that policy created "these beautiful comparison groups. If you take 1,000 people born one week, and compare them to 1,000 people born a week later, there shouldn't be anything [systematically] different between them except for their probability of getting the shingles vaccine."

The two groups in Wales, comprising over 280,000 people, did show a striking difference over the next seven years: the vaccine-eligible group were 20 per cent less likely to receive a dementia diagnosis. Eric Topol, a US researcher who writes the *Ground Truth* medical blog, surveyed the evidence and concluded recently: "If this vaccine was a drug and reduced Alzheimer's by 20 per cent, it would be considered a major breakthrough." One study published last month in *The Journal of Gerontology* even suggested a link with slower biological ageing.

It is unclear why women benefit more than men and unknown whether the dementia advantage comes from keeping the shingles virus bidden down or from a more general vaccine-induced polishing of the immune system. It could be both. Research from 2024 showed that the newer Shingrix vaccine and RSV vaccine are both linked to an even greater reduction of dementia risk, attributed to an immune-boosting ingredient.

One theory is that the vaccines somehow reduce inflammation, which might otherwise prime brain cells to go rogue or reactivate viruses. It is unclear, though, how these findings relate to people who have already had shingles, nor whether a jab would lower their dementia risk.

Goldsetzer is now looking to fund a clinical trial on Zostavax to answer those questions and as a step towards regulatory approval. In November, the Alzheimer's Society, together with scientists at the University of Exeter, also identified Zostavax as a promising candidate.

The UK recently announced plans to lower the age of eligibility for Shingrix to 60; the UK Health Security Agency said vaccine advisers do weigh up off-target benefits and had noted the link. Topol thinks over-50s should consider it. Zostavax, meanwhile, is out of patent. You can't cheap shot it with potentially profound implications for patients, medicine and future dementia research—is on the money.

The writer is a science commentator

Emerging economies shine despite US volatility

For the rally to endure, developing markets need to build on their resilience

Despite the risks of Donald Trump's aggressive protectionist agenda, the mood among policymakers and central bankers at the Conference for Emerging Market Economies in AlUla, Saudi Arabia, this week was cautiously upbeat. Assets across the ragtag grouping of economies have been on a tear. Last year, benchmark equity indices in countries including South Korea, Poland and Vietnam more than doubled the S&P 500's 16 per cent gain. Returns on local-currency bonds and sovereign credit outpaced developed markets too. The rally has rolled on into 2024.

A weak dollar, in part a byproduct of the US president's capricious approach to policymaking, has helped. International investments now look more attractive, and developing economies'

dollar debts and import costs have fallen. In other words, as America has started to display traits investors often associate with risky emerging markets, actual EMs have prospered. But the desire to diversify US-centric portfolios and the softer dollar are not the whole story. There are structural drivers, too.

First, developing nations are far more resilient than they used to be. Research by the IMF shows that portfolio outflows, real GDP and exchange rates have become less volatile in emerging markets in response to risk-off shocks since the global financial crisis. There are exceptions, but this reflects more diversified fiscal and monetary policy, and stronger foreign reserve buffers.

Policymakers have also been pragmatic in responding to US tariffs, cushioning the blow through negotiations, new trade deals and domestic reforms. Last week, Indian stocks jumped the most in eight months after Trump announced an arrangement with Prime

Minister Narendra Modi to lower duties.

Next, many emerging economies are no longer peripheral players in global trade and manufacturing. The 10 emerging-market members of the G20—including China, India and Brazil—now account for more than half of global GDP growth. Export powerhouses such as South Korea, Vietnam and Taiwan have benefited from the AI boom, supplying chips and high-tech components to US hyperscalers. Many emerging Asian economies have embedded themselves more deeply in non-US supply chains too.

Rapid urbanisation, rising consumer classes and large labour pools mean investors are beginning to view emerging market businesses as more than just a portfolio hedge. Valuations reinforce the case. Emerging market equities remain attractively priced relative to developed peers after being unloved for so long.

