

Dyal Singh's legacy

Bid to rename college is ill-advised

THE proposed renaming of Dyal Singh (Evening) College reflects a cavalier disregard for the memory and legacy of the visionary 19th-century philanthropist to whom the institution is dedicated. Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia, the legendary founder of *The Tribune* and Punjab National Bank, envisaged a secular, inclusive college devoted to quality education and public good. The Delhi-based institution has a rich history dating back to 1910, when it was established in Lahore — 12 years after Majithia's death. The argument that two "day colleges" cannot run with the same name may be administratively convenient, but it is not compelling enough to override heritage and popular sentiment.

No less troubling is the legal dimension. Clause 12 of the 1978 transfer deed, under which Delhi University (DU) took over the college, explicitly states that the institution "will continue to be known as Dyal Singh College". Violating this clause could invite consequences as severe as the withdrawal of land rights and forced relocation — a risk no responsible administration should take lightly. It's also unfortunate that faculty members generally learnt of the proposal to rename the college after Sikh warrior Banda Singh Bahadur only when the DU Vice-Chancellor publicly announced it on Vir Bal Diwas recently. Such unilateralism undermines the very ethos of a university, which is meant to function through consultation and consensus. The unanimous resolution passed by the staff association sums up the resentment of teachers, non-teaching staff and students at being excluded from a move that affects the college's identity and future.

Educational institutions are not only centres of learning but also custodians of collective memory. The unsuccessful 2017 bid to rechristen the college as "Vande Mataram Mahavidyalaya" should have served as a cautionary tale. DU would be well advised to pause, consult and reflect. At stake is the name of a towering figure as well as over a century of academic and moral inheritance.

Road safety first

Don't give free pass to violators

THE road transport ministry figures are stark even by India's shaky safety standards. That over 70 per cent of the 40 crore vehicles in the country do not comply with statutory norms presents a grim reality. Data shared with the states and UTs shows that over two-thirds of these non-compliant vehicles are two-wheelers. Whether it's non-possession of vehicle fitness or pollution under control certificates, or having no insurance at all, this wilful defiance invariably gets a free pass. Such casualness can lead to a false sense of immunity, and the carefree driver then becomes a risk to himself and the other road users. Under the proposed framework, non-compliant vehicles will be automatically de-registered if the requirements are not taken care of. It is a much-needed step to cement regulatory control.

The challenge is not simply the sanitisation of the Vahan database by putting the violators on notice. A bigger task is forging a social mandate for responsible road behaviour. Community involvement on that count has been dismal. What's more troubling is how the messaging by political figures is antithetical to instilling any respect for traffic regulations. At no political rally is there even a passing mention of safe driving. Every traffic rule is violated as the support base gathers. Religious organisations and *devas* may have done a tad better in regulating traffic at their events, but the sight of the devout packed in vehicles with no regard for safety provisions is scary, to say the least. The normalisation of such risk-taking is an administrative lapse, but it continues to be endorsed.

A tough stance against unsafe driving comes from unexpected quarters. Social media routinely calls out irresponsible road behaviour and engineering faults. Mass public acceptance of what's right and wrong will ultimately bring about change.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JANUARY 16, 1926

Police administration in Punjab

WE have already dealt with some of the salient features of the annual report on police administration in Punjab. Now we come to that part of the report in which the Inspector General of Police (IGP) states that "it is becoming increasingly apparent that the police of the province is in need of considerable reorganisation and expansion". In the IGP's opinion, the police force is over-worked and underpaid; and it is necessary to increase the numerical strength of the force and also the pay scales, if it is intended to satisfactorily meet the "rising tide of crime" in the province. Dealing with the remarks of the IGP regarding the alleged increase in crime, the Governor-in-Council says: "It is obvious that the volume of crime arises from a variety of sources, and cannot be attributed only to those causes, namely, the unsuitability of an exotic legal system and the inadequacy of the police force, on which the Inspector General lays stress. The Governor-in-Council is prepared to consider specific proposals for improvements in both regards, but it seems clear that the present level of crime is due to a large extent to causes of which some, fortunately, in the case of violent and organised crime, are of a temporary nature, while others are more permanent, though improvable, features of provincial life. The Governor-in-Council, therefore, cannot accept the view that we are faced by a rising tide of crime demanding a general reinforcement of the police strength, but he is equally unable to base a facile confidence on the mere fact that we are no worse off than in some preceding periods or to feel that the province is meeting the problem in a satisfactory manner."

OPINION

Budget must spur deeper reforms

Indian economy needs to grow faster in order to escape the middle-income trap



SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST



ROADMAP: FM Nirmala Sitharaman with MoS (Finance) Pankaj Chaudhary during a recent pre-Budget meeting. PTI

THE 2026-27 Budget proposals are being formulated in the backdrop of continuing geopolitical tensions and the imposition of hefty US tariffs. At this juncture, the first advance estimates for the 2025-26 financial year have brought some glad tidings. The prospect of 7.4 per cent GDP growth is a turnaround from earlier predictions by the RBI of a moderate 6.5 per cent.

It has also shown that reforms make a difference and they need to be accelerated in order to sustain growth at this level. The restructuring and recalibration of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), for instance, has been a game-changer for the economy. It was a step that should have been taken much earlier, given the regulatory complexity in the system. The streamlining measures have led to a spurt in consumption during the festival season in October-November 2025 and this, in turn, looks set to revive the investment climate.

The other long-awaited measure taken recently has been the implementation of the four labour codes that were passed five years ago in Parliament. The codes replaced as many as 29 separate laws dealing with industrial relations, several of which had been on the statute books from colonial times. The multiplicity of legislation created enormous complexity in dealing with labour issues over the years. Compliance was consequently a confusing affair for business enterprises.

This may not have been a reform that gave an immediate impetus to growth, but it has

brought clarity and simplicity in an area of serious concern for potential investors. Besides, the codes bring labour regulations into the modern era by giving greater flexibility in terms of work from home while providing a measure of social security for workers in the fast-growing gig economy. The codes may still have lacunae, which can be addressed in future, but scrapping the earlier laws has surely made doing business easier in the country.

The need for reforms in other areas is underlined by the fact that all is not positive in the first advance estimates. For instance, growth has slowed down in the second half of the year from October to March. The first two quarters recorded growth of 7.8 and 8.2 per cent, respectively, but the second two quarters are assumed to be at a lower level of around 6.9 per cent.

On the plus side, the advance estimates show a rebound in manufacturing from 4.5 per cent to 7.4 per cent and this has given a big push to higher growth in the 2025-26 financial year. It is also significant that the pace of growth has stepped up over the past three years,

Manufacturing has not yet expanded sufficiently to absorb unskilled or skilled personnel available in the market.

with the average at nearly 8 per cent. Projections for the 2026-27 financial year made by institutions like the World Bank are lower at around 6.5 per cent, but it increasingly looks as if growth may now be sustained at higher levels. Though India has been the fastest-growing major economy for several years now, it needs to grow faster to escape the middle-income trap and become a developed nation by 2047.

Finance Minister Nirmala

month. The surge has largely been due to electronics, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals, petroleum products and readymade garments.

What is even more unexpected is that exports to the US have risen by 22 per cent despite the hefty tariff barriers. A big component has been mobile phones which recorded a three-fold increase in the course of just one year.

Another element of economic growth that is not captured by much of the data is the extent of joblessness. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, the unemployment rate reached a three-month low of 8.6 per cent in December due to a decline in rural joblessness. The data does not reflect the fact that India has not been able to utilise its much-lauded demographic dividend by providing enough jobs to the youth. Agriculture continues to be the biggest employer with 45 per cent of the workers in this sector alone. Manufacturing has not yet expanded sufficiently to absorb unskilled or skilled personnel available in the market.

It is in this sector that lessons can be learnt from other Asian economies that have managed to expand small and medium enterprises sufficiently to provide more labour-intensive employment. The new labour codes are bound to be helpful in this regard by making job issues easier to tackle, thereby removing one big hurdle in the way of new investors and existing employers.

The Budget should thus be used as an opportunity to bring about greater ease of doing business in the economy. Reforms, especially in terms of eliminating the regulatory cholesterol in the system, need to be carried out much more quickly compared to the GST restructuring and the implementation of the labour codes. Only then will it be possible to push growth to the levels needed to become a developed economy.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We've done a lot in infrastructure, but other areas need more attention. —Raghuram Rajan

Life lessons from the school diary

AASTHA BAGGA

AS the years passed, two small columns about caste and religion in the school diary began to feel heavier than the rest of the page. At first, my resistance was childish, born more out of defiance than understanding. I wanted labels that sounded grand and powerful, labels that history books glorified. The stories of kings, sages and scholars subtly planted in my mind the idea that caste defined worth, that religion defined virtue. To my young self, being a "Brahmin" felt like being intellectually superior, and inventing my own religion felt like an act of rebellion disguised as pride. I did not yet understand that I was already surrendering to the same rigid framework I claimed to resist.

My father, however, never argued loudly. He never lectured me on social justice or constitutional values. His protest was silent but consistent. Every year, with the same calm handwriting, he wrote "Indian" and "Humanity" in the columns for caste and religion in my school diary; as if repetition alone could one day carve meaning into my stubborn mind. At that time, I saw it as his refusal to acknowledge reality. After all, society thrived on these distinctions. Festivals were celebrated differently, surnames revealed social standing and casual conversations often carried invisible hierarchies. How, I wondered, could one simply erase caste and religion with a pen?

It was only later, when I began to read beyond textbooks, that the cracks in my understanding widened. What was introduced as a functional classification had hardened into birth-based discrimination, denying dignity and opportunity to millions. I began to realise that history books had not lied outright, but they had softened truths, making oppression sound philosophical and hierarchy seem natural.

College was the turning point. The campus, which I had imagined as a space of free thought and progress, mirrored the same divisions I had grown up with — only louder and more organised. Student elections were fought not on ideas or vision, but on caste equations and religious loyalties. Slogans replaced dialogue, and identity overshadowed merit. Friends were advised whom to vote for, not based on competence, but on community. Watching educated young minds willingly reduce themselves to vote banks was disheartening.

In those moments, my father's quiet entries in my school diary returned to me with startling clarity. He had known all along that the world would try to define me before I defined myself.

By writing "Indian" and "Humanity", he was not denying my roots, but teaching me not to be imprisoned by them. He was preparing me to see people beyond labels, to value character over category.

Today, when I look back, I no longer see those annual fights as disagreements. They were lessons — patiently repeated, gently enforced. In a society obsessed with divisions, my father chose unity. He raised me simply as an Indian, and more importantly, as a human being.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Faith in the rule of law

Refer to 'Speedy trial is Umar-Sharjeel's right'; the end goal of the judicial dispensation is not only to deliver justice, but also to strengthen the common man's faith in the rule of law. When chinks appear in the public perception of justice, that faith becomes the first casualty. Despite a plethora of judgments acknowledging the right to a speedy trial as inherent to Article 21 of the Constitution, the continued denial of bail to these two individuals creates significant dents in the most cherished rights to life and personal liberty. Even if *prima facie* their role is visible, they remain "accused" in the eyes of the law. What prevents the prosecution from establishing their guilt (if any) even after a span of five years? With a witness list running into hundreds, the fight at the end of the tunnel seems to be effective only invisible for decades.

ABHYAM SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Groundwater is like bank balance

Refer to 'When politics trumped Punjab's water security'; the historical background of Punjab's water security since 1986 should be an eye-opener. During the late eighties, Punjab government paid little attention to the model ground water draft circulated by the Central government. Power for the farm sector is free for the past over 20 years. The writer has rightly suggested curbing the policy of free power and encouraging diversification of crops. Availability of groundwater for irrigation is the key factor for agriculture production. Groundwater is like a bank balance; this resource is being overdrawn by over 200 per cent especially in central Punjab for the last two decades. We are already late in taking action.

SK MITTAL, PANCHKULA

Gig workers' issues unaddressed

Apropos of 'Good riddance'; the government's decision to end the 10-minute delivery promise is a critical turning point for the gig economy. This intervention acknowledges the inhumane pressures placed on gig workers. However, this measure does not address the fundamental issues facing gig workers: income instability, arbitrary deactivations and the absence of social safety nets. This reform is more than just about operational logistics; it's about protecting the

dignity and well-being of people who make the quick-commerce industry flourish.

SANJEEV KUMAR GARG, RAMPURA PHUL

Drone kites a good alternative
With reference to 'The lethal thread'; administrative officials at the district level and the police turn a blind eye to lucrative black market networks. Nylon threads and any kind of glass coated synthetic threads meant for kite-flying should be taken off the market as local manufacturers have copied the Chinese *dor*. No charges are ever pressed against black marketers. The police should set up checkpoints at major kite flying spots and also conduct surprise checks to confiscate illegal material on the spot. Legal reforms are needed to make prosecution of nylon *manjha* sellers stringent and faster. 'Drone kites' are the best substitute for ordinary kites.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Police, MC officials must act
Apropos of 'The lethal thread'; until enforcement becomes consistent and deterrent, the skies will remain deadly. In fact, our elected representatives, especially municipal councilors, have a responsibility to prevail upon people in their areas against the menace of nylon kite string. Police officials of the area should be held accountable. The errant people who play with others' lives need to be taught a lesson so that they do not play with precious lives.

BRIJ B GOYAL, LUDHIANA

Keep religion, politics separate
The annual Maghi Mela at Muktsar is a profound occasion dedicated to the sacrifice of 40 brave warriors who laid down their lives fighting the Mughals. It is deeply disheartening, however, to witness how this solemn religious commemoration has been overshadowed by political opportunism. Every year, political parties exploit this sacred gathering as a platform for mudslinging and electoral campaigning. This blatant politicisation hurts the sentiments of the devotees who come for prayer and reflection. It's high time that political entities showed restraint and preserved the sanctity of religious traditions by keeping their agendas away from spiritual congregations.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.

These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Farmers want assured returns to diversify



HARVINDER KHETAL
DEPUTY EDITOR, THE TRIBUNE

INDIA has overtaken China to become the world's largest rice producer with 150.18 million tonnes, as per the Union Agriculture Ministry data. Wheat acreage across states has risen to a record 334.17 lakh hectares during the current rabi season (2025-26), as farmers favour wheat amid weak prices of other crops, raising prospects of another bumper harvest and easing export curbs. This ascent may appear, at first glance, as an unalloyed success. For Punjab, however, these milestones are less a cause for celebration than a reminder of a deepening structural crisis.

The state that once powered the Green Revolution now finds itself trapped by its legacy — a farming system built for food security in the 1960s that has become ecologically and economically unsustainable in the 21st century. Punjab's agriculture remains overwhelmingly dominated by the wheat-paddy cycle. Together, these two crops account for nearly 85 per cent of the state's gross cropped area. This dominance is a matter of policy design. Decades of assured procurement at minimum support

prices (MSPs), subsidised electricity for irrigation and a procurement infrastructure unmatched anywhere else in the country have made wheat and paddy the safest choices. In an environment of rising costs and uncertain markets, farmers grow what the system rewards.

This explains why crop diversification has remained more rhetoric than reality. Successive governments have urged Punjab's farmers to shift towards maize, pulses, oilseeds and horticulture. Yet these alternatives rarely come with the same guarantees. Market prices fluctuate sharply, procurement is patchy or absent and processing and storage infrastructure weak. Faced with such uncertainty, diversification becomes a gamble rather than a transition. Not surprisingly, security trumps sustainability.

However, the ecological costs of this model are now impossible to ignore. Paddy cultivation in a semi-arid region has driven groundwater depletion to alarming levels. Official estimates say that over three-quarters of Punjab's groundwater blocks are overexploited. Recent reports from the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) reveal that Punjab records the highest rate of groundwater extraction in India. The water table is falling by nearly a metre annually in several districts. Paddy cultivation — a water-intensive crop in a semi-arid region — is the primary driver for this dire situation. Tube wells are drilled ever



SAFEST CHOICE: The state's agriculture remains overwhelmingly dominated by the wheat-paddy cycle. FILE PHOTO

deeper, electricity consumption soars and the cost of cultivation rises year after year.

Soil health has also suffered. Repeated mono-cropping of wheat and rice, combined with heavy fertiliser use, has depleted organic carbon and micronutrients. Stubble burning, a byproduct of mechanised paddy harvesting and compressed cropping cycles, has become an annual environmental crisis, choking cities beyond Punjab's borders. These problems are structural outcomes of a cropping pattern frozen in time.

Economically, the picture is equally troubling. While MSP procurement ensures price stability, farm incomes have stagnated. Input costs — seeds, fertilisers, diesel and labour — have risen faster than returns. Small and marginal farmers, with limited land and high

dependence on credit, are especially vulnerable. Punjab continues to report farmer suicides every year. The numbers underline a hard truth: procurement-led security has not translated into lasting prosperity.

This distress has increasingly spilled onto the streets. In recent years, Punjab's farmers have repeatedly mobilised against what they see as broken promises and policy neglect. Thousands converged on Chandigarh to mark five years since the 2020-21 farm laws agitation, demanding a legal guarantee for MSP, debt relief and accountability for assurances made at the time of repeal.

Elsewhere, farmers blocked highways and protested at mandis over unsold paddy stocks and delayed procurement. Police action at protest sites such as Shambhu and Khanauri has further deepened mis-

trust. It highlights how economic distress is translating into political confrontation.

Successive governments

have recognised the problem and introduced crop diversification schemes. Incentives to shift from paddy to maize, for instance, are well-intentioned. But they remain piecemeal. A one-time payment cannot offset the absence of assured buyers, storage facilities or processing units. Nor can it compensate for the institutional familiarity farmers have with wheat and rice. Diversification, to be credible, must offer a similar certainty of returns.

Punjab's predicament also exposes a national policy contradiction. On the one hand, India celebrates record rice production and expanding wheat acreage as symbols of food security. On the other, it urges states like Punjab to diversify for environmental reasons.

As long as the Food Corporation of India procures rice and wheat in bulk while alternatives are left to the vagaries of the open market, farmers will stick to staples. You cannot preach diversification while rewarding monoculture.

The solution, therefore, lies in redesigning incentives. If pulses, oilseeds and maize are genuinely national priorities for nutrition, import substitution and sustainability, they must enjoy procurement assurance, price support and infrastructure investment comparable to wheat and rice. Punjab's farmers should not be asked to bear the cost of national food policy

adjustments alone.

Plus, Punjab has the potential to become a hub for high-value agriculture — dairy, vegetables, fruits and food-processing. But this requires investment in cold chains, logistics and agro-industries. It also requires land consolidation, cooperative models and market access that protect small farmers from corporate dominance.

There is also a generational dimension to Punjab's agrarian crisis. Younger farmers are increasingly disillusioned with agriculture that requires high effort, but offers low dignity and uncertain returns. Many seek livelihoods outside farming or outside the country altogether. Without structural reform, Punjab also risks losing its human capital.

Ultimately, Punjab's crisis is a cautionary tale for the rest of India. It shows what happens when agricultural success is measured only in terms of tonnes produced, not in sustainability achieved.

The state fed the nation when it was most needed. Today, it needs a new social contract, one that balances food security with ecological survival and farmer welfare.

India's record grain production should prompt reflection. For Punjab, the challenge is stark: continue down a path of diminishing returns or undertake a difficult but necessary transition. The choice will determine the future of the state's farmers as also the credibility of India's promise of sustainable agriculture.

Can India harm Pakistan by restricting Indus waters



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

DURING an interaction with students of IIT-Madras on January 2, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar turned his attention to India's "bad neighbour to the west". He made the valid point that India had the right to defend its people against a country which perpetrated terrorism "deliberately, persistently and unrepentantly".

He went on to emphasise that it was up to India to decide how it would "exercise that right". He recalled that "many years ago", India had, as a measure of goodwill, agreed to a "water-sharing arrangement" with the western neighbour. However, as Pakistan had been involved in terrorism against India over the decades, it could not ask for sharing of waters. Jaishankar was essentially reiterating Prime Minister Narendra Modi's point that "blood and water cannot flow together".

Both Modi's and Jaishankar's comments relate to the river waters that flow from India to Pakistan.



RETALIATION: India has held the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance since the Pahalgam terror attack. PTI

Both are general expressions of anger and dismay against Pakistan's pursuit of cross-border terrorism. However, they lack specificity and precision. They also do not take into account to what extent India can control the rivers that flow from India to Pakistan.

The "water-sharing arrangement" is the India-Pakistan Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960. Pakistan had from the outset raised the apprehension that India had the capacity to deny it water. This is because the rivers that sustained life in Pakistan — Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej — flowed through India and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) before entering its territory.

Pakistan's fears were unfounded because in the case of the Indus, Jhelum and to a large extent Chenab, India simply could not, wholly or substantially, hold back their waters. That was true then and it is so now as well. India could stop the waters of the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej from flowing into Pakistan, but they hold only 20 per cent of the waters of these six rivers taken together. Hence, Pakistan's real desire was that India should not impede the flow of the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab. The waters issue was also used in Pakistan to fuel anti-India sentiment.

The IWT was negotiated with the help of the World Bank. The process took nine

years. India generously gave Pakistan waters of the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab (called the western rivers in the treaty). It only retained the right of using a small portion of their waters for irrigation and run-of-the-river power generation. India retained full use of the Ravi, Sutlej and Beas. That meant that its "share" of the waters of the Indus Rivers System (IRS) remained only 20 per cent; the rest was given up to Pakistan.

India has held the IWT in abeyance since the Pahalgam terror attack in April last year. Earlier, in September-October 2024, there were reports that India had asked Pakistan for a renegotiation of the treaty because the situation

A full account of how much water India is losing because of the Indus treaty should be made public by the government.

tion concerning the use of waters and the generation of power had changed since 1960. Pakistan had responded by suggesting that the matter be raised in the India-Pakistan Indus Waters Commission under the IWT. India had rejected this approach. It wanted a Pakistani commitment for renegotiating the treaty. Now, this has become academic because India has held the treaty in abeyance.

Pakistan has warned that restricting the flow of water into its territory would be "an act of war", but it's unlikely that the threat would prevent India from undertaking actions to use the IRS's waters where it can for the benefit of its people.

The terrain through which the Indus flows in India before it enters PoK is such that a large dam cannot be constructed. Certainly, its waters cannot be diverted meaningfully in Ladakh or elsewhere. Large dams cannot be constructed on the Jhelum too. But its waters can be used for navigation, and limited irrigation possibilities exist.

Pakistan prevented the construction of the Tulbul Navigation Project for decades. Now it can be completed. The IWT has always been unpopular in J&K because it circumscribes the use of the erstwhile state's rivers.

The Chenab can be utilised for power generation and perhaps its water can be diverted for irrigation, but dams with large pondages cannot be constructed because of the terrain. And, the eastern rivers are with India in any case.

All in all, it is difficult to foresee how India can utilise the waters of the western rivers in large measure beyond what is already provided in the IWT. Hence, can India really trouble Pakistan through restricting the flow of river waters? Perhaps not. In any event, a full account of how much water India is losing because of the IWT should be made public by the government.