None of this means risks have disappeared. If the US Supreme Court strikes

Rapid urbanisation, rising consumer classes and large labour pools mean investors are beginning to see more than just a portfolio hedge

down Trump's reciprocal tariffs, fresh attempts to reimpose duties through other legal routes would revive trade uncertainty. The dumping of Chinese goods remains a worry, and a slowdown in the AI investment cycle would hit technology exporters hard. Several countries remain fragile.

For the investor interest to endure, developing economies need to build on their resilience. That means doubling down on credible fiscal frameworks and monetary policy, building new trade ties and supporting the development of services sectors to act as a shock absorber. Opening their financial markets further by strengthening corporate governance, improving disclosure standards and deepening market oversight would help turn hot money into stickier investments too. Whether last year marks the start of a lasting rally or another false dawn will depend as much on the policy choices made in Jakarta, Abuja and beyond, as on Washington's mood swings.

Letters

A former PM offers a cure for Thailand's economic ills

Your article on how Thailand became the "sick man" of Asia (Report, February 4) correctly recognises the symptoms but the diagnosis misses the potential cure.

First, to revive consumer confidence, we must break the vicious cycle of household debt. Past stimulus programmes failed to generate a meaningful multiplier effect because their impact was diluted by the weight of existing debt and economic uncertainty. Thais cannot escape the debt trap through cheque handouts alone. Instead, what is needed is what I call the "big reset". By utilising asset management companies to

aggressively purchase non-performing loans, indebted households can gain the breathing space necessary to rejoin the economic cycle. Such an initiative would address household debt and domestic consumption simultaneously.

Thailand needs to move from being just a destination to an integral part of the global economy. This requires a two-pronged infrastructure strategy. First, the country must focus on hard, strategic assets such as a north-south railway system and the land bridge connecting the Andaman Sea to the Gulf of Thailand, which would significantly enhance trade flows.

Second, regulatory frameworks must

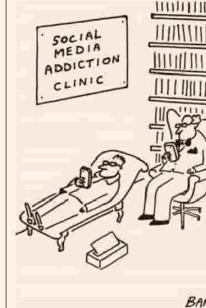
be modernised. The introduction of direct power purchase agreements is a game-changer. This would allow global investors to purchase green energy directly, thus removing a primary barrier for technology companies with strict ESG mandates. Combined with Thailand's "go cloud first" policy, we have already helped secure anchor investments in data centres and semiconductors, which can be catalysts for an AI-driven productivity boom.

As for tourism, it must evolve from volume to value. Thailand has far more to offer than just beaches; and a stronger, more diversified, leisure industry would do much to reverse the

decline in tourism which you highlight. Finally, the ease of doing business requires systematic improvement to become more investor-friendly. This is a long-term issue, but we must begin now.

Despite current challenges, Thailand still retains strengths in affordability, climate, tourism, food, medical services and wellness. With the right reforms, we can reclaim our place as an indispensable partner the world cannot overlook. We can get the "sick man" running—and fast.

Srettha Thavisin
Former Prime Minister of Thailand and founder of Sansiri, Bangkok, Thailand



Trump's Fed chair pick shows bond market's clout

I very much appreciated Martin Wolf's piece outlining some of Kevin Warsh's prior statements about the role of the US Federal Reserve, and how these might or might not be clues as to his possible role as Fed chair (Opinion, February 4).

Why did President Donald Trump nominate him, given his prior hawkish comments, and how did his nomination survive Treasury secretary Scott Bessent's review of the candidates? One might note Bessent's comments made no recommendations, but rather presented the candidates and described the possible implications of their nominations.

I am reminded of James Carville's quip that while he did not believe in reincarnation, if it did happen he wanted to come back as the bond market—you can intimidate anyone.

In the case of Warsh's nomination, policymakers have clearly responded, and the bond market has won the day.

Vic Miller
Washington, DC, US

A Labour white knight?

As a Brit who spent almost all her career in Washington DC observing our endless leadership shambles from across the pond, I fail to comprehend how we not only let David Miliband go (back in 2010), but are now repeating the same mistake with Andy Burnham ("Starmer's weakening grip on power", The FT View, February 7).