Pakistan has followed an obstructive approach to the IWT and desperately wants it to continue. The reasons are two-fold. First: it does not

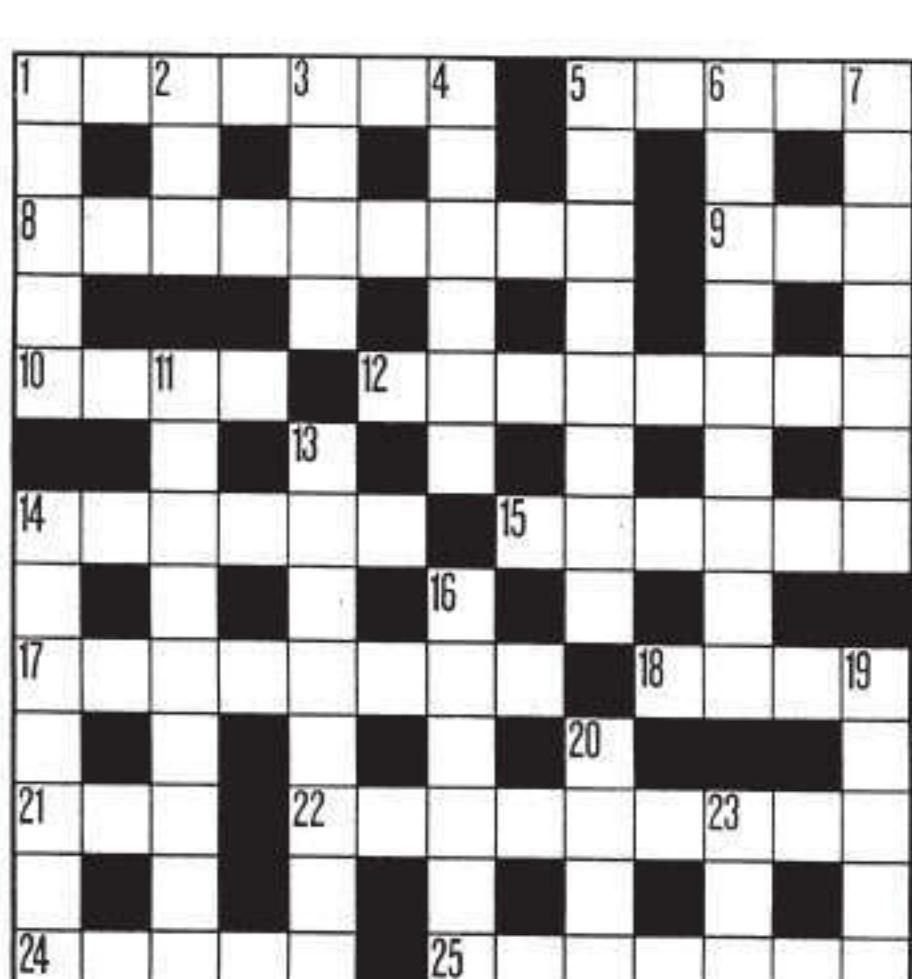
wish to lose even a small quantity of water because it has become a water-scarce country. Pakistan's water management has been terrible, but it does not wish to acknowledge this fact. Second: Pakistan does not want India to ever disrupt the flow of water, especially during the agricultural season, because that may negatively impact crop yields.

Pakistan has agreed to discuss the IWT modification, although under the Indus Waters Commission, because it may feel that India would not agree to use the mechanism for these discussions.

However, there is a section in Pakistan which wants to engage India in sub-surface water management. This section believes that India and Pakistan share aquifers and that their joint management would benefit Pakistan. They would like the IWT to extend to sub-surface waters too. India should never agree to expand the scope of cooperation to sub-soil water in view of Pakistan's obstructionism in IWT management.

India is both an upper riparian state and a lower one, as in the case of the Brahmaputra. This reinforces the need for the government to provide greater clarity to the comments Modi and Jaishankar have made on sharing of waters. The people deserve not to be confused on vital issues such as water.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Country of northern Europe (7)
- 5 Opponent of equal ability (5)
- 8 Give consideration to (9)
- 9 Seed-bearing head of cereal plant (3)
- 10 Raised platform (4)
- 12 Hasty and careless (8)
- 14 Insect, pest in stored grain (6)
- 15 Easily influenced (6)
- 17 Sudden extreme fall (8)
- 18 In a different way (4)
- 21 Prohibit (3)
- 22 Offensive (9)
- 24 Distinguished (5)
- 25 Informal alliance (7)

Yesterday's Solution

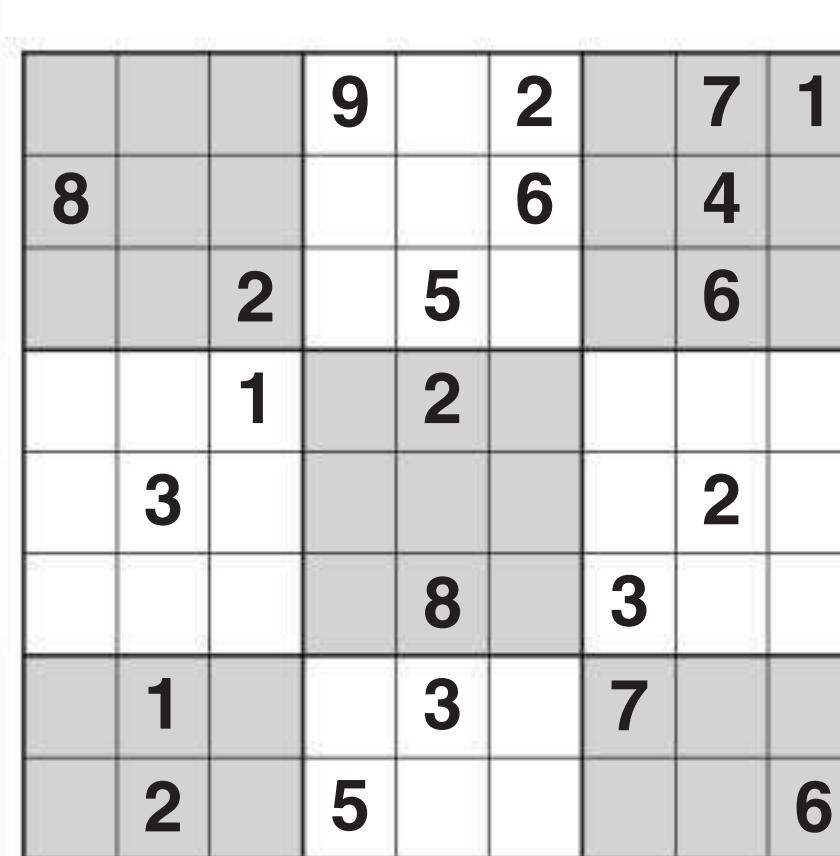
ACROSS: 1 Disabled, 5 Garb, 9 Flung, 10 Trefoil, 11 Occasionally, 13 Danube, 14 Cuckoo, 17 Intelligible, 20 Torment, 21 Erica, 22 Chef, 23 Eyesight.

Down: 1 Daft, 2 Soupcon, 3 Beggar belief, 4 Entail, 6 Atoll, 7 Balhoo, 8 Mean business, 12 Adriatic, 15 Killing, 16 Wintry, 18 Terse, 19 Fast.

DOWN

- 1 Place where battle is fought (5)
- 2 Remaining after all deductions (3)
- 3 Flippant (4)
- 4 Lethal (6)
- 5 Exclusive possession (8)
- 6 On the other hand (4,5)
- 7 Badly affected (4,3)
- 11 Fundamentally (2,7)
- 13 Last (8)
- 14 Emptily prolix talker (7)
- 16 Way of access (6)
- 19 Barren region (5)
- 20 Way out (4)
- 23 Acknowledge (3)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 16, 2026, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 26
- Margshirsh Parvishtha 3
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 13, up to 10:22 pm
- Dhruva Yoga up to 9:07 pm
- Moola Nakshatra 1447
- Moon in Sagittarius sign

FORECAST

SUNSET: 07:19 HRS	FRIDAY 07:19 HRS	SATURDAY 07:19 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	09	06
New Delhi	22	05
Amritsar	09	06
Bathinda	16	04
Jalandhar	09	06
Ludhiana	12	06
Bhiwani	19	01
Hisar	13	01
Sirsa	18	07
Dharamsala	—	—
Manali	—	—
Shimla	18	07
Srinagar	09	-02
Jammu	10	04
Kargil	02	-10
Leh	01	-11
Dehradun	22	07
Mussoorie	18	07

TEMPERATURE IN °C

OPINION

 The
Hindu
Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

 Do not shoot
the messenger

Anders Antonsen stated the obvious. Delhi's poor air has caught the world's attention

Danish shuttler and world number 3, Anders Antonsen, has served a wake-up call to Indian authorities about what the future could become if Delhi's air pollution goes unchecked. Antonsen withdrew from the ongoing India Open after citing "extreme pollution" in the city. "I don't think it is a place to host a badminton tournament," Antonsen, a four-time World Championship medal-winner, said. Badminton federation officials can fret over the shuttler's brutal but honest assessment of the city air and slap a \$5,000 fine on him, but Antonsen is not the first to complain about the less-than-ideal conditions for playing sports in the national Capital, and he is unlikely to be the last.

In December 2017, an India-Sri Lanka cricket Test in New Delhi was interrupted multiple times after Sri Lankan players complained about breathlessness due to pollution. An India versus South Africa T20 match scheduled on December 17 in Lucknow was abandoned due to smog. The Commission for Air Quality Management recently wrote to the Delhi and NCR state governments to halt outdoor physical sports activities in schools due to poor air quality. The fact is that winter in northern India has become synonymous with poor air, smog, low visibility, and pollution-related ailments. As per the Sameer app, between November 1, 2025 and January 14 2026, Delhi logged a total of 53 "very poor" air days, eight "severe" air days and 14 "poor" air days. The Supreme Court's scathing remarks underline a public health emergency that city residents, having few other choices, are forced to bear with. It is preposterous to expect visitors to accept the situation as a *fait accompli*.

Where does this leave Delhi and NCR? Antonsen's action may have a cascading effect on Delhi's sporting calendar: The city may lose out on marquee events until pollution subsides. Venues in southern, western, or eastern India, which offer relatively better air, especially in winter, could be asked to host them. (The Central Pollution Control Board in December found that seven of the 10 most polluted cities in India were located in NCR.) Pollution in Delhi has ceased to be a domestic issue; it now threatens India's international reputation. And over time, it will reduce Delhi-NCR's appeal as a place to live and work. Breathable air needs to be viewed through the prism of the right to life, and its absence considered as life-threatening. Maybe the people who run the Capital will listen to the voice of a visitor over that of long-suffering citizens.

 Reimagining the
startup ecosystem

The government's flagship entrepreneurial support scheme, Startup India, marks its tenth anniversary on Friday. From 400 startups in 2016 to over 200,000 today, the mission has contributed to there being today 2.1 million jobs and 120 unicorns. Valued at over \$350 billion, these account for what is the world's third-largest startup ecosystem. This week, the government is expected to unveil the next iteration of the programme that puts future technologies front and centre. Such a pivot could not come sooner. India's startup success is dominated by consumer-facing services—food delivery, e-commerce, fintech—where India's scale and demand are a big advantage. It is what has driven models such as Zomato, Ola and PhonePe to success. But it also represents a stagnation: Indian entrepreneurs may have cracked the code of adapting existing tech to the country's massive domestic market, but few have forayed into foundational future technologies. From super-efficient batteries to cutting-edge AI models, today's most innovative and successful tech startups come from Silicon Valley or Shenzhen.

The government's pivot acknowledges a world where technology leadership is inseparable from national security, economic dominance, and strategic autonomy. Global semiconductor supply chains are being redrawn along geopolitical lines. AI development is concentrated in the US, whose sanctions can switch off essential services that many across the world have come to depend on. Defence, space, and quantum computing are no longer purely commercial pursuits but elements of national power.

India cannot remain merely a consumer of these technologies if it aspires to shape the coming decades. The shift toward deep tech and AI—with its emphasis on corporate engagement—could offer a practical pathway. The government has taken a crucial enabling step; India's entrepreneurs must now step up.

 A call to reenergise the
Indian space ecosystem

The recent PSLV setback shines a light on bottlenecks plaguing India's space programme and its potential debilitating impact on strategic choices

The failure of the PSLV-C62 launch is more than about the failure of a rocket or of the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro). This is the fifth Isro failure in the last seven years, but it should draw attention to wider problems disrupting the evolution of the Indian space domain as a national space power and as a combat force multiplier in the era of multi-domain operations.

Despite being the fourth-largest economy globally, a deeper examination of the Indian space ecosystem reveals that India is gradually falling behind traditional space powers, the US, China, Russia, EU and Japan, in all three areas of space—upstream, comprising satellite constellations, midstream, for fast-paced space data aggregation, and downstream, that covers revenue generation. India's focus on prestige programmes like Gaganyaan may have actually triggered a fall in the country holding the highest global small satellite launch share of 35% in 2017 to zero in 2024.

It was the US' activation of Selective Availability of GPS signals during the Kargil War that pushed India to develop NavIC, its own satellite navigation constellation. Since then, however, India has fallen behind. Despite the successful

launch of Isro's GSLV-F1 rocket in January 2025, an anomaly encountered in India's second generation NavIC satellite NVS-02 prevented it from being placed in the final orbit. Of the minimum seven NavIC satellites required, India today has only four fully functional ones and even out of these two are nearing the end of their life.

The three biggest bottlenecks for India in the commercial space domain are slowing launch frequency because of reliability concerns of launch rockets and limited launch facilities, delays in satellite production, and time running out for suitable orbital slots. While American and Chinese companies have made hundreds of thousands of International Telecommunication Union (ITU) filings to secure access to spectrum and orbital slots, India is late even in ITU filings.

Meanwhile, China's reforms of its satellite launch architecture have facilitated its South Asian expansion. In 2025, China launched four satellites for Pakistan, and a Chinese company, Piesat, entered into a 20-satellites deal worth \$406 million with Pakistan by cutting SUPARCO's (Pakistan's Isro equivalent) budget by 90%. Last year, China also launched a satellite for Nepal while a Nepalese satellite was lost in the Indian PSLV-C62 launch.

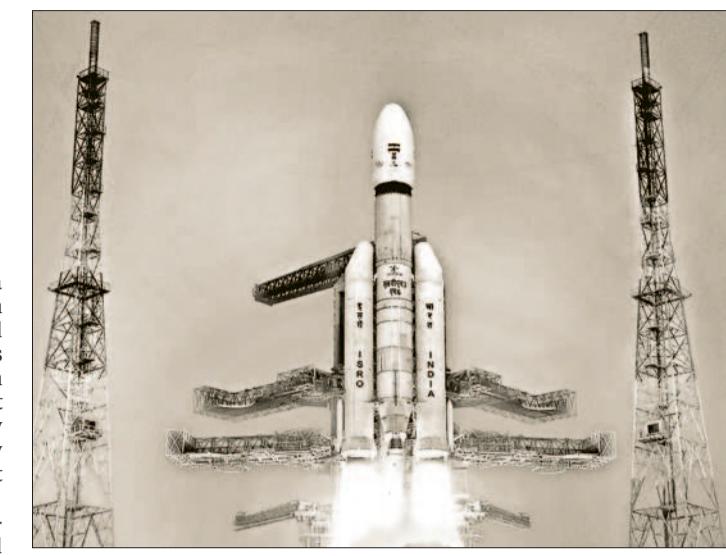
The strategic autonomy that Indian foreign policy keeps highlighting cannot be facilitated without data self-sufficiency or data sovereignty in the space domain. MapmyIndia's Mappls navigation software is better suited for Indian conditions than Google Maps, but most Indians still use the latter giving away data and revenue to an American corpo-

ration. This is in sharp contrast to China which has its own Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS), Beidou, and does not allow Google in its territory. As India inks satellite communication deals with Elon Musk's Starlink, it must not be forgotten that he selectively denied Starlink to Ukraine on many occasions when that country needed it the most.

Militarily, Operation Sindoore displayed India's critical dependence on American and other foreign remote sensing satellite constellations even as the data available was selectively delayed. China, on the other hand, reliably provided 129 civilian commercial satellite images of Palgham to Pakistan from January 1 to April

27, 2025, allowing the latter to plan the Palgham terrorist attack on April 22. India's first electronic intelligence (ELINT) experimental satellite has not led to formation-flying ELINT constellations due to the absence of a roadmap and funding. By contrast, it was China's ELINT array of 170-plus satellites across 15 constellations that allowed the Pakistani Air Force to claim they could electronically identify every IAF aircraft during Operation Sindoore.

Compared to Russia, the US and China, which all have separate military space forces, India's Defence Space Agency, raised only in 2019, remains a lower-ranked and inadequately empowered tri-service organisation, manned by non-specialists unlike in the other three other militaries. The three armed services and several agencies continue to work in compartmentalised data silos and are thus unable to stitch together a common operating picture, essential for



A deeper examination of the Indian space ecosystem reveals that India is gradually falling behind traditional space powers. AFP

military commanders to take correct and timely decisions. Even Pakistan has a space command under its Air Force—announced in 2021 and fully functional by 2024 and integrated with its cyber command.

The Chinese defence budget is three times that of India's and so a 3:1 ratio or even a 10:1 ratio in the satellite launch domain in China's favour—China's space programme falls under its military unlike the case in India—could have been considered reasonable. However, the asymmetry is much wider with a Chinese array of 396 remote sensing satellites out of the over thousand satellites operational in 2024. Even India's Space Based Surveillance-III plan for launching just 52 defence satellites by 2030 is likely to fall well short given its current launch frequency—only one defence satellite launched from 2023 to 2025. With Chinese launches for Pakistan, the latter is likely to soon have an important combat edge over India. Direct purchase of a foreign satellite with an Indian flag or launch of an Indian commercial satellite from foreign soil will make India slightly more self-reliant in the interim period than

daily dependence on foreign satellites for procurement of satellite images to monitor the rapid developments in its neighbours.

India's limited space assets are further threatened by qualitative and quantitative advancements in counter-space capabilities by China, and others. Chinese space-based manoeuvres near Indian satellites are not uncommon while their military's ground-based assets in Xinjiang and Tibet have attempted jamming of Indian satellites during the Galwan stand-off.

Atmanirbhar in the space domain is not a choice but a strategic essential for India. While Operation Sindoore has accelerated Indian induction of drones and other combat platforms, strategic clarity on space policies remains missing. Sindoore 2.0 is probably inevitable and so timebound accountability of stakeholders in the space ecosystem and certain critical decisions are absolutely essential.

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 Why nations must call out
Trump's transgressions

Although consistent with the long-term trend in American foreign policy, the US's invasion of Venezuela and abduction of its leader Nicolás Maduro, break from the pattern of recent years.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US had become less interventionist and more tolerant of ideological diversity in South America. More broadly, a wariness about foreign interventions took shape during the Obama years and was articulated clearly by President Donald Trump during his first presidency.

For instance, Trump's first two speeches at the United Nations General Assembly in 2017 and 2018 mount a strong defence of the principle of sovereignty of all nations. Both Trump and Joe Biden wanted to scale down American entanglements in the Muslim world, as illustrated in the withdrawal from Afghanistan. During his re-election campaign, Trump was critical not only of American involvement in the Ukraine war but also of America's "forever wars". In Riyadh in May last year, Trump railed against "neo-cons" who had "wrecked far more nations than they had built" by "intervening in complex societies that they did not even understand themselves". And it is likely that he resisted Israeli pressure to wage an expansive war of regime removal and State degradation in Iran, limiting direct American military involvement to bombings of Iran's nuclear sites in June last year.

So what explains the invasion, the kidnapping, and the plans to run Venezuela? It is surely about the control of Venezuelan energy, which will aid the US's bid for global AI dominance. But this didn't require invasion and abduction since Maduro had publicly stated his willingness to give America access to Venezuelan energy. It could be that the interventionists or the neocons within the administration prevailed over Trump. Or, it could be that Trump succumbed to the temptations of unchecked power at home and abroad, for few modern leaders have enjoyed the volume and quality of unrestrained capabilities to influence outcomes globally that Trump enjoys.

Whatever be the wellsprings of America's Venezuela-related actions, they can be understood mainly through three frames.

First, it is the latest in the classical pattern in international politics of the strong vanquishing the weak, the law of the fish or *mat-syanaya*. The actions repeat the past pattern of America's intervention in its neighbourhood to assert dominance, project power, and send a message of deterrence to its rivals near and far.

Second, since the US government has framed Maduro's abduction as a law enforcement action, it constitutes what Mahatma Gandhi called official lawlessness to describe the British use of legal provisions

to suppress Indians' legitimate national aspirations, including the right to demand freedom and sovereignty. America's use of its domestic law to justify the invasion and capture of a foreign country's leader almost certainly violates international law, including the sovereign rights of the Venezuelan State. And, the actions definitely bury the western notion of a rules-based international order, which America swore by until a little more than a year ago.

Finally, Trump's declaration that the US will "run" Venezuela—ostensibly because the country has been misgoverned—and control its energy resources—because Venezuelans haven't been efficient at extracting oil—marks the return of classical colonialism. Classical colonialism is a practice in which a foreign power occupies land, subjugates people, and exploits natural and human resources on the argument that the current rulers misgovern the country and do not represent the true aspirations of the people. It promises—as Trump has to Venezuelans—to do good by the people. This was the British template in India.

This mix of great power excess, violation of international law, and colonialism has an immediate precedent in

Israeli-American militarism in West Asia since October 2023. There, Israel has almost succeeded in its settler colonial project. It has executed a genocide in Gaza, impairing the possibility of future generations of healthy Palestinians in their homeland. It has laid out plans to ethnically cleanse Gaza of Palestinians even as it has de facto annexed the West Bank. Furthermore, to execute the final stage of its settler colonial project, Israel has, with American assistance, created a neighbourhood comprising pliant or complicit leaders running weak States with phantom sovereignty, whom Israel can or does bomb at will.

Zoom out and you will find across West Asia, North Africa and South America a large geography of imperialism in which two military hegemons, working in tandem, act as they please, extracting resources, colonising territory, and executing a genocide. If Trump's America has felt emboldened to invade and humiliate Venezuela, it is also because a majority of the leading powers of the world—including Europe, Russia, and China—have allowed Israel to get away with a lot worse. Impunity is thriving on impunity. Violation of State sovereignty is facilitating crimes against humanity, and the two could set global geopolitics into a tailspin. Between them, Israel and America have put Colombia, Canada, Greenland (and thus Denmark and Europe), Mexico, Cuba and Iran on notice. And speculation is rife that the US could also attack Iran. Everyone should take secretary of State Marco Rubio's warning to other States and leaders during the first official briefing following Maduro's abduction seriously and view it alongside Benjamin Netanyahu's regional rhetoric since late 2023.

The time for sovereign States of the world to hedge and equivocate is over. If they don't stand up to these crimes against humanity and aggression against States, they risk precipitating a dangerous, truly global crisis that will take a heavy toll.

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{ **ABBAS ARAGHCHI** } FOREIGN MINISTER, IRAN



Between war and diplomacy, diplomacy is a better way, although we don't have any positive experience from the United States. But still diplomacy is much better than war

Commenting on the need for de-escalation between Iran and US



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 Sheltering the homeless
as the temperature drops

This winter has been excessively cold for India with a sharper drop in temperatures across several parts of India than previous years, resulting in more frequent cold waves. This has spelled misery for many Indians living without adequate shelter or resources to withstand the cold. For the homeless, such temperature conditions could even prove a death sentence. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, more than 19,000 people lost their lives to cold waves between 1995-2020. In Delhi alone, the National Forum for Homeless Housing Rights estimated 474 deaths among the homeless last winter.

The management of cold waves relies on a coordinated effort between the Union and state governments. While Union government departments issue guidelines, circulars, and advisories, and allocate funds for disaster response and mitigation (including cold waves), state governments are primarily responsible for implementing these measures on the ground, along with their own initiatives. India also has a dedicated framework for cold wave management: The National Guidelines for Preparation of Action Plans for the Prevention and Management of Cold Waves and Frost 2021 (NDMA Guidelines), issued by the National Disaster Management Authority.

The NDMA guidelines provide a framework for states and districts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to cold waves by identifying vulnerable populations, issuing timely warnings, preparing action plans, and setting up shelters and relief facilities. Yet, among all these measures, the most urgent, i.e., providing a roof over people's heads during biting cold waves, often fails to receive the attention and urgency it deserves.

To address this challenge, many northern states, especially major cities like Delhi, set up temporary shelters each winter to protect the homeless during cold waves. However, both their availability and upkeep leave much to be desired.

The scale of homelessness in India far outstrips the capacity of these shelters. The 2011 Census recorded around 1.7 million homeless people nationwide, a figure widely regarded

as a gross underestimation. In Delhi alone, the Shahri Adhikar Manch estimates that nearly 300,000 people live in the open, numbers that existing night shelters simply cannot absorb. In 2024, for instance, the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) maintained night shelters with a total capacity of roughly 20,000 people, inadvertently leaving many to face the cold on the streets.

Even those who gained admission encountered shortages of blankets, food, water, and medicines. While this issue ultimately stems from the broader crisis of homelessness rather than the mere shortage of night shelters, immediate action on the latter is critical.

For this winter and the ones to come until homelessness is meaningfully reduced, ensuring adequate and functional shelters must remain a top priority for states. Firstly, there must be greater allocation of funds for night shelters. This year, DUSIB issued a ₹3.4 crore tender to establish 250 temporary shelters, which, along with the existing ones, are expected to accommodate around 20,000 people in total. But when the lives of likely hundreds of thousands are at stake, why can't this capacity be significantly expanded? Delhi and other states can also tap into the State Disaster Response and Mitigation Funds for this purpose.

Taking a step beyond merely establishing shelters, states must also focus on maintaining them effectively, ensuring they are adequately equipped and managed, with effective coordination between key departments such as health, police, public works, food, and housing. No other peril compares on a human level to the tragedy of people dying on the streets because of being exposed to intense cold.

As the Rajasthan High Court observed in May 2024, providing shelter, warm clothing, food, and medicine to the poorest of the poor is the bare minimum expected of a welfare state. At the very least, it is what must be done to prevent avoidable loss of life each winter.

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Exporting problems

China's record trade surplus ensures global turmoil will continue

Official statisticians in China have announced that the export superpower's trade surplus hit a record \$1.2 trillion in 2025. This is in spite of several headwinds, including domestic weaknesses, faltering global growth, and, of course, the new administration in the United States (US) clearly targeting Chinese exports. Most of the time, this might be seen as a sign of resilience on the part of an economy. But this is not one of those times. It is in fact an indicator of weakness at the top of the leadership in Beijing—an unwillingness or inability to restructure the country's economy in a manner that would provide long-term stability, resilience, and growth for both themselves and the world.

China's growth model ran out of steam some years ago. It is designed around state-directed investment and exports and financed by financial repression, in which households and workers save more than they need to and are forced by the state-controlled financial system to pass on the excess to the government. This investment-heavy and consumption-poor model necessitates a surplus of savings—which in macroeconomic terms almost guarantees a giant trade surplus. Beijing has had ample opportunities to address this, but it would require genuine political and economic reforms at home. Local governments and large state institutions would lose power when they no longer have excess savings to draw on. The private sector would grow in power, and the communist party's subjects would have more economic agency as householders and workers. They might even come to think of themselves as controllers of their own destiny rather than as recipients of the benefits of a state-run model. This would hardly be in the interests of the people who run the system. And thus it has repeatedly responded to successive crises through stimulus without rebalancing—pushing capital back into the creaking pipelines that once shored up its growth.

As a consequence, China is stuck on a treadmill. It must keep running and growing exports ever faster in order to squeeze out ever smaller amounts of growth. The consequences for international politics and for global development of this failure to reform have been severe. Populist politics has arisen in the US and elsewhere in the West as one consequence of it, destabilising the global trading system. Meanwhile, the natural ladder of development—in which countries climb up the value chain and then leave space for those poorer than them to take over low-end manufacturing—has been broken. China continues to dominate across the entire gamut of factory output, instead of leaving some for its poorer competitors. Left to itself, Chinese capital would flow out of the country to create competitors for its own exports. But regulations do not permit that to happen. Meanwhile, its own domestic demand remains subdued, and its consumers are not allowed to spend what they earn on global goods—the natural form of rebalancing.

This cannot and will not continue forever. It is in the nature of imbalances to lead to crises. US President Donald Trump's tariff war is one such crisis, although its effect has not been to force China to change its ways but merely to find mechanisms to divert its trade and covertly access Western markets anyway. The coming year will unquestionably see the multiplication of such crises, including in the developing world. This process will continue until the Chinese Communist Party changes course.

Rethinking affordable housing

Reforms in land, finance and rental market needed

India's challenge in urban housing does not stem just from inadequate access to credit or home-ownership schemes. Cities are failing to create conditions where it is economically viable to build affordable homes, pushing households into informal settlements, long commutes, and higher debt. A new NITI Aayog report on affordable housing attributes this collapse in supply to high land costs, restrictive planning norms, weak rental markets, regulatory delays, and the withdrawal of fiscal incentives. Resultantly, affordable housing has become a high-risk, low-return proposition for both developers and financiers. Over the past decade, the segment has attracted less than 8 per cent of flows into residential private equity while foreign funds accounted for just 10.2 per cent of inflows into the segment.

The recent data from Knight Frank and the National Real Estate Development Council (Naredco) underline the severity of the problem. Across India's top eight cities, the supply-to-demand ratio for homes priced below ₹50 lakh went down to 0.36 in the first half of 2025 from 1.05 in 2019. Meanwhile, the share of affordable housing in new supply has hit 17 per cent, plunging from over 50 per cent in 2018, signalling a structural retreat by real-estate developers from the segment. The shortage in urban affordable housing is estimated at 9.4 million units, with cumulative demand from economically weaker sections (EWS), lower-income groups (LIGs), and middle-income households projected to reach 30 million units by 2030.

The NITI Aayog's proposals amount to a long overdue reset in the affordable housing policy. At the centre is the suggested revival of Section 80-IBA of the Income-tax Act, which, between 2016 and 2022, allowed developers a full tax exemption on profits from approved affordable-housing projects. Bringing it back would improve project economics and restore a degree of policy certainty, which private developers have sorely missed. The report also recommends exempting from tax rental income and capital gains for affordable housing real-estate investment trusts (REITs), a step aimed at drawing institutional capital into a segment starved of long-term funding. It also suggests allowing the National Housing Bank (NHB) to issue tax-free bonds with funds channelled into concessionary lending for housing for EWS and LIGs, alongside a new long-term fund backed by the NHB and Housing and Urban Development Corporation. It also backs mandatory inclusionary zoning, requiring 10-15 per cent EWS/LIG housing in large residential and commercial projects. Additional measures include waivers on stamp duty and registration charges, exemptions on change-of-land-use charges, and incentives tied to using at least half the permissible floor area ratio for affordable units. Crucially, the report calls for treating rental housing as residential rather than commercial, with lower electricity and water tariffs.

Yet policy design is only half the battle. The success of these reforms will depend on implementation by states and cities. From 3D printed homes in Kenya to community engagement and collaborative financing models in Nepal, global best practices highlight that varied strategies can be scaled up to make housing affordable. Utilising public land for public housing projects, rationalising norms on the floor space index (FSI), investing in transport and infrastructure in peripheral areas, and building credible, technology-enabled housing data systems should complement the proposed incentives.

Hidden stars of Indian science



This book focuses on the achievements of five individuals (two of whom worked in tandem), roughly between 1875 and 1950. All of them were Indians, and they had significant scientific and technical feats to their credit, in different fields of bioscience. All of them were trained and educated in institutions established by the British rulers of the subcontinent, and they lived out their working lives during the era of British rule (though one of them did most of his work in the US). All of them struggled to overcome barriers of race and contended with

inadequate resources. Each of them succeeded to the extent that they managed to put together a very significant body of work. However, none of them got the recognition they deserved. Part of the problem may also be the generally ahistorical culture of India where things are badly documented, and archival records and data are pigeonholed and forgotten.

The authors are both trained in the biosciences so it is not surprising that they chose to focus on individuals who were working in those fields. The essays are buttressed by solid research and supported by meticulous footnotes.

However, the focus in the writing is less on the science and more on the socio-political environments in which these men worked, which was, of course, under British rule. And in all but one case, they worked as employees of British-run institutions. There is a strong nationalistic tinge to the presentation of these lives, to the point where it some-

times obscures the magnitude of their achievements. Also, the book employs the conventions of "faction", dramatising the narrative and embellishing it with plausible dialogue and the description of likely emotions at critical moments of their lives.

Also, in an apparent attempt to explain the context, each essay starts with a long exposition on the historical background. This can get tedious and some of it seems irrelevant. For example, the first essay on U N Brahmachari starts about 50 years before his birth in 1873 before coming to the prevalence of Kala Azar, the disease which was Brahmachari's principal battleground. The other essays have similar "slow-burn" introductions that can test readers' patience.

The other irritant is a stylistic tic—there are far too many adjectives and much over-amplification. To take an example at random: "The Ahom kingdom had been mercilessly rolled down a

steep slope of destruction."

The diligent reader who can get past these challenges will find much to engage with in this book and its fun going down the rabbit holes of footnotes and references. Brahmachari figured out how to combat Kala Azar, discovering a way to isolate urea stibamine from Antimony compounds. That drug was pretty much the only effective antidote to visceral leishmaniasis, to give the black fever its scientific name. It reduced mortality from 90 per cent to around 10 per cent, according to the authors.

The second essay is about Ram Nath Chopra, who discovered or rather rediscovered the therapeutic properties of sarpagandha. Chopra was among the few researchers who sought to discover and isolate the active ingredients of plants mentioned in the ayurveda tradition. He, along with Rustam Vakil, was among the first researchers to flag blood pressure variations as potentially life threatening. Reserpine, one of the drugs derived from sarpagandha, and later synthesised, is now a standard drug for hypertension.

The third essay features Azizul

Haque and Hem Chandra Bose. Haque and Bose were with the Bengal police when they were tasked with an analysis of fingerprints by the Inspector General, Edward Richard Henry. They developed a practical system of classification of fingerprints that made it possible to use these in forensic investigations. This pioneering work is called the Henry system however—he hogged the credit for presenting it to Scotland Yard, and only reluctantly acknowledged the fact that Bose and Haque had actually developed the system.

The fourth essay is by far the longest and Yellapragada Subbarao had the least conventional career trajectory. "Subbu" as he's referred to, ran away from home at age 12, was recaptured and returned to the custody of his overbearing mother. He qualified as a doctor, briefly flirted with becoming a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission, and was

more or less blackmailed into marrying into the family of a benefactor. Then he went to Harvard and spent the rest of his life in America.

He discovered the function of adenosine triphosphate (ATP) as an energy source in the cell, and led the department at Lederle Laboratories in which Benjamin Minge Duggar discovered chlortetracycline. He discovered folic acid as a cure for tropical sprue. He discovered methotrexate, a chemotherapy drug and diethylcarbamazine (DEC), the only effective drug for treating filariasis. That's an amazing body of work—many Nobels have been awarded for less. He was only 53 when he died.

Despite the flaws, this well-researched book is worth the effort of wading through. These are men who deserve recognition, belated though it may be.

hol excise to maintain revenue buoyancy. This creates the fundamental policy conflict: The need to reduce negative externalities versus the financial pressure to maximise tax revenue. The principled answer lies in shifting the state's objective from maximising revenue to *optimising revenue*. Optimisation means setting the tax rate not to fill a budget deficit, but to achieve a specific public policy outcome—internalising the negative externality.

The theoretically sound solution lies in applying the Pigouvian principle, namely to align the excise duty with the estimated economic value of the negative externality from alcohol consumption. Research and international best practices demonstrate that the most effective way to implement this is by fixing excise duty in *direct proportion* to the alcohol content of the beverage. This moves away from the confusing and arbitrary taxation based on the price of the beverage or category, and targets the source of the social risk—the ethanol itself. A high-alcohol spirit is taxed proportionally higher than a low-alcohol beer, creating a clear price signal that encourages consumers to choose beverages with lower alcohol content, thereby promoting responsible consumption.

Available evidence clearly demonstrates that India's current excise taxation structure is inverted, with lower-alcohol beverages taxed more heavily than higher-alcohol spirits when measured per unit of ethanol. On an average, beer is taxed 30-70 per cent higher per unit ethanol than whisky, reinforcing the argument that India's current alcohol taxation regime does not follow a harm-based or alcohol-content framework; instead, it structurally penalises lower-strength beverages while comparatively favouring higher-strength spirits.

Beyond taxation, the regulatory framework must be streamlined to ease compliance and improve consumer safety. The safety and standards of alcoholic beverages are already within the purview of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). State governments should align their production regulations with these established FSSAI standards. This alignment would allow for joint enforcement mechanisms, significantly easing the compliance burden on the industry, which currently faces overlapping and often conflicting demands from multiple state departments and central bodies.

Going forward, the new regulatory and taxation framework should, therefore, consist of five integrated elements:

1. The tax structure must be based solely on alcohol content in beverages.
2. Complete alignment with FSSAI standards for safety and quality.
3. Strict enforcement of locational norms (away from educational/religious sites) and minimum drinking age.
4. Easing and removal of all other arbitrary restrictions (like licence caps or production limits) to allow the market to determine efficient production and distribution.
5. The State steps back from acting as a revenue maximiser and focuses exclusively on its appropriate role as a regulator and guardian of public health.

By transitioning from a revenue-hungry, punitive regulatory regime to a principled framework that leverages optimal taxation and clear, targeted regulation, states can better reconcile their competing public interests.

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Alcohol regulation and the revenue trap

An optimal state policy must go beyond a revenue-hungry, punitive regulatory regime

To usher in 2026, alcohol consumption remained a centrepiece of festivities, with an estimated consumption of 12 to 15 million cases in India. In parallel, it took a near doubling of police deployment on the roads to bring about a 37 per cent drop in drunk-driving cases in Mumbai alone that night.

Governance of alcohol—its manufacture, distribution, sale, and taxation—remains one of the most fraught areas of public policy, sitting at the intersection of public health, social morality, and fiscal necessity. For an Indian state, the challenge is perpetual and profound: How does one responsibly manage a commodity that is simultaneously a major source of revenue and causes significant social harm?

The necessity for state intervention in the alcohol market begins with basic economics. Alcohol consumption is a classic case of *negative externalities*. The costs associated with consumption—public disorder, traffic accidents, domestic abuse, loss of productivity, and strain on public healthcare systems—are borne not just by the consumer, but by society at large. The price paid by the consumer in the market, therefore, does not reflect the true social cost of the good. Left entirely to the market, there will inevitably be over-consumption, leading to suboptimal social outcomes.

This foundational market failure calls for state intervention to internalise these social costs and mitigate the negative externalities. However, this imperative must be tempered by two considerations.

First, alcohol is not in the category of goods like heroin that call for complete prohibition. Its consumption, in moderation, is a matter of personal choice in most societies. Hence, the public policy goal should be not to ban, but to secure *informed and responsible consumption*.



AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM
K P KRISHNAN

In terms of economic size, excise collections constitute close to zero in prohibition states but rise up to around 1.5-2 per cent of gross state domestic product (GSDP) in high-dependence states such as Chhattisgarh and Telangana. Most other states fall between 0.5 per cent and 1.2 per cent of GSDP. Importantly, this fiscal pattern marks a sharp increase over the last 7-8 years, as the introduction of GST significantly reduced the number of independent tax instruments available to states, resulting in a steady structural shift towards greater reliance on non-GST sources, especially alco-

hol excise to maintain revenue buoyancy.

This creates the fundamental policy conflict: The need to reduce negative externalities versus the financial pressure to maximise tax revenue. The principled answer lies in shifting the state's objective from maximising revenue to *optimising revenue*. Optimisation means setting the tax rate not to fill a budget deficit, but to achieve a specific public policy outcome—internalising the negative externality.

Available evidence clearly demonstrates that India's current excise taxation structure is inverted, with lower-alcohol beverages taxed more heavily than higher-alcohol spirits when measured per unit of ethanol. On an average, beer is taxed 30-70 per cent higher per unit ethanol than whisky, reinforcing the argument that India's current alcohol taxation regime does not follow a harm-based or alcohol-content framework; instead, it structurally penalises lower-strength beverages while comparatively favouring higher-strength spirits.

Beyond taxation, the regulatory framework must be streamlined to ease compliance and improve consumer safety. The safety and standards of alcoholic beverages are already within the purview of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). State governments should align their production regulations with these established FSSAI standards. This alignment would allow for joint enforcement mechanisms, significantly easing the compliance burden on the industry, which currently faces overlapping and often conflicting demands from multiple state departments and central bodies.

Going forward, the new regulatory and taxation framework should, therefore, consist of five integrated elements:

1. The tax structure must be based solely on alcohol content in beverages.
2. Complete alignment with FSSAI standards for safety and quality.
3. Strict enforcement of locational norms (away from educational/religious sites) and minimum drinking age.
4. Easing and removal of all other arbitrary restrictions (like licence caps or production limits) to allow the market to determine efficient production and distribution.
5. The State steps back from acting as a revenue maximiser and focuses exclusively on its appropriate role as a regulator and guardian of public health.

By transitioning from a revenue-hungry, punitive regulatory regime to a principled framework that leverages optimal taxation and clear, targeted regulation, states can better reconcile their competing public interests.

The author is an honorary senior fellow at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy, and a former civil servant

India's invisible AI boom

By most official measures, India's productivity story looks calm. Output per worker rises slowly; wages inch up; efficiency appears steady. If these numbers were all one looked at, it would be reasonable to assume that the way work gets done in India has not changed very much.

That assumption is becoming harder to defend. Inside offices, call centres, software teams, and government departments, work is moving differently. Decisions are taken faster. Drafts are completed sooner. Errors are caught earlier. Coordination takes fewer rounds. None of this shows up clearly in gross domestic product (GDP) or labour productivity data. And yet, it is impacting everyday work.

India's headline productivity numbers barely register this change. There is no sudden jump in GDP. Wages have not surged. Labour productivity statistics show little sign of an "AI dividend." To many observers, this seems to confirm a familiar suspicion—that artificial intelligence (AI) is being oversold. That conclusion may be too quick. The problem may not be AI. The problem may be how productivity is measured.

Most productivity metrics were designed for an industrial economy in which intelligence was scarce, slow, and closely tied to human labour. Output rose when firms hired more workers, installed more machines, or extended working hours. AI does not fit neatly into that model. It delivers cognitive assistance without adding labour or time in the usual way. As a result, many of its effects pass through organisations without appearing clearly in the statistics.

This puzzle is not unique to India. In the United States, labour productivity growth has averaged around 1-1.5 per cent a year for more than a decade,

with no obvious acceleration even after the widespread release of generative AI tools in late 2022. This is striking because adoption has been unusually fast. By 2024, nearly a third of US workers were already using generative AI at work.

High adoption, modest productivity growth—that tension now sits at the centre of the global AI debate. Look more closely, however, and the picture becomes less puzzling. At the level of individual tasks, AI's impact is often substantial. Field experiments in customer support show average productivity gains of around 14 per cent, rising to over 30 per cent for newer or less-experienced workers, while response quality improves, error rates fall, and employee attrition declines. Studies of management consultants report faster task completion and smoother coordination.

These are meaningful gains, but they rarely translate into higher measured output. Firms use them to shorten turnaround times, reduce training costs, standardise responses, and smooth internal workflows. The number of calls handled or reports filed often stays the same. Output appears flat. Work changes underneath.

India is already seeing this pattern. Large IT services firms report 20-30 per cent reduction in coding and testing time in selected workflows using generative AI. Yet billed effort and overall revenue growth remain subdued. Faster delivery is absorbed into fixed-price contracts, margin protection, and quality control rather than expanded output.

From the perspective of national accounts, little seems to happen. The reason is fairly simple. AI mostly saves time, not labour. It speeds up drafting, searching, debugging, summarising, and decision-making. Productivity statistics, however, are built to capture changes in output per hour worked, not

changes in how quickly uncertainty is resolved or coordination improves.

There is another blind spot. Productivity analysis focuses on averages. AI's most consistent effect is on variation. Lower-performing workers tend to improve the most. Error rates fall. Outcomes become more predictable. For firms, reliability and consistency often matter as much as higher average output. Official statistics barely shows these takes.

Economic history offers a reminder. In the early decades of electrification, productivity growth remained weak because factories initially used electric motors as direct replacements for steam engines. Only when production was reorganised around electricity did productivity surge, decades later. In 1987, economist Robert Solow observed that computers were visible everywhere except in the productivity data. The computer-driven productivity boom arrived only in the late 1990s, once organisations adapted.

AI appears to be following a similar path. It is altering work faster than it is boosting measurable output. For India, this matters. The country's growth strategy increasingly depends on digital public infrastructure, services exports, and the productivity of its large working-age population. AI is already present across these domains. But its early gains will mostly appear as faster workflows, fewer errors, and tighter coordination, not as immediate jumps in output per worker.

AI is unlikely to announce itself through a dramatic spike in GDP. It will arrive more softly, through small changes that accumulate over time.

The real risk is not that AI will fail to transform India's economy. The risk is that it already is—while our measurement systems continue to look the other way.

The author is a theoretical physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US. His forthcoming book is called *Last Equation Before Silence*

OPINION

The next five reforms India needs

They can help ensure that India remains on a high-growth trajectory over the next two decades



AMITABH KANT

For the first half of this year, India has grown at 8 per cent, defying most expectations. Despite volatility in global trade and tariffs, India's exports grew by nearly 20 per cent in November. With reforms in the goods and services tax, the removal of several quality control orders, the reports of committees on deregulation, and the crucial implementation of the labour codes, these structural reforms raise India's potential growth rate. Currently, Parliament is debating important bills on private participation in nuclear energy and 100 per cent foreign direct investment in the insurance sector.

Clearly, the reform agenda is not running out of steam. We must keep this reform momentum going. We must not be satisfied with 8 per cent growth rates for successive quarters — we need them for the next two decades.

History shows that only a handful of economies, such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and China have achieved such long, uninterrupted growth cycles. India now has the macro-stability, digital backbone and institutional capacity to attempt this leap. We must raise productivity, lower costs, deepen markets and strengthen our cities.

BUDGET
2026-27
VIEW

heavily dependent on imports for many of these components, exposing us to supply chain risks and undermining strategic autonomy. We must bet big on green and digital manufacturing. Continued investments in infrastructure are essential, as world-class infrastructure and urban ecosystems enable manufacturing to thrive. Blended finance, de-risking

These are the five reforms that India needs:

First, municipal reform. We cannot let our cities choke on pollution and overflow with waste anymore. While Global Capability Centres are expanding rapidly, their future scale depends on cities that offer clean air, reliable infrastructure, efficient urban transport and responsive local governance. The Budget last year announced the creation of an urban challenge fund, worth ₹1 trillion. This must be operationalised at the earliest. Climate risk must be a central part of urban planning, with clean mobility and efficient buildings mainstreamed. Implementing circular economy solutions around water and waste is crucial not just for sustainability but also for public health. Fixing urban governance will make urbanisation a productivity multiplier.