Is there no hope for a charismatic, decent, intelligent, centrist Labour leader who can rein in our ever-expanding but weak, inefficient and ineffective government footprint and arrest the dismal state of decay of our country?

Sanya Beidas-Strom
Battle, East Sussex, UK

Badenoch rejects centrism for a new common ground

Camilla Cavendish ("The Tories have forgotten what it takes to prosper", Opinion, FT.com, FT Weekend, January 31) frames current Conservative Party strategy as caught in a false choice between stale continuity and shiny insurgency, and reads party leader Kemi Badenoch's stance as a rejection of a recoverable political "centre".

The Cavendish article assumes that there is a static bloc of centrist voters waiting to be wooed, and treats groups like Prosper UK as natural conduits to them. In so doing, it underplays the depth of institutional and cultural failure felt by voters, including of course that aimed at recent Conservative governments, and treats Badenoch's refusal to triangulate to one-dimensionality, rather than what it is: a reflection of the need for more fundamental change.

This mistakes technocratic reassurance for electoral common sense. Serious parties pull voters towards solutions; they do not flatter them where they stand. There is no lump of "centrist" votes waiting to be harvested. Politics is not market research but persuasion. Badenoch grasps what is failing—soft budget constraints, performance decision making, a deep loss of seriousness and capability—and she is reshaping conservatism accordingly, in order to address both the policy challenges and the public's underlying sense of disenchantment.

Jesse Norman
MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, Shadow Leader of the House of Commons, London SW1, UK

What the ICJ actually said about the Gaza 'genocide'

Jane Hirschmann (Letters, January 25) bases her objection to the New York pension fund investing in Israel bonds on the statement that "the International Court of Justice as well as other major organisations have unequivocally decided that Israel's killing and destruction of both the Palestinians and the infrastructure in Gaza is a genocide".

This is incorrect. The ICJ has given an interim ruling, the purpose of which, as explained by Joan Donoghue, the president of the ICJ at the time of that ruling, in a BBC interview, was to declare that South Africa had a right to bring its case against Israel and that Palestine had "plausible rights to protection from genocide".

The ICJ's ruling on whether genocide has been committed will, according to some estimates, take a matter of years.

William Stocker
London NW5, UK

At stake is our institutional capacity to do big projects

The article "High-speed rail project's soaring cost puts it on track to be world's dearest" (Report, January 14) misses key context and significant factors contributing to HS2's cost.

Cost per km is a poor measure. Major inner-city stations, extensive urban sections, complex junctions, all essential to achieve HS2's primary purpose of releasing capacity on the network, contribute to nearly half its cost, whereas most comparators either address these items in separate projects or are not required. Built to last 120 years, and to move up to 40,000 passengers an hour, upfront costs are high, but it would be one of the cheapest to maintain and operate.

Energy, rail and road project costs in the UK are some of highest globally. High population density results in high land values and more utility and route diversions. But the UK also suffers from a fragmented supply chain, stop-start investment decisions, and an unreliable client in the shape of the government. Recent high energy and material costs after Covid and Ukraine, combined with a global skills shortage, have increased construction costs on all projects.

In March 2023, government imposed an annual nominal cap on spending leading to higher overall costs and delays for HS2. Government indecision on aspects such as Euston, scope changes and write-downs for cancelled sections have added further billions.

If we continue misdiagnosing reasons for high costs and cancelling much-needed infrastructure, instead of fixing the system, we will never build the institutional capability to deliver major infrastructure efficiently.

Ben Phillips
Reading, Berkshire, UK

FT climbing stories mustn't be the peak of its ambitions

As a former professional climber, I appreciate the recent "ascent" in climbing-related content.

In the last two weeks, FT Weekend carried not two but three articles: "The world's love affair with climbing" by Josh Noble (January 31); "Gaming's most masochistic sport? Mountain climbing" by Lewis Gordon (January 31); and "Postcard from . . . the Alps" by Ben Tibbets (February 7). This, on the back of the relatively recent Olympic Games inclusion.

I was one of Australia's first resident climbers to be paid to, well, climb. I now teach young climbers and hope to transition to taking on one or two Olympic hopefuls.