Second, to continue building our manufacturing depth, the Clean Tech Manufacturing Mission and the National Manufacturing Mission, announced in the Budget, must be operationalised at the earliest. We must build our capabilities in the technologies that are defining global industrial competition. Technologies such as semiconductors, solar PVs, batteries, electrolyzers and critical minerals are as much a technological flashpoint as they are a geopolitical one. Today, India remains

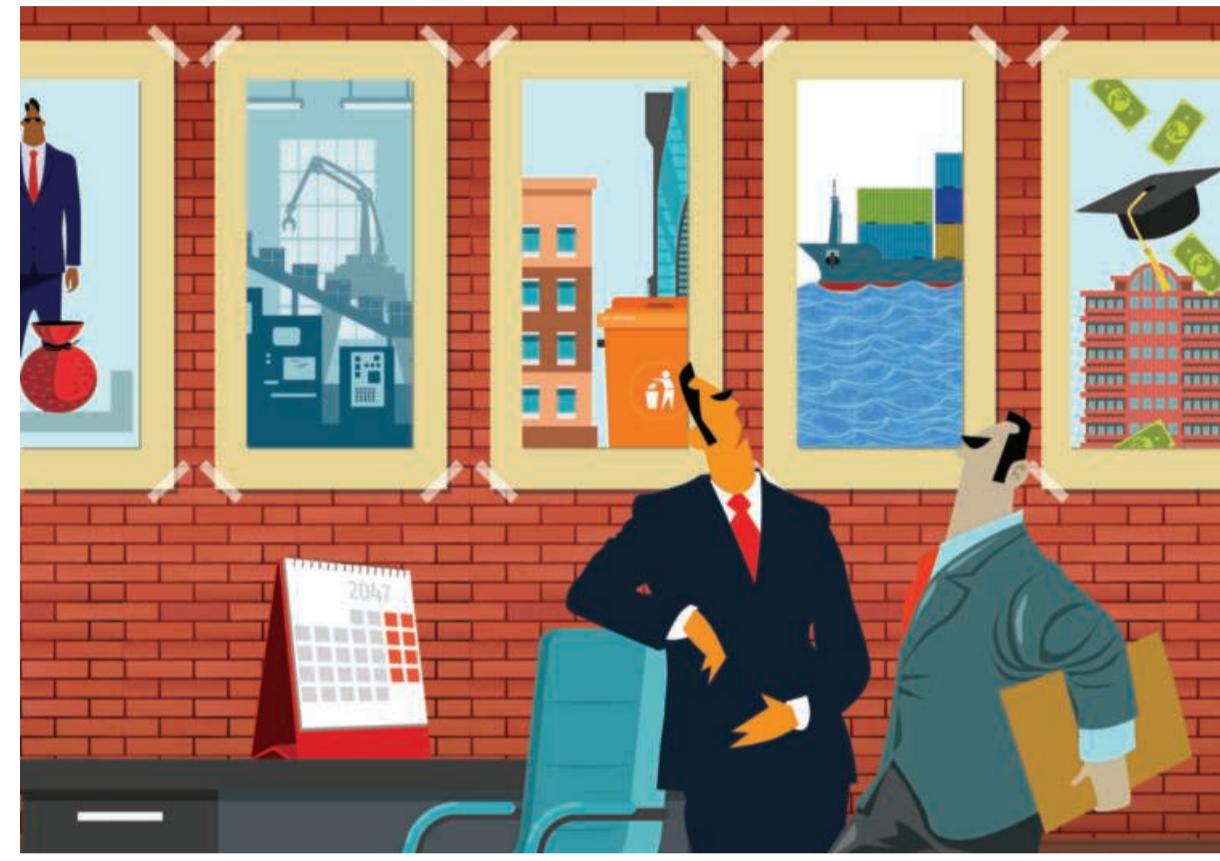


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

instruments and modern public-private partnerships (PPP) contracts can crowd in significant private capital to help overcome India's infrastructure deficit.

Third, we must reduce trade barriers. India's manufacturing and export ambitions require a clear recognition of a simple reality: To export competitively, India must import efficiently. Customs reforms are an important area of reform, as identified by the finance minister. Faster clearances, risk-based inspections, and a shift to trust-based compliance should be the desired outcomes of this reform exercise. Reducing trade

barriers also means fast-tracking negotiations of free trade agreements (FTAs). We must accelerate FTA negotiations while clearly protecting our red lines, particularly in agriculture and sensitive sectors. Speed matters. Manufacturing ecosystems need assured access to large markets to achieve scale, attract investment, and integrate into global supply chains. Trade policy should be seen as an instrument of growth.

Fourth, innovation policy must be reoriented from grants to mission-driven development. A dedicated national programme that provides grants of \$1 million to 500 academics

from the world's top universities will attract the best minds. In parallel, a sabbatical programme inviting 1,000 academics to support them with grants of \$100,000, with top-ups, will promote knowledge transfer and ecosystem development. Commercial innovations are a blind spot in our innovation ecosystem owing to a lack of industry-academia partnerships. Global models, such as the Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG) at the University of Warwick, UK, are a pertinent example. The WMG conducts industrial research, offers degrees, and supports small businesses. Notably, they have partnered extensively with

the Tata Group, including through Tata Motors. Such centres must be established nationwide, starting with the Institutes of Eminence.

The government must not just fund research, but also become a buyer of technology. Putting out grand challenges, ranging from sewage-free cities and real-time water quality monitoring to indigenous clean-energy batteries, precision digital support for farmers, and radically faster urban infrastructure delivery, can help scale these solutions and expand their applicability across the Global South.

Finally, we must lower the cost of capital in the economy. The average cost of capital in India is 400 to 600 basis points higher than in other large economies. To reduce the cost of capital, fiscal consolidation is a must. If the government borrows a sizable chunk of available capital, whether at the Centre or the State level, the remaining capital in the economy becomes more expensive. Institutional mandates ensure that government debt is bought up. Take, for instance, the statutory liquidity ratio (SLR), which mandates that 18 per cent of all bank assets must be held in government securities. Similar provisions exist for insurance companies, too. There must be a phased rollback of the SLR to free up capital and lower borrowing costs. At the same time, the deepening of bond markets will allow more corporate debt to be raised through bonds rather than loans.

Sustaining 8 per cent-plus growth rates is necessary if we are to reach high-income status by 2047. Our foundations: Macroeconomic stability, digital public infrastructure and structural reform, are firmly in place. We must match the boldness of our vision with execution.

The author is chairperson, Fairfax Centre for Free Enterprise, former G20 Sherpa and Ex-CEO, NITI Aayog, Govt of India. Views are personal

OPINION

India's manufacturing renaissance

The architecture of a new industrial era is being shaped by sustained political leadership and long-term institutional thinking



ONKAR KANWAR

For much of independent India's economic history, manufacturing was spoken about more as a potential than an outcome. The ambition was always there. Execution, less so. Fragmented infrastructure, policy uncertainty, and an ecosystem that made scale hard to sustain all played their part. Logistics was something to be endured rather than leveraged. Manufacturing mattered, everyone agreed — yet it often sat on the periphery of national strategy.

That reality has changed. And not quietly.

Over the past decade, under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has seen a governance-led shift that has brought manufacturing back to the centre of economic thinking. What sets this phase apart is not just intent, but clarity and follow-through.

Manufacturing is no longer an add-on to growth plans — it is increasingly part of how India sees itself as a country that builds, produces, and competes.

From intent to infrastructure

The most significant defining aspect of the Modi government has been the redefinition of the state's role in economic development. Instead of managing enterprise, the emphasis has been on building the conditions in which enterprise can thrive. This is not always visible in headlines, but it is deeply felt by industry.

Manufacturing does not scale on announcements. It scales when supply chains move predictably. When inputs arrive on time. When finished goods reach markets without friction. And when capacity planning can be done with confidence.

The government's sustained push on infrastructure, championed consistently by Prime Minister Modi, has addressed constraints industry struggled with for decades. Highways, freight corridors, port modernisation, and logistics integration have reduced friction across supply

chains. Initiatives such as the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan reflect an understanding at the highest level that modern manufacturing depends on coordination, speed, and visibility. Infrastructure, in this context, is not just an asset. It is a strategic enabler.

Industrial policy with clarity

Industrial policy has also undergone a clear shift in philosophy. Under Modi's visionary leadership, the move away from broad subsidies towards outcome-linked support has been deliberate. The Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes are a clear expression of this thinking.

Rather than protecting inefficiency, the approach rewards performance and scale. This is a strong and unambiguous signal to both global and domestic industry: India is prepared to compete, and it will support those willing to commit capital and capability.

The response across electronics, pharmaceuticals, automotive components, and advanced manufacturing suggests that this clarity was both timely and necessary. For manufacturing leaders, policy consistency is critical. Long gestation investments depend on predictability, and the continuity of direction under the Modi government has enabled enterprises to plan beyond short political or economic cycles.

Digitalisation as a silent multiplier

Another hallmark of the Modi era has been the expansion of digital public infrastructure. Platforms such as Aadhaar, UPI, and integrated digital compliance systems have quietly reshaped how businesses interact with the state and with each other.

For manufacturing enterprises, particularly micro, small and medium enterprises, this digital backbone has reduced transaction costs and simplified compliance. Processes that once required time, intermediaries, and discretion are now more transparent and efficient. This reduction of friction may not dominate speeches, but it has materially improved ease of doing business.

Digitalisation has also widened participation. Smaller enterprises can now access formal supply chains, capital, and markets with an ease that was hard to imagine a decade ago. In that sense, digital public infrastructure has become one of the Modi government's most effective industrial enablers.

People at the centre of production

Manufacturing ultimately succeeds or fails on the strength of its people. This re-

ognition has increasingly informed policy choices under Prime Minister Modi, particularly in the emphasis on skilling and workforce readiness.

For a country with India's demographic profile, this alignment is essential. The growing focus on vocational training, industry-linked skilling programmes, and capability development is beginning to translate demographic potential into productive capacity. Precision skills, quality awareness, and technical competence are no longer optional. They are becoming the norm.

This shift also restores dignity to industrial work. Manufacturing today offers learning, mobility, and long-term career pathways. As skills deepen, competitiveness improves, reinforcing the link between people, productivity, and global relevance.

A shared responsibility

What is unfolding is not the result of government action alone. Even under decisive leadership, policy can only set direction and build platforms. Enterprise must still invest, innovate, and execute.

The strength of the current phase lies in this alignment between public intent, articulated clearly by Prime Minister Modi, and private capability responding at scale. India remains among the fastest-growing major economies in the world, and manufacturing will be central to sustaining that momentum, particularly as global supply chains diversify.

This opportunity, however, demands discipline. Execution, quality, and competitiveness will determine outcomes. The foundations have been laid with intent and foresight. What follows will test both institutions and industry.

Beyond a moment

This is not a phase, nor a slogan-driven spike. It is the early architecture of a new industrial era shaped by sustained political leadership and long-term institutional thinking. When vision is matched with execution, and when governance and enterprise move in step, manufacturing becomes more than an economic activity. It becomes a nation-building force.

India has arrived at such a moment. The opportunity is real. The foundations are visible. And the responsibility, unmistakably, is shared. The Prime Minister has created the environment and conditions; it is for us in industry to build on it and take the country forward.

Onkar Kanwar is the chairman of Apollo Tyres Ltd

NAME OF COMPANY: STARSOURCE MULTITRADE LIMITED
(formerly Chemo Pharma Laboratories Ltd)

Registered Office of the Company: 5 Kumud Apartment CHS Ltd, Karnik Road, Chikan Ghar, Kalyan, Dist Thane 421 301, MS, India CIN No L99999MH1942PLC003556
Email: chemopharmalaboratorieslimited@gmail.com Phone: 022-22078382
NOTICE is hereby given that the following share certificates issued by the Company have been lost/misplaced and the holder of the said securities/applicant has applied to the Company for issuance of duplicate share certificates.

Name of Shareholder : Ravindra Somani, Folio No 001324, FV Rs.10/- each, Total 47411 shares

SR NO	CERTIFICATE NO	NO OF SHARES	DISTINCTIVE RANGE FROM	DISTINCTIVE RANGE TO
01	3141 to 3159	937	0141025	0141961
02	3287 to 3296	500	0147543	0148042
03	3361 to 3363	2627	0150846	0153472
04	3382 to 3396	15000	0154173	0169172
05	3411	385	0183173	0183557
06	3490 to 3494	4625	0187455	0192079
07	3646 to 3661	14380	0208401	0222780
08	5053 to 5056	3125	0478178	0481302
09	5067	3332	0481697	0485028
10	5114 to 5116	2500	0488973	0491472

The public are hereby warned against purchase or dealing in any way with the above share certificates. Any person who has any claim in respect of the said share certificates should lodge such claim with the Company above mentioned within 15 days of publication of this Notice after which no claim will be entertained and the Company will proceed to issue with the duplicate share certificates.

Place: Mumbai
Sd/-
Date: 16/01/2026
Ravindra Somani

Public Notice TATA STEEL LIMITED Registered Office : 24 Horni Mody Street, Fort, MUMBAI – 400 001			
NOTICE is hereby given that Certificate for the under mentioned Securities of the Company has been lost / misplaced and the holders of the said Securities/ applicants have applied to the Company to issue duplicate certificate.			
Any person who has a claim in respect of the said Securities should lodge such claim with the Company at its Registered Office within 15 days from this date, else the Company will proceed to issue duplicate Certificate without further intimation.			
Names of the Holders Kind of Securities & face value No of Securities From To Dilip Jayantilal & Indira D. Thakkar 44400 Shares of Re. 1 each 44400 Shares 60058141 to 60102540 Dilip Jayantilal & Indira D. Thakkar Names of Holders			
Mumbai : 16th January 2026			

BLUE CHIP INDIA LIMITED (CIN : L65991WB1993PLC060597)	
Registered Office : 10 Princep Street, 2nd Floor, Kolkata – 700072, West Bengal, India	
Email : bluechipindialimited@gmail.com; Website : www.bluechipind.com; Tel: 91-33-4002 2880	
NOTICE OF EXTRA-ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING	
Notice is hereby given that the Extra-Ordinary General Meeting ("EGM") of the Company will be held on Friday, 06th February 2026 at 03.00 p.m. through VC/OAVM to transact the businesses, as set forth in the notice of the meeting.	
In compliance with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs ("MCA") Circular No. 20/2020 dated May 05, 2020 and Circular no. 02/2021 dated January 13, 2021 read with Circular Nos. 14/2020 and 17/2020 dated April 08, 2020 and April 13, 2020 respectively (collectively referred to as "MCA Circulars") and Securities and Exchange Board of India ("SEBI") vide its Circular No. SEBI/HO/CFD/CMD1/CIR/P/2020/79 dated May 12, 2020 and Circular No. SEBI//HO/CFD/CMD2/CIR/P/2021/11 dated January 15, 2021 (collectively referred to as "SEBI Circulars"), the Notice of EGM has been sent in electronic mode to Members whose email IDs are registered with the Company or the Depository Participant(s). The copy of the Notice of EGM will also be available on the Website of the Company i.e. www.bluechipind.com , websites of the Stock Exchange i.e. BSE Limited at www.bseindia.com , NSE at www.nseindia.com , CSE at www.cse-india.com and on the website of CDSL (agency for providing the Remote e-Voting facility) helpdesk.evoting@cDSLindia.com .	
In compliance with Section 108 of the Companies Act, 2013 read with Rule 20 of the Companies (Management and Administration) Rules, 2014, as amended from time to time, Regulation 44 of the BSE ("Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements") Regulations, 2015 ("Listing Regulations") and Secretarial Standard - 2 on General Meetings issued by The Institute of Company Secretaries of India, the Company is pleased to provide the facility to Members to exercise their right to vote by electronic means on resolutions proposed to be	



OUR VIEW



Deadlines and red lines need sharp cost control

Management involves goal orientation, but as the cases of 10-minute delivery in India and America's warnings to Iran show, its complexity multiplies once human costs are factored in

Long before B-schools began to sprout, 'management' referred to a bunch of people in charge of an establishment, not a discipline. The word made its debut in academia only after basic principles got codified. Frederick Winslow Taylor, an early exponent, said it was about organizing work for optimal results. As a concept, it got a fillip from Peter Drucker, who expanded the scope of its role and laid special emphasis on clearly defined objectives. And as it gained ground, goal orientation began to get around as its primary lesson. Today, targets stare at us from everywhere, be it at work or play, plans for the next hour or the rest of one's life. Success often involves crunched timelines, stiff deadlines and thin red lines. Most of these are harmless, regardless of how strictly they're set. But if they happen to put lives at risk, then it is another matter altogether. Two cases in this week's news, one local and the other global, pose tests of leadership wisdom. Both argue for human costs to be factored into key decisions on what's being managed.

The first under management is a deadline. This week, Blinkit reportedly rolled back its 10-minute delivery promise upon being urged by India's labour ministry to do so. Rival platforms are expected to follow. This speaks well of their public spirit. After all, snappily met home orders have been the key selling point of quick commerce, a market that arose on the back of crushed response times. By design, the gap between an app swipe and doorbell ring was to be closed by algorithmic efficiency and dark-store networks, with road safety left to state enforcers. Yet, the risks borne by delivery agents in a scramble to deliver their wares has made it a job-hazard issue across urban zones

of traffic chaos, which explains the Centre's nudge to relax targets. Granted, Q-com players cannot afford to slacken off, let alone abandon their business model. Even so, since every life and limb counts, an ease-up on the clock must not end up as an empty gesture. As an earnest effort, gig platform managers could deploy safety drives and campaigns aimed at a consensual reset of market norms (if not traffic). The other thing under management, a matter of global consequence, is a red line. This is not a literal tick-down of time, but a do-not-cross limit set by the US for protestor blood shed in Iran, beyond which the White House had warned it's "locked and loaded" for action. What began as a thin red line has thickened over the week as the Iranian toll of street deaths has spiked under Tehran's crackdown. While America's leader has signalled that "help" is on its way, Uncle Sam's greater goal looks like regime change, which means the stakes are very high in terms of lives at risk. The US calculus would need to include inputs like the likelihood of faulty intel on the nuclear threat of an adversary that might opt to fight till the end. Even if the odds suggest that surgical strikes can safely be carried out to weaken the Iranian regime's grip on power, the eventual death toll likely to be notched up cannot be kept off scenario maps of the future. Human costs count and need to be minimized. In such delicate situations, haste could prove costly, especially if the line between goal orientation and goal fixation gets blurred.

Management, clearly, is far too complex to be stuffed into a nutshell. But for pithy advice, let's recall Drucker again. Put every assumption to scrutiny, he advised, or goal-setting could become delusional.

VRUNDA BANSODE & VEDA KULKARNI



are, respectively, founder CEO and chief technology officer at Impactica.org

For a long time, we have been banking on India's demographic dividend, or the fact that we have a high proportion of young people in our population. For this demographic dividend to fulfil its economic potential, young citizens need to be skilled and employable. But we have some catching up to do—45% of children are not proficient in basic literacy and numeracy at the end of primary education, and our universities do not make it to global research leadership charts. We cannot hope to achieve our Viksit Bharat goal without closing learning gaps. The primary route to do so is through education and training institutions.

India has achieved nearly universal enrolment—most children of school-going age are enrolled in schools. Our government schooling system is vast, educating 121.6 million children in the more than 1 million publicly run schools. Another 125.3 million children—more than half the total—study in 457,000 private schools, which form the world's third-largest schooling system by

themselves. In all, these one-and-a-half million schools oversee the education of just under a fifth of the world population under 15 years of age. In other words, our private schools are responsible for educating 9-10% of the world's future workforce.

Surprisingly, however, we have scarce data on who exactly bears this responsibility. Private schools in India are mandatorily run by non-profit institutions, which can be registered as trusts, societies or Section 8 companies. We do not have any publicly available registry of these trusts, societies and not-for-profit companies.

The ethos of any institution is heavily influenced by the people who lead and manage it. Yet, we have no public visibility of these behind-the-scenes institutions, let alone a mechanism for their accountability.

We worry about school infrastructure, costs borne by parents, learning outcomes, world rankings and more, but are left largely clueless about who runs private schools in India. Most schools are affiliated to one of the country's three major boards—state, Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE), leaving aside minuscule ones. Over 400,000 private schools are affiliated with 30 or so different state boards. Although

some states have placed lists of schools and associated non-profit entities in the public domain, the quality and comprehensiveness of this information varies widely from one state to another. No central nationwide list is available that links state-board school names with the trusts that run them.

This lack of information is also true of India's 5,000-odd ICSE schools. CBSE, which has 31,740 affiliated schools, does have a portal called Saras that offers school-wise information. However, in many cases, the column stating the name of the institution that runs the school is filled with junk data or typo-ridden names; clearly, data collection was not followed by verification.

A simple system of connected databases that link the names of schools with those of associated non-profit entities, as verified against the database of registered non-profits, could solve the issue of structural opacity and make their governance easier. Parents

will also be able to verify the credentials of the schools they want their children to attend and the institutions behind them.

After school, over a quarter of India's 18-23 age group goes on to higher education in colleges and universities. We have 1,338 universities, which include central, state, deemed and private ones. Universities in India also operate as not-for-profit institutions. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has published guidelines on 'public self-disclosure' by higher-education institutions, emphasizing its importance under the

National Education Policy 2020. We recently looked for this information on the websites of varsities ranked in the top 100 under the National Institutional Ranking Framework. The website quality of even top-rated universities leaves much to be desired. Keeping aside the quality of information available, even the mandatory criteria for transparent disclosures that UGC demands is met by barely 60% of

our top universities. The Supreme Court has recently ordered a nationwide audit of all private and deemed universities. Rather than being a one-off exercise, it should lead to the annual collection and publication of standardized information.

In the world of economics, statistics and business, we have benchmarks and best practices for most parameters that go into situational and progress reports. But for the world's third-largest schooling system—India's private schools—a search for elementary data that would let us track variables like the average number of schools run by trusts, or their average annual budget, lead to no answers. Higher-education data is not much better. If we do not know the state of this sector, how can we make policy decisions that lead to progress? How can we reap the rewards of our demographic dividend if we have no idea who exactly is responsible for nurturing children through their education and skill development for employability?

We need accurate data, closely monitored indicators and well-connected systems for regulatory oversight to be exercised properly. The potential of our human capital is our biggest asset. It's time for transparency, accountability and clarity in the operations of the institutions we entrust this asset with.

GUEST VIEW

Powell probe: Is this the Federal Reserve's Versailles moment?

Public-project budget overruns are routine but tiny compared to what lost US credibility could cost



KRISHNAN RANGANATHAN
is a former executive director, Nomura, and a member of the visiting faculty at various B-schools in India.

flicted. The central bank reportedly chose to add square footage for an underground staff car park and a tunnel linking the two buildings. Critics note that 500 parking spaces could have been leased nearby for roughly \$30 million. Instead, the subterranean option is estimated to cost nearly 10 times that. This is not cost discipline at its finest. Yet, comparisons with London, where civil servants and Bank of England staff are expected to take public transport, are tempting but misleading. Washington is not London: public transport is patchy and onsite parking is common in federal Washington.

This pattern has a name. Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner in *How Big Things Get Done* call it the Iron Law of Megaprojects. Their dataset spans more than 16,000 projects across 136 countries. Only 8.5% hit both cost and time targets. Just 0.5% managed cost, time and benefits simultaneously. The lesson is clear and scary: over budget, over time and short of benefits—over and over again. It afflicts almost every project and America is not alone.

The European Central Bank's headquarters in Frankfurt arrived three years late and exceeded its original budget by €350 million. NASA's James Webb Space Telescope ran seven years late and its final cost was an astronomical

QUICK READ

Cost overruns in public projects the world over are a rule rather than an exception, a result of plans that prioritize approval over implementation. Fed renovations fit the pattern.

The Fed's spending could be called extravagant but the US investigation risks serving the interests of anyone looking to undermine the dollar's status as the world's reserve currency.

JUST A THOUGHT

Our demographic dividend is our strength. The youth have what it takes to engage with the latest technology.

NARENDRA MODI

GUEST VIEW

Just who is in charge of India's demographic dividend?

VRUNDA BANSODE & VEDA KULKARNI



are, respectively, founder CEO and chief technology officer at Impactica.org

For a long time, we have been banking on India's demographic dividend, or the fact that we have a high proportion of young people in our population. For this demographic dividend to fulfil its economic potential, young citizens need to be skilled and employable. But we have some catching up to do—45% of children are not proficient in basic literacy and numeracy at the end of primary education, and our universities do not make it to global research leadership charts. We cannot hope to achieve our Viksit Bharat goal without closing learning gaps. The primary route to do so is through education and training institutions.

India has achieved nearly universal enrolment—most children of school-going age are enrolled in schools. Our government schooling system is vast, educating 121.6 million children in the more than 1 million publicly run schools. Another 125.3 million children—more than half the total—study in 457,000 private schools, which form the world's third-largest schooling system by

themselves. In all, these one-and-a-half million schools oversee the education of just under a fifth of the world population under 15 years of age. In other words, our private schools are responsible for educating 9-10% of the world's future workforce.

Surprisingly, however, we have scarce data on who exactly bears this responsibility. Private schools in India are mandatorily run by non-profit institutions, which can be registered as trusts, societies or Section 8 companies. We do not have any publicly available registry of these trusts, societies and not-for-profit companies.

The ethos of any institution is heavily influenced by the people who lead and manage it. Yet, we have no public visibility of these behind-the-scenes institutions, let alone a mechanism for their accountability.

A reliable registry of schools showing links with operators will help policymakers and parents alike. The potential of our human capital is such a valuable asset that we can't afford any neglect.



THEIR VIEW

Data governance failures are too costly: Here's what must be done

Mastering how best to govern data isn't just about safety. A variety of benefits can combine to spell a competitive advantage



ARPINDER SINGH & HARSHAVARDHAN GODUGULA
are, respectively, India and emerging markets leader, and partner, forensics and integrity services, at EY.

It wasn't long ago that a multinational firm faced multiple compliance failures spanning several years that resulted in billions of dollars in fines for lapses in risk management and other critical areas. This served as a stark warning to organizations worldwide: the cost of non-compliance and poor data governance is non-negotiable.

The scenario in India is not very different. As regulatory penalties soar into hundreds of crores, Indian organizations now face an unprecedented convergence of regulations; a single incident can trigger action under multiple regulatory frameworks within hours. The risks are not just regulatory. Flawed data governance practices not only disrupt business operations, but also result in inaccurate reporting, delayed decision-making and impaired customer trust.

Yet, most still operate with a 'we'll find it when we need it' approach to data management, even though such an attitude can prove financially and operationally catastrophic.

Why do organizations struggle? In our experience, the core issues that lead an organization's data governance to fail, often lie in outdated, fragmented technology and decades of underinvestment in building a strong governance backbone. Often, organizations that are undergoing massive restructuring exercises with multiple mergers or acquisitions are the ones that fall prey. On the other hand, organizations with legacy IT systems with an under-evolved risk environment remain vulnerable.

When organizations begin to reassess governance frameworks, uncover vulnerabilities and strengthen their technology infrastructure, they start recognizing drawbacks of the siloed approach they have always taken. They find it has prevented scale, which, coupled with manual processes and controls, results in weak cyber defences. Moreover, data stored in different formats makes it difficult to establish a unified data governance framework. As a result, organizations often rely on technology to compensate for poor data governance.

Data governance failures represent a strategic and not just regulatory risk: Preventing such failures isn't about deploying more technology, but about embedding integrated, business-aligned governance capabilities across the organization. A fragmented, reactive approach no longer suffices in an environment where operational continuity, regulatory scrutiny and brand credibility are tightly intertwined.

Here's a five-pillar framework designed to help enterprises build resilience and agility at the core of their data strategy:

First, break down data silos with unified architecture by centralizing logs and enabling forensic-grade search without needing to move data. Orga-



ISTOCKPHOTO

nizations with evolved data governance practices locate critical communications in minutes, not months, saving time, reducing risk and improving their decision-making.

Second, automate compliance to meet regulatory deadlines by integrating pre-configured templates for compliance with rules laid down by the country's apex cyber-security body CERT-In, India's digital personal data protection law and the market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India.

These templates should be auto-populated with data from live systems. Establish escalation workflows that can be activated within regulatory service-level agreements, enabling timely and accurate reporting under pressure. This would reduce the risk of penalties and reputational damage.

Third, ensure data integrity for regulatory compliance and legal defence by enforcing consistent metadata practices and chain-of-custody protocols aimed at ensuring that data stands up in court or in case of a regulatory review. Without proven authenticity, even valid evidence can be dismissed, compromising legal and compliance outcomes.

Fourth, prioritize data recovery processes based on business impact. Define recovery windows based on data criticality. For example, restore cus-

tomer transactions within two hours, payroll within 24 and archives within a week. Such practices make recovery not just quick, but also meaningful, ensuring that business continuity aligns with customer and stakeholder expectations.

Fifth, preserve all executive communications to defend against litigation with traceable links across

platforms between strategic decisions and supporting documentation. If and when regulatory scrutiny intensifies, organizations with clear and defensible records are better placed to avoid adverse outcomes.

A clear, leadership-approved charter is essential to define the primary objectives of data governance and guide its implementation across the organization. Additionally, the company must align its data governance strategy across all group entities. It may even need to temporarily slow down the pace of report generation to reduce chaos and allow time for disparate sources of data to be unified effectively.

To sum it up, mastering data governance is no longer optional, it's a critical competitive advantage today. Organizations that get it right don't just avoid costly penalties, but accelerate decision-making, generate trust among stakeholders and create resilience that sets them apart in a hyper-regulated market.

QUICK READ

As regulatory penalties soar, Indian organizations face an unprecedented convergence of regulations; a single incident can trigger action under multiple regulatory frameworks.

Organizations that get their data governance right don't just avoid penalties, but speed up decision-making, win stakeholder trust and create the sort of resilience that sets them apart.

allow time for disparate sources of data to be unified effectively.

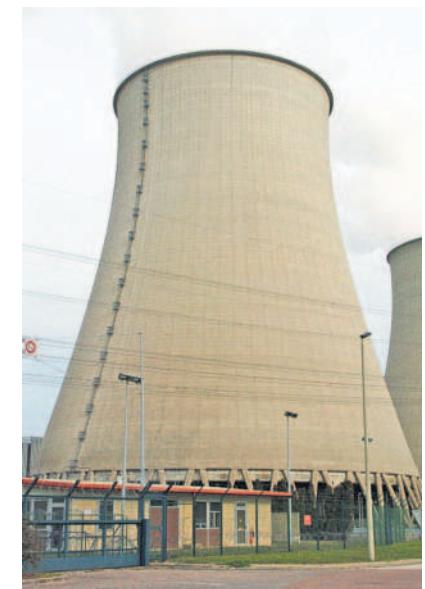
To sum it up, mastering data governance is no longer optional, it's a critical competitive advantage today. Organizations that get it right don't just avoid costly penalties, but accelerate decision-making, generate trust among stakeholders and create resilience that sets them apart in a hyper-regulated market.

India needs to ensure nuclear power regulations have teeth

The fallout of lax regulation could be catastrophic in this sector



MIHIR SHARMA
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.



India must regulate its proposed nuclear power build-up tightly. BLOOMBERG

standards, removing the biggest reason that the 2008 nuclear deal underperformed.

This has been a political landmine for a very long time. In 1984, a pesticide plant in the central Indian town of Bhopal leaked a highly toxic gas. Thousands died. We still don't know exactly how many—but enough to make it the world's deadliest industrial disaster. Many Indians still believe the plant's operator, the US company Union Carbide, got off too lightly. The shadow of Bhopal has meant that the Indian state has always wanted to ensure it could go after suppliers of industrial equipment if needed; but, across the world, the liability for nuclear accidents is usually shouldered by a plant's operator, not those who provide the technology and equipment.

Moving beyond this was essential to finally make nuclear energy projects financeable. But the government shouldn't skip out on the other half of the bargain: Regulation.

The controls that India's new law proposes appear strong enough—on paper. But unless the government is very careful, things might be different in practice. This is particularly true once well-connected business groups get involved. In sectors from coal to airports to telecom, apparently independent regulators have been accused of being too weak on politically influential Indian corporations. That's bad anywhere.

In the nuclear sector, it could be disastrous. The problem of information asymmetry is unusually severe, the care required unusually high and the damage that an accident could cause uniquely irreversible. Regulators thus have to believe that they can delay projects, shut down plants and even embank tycoons from public if need be.

India tends to build sectors first and regulate them later. With nuclear power, it must do both together. It will save billions by allowing the private sector in, but it must also spend billions on independent laboratories, well-paid inspectors and real-time monitoring.

The government is right to hope that private capital will help manage the awesome upfront cost of building the world's second-largest fleet of reactors. But it has a startup cost of its own to pay as well: The creation of regulatory expertise and governance capacity.

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MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Why companies reward their stars but forget the glue

DEVINA SENGUPTA



writes on workplaces and education at Mint.

In my 15 years of journalism, I have written countless stories on how corporates are barely managing to hold on to their high-potential employees, or why retrenchments are more than just a passing wave. Between the mavericks, the weakened middle order and the meandering bottom dwellers, I did not once write about 'glue employees'—the lot who hold it all together. And how did I miss them? Well, because I was as blind to this phenomenon as most of India Inc.

It hit me while reading a *Wall Street Journal* article in which reporter Heidi Mitchell spoke with behavioural scientist Jon Levy about who a 'glue player' is.

A glue-player, Levy explains, is someone who holds a team together, helps recruits settle in and often has the perspective needed to spot the right way forward for the group, but does not take the spotlight.

So a glue-employee is one who gets the best out of a team. But here's the catch. In a fiercely competitive workplace, where top

performers are rewarded while the rest are relegated to the 'better luck next time' bucket, the glue-player often gets shuffled in with the rest. This can be a big mistake by managers who rose via the 'high performance at any cost' route and have had little training or inclination to appreciate someone who did not take this fast track.

I recalled a former colleague who fit the mould of a glue-player as fit were made for him. A good performer and dependable colleague, he helped many of us out of professional ruts that came more frequently than we had expected. At the end of many an event, he was mentioned in appreciation emails from bosses, an acknowledgement he invariably shrugged off. Never the best, but always the one who stitched together pending work when others slacked off.

In the end, the team won. The business won. The slackers went unnoticed. The top performer mopped up some credit. And the glue-employee quietly faded into the background.

I thought of other glue-employees that I may have known, and I realized that whenever I have been pushed against the wall because of a work deadline, the team's best performers did not always help out. My slips

would have never impacted their career trajectory, so why bother? But there were a few who volunteered help. They thrashed out the work with me, stayed late, checked after submission and brought out a few chuckles with anecdotes of past slip-ups on their part. Was I grateful to them? Of course. But did I credit them with any of my career success? Admittedly, no.

Somehow, our goodbye letters tend to point out the achievers who helped us improve our work, but rarely those who helped us go through the routine grind, battle monotony and get bigger projects by putting in a word here and there on our behalf.

The *Wall Street Journal* interview had a point on compensation and whether glue-players should be rewarded the way high performers are. It made me wonder if it is even possible in India Inc, especially in large organizations where getting lost is easy.

QUICK READ

A glue player is someone who holds a team together, helps new recruits adapt and often has the perspective needed to identify the best way forward but does not seek the spotlight.

Employers that use a formal reward system to keep their glue-players bonded to their roles may find they have just the right team cohesion needed for the delivery of better results.

Dear reader, it does not matter which sector you work in, but have you filled up any appraisal form where you have been asked how you helped someone else achieve their targets? I do not mean the conventional 'are you a team player' question that has become quite routine. But have you ever been measured on your contribution towards someone else's success?

I wager most of us have not filled in such a questionnaire or been asked to answer this question during an appraisal process.

In a corporate culture where we are wired to gloat about our own success, wins of affirmation and how the organization benefits from the work we do as individuals, talking about someone else's role or merit would seem like precious time wasted. After all, a scramble for scarce internal resources, which usually includes the boss's attention, plays out from a very early stage in our careers.

Glue-employees are not mediocre, by the way. They could be just as good as the top performer. The difference is that they take the trouble to nudge others ahead as well. They tend to be secure in their jobs, a sense of security that can be mistaken for being under-ambitious. Bosses who know the value of glue-employees recognize the need to keep them close and reward them.

For glue-employees to be recognized formally, employers must improve how they document work contributions. This could mean detailing the roles played behind a project, instead of the task being chalked up to the designated team's leader alone. Such a company would soon notice that some employees' names pop up frequently. These could form a long-list of glue-players, with endorsements from others used to create short-list. Over the last three or four years, high-potential employees have got pay hikes of 1.7 to 1.8 times the median raise; this should be offered to glue-players as well. Their retention may be more valuable to employers than they realize.

In times of uncertainty, companies that keep glue-players bonded to their roles may find they have just the right team cohesion needed for superior results.

• HEALTH

In Gujarat, India's 1st state-funded lab to study most lethal pathogens



Union Home Minister Amit Shah at the foundation ceremony for the BSL-4 bio-containment facility in Gandhinagar, Tuesday.

Brendan Dabhi
Rajkot, January 15

UNION HOME Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday laid the foundation for a Bio-Safety Level 4 (BSL-4) Containment Facility and laboratory in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. He called it a "health shield" for India and said it heralded the "beginning of a new era of health security and biotechnology in the country".

What is a BSL-4 facility?

The technical term "Bio-Safety Level 4" represents the highest level of biological containment. Such laboratories are designed to safely research the world's most dangerous and life-threatening pathogens which are highly infectious and often lack effective vaccines or treatments.

At these labs under extremely controlled conditions that are inspected and monitored based on international standards, scientists conduct advanced research on high-risk pathogens, work on the development of diagnostics, vaccines, and therapeutics, and conduct rapid outbreak investigation and response.

The BSL-4 laboratory coming up in Gandhinagar, along with an Animal Bio-Safety Level (ABSL) facility, will be a strategic national asset where research is conducted on the deadliest pathogens known to humanity, including the Ebola virus, Marburg virus, Crimean-Congo Hemorrhagic Fever (CCHF) virus, Kyasanur Forest Disease virus, and Nipah virus, among others.

India has other labs equipped with different levels of biosafety. These relatively lower safety levels include ABSL-3 and ABSL-2. There are also ABSL labs of varying safety levels. The Centre has been looking to establish a network of 165 biosafety laboratories, under which 11 BSL-3 level labs and 154 BSL-2 level labs were approved.

Since 2021, a total of 42 Virus Research and Diagnostic Laboratories have been approved, of which 41 labs are ABSL-2 and 1 lab is BSL-3. Of these, 38 were functional and four were under development as of March 21, 2025.

The Gujarat lab

The BSL-4 lab is being built at a cost of Rs 362 crore over 11,000 square metres. It will be the second such civilian research facility in India and the first to be fully funded and controlled by a state government. It will function under the Gujarat Biotechnology Research Centre. The facility will comprise BSL-4, BSL-3, BSL-2, as well as ABSL-4 and ABSL-3 laboratory modules.

This will help the state not only respond to deadly human disease outbreaks in real time but also to zoonotic diseases transmitted from animals to humans, as well as aid in research and development of vaccines and therapeutics.

A senior official from the Department of Science and Technology in Gujarat told *The Indian Express*: "This facility will be constructed according to stringent international standards. Our scientists will be able to conduct research on deadly pathogens that are currently hampered by bottlenecks in the field due to lack of BSL-4 facilities. Further, the Department of Biotechnology has also signed an MoU declaring this upcoming lab as a national facility, which means that there will be guidance from expert institutions across India."

• TRANSPORT

Most road accidents occur in known zones, solutions lie in focused efforts

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, January 15

• 59% of all road accident fatalities do not involve any traffic violation, indicating that road engineering is one of the biggest contributory factors for deaths.

• 53% of deaths were reported in accidents occurring between 6 pm and 12 am.

THESE ARE among the key findings of an investigation into the country's top 100 districts in terms of severity of road accident fatalities. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) and the NGO SaveLIFE Foundation released the joint report on January 8, ranking Maharashtra's Nashik Rural at the top spot, followed by Pune Rural, Patna and Maharashtra's Ahmednagar.

The findings shed light on the gaps in road safety in India. The report noted that most accidents are concentrated in known locations, including specific road stretches and crash-prone spots. It suggested that if the government's schemes and budgets are directed toward such locations, a significant

number of deaths could be prevented.

This aligns with the recent statements of MoRTH Minister Nitin Gadkari, who said that poor civil engineering and sub-standard detailed project reports (DPRs) are driving the rise in road accidents and fatalities.

Curbing fatalities is key for India, which ranks first in the world in road accident fatalities. Its numbers are also far ahead of the second- and third-ranked countries: China accounts for just 36% of India's total road deaths, and the United States' figure is around 25% of India's. The report stated that 89,085 people died in these 100 districts alone during 2023 and 2024 — accounting for over 25% of the total road accident deaths. A total of 3.5 lakh people died in 9.68 lakh accidents in the two years in the country.

Key findings

Uttar Pradesh accounted for the highest number of districts on the list, at 20 districts. Tamil Nadu came second at 19 districts, followed by Maharashtra (11), Karnataka (9) and Rajasthan (8).

India has the second-largest road net-

• RECURRING PROBLEMS ON THE ROAD

42% of all fatalities were recorded on critical corridors.

58% fatalities were recorded on critical crash-prone sites.

72% of the fatalities were recorded in rear-end, head-on and pedestrian crashes.

• Around 8 in 10 victims were hospitalised by means other than the government's 108 ambulance service, or not hospitalised at all.

Source: Zero Fatality Districts: A Collaborative Framework to Reduce Road Crash Deaths, for 2023 and 2024

work in the world, totalling about 63.45 lakh km. Within this figure, National Highways account for 1.46 lakh km, State Highways for 1.80 lakh km and Other Roads for 63.45 lakh km. Around 63% of the total road crash fatalities occur outside of the National Highways. "The road crashes and consequent fatalities are shaped by local

road design, policing patterns and hospital readiness," the report said.

Around 54% of all fatalities were reported on 18 target corridors of the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) and state Public Works Department (PWD) roads, with 379 critical locations on these stretches.

The report said that 58% of the total deaths were recorded on the crash-prone locations and 42% on the critical corridors. Rear-end, head-on and pedestrian crashes were responsible for 72% of all fatalities. On violations contributing to crashes, speeding accounted for 19% of deaths, followed by rash driving (7%) and dangerous overtaking (3%).

According to the report, damaged crash barriers, absent or faded pavement markings, unprotected hard structures, damaged or wrong signage, and inadequate illumination are among the top 20 most common engineering issues on the road.

The Stockholm Declaration on Road Safety, adopted at the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety in 2020, set a global target to reduce road traffic deaths and injuries by 50% by 2030. India is a signatory.

No. 1 district in fatalities

The report narrowed the focus of road safety efforts by putting fatalities into perspective and showing what drove the numbers.

Take the case of Nashik Rural. According to the report, 2,678 people died in the district in two years in 4,336 crashes, and 2,194 others were grievously injured. The investigation revealed the following about the district:

• 21% of the fatalities were reported due to speeding and rash driving.

• 50 critical locations accounted for 26% of fatalities, due to critical violations such as overspeeding, dangerous overtaking, rash driving and zig-zag driving.

• 60% of the fatalities were attributed to head-on and rear-end collisions, and pedestrian crashes.

• After the accidents, 18.8% people used 108 ambulances, 19.8% used private vehicles, and 57% used private ambulances.

Solution in enforcement

The report recommended that the NHAI and state PWDs should conduct a

comprehensive Road Safety Survey on each corridor and identify the prevalence of engineering issues from the list of 20 recurring issues on each critical corridor.

For the critical crash-prone locations, it has recommended site-specific interventions under the relevant Indian Road Congress (IRC) and MoRTH guidelines.

Along with this, it suggested upgrading the critical police stations with adequate manpower for undertaking enforcement activities, audit all 108 ambulances for compliance with the National Ambulance code and setting a target for 108 ambulances to cover 75% of hospitalisations.

Notably, the report stated that no new schemes are needed to reduce fatalities. Instead, existing government schemes must be utilised effectively, with better coordination among key departments — police, hospitals, and road agencies.

"The current budget should be aligned for engineering, enforcement resources and health capacity. Reducing road deaths is not about more effort. It is about better systems, clearer authority, and sustained leadership," said the report.

• DIPLOMACY

The message in India's late entry to US-led groupings



ANIL SASI

FOR INDIA'S policy makers, a sense of *deja vu* is undeniable. Just like it was let into the US-led Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) by the Joe Biden administration a full year after the launch of the strategic initiative in June 2022, India's induction into Pax Silica has come through belatedly, a month after the initiative was launched by the Trump administration. And it is being interpreted as a conciliatory note from incoming US Ambassador Sergio Gor amid efforts to repair the strained bilateral ties.

The new grouping is a significant one. It signals the manner in which the next global tech order could take shape as countries regroup in strategic sectors involving a Chinese presence. Groupings such as Pax Silica could cohesively work to address supply chain choke-points next.

So, in theory, the countries that control the inputs for manufacturing — such as magnets and critical minerals — could potentially shape the rules for everyone else. As a former diplomat put it: "India should read Pax Silica as a map of where leverage will sit." That's why there's a subtle message in India not making it to the list at the first go.

So far, the refrain in India's policy circles has been that while the bilateral trade relations with the US have been negatively affected, the Trump administration in Washington DC has continued to be bullish on the relationship with India when it comes to strategic issues and defence cooperation.

But being left out initially, and then belatedly brought into Pax Silica almost as an afterthought, exactly like it happened in the case of MSP, could be a reminder that India needs to be seen as bringing something to the table if it has to be a natural partner of choice in any US-led strategic initiative.

Pax Silica aims to build a secure supply chain, ranging from critical minerals and energy inputs to advanced manufacturing and semiconductors, all of which are also



India's inclusion in Pax Silica is being seen as incoming envoy Sergio Gor's efforts to strike a conciliatory note. AP

What is Pax Silica?

Pax Silica is a US-led strategic initiative to counter China's dominance in new age sectors. It aims to reduce what the US calls "coercive dependencies" and protect materials and capabilities "foundational to artificial intelligence", and "ensure aligned nations can develop and deploy transformative technologies at scale".

The fine print issued by the US State Department after the initiative was launched in December says it aims to build a "secure, prosperous, and innovation-driven silicon supply chain" to secure access across the AI stack, from minerals and chips to security and logistics.

A US Department of State statement in December said the inaugural Pax Silica Summit brought together counterparts from Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Australia. "Together, these countries are home to the most important companies

and investors powering the global AI supply chain," the statement said.

The common theme in this initial list is that these are countries that have some sort of a lead in AI or semiconductor supply chain, and where India currently does not have anything to tangibly show for it.

Just like in the case of earlier such initiatives, particularly MSP. The US initiative intends to sideline China and India naturally sees itself being part of such an initiative. But the lack of processing capacity and expertise is the primary reason why it did not make the cut at the outset. For both MSP and Pax Silica, New Delhi had to lobby considerably to get in, government officials told *The Indian Express*.

Thrust areas

Experts have said China's dominance in the global critical minerals market, which has created a wide gap in price points between Chinese products and those produced elsewhere, is a shared challenge. While this could help India attract American investments, it could also expose it to coercion by China over its deepening involvement with the US.

Measures under Pax Silica include pursuing new joint ventures and strategic co-investment opportunities, protecting sensitive technologies and critical infrastructure from undue access or control by countries of concern and building trusted technology ecosystems, including ICT systems, fibre-optic cables, data centres, foundational models and applications.

"The initiative responds to growing demand from partners to deepen economic and technology cooperation with the United States and understanding that AI represents a transformative force for our long-term prosperity. Recognition that trustworthy systems are essential for safeguarding our mutual security and prosperity," the US State Department said. Most of these resonate with India's strategic intent.

US Secretary of the Treasury Scott Besent, in October, had stated that the US was pushing back firmly against China's export controls on critical minerals and expected strong support from "Europe, India and other Asian democracies". India still ended up outside of Pax Silica in the first list.