Hira Verick
Munich, Germany

Opinion

Reasons Maga loathes London



POLITICS

Edward Luce

A city once paved with gold is today riddled with Isis checkpoints, according to Maga world. Dick Whittington found no gold on London's streets. The 2026 version of the fabled character would have similar trouble locating London's sharia-governed no-go zones. But the myth of London as a third-world sinkhole is now central to Maga politics. Restoring Britain's allegedly vanishing character is also an official goal of Donald Trump's foreign policy.

The question is why? It is not enough

to succeed, said Gore Vidal; others must fail. That London is doing fine in spite of being an immigrant city – and partly because of it – is a provocation to the Maga movement on both sides of the Atlantic. London serves as the most visible symbol of a Europe that Trump's national security strategy claims is facing "civilisational erasure". If you add in Silicon Valley's animus towards EU and UK digital safety regulations, the coming year promises escalation in the transatlantic ideological conflict. London gets star billing.

Not a day goes by when Trump's close ally, Steve Bannon, does not cite London as a sharia-governed city. Bannon has shifted his daily *War Room* broadcast from Washington to Texas to back a state referendum that would ban sharia law (Prop 10). Other US states are pushing similar propositions. Rhetoric against the Islamic threat looks set to return to centre stage in the Republican

midterm election campaign. "London is exhibit A in our warning," says Bannon. London is also the prime target of the US state department's campaign against Europe's alleged censorship regime. As my colleagues reported last week, Sarah Rogers, Trump's under-secretary for public diplomacy, called the UK's online safety law "tyrannical" and openly

The city serves as a symbol of a Europe that Trump's security strategy claims is facing 'civilisational erasure'

backs Nigel Farage's Reform Party. America's goal is to empower freedom-loving Brits and their European peers, Rogers argues. She is spending US taxpayers' money in service of that cause.

Trump's ideological war on Europe

has two prongs. The first is the fight against multiculturalism on both sides of the Atlantic. Europeans stand in as overseas Democrats. In that respect, Europe, and Canada and Australia to some degree, serve as a foil for US domestic politics. The second is a commercial battle against alleged European censorship. They are two sides of the same coin. Trump and many of his Silicon Valley backers disagree over the annual H1B foreign worker visas that Big Tech needs. On Europe, however, they are united. Elon Musk's backing of far-right European figures, including Britain's Tommy Robinson, is indistinguishable from his campaign against European regulation.

When Brussels in December imposed a €120m fine on X for breaching EU data laws, JD Vance, the US vice-president, said: "The EU should be supporting free speech not attacking American companies over garbage." Britain's

threat in January to ban Musk's X over his AI platform's generation of sexualised images of children produced instant retaliatory threats from Trump officials. "From America's perspective, nothing is off the table when it comes to free speech," said Rogers.

This is where Trump's goals clash. Standing up for your country's commercial interests is normal for any government. Threatening to retaliate against countries that are trying to protect their children from abuse and exploitation enters provocative new territory. Nor does it serve Trump's Maga allies. Eighty-one per cent of Brits disapprove of Trump, which includes a lot of Reform voters. Trump is often associated in foreign minds with Jeffrey Epstein. The widening scandal over the child sex offender's connections has claimed a British ambassador, a Downing Street chief of staff and could still topple Keir Starmer's prime minister-

ship. That no US political figure from either party has been felled by the scandal is well known beyond America.

Add to this that Trump's administration now requires five years of social media history for once-routine UK and EU visa applications – and that these rules are set to apply to visiting World Cup football fans – and you have the ingredients of a populist reaction to Trump's America. Not for the first time, Trump is in danger of being hoist on his own petard. London's "disgraceful" third-term mayor, Sadiq Khan, is boosted by Trump's animosity. Canada's quest for a concert of like-minded middle powers is being made easier. Agitating for free speech while sifting through foreign social media histories seems self-contradicting. Insisting that this is a battle for civilisation is likely to produce a lasting breach.

edward.luce@ft.com

Why are fertility rates collapsing?