• LAW

Behind change in Karnataka law, Coorg's unique land record system

Johnson TA
Bengaluru, January 15

THE KARNATAKA government has amended its land revenue law to modernise an age-old system of land records in the scenic Coorg region, home to the indigenous Kodava community.

Karnataka Governor Thawarchand Gehlot gave his assent to the Karnataka Land Revenue (Second Amendment) Act, 2025 on January 7. The amendment is aimed at modernising the land records for the unique Jamma Bane land holdings in Coorg, which is now in Kodagu district.

In this region, families have passed down land grants from the time of the British and Kodava kings for generations. But the records contained the names of original grantees (pattadars) even when bequeathed to new generations.

The absence of official ownership documents made it difficult for current owners to buy or sell land or to secure bank loans.

What are Jamma Bane lands?

The Jamma Bane tenure is a form of land holding prevalent in Kodagu district which is distinctly different from other classes of land holdings in the state. The word Jamma means hereditary.

These Jamma lands were originally



granted by erstwhile kings of Coorg and the British — between 1600 and 1800 — to local communities in return for military service.

Jamma lands comprise both wetlands, used for paddy cultivation, and forested highlands, which have transformed into the now-famous coffee estates of Coorg.

The ownership is registered in the name of the original pattadar from a family. Over generations, the names of the new owners are added alongside the name of the pattadar. The land ownership name could not be changed to reflect new owners.

The Coorg Land Revenue and Regulations Act, 1899 was in place to govern land ownership in the region till the introduction of the Karnataka Land Revenue Act,

1964. However, some provisions of the 1899 Act were continued in Kodagu despite the absence of these provisions in 1964 Act.

AS Ponnana, the Congress MLA from Virajpet, said in the Assembly: "The name of the family head continues in the land records even after death and even after 40 to 50 years of change (of owners). This has continued as a tradition despite the lack of provisions in the Karnataka Land Revenue Act."

Why did the state bring the Bill?

"Historically, these lands have been held and enjoyed on the basis of customary rights by members of joint families, often without clear entries in the Record of Rights. With the passage of time, complications have arisen in maintaining accurate records of ownership, inheritance, survivorship and alienations pertaining to Jamma Bane holdings," says the statement of objects and reasons for the draft of the Bill that was tabled in August in the Assembly.

"In particular, the absence of explicit provisions in the Karnataka Land Revenue Act, 1964 (Karnataka Act 12 of 1964), to record the rights of joint family members in such holdings has led to difficulties in mutation, registration, inheritance and maintenance of revenue records," stated the draft Bill.

This led to numerous disputes regarding succession, alienation and privileges at

tached to Jamma Bane lands. "It has therefore become necessary to provide statutory recognition of the peculiar nature of Jamma Bane tenure in Kodagu District and to ensure that the rights of all members of a joint family are duly recorded in the mutation and revenue registers," the Bill stated.

The modified version of the Bill which was tabled and passed by the legislature last month — after incorporating the recommendations of a sub-committee of the state legislature — states that changes introduced in the land records of Kodagu district were not consistent with the Karnataka Land Revenue Act, 1964.

What does the amendment do?

The new amendment to the law essentially empowers tahsildars (assistant commissioners of the revenue departments) in Kodagu to make necessary corrections in land records to bring them in conformity with the Karnataka Land Revenue Act, 1964 for Record of Rights containing the names of persons who are holders, occupiers, owners, mortgagees, landlords or tenants of the land or assignees of the rent or revenue..."

"This amendment will bring the land records of Kodagu District in conformity with law and ensure consistency with the rest of the State," states the amended new law.

**Happening today**

• PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi will participate in a programme marking a decade of the Startup India initiative.

• ON THE first trip by a Canadian leader to China in eight years, Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney will meet China's President Xi Jinping. Canada is trying to repair ties with China, fuelled by a push to diversify markets after US tariffs.

• INDIA OPEN Super 750: Lakshya Sen will take on Lin Chun-Yi in the quarterfinals.

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Business as Usual

By EP UNNY

**NATION**

PAGE 11

PEAK POWER DEMAND THIS WINTER TOPS LAST SUMMER

EU LEADERS TO BE REPUBLIC DAY CHIEF GUESTS

India moves ahead on EU deal as US pact hangs fire

Closed 20 of 24 chapters, talks over a few issues are on: Commerce Secy

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, January 15

AMID THE uncertainty over a trade deal with the US which is dampening investment and export prospects, India has made considerable progress in its trade deal negotiations with the European Union (EU).

Commerce Secretary Rakesh Agarwal said Thursday

that India and the EU have signed as many as 20 out of the 24 chapters and aim to reach a deal before EU leaders visit India later this month.

The President of the European Council, Antonio Luis Santos da Costa, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, will be chief guests at the Republic Day celebrations. They will also

E. EXPLAINED**Why this will be a big deal**

When the deal with the EU is done, it will be one of the largest trade pacts signed by India. Steep US tariffs are hurting India and it is looking at opportunities in the EU for its labour-intensive exports. Sensitive agricultural issues from both sides are said to be off the table.

co-chair the 16th India-EU Summit on January 27. A formal announcement was made Thursday by the Ministry of External Affairs.

Commerce Secretary Agarwal told reporters: "We were already in the last and most arduous leg of the negotiations with the EU for three months. We are very close now. We have closed 20 out of 24 chapters. There are a few issues on which the negotiations are ongoing. We are virtually engaged on a day-to-day basis. We are trying to see if

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

INDIGO, A-I SKIRTING IRAN AIRSPACE

India prepares to pull out its nationals from Iran, first batch ready

Shubhajit Roy & Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, January 15

WITH IRAN temporarily closing its airspace to commercial flights Thursday and tension mounting in West Asia due to uncertainty over US moves against the Tehran regime, India has begun taking steps to evacuate its nationals out of Iran.

Indians in Israel have also been advised to stay "vigilant" and Indian nationals have been asked to avoid non-essential travel to Israel.

There are about 10,000 Indians in Iran, from students and pilgrims in Qom's seminaries and Mashhad to those in medical colleges in Tehran and Isfahan.

"In view of the evolving

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

'Serious issue': SC notice to Mamata, officers on ED's plea

Stays Bengal FIRs, says keep footage of search at I-PAC co-founder's home

Ananthakrishnan G
New Delhi, January 15

OBSERVING THAT the Enforcement Directorate had "raised a serious issue" with its petition seeking a CBI probe into the alleged obstruction by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and state police

officers during search operations at the Kolkata premises of political consultancy firm I-PAC, the Supreme Court Thursday issued notice to the CM and top police officers.

The bench of Justices P K Mishra and Vipul M Pancholi also stayed proceedings in the

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

ROW OVER INK, PROBE ORDERED

BJP-Shinde Sena set to sweep elections to BMC, say exit polls

Express News Service
Mumbai, January 15

EXIT POLLS have predicted a sweep for the BJP-led alliance in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections, the results of which will be declared Friday, along with those of 28 other municipal corporation polls. At least two pollsters also projected the BJP to retain the Pune Municipal Corporation, a traditional NCP stronghold that the ruling party had bagged in 2017, the last time civic body elections were held in Maharashtra.

Commerce Secretary Agarwal told reporters: "We were already in the last and most arduous leg of the negotiations with the EU for three months. We are very close now. We have closed 20 out of 24 chapters. There are a few issues on which the negotiations are ongoing. We are virtually engaged on a day-to-day basis. We are trying to see if

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Vande Bharats will offer local cuisine of origin stations, first on six routes

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, January 15

IDIYAPPAM, PARIPPU Vada, Chettinad Vegetable Gravy, Soyabean Fry with Pachakka on the Mangaluru-Thiruvananthapuram route; Kashmiri Pulao, Rajma, Chhole-Kulche, Kashmiri Roth Cake, Chana Dal Burfi on the Katra-Srinagar route; and Upma, Palakura Pappu, Paneer Kolhapuri, Dry Benda Kaya Vepudu on the Nagpur-Secunderabad route. These are some of the new food items introduced by Indian Railways as part of its initiative to encourage local cuisines in the national carrier, starting with the Vande Bharat trains. Food will be one of the main

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

As cricket shifts address, most roads from U-19 World Cup lead to S Asia

Sandip G
New Delhi, January 15

ALL THE cricketers who took the field in India's U-19 World Cup opening game against the USA on Thursday were bound by a common heritage. They were either Indians or of Indian descent, with the Stars and Stripes embossed on their chests. And when India's national anthem rang out before

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



USA players celebrate the fall of an Indian batsman during their ICC Under-19 World Cup match in Bulawayo, ICC



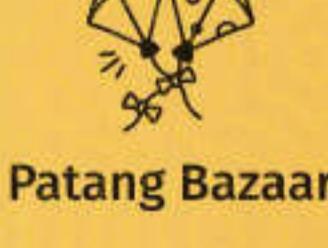
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Hon'ble Minister of Home Affairs & Cooperation, Govt. of India

Guest of Honour**Shri Vinai Kumar Saxena**

Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor, Delhi

August Presence**Smt. Rekha Gupta**

Hon'ble Chief Minister, GNCTD

at Baansera

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10:00 AM onwards on 17-18 Jan, 2026

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New Delhi

• WEB EXCLUSIVE
‘Donald Trump thought his tariffs would hurt China. He was wrong.’ —
By Amit Kumar, Manoj Kewalramani
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• WORDLY WISE
Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.
— Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

The Editorial Page

FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026

The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAM NATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

China's exports hold up but there are pain points

IN 2025, US President Donald Trump upended the global trading system. In April, he unveiled his policy of reciprocal tariffs, targeting nations across the world. Trump's ire was particularly directed at Beijing, accusing it of unfair trade practices, and a pattern of “record setting tariffs, non-monetary tariffs, illegal subsidisation of companies, and massive long-term currency manipulation”. At one point, Trump raised the tariffs imposed on China to a peak of 145 per cent. The tariffs were, in part, meant to address the growing US trade deficit. Several months later, the effects of the tariffs are now visible in the Chinese trade numbers. But the picture that emerges is not straightforward.

As per the latest data, China's exports to the US have indeed fallen by around 20 per cent in 2025. But its overall trade surplus has risen to a staggering \$1.19 trillion in 2025, up 20 per cent from \$993 billion in 2024. This resilience underlines its dominance in global manufacturing and trade and its ability to withstand shocks. It also implies that the fall in the surplus with the US has been offset by gains in other markets, as Chinese goods have flooded other regions such as Southeast Asia. As per ING, a global financial firm, strong export growth was observed to ASEAN, India, the EU and Africa, with products like semiconductors, ships and autos growing at a robust pace. This surge in Chinese exports will only intensify competitive pressures for other countries in their domestic and foreign markets. But healthy exports have also meant that China's growth has held up better than expected, by offsetting domestic weakness. In its Global Economic Prospects, the World Bank noted that “activity in China proved more robust than anticipated, mostly on account of fiscal stimulus and increased shipments to non-US markets”.

The latest data will raise the pressure on China to allow its currency to strengthen and boost domestic consumption. Last year, the IMF had linked China's export performance to “a significant real exchange rate depreciation”, and recommended greater exchange rate flexibility and a pivot towards consumption-led growth. Beijing will have to carefully navigate its 15th Five Year Plan period, 2026 to 2030, as it seeks to address the pain points in the economy while trying to achieve its stated priorities and maintain the growth momentum.

Film certification process is punishment

AFILM was made and duly sent to the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which asked the makers to implement some cuts before it could be certified for release. It should have been a straightforward process, from conception to release, pausing only at the mandated stop at the CBFC. However, in the case of *Jana Nayagan*, like so many other films before it, the path to the big screen has become tortuous, winding through courtrooms as the makers struggle to get the film out. The repeated postponement of its release, because the CBFC has withheld the certificate despite its examining committee recommending it in December, has once again trained the spotlight on the needless twists and turns of the certification process.

The problem begins with the Cinematograph Act of 1952, which empowers the CBFC to classify content for viewer suitability. The ambiguity around words like “public order”, “decency” and “morality” has repeatedly been used to turn the certification process into a censorship regime. Demands for arbitrary cuts are routine and, as reported by this newspaper in September, have intensified under what has been described as a “one-man show”. The limited scope for redress worsens the situation. The summary abolition of the Film Certificate Appellate Tribunal (FCAT) in 2021 has left filmmakers with little choice but to appeal to the high courts if they disagree with a certificate or if one is denied altogether. The *Jana Nayagan* saga illustrates how punishing this process can be. The makers were forced to approach the Madras High Court when the certificate was withheld following a complaint from a member of the examining committee that their concerns had not been addressed. The initial order by the HC, directing the CBFC to issue the certificate, was reversed by another bench, after which the *Jana Nayagan* team approached the Supreme Court. The SC has, in turn, refused to intervene and asked the makers to wait for the next Madras HC hearing, scheduled for January 20.

Over the years, attempts have been made to reform the certification process, with committees headed by Justice Mukul Mudgal and filmmaker Shyam Benegal suggesting much-needed changes. As their recommendations gather dust, the space for artistic expression continues to shrink. Livelihoods hang in balance as the financial burden of long-delayed or unreleased films grows heavier.

Dahi chooda, not so unassuming

AHANDFUL of flattened rice, soaked in water for a few minutes (not more, else it loses its texture), a bowl of curd (mix water if it's thick), and a spoonful of pickle. This is the standard recipe for dahi chooda, sometimes taken as comfort food, and on occasion, to mark a ceremony. But in Bihar, it signals something far more complex than its simple recipe. It marks political ruptures and new intimacies, and silent transitions. RJD supremo Lalu Prasad's visit to his estranged son Tej Pratap Yadav's dahi chooda event in the presence of Bihar Governor Arif Mohammed Khan and Deputy CM Vijay Kumar Sinha can be read in this context.

In mid-1990s Bihar, the unassuming bowl of dahi chooda became the centre of political attention when, as CM, Lalu Prasad started organising dahi-chooda feasts at his official residence on Makar Sankranti. While the first day of the feast was usually reserved for political leaders, on the second day, the gates were opened wider. Lalu Prasad would serve dahi chooda himself to his guests. Over the years, the feast became an occasion for political signalling.

In 2015, ahead of the Bihar assembly elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended a dahi chooda event organised by Ram Vilas Paswan (the BJP and the LJP fought the elections together). That same year, a disgruntled Nitish Kumar, who had left the NDA in 2014, attended Lalu Prasad's gathering. Within months, the Mahagathbandhan alliance was stitched. Four years later, Nitish Kumar was found attending dahi chooda feasts with Paswan and Sushil Kumar Modi, in a display of NDA unity. It is believed in Bengal that dahi chooda settles upset stomachs. But in neighbouring Bihar, it can presage political upsets.

In a year of unpredictability, India needs to accelerate EU FTA

GERMANY CHANCELLOR Friedrich Merz's kite-flying with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with announcements on cooperative defence production and visa-free transit travel for Indian travellers, holds out a promise that an EU-India trade agreement may finally be on the anvil, with the EU-India Summit less than two weeks away. Considering that an FTA has been held hostage for the last decade to issues of environment and labour rights, this is no mean feat. As a new year dawns, the question is what lies ahead, especially with US President Donald Trump continuing on a disruptive path. Developments in the world's two largest economies — the United States and China — will shape the broader context in which India must navigate the year ahead, underscoring the growing importance of regional trade agreements such as the India-EU pact, following the concluded India-UK agreement.

The US economy ended 2025 on a strong note, registering robust 4.3 per cent growth in the third quarter, driven largely by consumer spending. Yet the underlying structure reveals significant imbalances. Investment growth is almost entirely concentrated in the expansion of AI capacity, a momentum unlikely to be sustained. Corporate hiring has virtually stalled. AI-related stocks display unsustainably high price-to-earnings multiples, and it remains unclear what final consumption demand for AI-enabled output will be. At the same time, AI capacity expansion is

highly energy intensive, an issue that will grow as capacity building shifts to developing countries.

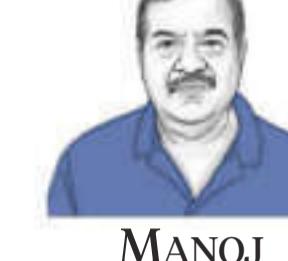
Consumption growth is heavily skewed toward upper-income households and is likely to taper off. Broader trends will depend on how Trump's proposed tax cuts are financed. If tariff revenues are used, this may work briefly — at least in FY 2025-26. However, the sharp rise in average tariffs will feed into domestic inflation, choke consumption demand, and eventually erode tariff revenues.

Tax cuts will also add to government debt, pushing it onto an unsustainable path and raising interest rates. The combined effect will be a contraction in both consumption and investment demand. A similar sequence followed the imposition of “reciprocal tariffs” earlier, raising doubts over whether the late-2025 spurt in US growth can be sustained.

China's outlook is even more troubling for global demand. Long-term growth has been on a secular decline — from 8-10 per cent in the decades after 1980, to about 5 per cent in 2024-25, and now trending towards 4 per cent or lower.

The real estate crisis continues to depress demand, while ageing demographics further constrain consumption.

Even China's recent export surge offers limited reassurance. Much of it reflects diversion of exports away from the US toward developing countries, many of which are responding with



MANOJ PANT

By 2024, the cumulative FDI from the EU was around \$120 billion, and it offers substantial potential. With focus on areas like electronics and infrastructure, this matches India's own current areas of interest well. Germany will be leading the effort in this context

higher tariff and non-tariff barriers. Another portion is driven by tariff arbitrage, with Chinese goods reaching the US indirectly via partners such as Mexico and Vietnam. This channel is unlikely to last. The US is expected to block such routes, and Mexico has already imposed tariffs of 35 per cent on non-FTA partners and 50 per cent on automobiles and auto parts.

From India's perspective, traditional global trade prospects in 2026 are therefore limited, except for some resilience in services trade, largely linked to the US economy. The recent spurt in commodity trade towards the last months of 2025 was largely driven by pre-emptive purchases ahead of the Trump tariff regime that took effect after August last year.

Trade diversion away from the US then offers the main scope of trade expansion. Here, the importance of the UK and EU free trade agreements looms large. Amid the media focus on the US and Trump, it is often forgotten that the EU is India's fourth largest market. In addition, the EU, increasingly wary of the US amid emerging frictions — from Greenland to potential confrontation over Chinese trade — must reassess new partnerships, particularly in skilled immigration. Germany's Skilled Immigration Act already provides quotas for Indian professionals.

So, for the first time, India may find movement of skilled persons (Mode 4 in WTO parlance) a negotiable instrument in the forthcoming India-EU trade agree-

ment. The recent India-Germany cooperation could thus prove more than a kite-flying exercise.

The dominance of Germany in EU trade is well known, so one can expect an Indo-German cooperation agreement to broaden into an India-EU trade deal incorporating new elements of service trade and an investment agreement to bring in technology where Germany is at the forefront today. A technology component could also give a fillip to foreign direct investment (FDI). It is well known that the best long-term source of technology is an inflow of FDI. Studies show that FDI and trade are actually complementary. India-EU trade is already at a very high level. By 2024, the cumulative FDI from the EU was around \$120 billion, and it offers substantial potential. With focus on areas like electronics and infrastructure, this matches India's own current areas of interest well. Germany will be leading the effort in this context.

In our last column (‘Why is India signing so many FTAs? It's not just economics’, IE, December 15), we suggested that there may be a method to India's rush to sign FTAs. Now, some of these must translate into tangible economic gains. The talks with Germany could well mark the start of a meaningful India-EU FTA, where a services agreement incorporating Mode 4, alongside an investment pact, finds pride of place. That would indeed be a happy new beginning.

The writer is visiting professor at Shiv Nadar University and former VC, IIFT

A neighbourhood is where we live in dignity



SHAHANA RAFIQ

FOR A long time, I believed that neighbours were people who lived next door, whom we met at the staircases, and exchanged occasional greetings with over hurried mornings. It was only when my surroundings changed that I realised how deeply a neighbourhood shapes one's everyday life, sense of self, and feeling of belonging.

I was born and brought up in a predominantly Muslim locality in Old Delhi. It was not something I consciously noticed as a child; it was simply normal. Our everyday life included the sound of *aazaan* echoing through the lanes, aromas of familiar food during Ramzan, and a quiet understanding of each other's routines. In that space, identity did not need explanation. In 2012, when we moved to West Delhi, the change felt unsettling. Though it was a “mixed” locality, Muslim families were few and scattered. In this new place, everything — from festivals to daily routines — felt unfamiliar, and adjustment seemed difficult.

So, while searching for a house to buy, my parents wanted a locality where there were at least a few Muslim families in the neighbourhood. At the time, I did not fully understand why this mattered. Eight years later, I do. It was never just about religion; it was about comfort, safety, and the freedom to live without constantly explaining oneself.

Within a year of us moving into our own house, something began to change. We started exchanging sweets during Eid and Diwali with people who were once complete strangers. Festivals became shared occasions rather than private celebrations. Small bonds started forming in unexpected ways. I was good at applying mehendi, and one girl from the neighbourhood was skilled at makeup. Over time, we began calling each other whenever there was a function. What started as a practical exchange turned into a friendship built on trust and mutual support. Similarly, since no one in my family knew how to drape a sari, one aunt who resides just next to us always stepped in to help. She never let us feel the weight of cultural difference, if any. Even today, she prepares

WHO'S MY neighbour

AN IDEAS SERIES

something in advance, knowing that I will visit her on Eid. Similarly, I look forward to her visiting our home on Diwali. These exchanges may seem small, but they represent acceptance that goes beyond tolerance, one rooted in care.

Living in a “mixed” locality taught me that proximity does not always guarantee connection, but connection is possible when people are open to it. We may not share the same religion, food habits, or traditions, but we share everyday life: Festivals, emergencies, and concerns.

I see how homemakers form relationships with one another in the neighbourhood. In a world of mundane household chores, these interactions add value to the ordinary. Conversations on balconies, shared laughter during afternoon breaks, and simple exchanges turn ordinary spaces into living communities. These women also engage in negotiations that happen collectively — with the *sabziwale bhaiya* and the *suit-wale bhaiya*. Such shared activities create a sense of unity and companionship. These moments are what keep a neighbourhood alive. They transform physical closeness into social connection.

At the same time, neighbourhoods also quietly regulate behaviour. Familiarity can feel protective, but it can also feel intrusive, especially for women. Because neighbours matter so much, their opinions often carry weight within families. For any act that goes against accepted family or social norms, there is a familiar warning: “What would our neighbours say?” Neighbours may not be part of our families, but they are people we see every day — witnesses to our routines, choices, and changes. Their presence becomes a form of social accountability, shaping how individuals behave, especially in closely-knit communities.

Our neighbourhood determines how safe and rooted we feel, how freely we express ourselves. Perhaps the most important question is not who our neighbours are, but whether our neighbourhoods allow us to live with dignity.

The writer teaches at Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi

MGNREGA gave women freedom. New law may not



Srimanjuri Guha and Annesha Mukherjee

THE VIKSIT Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeekika Mission (GRAM) Act (VB-G RAM) comes with the promise of increased welfare with 125 days of guaranteed work instead of the 100 days under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The new law may well adversely affect more than 26 crore workers by effectively eliminating the “work guarantee”. The shrinking and conditional job availability under the revamped scheme is likely to make it more challenging for rural women to find wage work.

Over the past several years, concerns have been expressed by academics and practitioners over the low female labour force participation (FLFPR) in India. The recent rise in FLFPR is due to increased participation in unpaid work in family farms and/or non-agricultural enterprises. In such a situation, the high share of women in work generated under MGNREGA is heartening. Despite changes in government and a pandemic, the share of women in total person-days increased from 48 per cent in 2008-09 to 57.94 per cent in 2024-25. This shows that since its inception, MGNREGA has been a critical source of employment for women. The respectability associated with government jobs and the availability of crèches encourage women. Additionally, women prefer workplaces that are closer to their residence as it reduces their commute time and cost, allowing them to manage domestic tasks. Along with high participation, legally mandated equalisation of wages and a revised wage payment system reduced women workers' financial dependence on male family members.

Adherence to patriarchal practices has relegated women to a secondary source of labour. They are expected to work only when their wages are necessary to complement household incomes. This perception of women may explain why they are the first to be excluded from MGNREGA work in areas with excess worker supply. The looming possibility of less guaranteed work under VB-G RAM may reinforce the existing gender hierarchies.

A vast majority of women workers, specifically those belonging to marginalised communities, in rural areas, are engaged in agricultural labour. Without guaranteed work for 60 days during peak agricultural seasons, they will be compelled to take up informal work that provides no assurance of availability, proximity, or wage parity.

Every policy is required to undergo monitoring and evaluation and make the requisite corrections to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness. Despite its limitations, the MGNREGA played a significant role in generating demand-driven employment. However, the Centre did not consult MGNREGA workers and other stakeholders before passing the VB-G RAM G Bill. Instead of addressing the faultlines in implementation, the government has put at risk a programme that promised to provide guaranteed employment when markets failed to do so.

Guha is a PhD scholar at the Centre for Development Studies, Kerala, and Mukherjee is a research associate at the Madras Institute of Development Studies

40 YEARS AGO

January 16, 1986



Indira assassination trial

THE EIGHT-MONTH long Indira Gandhi assassination trial came to an end with the special judge, Mahesh Chandra, reserving his judgment for January 22. Earlier, the defence counsel, P N Lekhi, concluded his final arguments in the case in which the surviving alleged assassin, Satwant Singh, and accused Balbir and Kebar Singh are facing charges of murder and criminal conspiracy. If found guilty, the three accused will be sentenced to death or to life imprisonment.

Soviet nuclear moratorium

SOVIET COMMUNIST Party general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev announced an ex-

tension of the unilateral Soviet moratorium on nuclear explosions by three months and invited the United States to join it by then, so it could be extended further. Gorbachev also offered to open all space research laboratories for inspection in order to keep space peaceful, and proposed an early elimination of mass annihilation chemical weapons together with their industrial base.

Reagan on arms control

PRESIDENT RONALD Reagan appealed to the Kremlin for progress in nuclear arms control talks, building on the fresh start he said that he and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had made at their summit last November. Reagan made his plea in a state-

ment dealing with the opening of the fourth round of arms negotiations in Geneva.

Haryana CM asks for CRPF

THE HARYANA Chief Minister, Bhajan Lal, urged the Centre to deploy the Central Reserve Police Force in Kandu Khera village to ensure fair census operations, alleging that the Punjab Police were terrorising the Hindi-speaking population. Talking to newsmen, Bhajan Lal alleged that the Punjab Police had abducted three or four persons and houses were being searched. He expressed the apprehension that some more persons might be whisked away and that senior civil and police officers from Punjab were camping in the village.

• **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
The Iranians demonstrating against their government are displaying awe-inspiring bravery.
— *The New York Times*

The Ideas Page

FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026



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DIS/AGREE THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



ILLUSTRATION: CR SASIKUMAR

In the first year of Trump's second term, India-US ties have been turbulent. What's next?

India needs a new foreign policy plan

BY SHYAM SARAN

THE NOISY entry of Ambassador-designate Sergio Gor into the American embassy on January 12 and his very upbeat remarks seem to have rekindled hopes of resuming the upward trajectory of the past 25 years in India-US relations. Indian officials watching from nearby South Block will be looking for any straws in the wind presaging that the bilateral trade agreement, already wrapped and ready for Trump's approval, will finally be concluded. But if US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick is to be believed, what Donald Trump is waiting for is a supplicatory call from Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Trump is likely to say, "You don't hold any cards." One hopes PM Modi does not make that call, because as the events of the past year show, supplication invites contempt and serial ignominy. Just ask any European leader. In the geopolitical card game that Trump is playing, it is only China that holds a strong hand, with its stranglehold on rare earths and magnets. So, Trump is deferential to President Xi Jinping and wants a "grand bargain" with him. When Japan is threatened by China for its prime minister's remarks on the existential importance of Taiwan to Japanese security, Trump warns his own ally not to provoke Beijing.

He has stated that with respect to Taiwan, it was for China to decide what it wanted to do, but that he would be "unhappy" if it decided to invade Taiwan. This sounds like a write-off of Taiwan, and with it, the Indo-Pacific strategy, in which partnership with India has been a critical component. The "Quadrilateral" or Quad among India, the US, Australia, and Japan is a likely casualty. In his remarks at the embassy, Gor said that Trump may visit India in a "year or two", which indicates that the Quad is no longer a US priority.

As we begin year two of Trump, it should be evident that the steady upward trajectory of India-US relations of the past 25 years has now stalled and is unlikely to revive despite the rhetoric coming from the US embassy or the belated inclusion of India in the US-led Pax Silica initiative. The downward turn is being aggravated by the growing hostility towards Indian-Americans and Indian expatriates in the US. This will provoke anti-American senti-

The writer is a former foreign secretary

Trump Year 2 holds no reassurance



MICHAEL KUGELMAN

IN NOVEMBER 2024, soon after Donald Trump got re-elected as US President, India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar made a proclamation. "I know today a lot of countries are nervous about the US, let's be honest about that," he said. "We are not one of them."

It was a seemingly reasonable declaration. US-India ties had been rock solid for several decades, including during Trump's first term, when Washington's relations with other close partners sank. Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi enjoyed a warm personal relationship. There was an expectation that tension points from the Joe Biden era would melt away: Trump had a more moderate view of Russia than Biden. And he wouldn't prod India on rights and democracy concerns.

The partnership got off to a predictably positive start. In February, Modi was one of the first foreign leaders to visit the Trump 2.0 White House. The two men announced a new phase of partnership. But then things went sideways in a hurry.

India's tariffs and large trade imbalance in its favour have long galled Trump. And his hyper-aggressive approach to negotiations means that those on the other side of the table are expected to give in — on practically everything. India made significant concessions — it lowered and eliminated tariffs, it took back undocumented workers — but it wasn't enough. Failed trade talks and new tariffs delivered the first blows to bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, India got dragged into Trump's Russia pressure tactics. Trump generally doesn't take a hard line on Russia, but he badly wants Vladimir Putin's buy-in for his Ukraine peace proposal. So he sought to pressure Putin by pressuring Russia's commercial partners to pull back from Moscow. India was an easy target. True, China imports more oil from Russia than India. But India dramatically increased Russian oil purchases after the invasion of Ukraine. India has actually increased its American oil imports in recent years, and late last year it decreased its Russian purchases. But it wasn't enough. India's tariff burden doubled, from 25 to 50 per cent.

Then there's Pakistan. New Delhi has long grudgingly accepted that Washington will maintain its dalliances with Pakistan's generals. But the speed and timing of a resurgence in US-Pakistan relations made it

an unavoidable source of US-India strain. The administration went from having few engagements with Pakistan to hosting Asim Munir at the White House — more than once. And this meteoric shift played out in Operation Sindoora's aftermath.

Another trigger for tensions was India's refusal to do things the Trump way. Its unwillingness to praise, to flatter, to make copious concessions, hurt India. In the era of Trump, New Delhi's calm and conventional approach to diplomacy became a liability.

Finally, there was the noise. Withering White House criticism about India's "dead economy" and its funding of Russia's "war machine". The MAGA base's ugly anti-India messaging. Problematic policies were the sad storyline of US-India ties this last year, and nasty American rhetoric was the screechy soundtrack.

New Delhi might argue its strategic autonomy gives it the flexibility to weather the US-India storm. In reality, it's in a bad place. It faces major obstacles accessing a critical export market. It has workarounds, like an impending FTA with the EU. But these can't replace America.

Also, future American help regarding China is uncertain. This is no small matter. Previously, Washington provided intelligence to help deter Chinese border provocations, and it partnered with New Delhi to counter Chinese power in non-military domains — like technology. More broadly, amid global tumult and unpredictability, close partnership with the US had been a rare and reassuring constant for New Delhi. Not any more.

Sergio Gor, Washington's new envoy in Delhi, has telegraphed a desire to patch up ties. That means a lot, given his deep influence in Trump's White House. But he'll need to work hard to recoup the trust the US has squandered in New Delhi. One signpost to watch is Washington power dynamics. If officials beyond Trump and his top aides carve out more policy space and start driving the relationship with India, the partnership could bounce back. Beyond the White House, and especially among mid-level officials and bureaucrats, there's strong support for close partnership with India.

But ultimately, it all comes down to Trump. Stabilising the relationship will require a presidential visit to India, for an overdue Quad leaders' summit. He's more likely to go if he has something big to announce, like a trade deal. For now, this much is true: Many countries remain nervous about the US-India, presumably, now one of them.

The writer is senior fellow for South Asia at the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC

Call antimicrobial resistance by its name

BY KAMINI WALIA

"

WHEN ANTIBIOTICS are used without need, they lose their power." A simple but powerful message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the last *Mann Ki Baat* of 2025 brought the discussion on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) out of hospital corridors and into the public sphere. For decades, AMR has been discussed largely within scientific, clinical, and policy circles, while remaining invisible in mainstream political discourse. The significance of this message lies not only in the awareness but in accountability. When AMR is acknowledged on a platform like *Mann Ki Baat*, it signals that antibiotic misuse is a national concern requiring collective responsibility — from patients and providers to regulators and policymakers. It also creates space for stronger enforcement of prescription

norms, investment in diagnostics, and stewardship programmes that have long awaited political backing.

Historically, some of the most successful global public-health advances have followed visible and sustained political leadership. When leaders champion a health issue, it brings visibility, legitimacy, and urgency, mobilising public attention, media coverage, and cross-sectoral engagement. It unlocks sustained funding, strengthens institutional accountability, and accelerates policy formulation and implementation. Leadership advocacy also helps overcome stigma, align fragmented stakeholders, and integrate the issue into broader development and security agendas. By openly acknowledging HIV/AIDS and challenging stigma, Nelson Mandela transformed HIV from a taboo topic into a national priority, accelerating treatment access and rights-based responses. During his time in office and later through his NGO, US President Bill Clinton trans-

formed the global HIV response by pushing for dramatic reductions in the cost of anti-retroviral therapy, expanding access to treatment in low- and middle-income countries, and mobilising political and private-sector support. David Cameron, former prime minister of the United Kingdom, was an early high-profile political voice on AMR, and his actions helped shape global AMR policy. Modi's emphasis aligns India with global health priorities at a time when drug-resistant infections threaten to reverse decades of medical progress. As one of the world's largest producers and consumers of antibiotics, India's recognition of its AMR challenge enhances its credibility on global platforms such as the G20 and WHO. More importantly, it underscores that safeguarding against overuse of antibiotics is central to India's health security and development.

In a country where self-medication and over-the-counter antibiotic use are widespread, the PM's words challenge the deeply ingrained belief that antibiotics are quick fixes for all infections and strengthen the hands of clinicians, pharmacists, and public health authorities who struggle daily against irrational prescribing and consumption. Political acknowledgement helps dismantle this culture of normalisation. It also legitimises the message that antibiotics are a shared societal resource, not consumer commodities.

The writer is senior scientist and programme officer, AMR, ICMR

Fake news, deepfakes, influencers — welcome to elections 2026



ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O'BRIEN

IN ABOUT 10 weeks, four states and one Union Territory go to elections. There will be campaign songs, reels, trails, tactics and more. Policies will be launched and re-launched. From jingles to *jumlas*. From public rallies to podcasts. If the 2019 polls were India's first "WhatsApp Elections" and 2024 India's first "digital forward" elections, then 2026 ought to be characterised by a potpourri of both. They say 2029 will be the AI election. Here are some thoughts on the intersection of media and politics from an ever-eager student of both.

Fake news

Fake news may be described as yellow journalism on steroids — sensationalism amplified by technology to spread at algorithmic speeds with little to no accountability. The impact of fake news on elections today can be understood by going back to the basic journalistic framework of the "five Ws".

What: While the term does not have any legal definition in India, the Australian government's eSafety Commissioner describes fake news as "fictional news stories that are made up to support certain agendas".

Who: With three out of five internet users in India accessing news and information online, the rapid proliferation of fake news is particularly worrying. A Pew Research Centre study of 2025 found that 65 per cent of those surveyed viewed made-up news and information as a huge concern, among the highest globally.

Why: Fake news has become a structural feature of Indian elections. While the votes are cast offline, the battle for those votes increasingly unfolds online. With over 90 crore internet users in India in 2025, influencing perception and shaping narratives has become possible with just a few clicks. A study by the Indian School of Business and CyberPeace revealed that 46 per cent of all fake news was political in nature.

When: Fake news peaks around elections, with the National Crime Records Bureau recording a 70 per cent rise in fake news cases in 2019, an election year, over the previous year.

Where: Digital platforms including social media platforms and messaging apps like Facebook, X and WhatsApp enable the rapid spread of fake news. Doctored videos, AI-generated pictures and clips blur fact and fiction while algorithms provide the push that makes such content go viral.

India has close to 900 private television channels, and nearly half of them are news channels. Television still has a deep reach — 23 crore homes own a TV set. In recent

years, though, there has been a marked shift to the digital mode. A Reuters Institute report shows that seven out of 10 Indians now prefer to consume news online. Of those, half get their news from social media. Fifty-five per cent rely on YouTube for news consumption, 46 per cent on WhatsApp, 37 per cent on Instagram, and 36 per cent on Facebook. Even with these media consumption patterns, newspapers, both in regional languages and English, still remain comparatively high on the credibility quotient.

Influencers

With the increasing use of social media, "influencers" have considerable heft in this space. These individuals, who are supported by strong research and production teams, have built a large following buoyed by their personal brand equity.

Among Gen Z, only 13 per cent prefer to follow "celebrities" and over 86 per cent prefer to follow influencers. In fact, the reach of these influencers has been so crucial that many senior politicians have actively reached out and have given them interviews. Even the Union government has not left this channel untapped. The government has engaged with influencers by empanelling "influencer agencies" on MyGov. Four influencers were empanelled in 2023, of which one's CEO is a vocal supporter of the ruling dispensation.

Deepfakes

The deceased patriarch of a regional party from the south "showing up" in trademark attire for a party meeting. Two leading actors of the Hindi film industry criticising the Prime Minister and supporting the largest opposition party. These are the kind of artificially created, digitally altered videos that popped up before the last Lok Sabha elections.

Deepfakes, the technical term for such pieces of content, have increasingly become one of the most potent tools deployed by political parties and agencies who help them design campaigns. Consider this. In the 60 days before voting began during the last general elections, 5 crore AI-generated calls were made to voters, where the voice of a political leader was synthetically generated to come across as if directly speaking to the voter. During the same elections, Meta approved 14 AI-generated electoral ads calling for violence against Muslims and an opposition leader. The Election Commission of India (ECI), as the constitutional authority responsible for administering election processes, ought to have stepped in to set up guardrails regulating the dissemination of such content. However, if the implementation of the recent SIR process is anything to go by, we may be praying to the wrong god.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party. Additional research: Anjana Anchayil, Dheemant Jain and Varnika Mishra

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BMC polls

READING THE editorial, my thoughts travelled down memory lane to 1992, when I started my career ('Where are the solutions Mumbai needs?', IE, January 15). Bombay was a place that transformed the dreams of many into reality. The infrastructure that existed was of immense help in serving those who walked and travelled through the streets of this bustling metropolis. Over the years, what I realised when I travelled through the streets on the way to Nashik a year ago was that congestion had increased in many places, and no pronounced signs of an eased life prevailed.

— Jiji Panicker K, Alappuzha

THE BMC elections were a missed opportunity ('Where are the solutions Mumbai needs?', IE, January 15). The focus was regrettably on divisive identity politics and short-term financial inducements. Mumbai's critical civic issues — potholed roads, waste mountains, failing public transport, and crumbling infrastructure — were largely absent from the discourse. These problems demand serious, long-term solutions, not populist posturing. Now, the elected body must swiftly shift its attention to a daunting to-

do list. Fixing public transport, creating sustainable waste and water management systems, and planning for the city's exploding density are not optional. Addressing Mumbai's decay requires accountability and imaginative, future-focused governance. The city needs its leaders to move beyond rhetoric and deliver pragmatic results that improve the daily life of every resident.

— K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Cultural union

KASHI TAMIL Sangamam celebrates a bond that has been deeply rooted in Indian culture for centuries ('Kashi & Tamil Sangamam: A celebration of unity', IE, January 15). In line with NEP 2020's emphasis on Indian knowledge traditions, it includes workshops and seminars that connect the ancient Tamil knowledge system with modern research, new innovations, and contemporary education. The theme of Kashi Tamil Sangamam 4.0, "Let's Learn Tamil — Tamil Karkalam", focused on promoting the learning of Tamil outside Tamil Nadu and strengthening linguistic inclusion. Tamil education in Uttar Pradesh would be a significant transformation for the youth of the Kashi region.

— Ankit Patel, via email



KAMINI WALIA

"WHEN ANTIBIOTICS are used without need, they lose their power." A simple but powerful message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the last *Mann Ki Baat* of 2025 brought the discussion on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) out of hospital corridors and into the public sphere. For decades, AMR has been discussed largely within scientific, clinical, and policy circles, while remaining invisible in mainstream political discourse. The significance of this message lies not only in the awareness but in accountability. When AMR is acknowledged on a platform like *Mann Ki Baat*, it signals that antibiotic misuse is a national concern requiring collective responsibility — from patients and providers to regulators and policymakers. It also creates space for stronger enforcement of prescription



Opinion

FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026

Budget's size matters

Don't let public spending suffer; government resources need to grow much faster

INDIA'S FISCAL CONSOLIDATION drive has been sharp and credible after the short-term countercyclical measures during the pandemic period. However, this has come with the cost of a subdued growth of general government expenditure (Centre + states) as a fraction of GDP. The ratio was 27.4% in FY25, marginally lower than 27.8% in FY17. Turning even further to the past, the ratio improved from 26.6% in FY13—an 80 basis points increase between FY13 and FY25. Even this modest rise is largely due to the increased expenditure by the state governments, although the combined share of the Centre and the companies owned by it would easily exceed that. What this implies at a broader level is that the ongoing fiscal consolidation is spearheaded by expenditure control as much as resource enhancement. While the focus on creating more fiscal space for public capital expenditure by way of savings in unprofitable categories of revenue spending is creditworthy, it's clear that productive social infrastructure spending has also suffered in the process.

Budget FY27 is going to be presented against the backdrop of a likely further slippage in the Centre's total expenditure, from the budgeted 14.2% of GDP in the current fiscal year. With gross tax revenues growing just 3.3% on year in April–November against 12.5% projected for the year as a whole, tax buoyancy in the current fiscal is likely to be much lower than the 1.1x budgeted. This bucks the trend of a steady rise in tax-to-GDP ratio since the Covid-induced trough. The fall in tax growth is primarily due to the deep income tax and Goods and Services Tax (GST) cuts. Meeting the fiscal deficit target of 4.4% of the GDP for FY26 might therefore require a significant reduction in expenditure compared to the Budget Estimates. In fact, in April–November 2025, the Centre's revenue expenditure grew at an anaemic 1.8%.

A positive is that even under such constraints, the Centre's budget capex grew 28.2% in the first eight months of the current fiscal year, more than four times the budgeted pace. This clearly reflects the government's commitment to maintain the relative quality of spending, even amid the resource constraints. States have performed relatively badly on the capex front with just 10% annual increase in April–November. According to CareEdge, states utilised only 38.3% of the budgeted capex amount for the full fiscal year by November-end. Accelerated public spending in physical infrastructure and in areas like health, education, and research and development is vital for raising the economy's growth capacity, and sustainable development. A quantum jump in gross capital formation (GCFI) in infrastructure is a prerequisite for fruition of the *Vikas Bharat* plan.

Public spending will have to play a crucial role in the GCFI project. Over the next five years, India's tax-to-GDP ratio must go up by at least 5 percentage points from the current level of 18%, which is the lowest among BRICS countries. The size of general government expenditure, net of interest payments, ought to hence rise by a comparable measure. Though additional taxes can't be an option, a widening of the tax base, and concerted focus on collecting the due taxes and using it for productive expenditure is a must. Over ₹16.5 lakh crore of direct taxes are caught in protracted litigation, and a similar sum is to be recovered as indirect taxes as well. That itself is around 60% of the Centre's current annual Budget size.

How Larry Ellison can get Warner to play ball

THE BILLIONAIRE ELLISON family said this week that it will try to overhaul the board of Warner Bros Discovery Inc. unless the Hollywood studio engages with their \$108 billion takeover bid. But winning support in a corporate fight won't be easy as long as their offer contains holes.

Sure, the Ellisons are leading rival suitor Netflix Inc. on price. Paramount Skydance Corp., the studio backed by tech luminary Larry Ellison and led by his son David, is dangling \$30 per share for the whole of Warner. That's attractive compared with Warner's December deal with Netflix, where the studio and streaming arms get sold for a targeted \$27.75 in cash and stock, and shareholders keep a cable-TV business whose value may not cover the shortfall versus Paramount's pitch.

But there's a snag with Paramount. What happens if a deal is agreed which ultimately doesn't close? Warner worries that the financing could collapse, resulting in a lot of wasted time and money. The reasoning is that a Paramount takeover would rely on such a vast debt package that it wouldn't take much to spook lenders Bank of America Corp., Citigroup Inc. and Apollo Global Management Inc. into pulling out—assuming the small print offers an escape hatch. Gross debt, on Warner's assessment, would be around seven times the two companies' combined profit as measured by expected earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation.

It's unclear whether this uncertainty is worse than the main doubt about the Netflix bid: the risk of a successful antitrust challenge to the creation of an even more powerful streaming giant. The ratio of debt to profit in a combined Paramount-Warner looks less scary if you boost the profit side of the equation with cost savings expected

from a tie-up. Factor in these, plus cash at hand, and Paramount says net debt would fall below four times Ebitda on completion, and would drop further over the subsequent two-and-a-half years. Giving full credit for these savings from day one would be overoptimistic, but it seems fair to allow for some benefit. Plus there's \$41 billion of Ellison-backed equity in this proposal. That's a huge cushion.

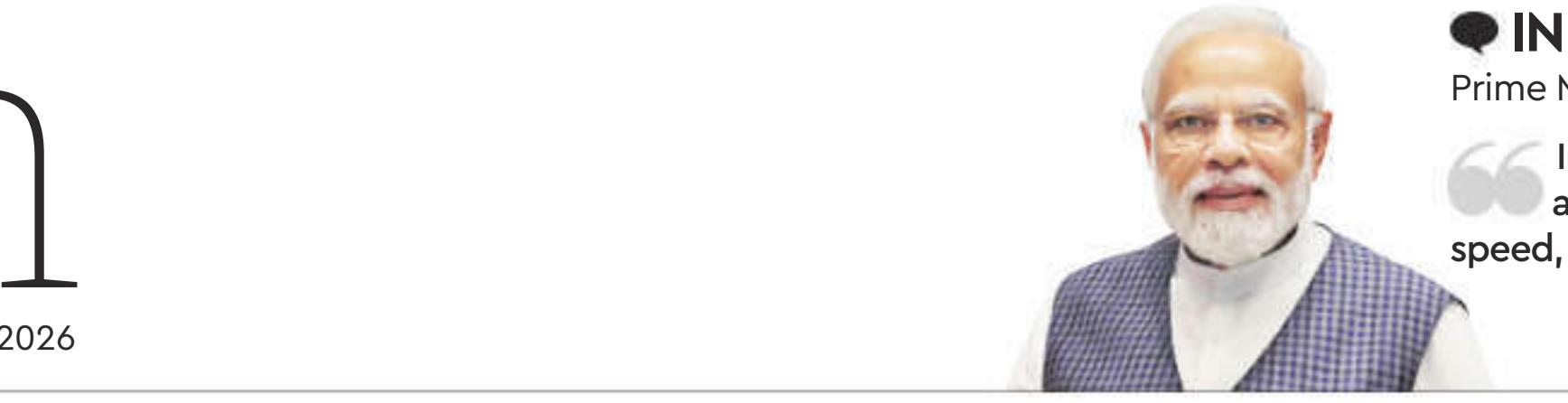
Warner is, however, more convincing when assessing how bad the fallout would be from either deal failing. If the Netflix transaction gets blocked, Warner just reverts to its pre-deal strategy of becoming a focused studio and streaming business having spun off its cable TV arm, Global Networks. Netflix doesn't want cable, so the carve-out is set to proceed as planned while the takeover grinds through regulatory scrutiny.