Martin Wolf Economics

Part of female graduates' decision to have children depends on how they expect their husbands to behave



The decline in fertility has occurred in almost every country in the world. Furthermore, notes the Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin, in her 2023 paper "The Downside of Fertility", every OECD member (but Israel) has a total fertility rate (average number of children per woman in a lifetime) of less than 2.1 (the replacement rate). Moreover, this is not at all new: "low levels of fertility have existed in many currently developed nations since the mid-1970s." (See charts.)

This transformation in fertility is the opposite of what Thomas Malthus foretold in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Humanity is unprecedentedly well off and yet has far fewer children relative to its numbers than before. I considered the causes in May 2024, in "From the baby boom to the baby bust". One is that a far higher number of children survive into adulthood, reducing the need for multiple births. Another is that we have managed to separate the joys of sex from the burdens of child-rearing. Yet another is that people came to prefer a few "quality" children (in each of which they invest more) to a large quantity of them.

Yet these changes do not fully explain what is going on, not least the markedly lower fertility rates of graduate women and the extraordinarily swift collapses in fertility in fast-growing economies with traditional gender norms, notably that wives should look after the children. In such countries, not only do the

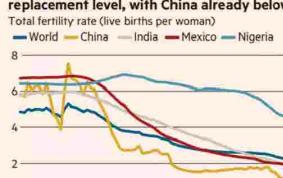
costs of bringing up children tend to be high, but they fall overwhelmingly on women.

On the whole, female graduates in the US (and elsewhere) are both far more likely to marry than non-graduates and have been more likely to have children in wedlock. Thus, for college graduates, in particular, a big part of their decision to have children depends on how they expect their husbands to behave.

The simple (and obvious) point is that educated women who end up with the full responsibility for childcare for multiple children have relatively more to lose than their non-college educated peers. This is why they are more likely to insist on marriage. It is also why they tend to have fewer children (though that is also because they start later).

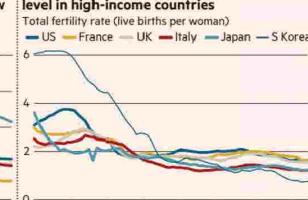
Goldin argues that women who gain professional incomes are better off and have much more agency. But if they are to do so, they need to postpone working in order to pursue their education, which increasingly they do. They are educated and in the labour force, they need to choose whether and with whom to have children. If they are to work successfully after having children, they will depend on the active help of their partners. But they cannot be sure the latter are reliable. Their partner might be a devoted helpmeet but he might leave her in the lurch. If his support fails, women will find it hard to sustain their career. So, graduate women hedge. They not only insist on

The global fertility rate has fallen to replacement level, with China already below



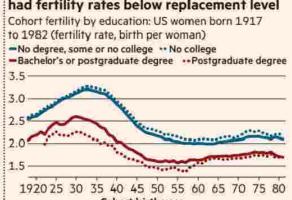
Source: UN

Fertility rates have fallen below replacement level in high-income countries



Source: UN

Educated US women born after 1940 have had fertility rates below replacement level



Source: Claudia Goldin: "The Downside of Fertility" (NBER 2025); US Census Bureau

marriage, but have few children, often one or none.

Goldin uses this analysis to explain what has been happening in the US over the long term. Thus, "the birth rate plummeted some time ago in the US... because women had more autonomy, they had more options, and because the relative earnings of college-educated workers greatly increased, their options became more valuable... The opportunity cost of children to more educated women rose. Women

needed greater assurances that the care of their children would be shared with the father."

Now consider the cases of countries that had huge economic growth from a low base, as in southern Europe and east Asia. There, she argues, social mores are often stuck behind contemporary realities. Men still hanker after the patriarchal norms of a traditional society. Women enjoy the liberation of a modern economy. Goldin notes that countries particularly affected by this expectation mismatch (such as Japan, South Korea and, I suspect, China) also have high rates of female childlessness.

Another relevant factor she alludes to is the "rat race". Quality children are expensive everywhere, but in some countries they are exorbitantly so. In

societies in which aspirations for chil-

dren are universally high and shared, parents are competing with one another for a limited number of top slots for their children. The result is intensive tutoring, which is an exquisite form of torture for both children and parents, and mostly the mothers. This increases the direct and indirect costs to women of having children to an inordinate degree. So, many do not do so.

Goldin's main suggestion is that men need to shape up, though she recommends greater state support for parents, too. But nothing seems likely to get the fertility rates of modern societies above replacement. Where I do agree is that the reactionary right's idea that the answer is to put women back into the kitchen and nursery is wicked and stupid. Only the Taliban thinks it is clever to deprive women of education. Moreo-

ver, if even the Chinese Communist Party cannot force women to have children they do not want, nobody can. What is more, only an imbecile would suppose you would get more children by arguing that women treat their husbands as their masters, yet again. We would get still fewer marriages and fewer children.

Gender norms will need to be even more equal and societal help with the costs of children even greater if there is to be much hope of raising fertility rates. But a big rise seems unlikely. A declining population looks inevitable in a huge number of rich countries, if mass immigration is ruled out. Would that really be the disaster some fear? But that is a topic for another column.

martin.wolf@ft.com

How Europe can escape an economic impasse

Isabel Schnabel

Europe is often portrayed as a continent in decline, squeezed between geopolitical rivals, held back by excessive regulation and struggling to keep pace with rapid technological change. But although this narrative is appealing in its simplicity, it is misleading.

By many measures, Europe is among the regions with the highest quality of life. Strong social protection, accessible healthcare and affordable education enable people to live secure, fulfilling and prosperous lives.

Europe is also one of the few regions in the world where democracy, the rule of

law and media freedom remain firmly entrenched, even if these values are also facing pressures here. In a world increasingly drifting towards autocracy, this institutional integrity is a significant asset. It provides stability, predictability and trust.

Throughout its history, Europe has made deliberate choices about the kind of society it wants to be – choices that shape how much Europeans work, how income is distributed and how risks are shared. These choices improve life outcomes, but they also affect conventional measures of economic strength. For example, if Europeans were to work as many hours as Americans, around two-thirds of the transatlantic gap in real GDP per capita would disappear, according to ECB staff calculations.

Europe is also more inclusive, with economic gains distributed more broadly. In the US, a large share of income does not accrue to 90 per cent of the

population. This difference also reflects a growing concentration of income gains in specific sectors and regions. Growth in real GDP per capita in the median US state and in the median Eurozone country has evolved largely in lockstep.

Put simply, the narrative that Europe is stagnating does not withstand scrutiny. But the continent does fall short on productivity.

In fact, countries in the southern periphery, once synonymous with crises and high unemployment, have experienced dynamic growth and strong employment gains in recent years driven by structural reforms, common European funds and strategic industrial policies.

Spain, for example, has emerged as a

German economy out of stagnation, with positive spillovers to the rest of the continent.

Where Europe does fall short, however, is productivity growth. This is not because it fails to innovate, but because it struggles to translate ideas into commercial success. European business founders still need to navigate a complex patchwork of legal systems, corporate codes and regulatory regimes. This fragmentation acts like an internal tariff wall, making it costly and difficult to expand across borders. As a result, intra-EU trade in services is no higher than trade with non-EU countries.

The most powerful idea for breaking this impasse is the creation of a 28th regime: a unified European corporate framework open to companies of all sizes and sectors. A 28th regime would not be intended to replace national legal frameworks, nor would it harmonise taxes or social security systems. Instead,

it would provide what Europe has long been missing: a truly single market that allows Europe to compete as one continent rather than 27.

Companies would grow across borders without legal reinvention. Capital markets would deepen. Talent would circulate more freely. And Europe could build a genuine "Made in Europe" brand for global market leaders that remain European not just in origin but also in value creation.

This is best achieved by means of an EU regulation that is directly applicable across all member states. Otherwise, Europe risks ending up with 27 versions of the 28th regime, recreating the very fragmentation it seeks to eliminate.

Europe has ideas. It has talent. What it needs is scale – and the courage to build it.

The writer is a member of the executive board of the European Central Bank