Paramount wants the whole of Warner, so the Global Networks separation would be put on ice. If a Paramount takeover couldn't close, Warner would have to reheat the spinoff plan. That could take months, adding to the delay from pursuing the failed merger. Meanwhile, Warner would rack up costs—a \$2.8 billion break fee to Netflix for switching sides, plus a potential \$1.5 billion penalty if a planned debt refinancing for the cable carve-out doesn't happen. Throw in other expenses and most of the \$5.8 billion break fee Paramount has offered in its attempt to usurp Netflix would be used up, leaving only \$1.1 billion, Warner says. That's small compensation for the setback to its business in this scenario.

As things stand, the Ellisons don't need to raise their bid yet. Netflix's falling stock price has dragged the value of its agreed deal to slightly more than \$27.30, excluding cable. It is considering changing the offer to be 100% cash. Bloomberg News reported this week. Even if that happens, the overall attractiveness of the Netflix tie-up still depends on the value of Global Networks, and that's not been helped by the weak stock-market debut of Comcast Corp.'s cable-TV business, Versant Media Group Inc.

Paramount's threats of a boardroom reset and litigation to get Warner to reveal its internal deliberations are big sticks. But carrots work too. Warner's objections relating to the cost of the deal failing are valid and may make shareholders pause before backing the Ellisons in a hostile contest. Father and son have a higher chance of clearing political and regulatory hurdles if they get an agreement with their target.

The Ellisons could add a bit more equity into the mix to ease the debt concerns. Above all, they'd be well advised to devise a framework for managing the Global Networks spinoff that suits both sides, while improving or restructuring the break fee. Do this, and it will remove any excuse for Warner not engaging.



INDIAN DEMOCRACY

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

India has proved that democratic institutions and democratic processes provide stability, speed, and scale to democracy

WHEN STATES DESIGN THEIR OWN RULES IN ISOLATION, THEY CREATE UNEVEN PLAYING FIELDS

The balkanisation of gig work

THE ROAD TO regulatory hell is often paved with uncoordinated legislation. As India attempts to formalise the social security net for its burgeoning gig economy, we are witnessing a fracturing of the national market that threatens to undo the very welfare gains it seeks to achieve. The recent legislative manoeuvres by states like Jharkhand and Karnataka, while born of a noble intent to protect the precariat, have stumbled into a thicket of economic distortion. By deviating from the architectural blueprint of the Central Code on Social Security (CoSS), 2020, these state-level bills are engineering a constitutional absurdity.

The result is a balkanised regulatory regime that penalises domestic entrepreneurship and enfeebles the platforms relied upon to sustain gig livelihoods. This acts as a penalty on the digital model itself. It exposes a fundamental flaw in the current legislative trend: When states design their own rules in isolation, they create uneven playing fields that incentivise regulatory arbitrage rather than genuine welfare.

The Parliament passed CoSS in 2020 with a vision of a unified national architecture. A delivery partner's livelihood does not adhere to the administrative boundaries of a district or a state. A student working in Ranchi today might move to a metro city like Delhi tomorrow, expecting their work history and accumulated benefits to travel with them.

State-specific legislation ignores this reality. By erecting silos of welfare, states are creating a scenario where a worker's benefits are trapped in the jurisdiction where they were working. If Jharkhand has one set of rules and Karnataka another, does a worker migrating between the two lose their safety net? Do they have to register twice? The friction this introduces defeats the very purpose of the Central Code designed to offer a safety net as flexible and mobile as the workers it protects.

RAGHAV PANDEY

Director, Centre for Regulatory Studies (CRS), National Law University Delhi



It is crucial to recognise gig work as a socio-economic bridge. For many, it serves as a transitional pathway from unemployment to aspiration. Consequently, welfare mechanisms must be designed to accommodate this mobility.

A significant yet often overlooked casualty of this patchwork approach is India's indigenous digital enterprise ecosystem. The majority of these platforms are homegrown success stories, forged by entrepreneurs who bet early on India's digital potential and fundamentally reshaped the service economy. They have brought efficiency, transparency, and traceability to sectors previously dominated by informal, cash-based networks.

Entangling these companies in a labyrinth of divergent state regulations inflicts a structural blow to scalability. A startup in Hyderabad cannot afford to navigate 28 different compliance regimes, welfare boards, and definitions of 'turnover' or 'aggregator.'

If every state acts as a separate regulatory island, the operational cost of expanding across India becomes prohibitive. We are already seeing signs of capital flight, with logistics companies hesitating to expand into states where the regulatory risk outweighs the market potential. Platforms may simply geofence their operations, avoiding states with punitive frameworks. Tragically, this hurts the consumer, the small business almost entirely hosted on the platform, and the workers in those

states the most.

The proposed legislation in Jharkhand offers a stark case study in this overreach. It proposes a Welfare Board with powers that dangerously blur the line between regulation and management.

The Board is empowered to make recommendations regarding the 'pricing' and 'remuneration' of gig workers. This represents a slippery slope toward state-controlled pricing in a free market. The gig economy thrives on dynamic pricing. If a bureaucratic board begins to dictate minimum floors or pricing caps, the efficiency of the algorithmic matching process collapses.

Furthermore, this power to review remuneration creates a shadow employment relationship. This is when the CoSS, for the first time, recognises and defines gig work and keeps it out of the ambit of the regular employer-employee relationship.

The central premise of the gig economy is that workers are independent contractors who enjoy flexibility. If the state dictates their wages, prescribes the format of their contracts, and controls the pricing of their services, the distinction between an employee and a gig worker evaporates.

This legislative overreach must be viewed through the lens of constitutional federalism. While labour is a subject on the Concurrent List of the Constitution, meaning states are within their rights to legislate, the doctrine of repugnancy suggests that when a central law exists, state laws must not conflict with it.

The CoSS 2020 is a central statute awaiting full notification. It was the product of extensive tripartite consultations involving unions, industry, and state governments. It represents a delicate compromise intended to standardise the definition of gig work and the funding of social security. By rushing ahead with divergent bills, states are undermining this federal consensus.

We also face the looming risk of double taxation. If the Central government notifies the CoSS rules tomorrow, will platforms operating in Jharkhand be liable to pay the central levy (capped at 5% of payout) and the state levy (1-2% of turnover). Laws are silent on this. Such fiscal uncertainty is poison for investor confidence. The solution is not to abandon the idea of gig worker welfare; however, the mechanism must be sound, and it must be national.

To honour the reality of the digital economy, states must pause parallel legislative activities. Creating state-specific hurdles defeats the logic of a digital single market.

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The second, governance must be balanced. Welfare Boards, whether central or state-level, must be truly representative, with equal weight given to platform representatives, worker unions, and independent experts rather than being dominated by government appointees who may lack industry expertise. The state must resist the urge to micromanage pricing. The role of the state is to ensure a floor of social protection, not to set the price of a ride from Ranchi Station to Kanke Road.

We need a welfare architecture that is constitutionally coherent, not one that collapses under the weight of its own contradictions.

The Hotel California of Indian investing



SIDDARTH PAI

Founding partner, CFO, and ESG officer, 3one4 Capital

FOR DECADES, THE road to Mumbai didn't run through India – it ran through Mauritius. This island nation wasn't just a source of capital; it was the toll gate for global FDI. But as the 'Hotel California' of Indian investing, investors are finding that checking out is easy, but leaving is impossible. Data from the RBI and DPIIT show that India has attracted over \$1 trillion of FDI this millennium, with most of it coming between 2015 to 2025. Of this, Mauritius is the single largest source of FDI to India. In the private equity-venture capital (PE-VC) world, a Mauritian structure was considered as hygiene.

Two powerful engines drove this dominance—the favourable double tax avoidance agreement (DTAA) with India which granted zero capital gains to investors, and the low cost of operations in Mauritius. The India-Mauritius DTAA taxed capital gains from share sales in the country of residence (Mauritius). Mauritius' zero capital gains tax meant that investments in India through Mauritius suffered no taxation.

Due to this, Mauritius dominated capital flows into India, especially into unlisted entities. Until recently, India's taxation structure was fundamentally against unlisted companies, who suffered capital gains at 20% as opposed to none for listed securities. It was only recently that the tax rates for listed and unlisted securities were normalised.

The fall of Mauritius came down to two sticks and a carrot. The first stick was the 2016 DTAA amendments. The issue

with Mauritius was that it was primarily a conduit for capital. Investors from the world over pooled capital in Mauritius to invest into India, taking advantage of the favourable DTAA. This prompted Indian authorities to renegotiate the DTAA in 2016, ending this treatment in a phased manner.

The second stick was the 'Principal Purpose Test' (PPT) and substance. 2024 saw the insertion of the PPT and an emphasis on substance. If the principal purpose for setting up the Mauritius vehicle was for tax avoidance, then the DTAA wouldn't apply. The crux was an assessment of whether the investment and divestment decisions were taken in Mauritius or if it was a mere conduit for capital into India. This spawned an entire industry of 'substance structuring' where partners and directors scrambled to prove that decisions actually originated in Mauritius. Despite a 2025 clarification that the PPT wouldn't apply to pre-2017 investments, the allure of Mauritius faded.

Finally, the carrot was Gujarat International Finance Tec-City- International Financial Services Centre (GIFT-IFSC). It is the only tax-free way to invest into Indian equities. The Government of India announced a scheme to allow for the tax-free redomicile of funds to GIFT-IFSC, giving

ing an off-ramp to funds domiciled in Mauritius. This scheme is expected to see a flurry of applications due to the recent case involving Tiger Global.

Tiger Global is amongst the storied investors worldwide and played an outsized role in India's largest startup exit—Flipkart. When Walmart bought Flipkart, Tiger stood to gain around \$1.2 billion from its investment. An exit of such magnitude drew the immediate scrutiny of

Tax Authorities. This led to high-stakes litigation that forced a re-examination of the landmark *Union of India v. Azadi Bachao Andolan* (2003) case, a landmark ruling. Central Board of Direct Taxes issued Circular No. 789 on April 13, 2000. The circular stated that a Tax Residency Certificate (TRC) issued by the Mauritian authorities would be conclusive evidence of

residency. Once a TRC was produced, Indian tax officers could not "look through" the entity to find its real owners or question its commercial substance.

This circular was immediately challenged in court by the non-government organisation Azadi Bachao Andolan, leading to a high-stakes legal battle. The Supreme Court in 2003 upheld Circular 789 and laid the route for various investors to use Mauritius as a vehicle for investing in India.

The India of 2016 is not the India of 2026. The era of intermediate pooling is over. As India adopts global standards, it refuses to remain a global exception

Centre reviewed the Social Security Code pertaining to gig workers right from defining them till providing social security benefits. Through the "10 minutes delivery" model has inherent risks, it is innovative for delivery platforms. The platforms must try to mitigate the risk gig workers face with apt insurance and enhance their average income.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India's PPP journey

Apropos of 'India's PPP journey and the road ahead' (FE, January 15), infrastructure investments are the backbone of a country's GDP growth. To move towards ease of doing business, the Centre has been harping on the need for more infra projects under Public Private Partnership models, relieving constraints on the government. Investing partners face several issues on ground right from

land acquisitions, installation of power, water and drainage systems and in getting clearances and approvals from multi agencies. The PM GatiShakti aims at bringing all the stakeholders under one roof by cutting down the red tapism prevailing across the departments. The writers' battoning on finding a common ground for dispute resolution deserves merit. Legal issues and disagreements arising out of transfer or sharing of ownership with

new partners to reduce friction among stakeholders would quicken project execution.

—RV Baskaran, Pune

Protecting gig workers

Apropos of "Business as usual" (FE, January 15), the Social Security Code lacks a clear definition for gig workers and their ambit of work. Gig workers work for multiple platforms and it is a major hurdle for fixing their benefits in concrete terms. It is time that the

Bye, Treaty Shopping, Yeh Tiger Zinda Hai

Tiger Global ruling won't dent India's appeal

Supreme Court on Thursday issued a landmark judgment in India's treatment of tax on capital gains by foreign investors by ruling that Tiger Global was liable to pay tax on sale of its stake in Flipkart to Walmart. Dispute arose because Tiger Global's investments were made prior to the period when India amended its treaty with Mauritius, through which investments were made, to plug exemptions to capital gains tax. The law is now settled that Indian taxmen can go beyond routing mechanisms for foreign investments, and probe the intention behind the specific arrangement. If there is reasonable doubt over routing of investments, grandfathering and residence clauses constitute weak arguments in India's evolving tax jurisprudence.

Import of the ruling is wide because it affects a class of investments made over a specific period to minimise tax incidence in India. GoI has made consistent efforts to dis-

courage treaty shopping, and the current set of rules is watertight, and in keeping with international norms. Fresh investments into the country must flow through routes GoI deems kosher. Ambiguity exists over previous investments. But the tax administration can, at best, examine them on

their merits. The development is unlikely to alter India's investment climate. Tax optimisation is not the principal consideration in investment decisions. Returns available to foreign investors in India arise from a far more intricate interplay of economic factors. India's tax rates and policy orientation compare favourably in the global context, and have low deterrence value for prospective investors.

The top court's verdict brings clarity to a period when venture capital was peaking. India's regulators have worked on dissipating froth in startup valuations. The centre of gravity is shifting back to the country because of its business prospects. Offshore tax avoidance structures are becoming less relevant as the Indian startup ecosystem matures. Courts are weighing in on this vision of entrepreneurship in the country.

Farm to Roads, A Circular Route

Scientists at two premier state institutions—CSIR Central Road Research Institute (CRRI) and CSIR Indian Institute of Petroleum (IIP)—have developed a breakthrough technology that transforms crop stubble, long criticised for causing severe air pollution in Delhi-NCR, into a material for road construction. This innovation is not just a triumph for Indian science and R&D, it also promises tangible benefits for public health, particularly improving air quality in the national capital.

For farmers, it allows them to derive value from stubble that was previously burnt. The advantages extend beyond agriculture: bio-bitumen produced from crop residue can reduce road construction costs. Roads built with this material are more

durable, lowering the frequency of repairs and construction work, which, in turn, reduces dust emissions — another critical source of pollution. Smoother roads also enhance vehicle efficiency, leading to fuel savings and reduced emissions, while improved road quality can decrease the likelihood of accidents.

This innovation exemplifies the principles of a circular economy, keeping resources in use longer and minimising waste. By replacing conventional bitumen with bio-bitumen, India could save up to ₹30,000 cr annually on bitumen imports. While this is a landmark achievement, it is not unprecedented—Indian researchers have previously converted waste materials such as steel slag and plastic into road-building products. The successful transition from lab research to commercial application sets a model for other R&D institutions to develop sustainable, cost-effective technologies. Beyond domestic benefits, this tech opens avenues for exports, particularly to developing countries investing heavily in infra, demonstrating India's potential to lead in green innovation globally.



JUST IN JEST

Delivery agents and cab drivers need non-human help for non-human devices

Tech to Help Humans Deal with, Um, Tech

The sheer drama of delivery agents and ride-hailing drivers wrestling with their GPS to find the way to their destination or pick-up point is tantalising. The device that promised to be a digital compass becomes alien tech for many, in the process sending them to the wrong alley, the neighbour's flat or, occasionally, the Andamans. The result? A barrage of phone calls to you: 'Sir, where exactly are you?' or 'Madam, can you tell me where your location is?'

So, it's time a bright spark calling himself 'startup entrepreneur' comes up with another layer of tech to play go-between for tech and human, preferably an AI that deciphers GPS for the delivery agent/cab driver. Drivers could have augmented reality glasses that project glowing arrows in the sky, like divine neon signs guiding them to the promised land of your pick-up point. Delivery agents could be armed with drones that scout the terrain, reporting back: 'Affirmative, the target residence is indeed behind — not on the left — of the Shani mandir.' Better yet, AI could simulate the customer's voice, soothingly repeating, 'Yes, this is the correct building. Please stop circling like a confused pigeon.' In short, the future of navigation lies not in more phone calls, but in technology that understands the human inability to read tech and use it. Till then, keep staring at your phone.

Does 'Tiger Global' leave investors confused, or finally put economic substance over legal form?

Tiger Changes Its Stripes

Now You See It, Now You Don't



Dinesh Kanabar



Rakesh Nangia & Maneesh Bawa

Treaties Aren't Tax Shields



A Boon Companion

SUMIT PAUL

Shaikh Saadi's parables and aphorisms carry deep wisdom. He said, 'A good companion on a journey makes it seem shorter.' It reflects the profound influence of companionship and camaraderie during travels. Whether embarked on a physical journey or a metaphorical one through life, a good companion has the remarkable ability to alleviate burdens of the journey and make the passage more bearable.

A companion who supports and uplifts us, be it through engaging conversations, shared laughter or empathetic understanding, can make time fly by and challenges of the journey appear less daunting.

Saadi reminds us of the immeasurable value of good companionship in making our journeys more enjoyable, meaningful and transformative. In one of his popular songs, Sahir Ludhianvi says, 'Main aksela bahut der chal raha, ab safar zindagani ka kat-ta-nahin/ Jab talak koi rangeen sahara na ho, waqt kafir jawani ka kat-ta-nahin.' We are social animals. We need company and a companion in life's sojourn. Conviviality is the essence of existence. They say in Urdu, 'Akela nahin koi raha hai/ Saath sayya thok chalta hai' — No one is alone/ At least the shadow accompanies one.

Ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras held that friends are companions on a journey who ought to aid each other in persevering on the road to a blissful life. One ought to remember that companionship on life's journey appears in many forms: friend, beloved, spouse, guide, mentor; or even a dog, a cat or another faithful pet.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Ample Legroom In a Flight

It's sheer ecstasy to find space to stretch your legs freely at 35,000 ft. In the cramped theatre of modern air travel — even first class seems to have become just a wee bit smaller — every shift feels like a negotiation with gravity. Abundant legroom suddenly transforms the metal tube you're hurtling in turn into a cabin from a cage into a lounge, a space where comfort is not rationed but generously offered.

With room to extend, one can recline with out-gut, cross legs without contortion, and even indulge in the simple pleasure of stretching up with

outdisturbing a neighbour. The body relaxes, mind follows, and suddenly the flight is not endured but — behold! — savoured. Long-haul journeys lose their sting, with hours dissolving into ease.

With leg space, sleep comes naturally, and the horizon outside the window becomes less a distant promise than a companion to serenity.

Legroom is not merely physical space, it's psychological freedom. It tells you that travel can be a gentle passage, a floating interlude between destinations. In that stretch of space lies the bliss of flight: remember that comfort, like altitude, elevates not just the human spirit but also the knees.

Chat Room

Chinese Economy Gets Spend Shrift

Apropos 'Real Import of Export Nos.' by Aditya Sinha (Jan 15), the intricacies of China's export-driven economy and overall economic model have hardly been understood by the outside world. Its staggering trade surplus showcases immense manufacturing potential, a managed currency, huge government subsidies and, most of all, an overpowering global dominance in hi-tech sectors. The enervated domestic consumption remains a huge mystery, defying all logic. Its global hegemony and multilateral expansion into new markets have enabled it to counter the aggressive US tariffs with least disruptions. In the long run, the excessive reliance on exports, increasing global hostilities and potential for deflation could hurt China's economy.

Rajarao Kumar
Bengaluru

Raise Our Glass to Taxpayers!



Deepak Mishra

The contrast could not have been more striking. On one side were two fugitives and tax-evaders — Lalit Modi and Vijay Mallya — celebrating the latter's 70th birthday in London, openly mocking the tax system. On the same day, India's I-T department sent a blunt email to taxpayers — mostly salaried professionals — informing them that their refunds had been put on hold due to a 'mismatch' in their returns. Two parallel realities: evasion ignored, and compliance questioned.

This is no accident. It's a design choice: a tax system that squeezes captive taxpayers, while sparing those who are harder than tax.

Its biggest casualty is India's salaried middle class, for whom compliance is not an option but a compulsion. Taxes are deducted at source on salaries, FDs, savings accounts, rental incomes, professional fees, property transactions, as well as on stock and bond market gains. They do not just pay taxes, they prepay them. When taxes on consumption are added, a salaried middle-class person in a metro is likely to part with as much as 45-50% of her annual income.

Little wonder many taxpayers are protesting. Take Bengaluru-based entrepreneur Rohit Shroff, who paid

₹4 in GST and I-T over 12-18 months, yet faced repeated notices and audits. In a LinkedIn post, he lamented that India's tax system treats compliant contributors with suspicion and said he's yet another citizen considering moving out of India in 2026.

Complaints of this kind may seem unfair to finmin. After all, recent years have seen lower corporate I-T rates, higher I-T thresholds, and rationalisation of GST rates. Important as these reforms are, Budget 2026 presents a larger opportunity: to reset the state's relationship with taxpayers by recognising them as patriots rather than suspects.

Instead of enforcing compliance with a stick — an approach that has largely failed — it's time to incentivise good behaviour. One widely practised and effective approach is the public disclosure of taxpayers' information. When income and tax payments are publicly visible, taxpayers are far less likely to under-report their earnings, as others can flag discrepancies to authorities. There are precedents for such a policy:

► Norway has made taxpayer information since 1863. Data are searchable by individuals' names, PIN codes and cities.

► Finland publishes tax information for all individuals every year on Nov. 1, a date dubbed by foreign media as 'National Jealousy Day'.

► Tax returns of all Swedish corporations and individuals have been public since 1903.

► Australia, Denmark, France, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sweden, Britain and the US have selectively attempted public disclosure of targeted tax information for individuals and corporations.

Evidence suggests that public disclosure improves compliance. In Norway, the income reported by doctors, lawyers, engineers and other professionals increased significantly after tax information was made available online.

In the US, public disclosure of tax delinquents has been associated with lower levels of tax delinquency. In Pakistan, following one-time public disclosure, tax-filing rate among MPs surged from around 30% to 90%.

There are legitimate concerns that such a policy could erode privacy, and as seen in Japan, expose wealthy taxpayers to threats from criminals. The greatest risk is likely to come from

Carrot is the stick

The writer is the former director-chief executive, ICRIER

**CONTRAPUNTO**

Transparency is not about restoring trust in institutions.
Transparency is the politics of managing mistrust

- IVAN KRASTEV

Information Omission

India needs more transparency. For that, CIC and other information commissions must cooperate

Ask not why Indian Railways charges you what it does. That's the message Central Information Commission – a body set up to ensure "smoother and greater access to information" – has sent across to the public through a recent order. The applicant in the case wanted to know how Railways fixes passenger fares for different categories, under different conditions, such as Tatkal. After a two-year wait, the application has been dismissed on the grounds that it seeks "trade secret/intellectual property".

Point taken. Trade secrets should be kept secret, like Coke's formula scribbled on a scrap of paper and stored in a bank vault. You don't want rivals to get hold of them and launch copycat versions. Absolutely. But who are Railways' competitors? Whether you board a train in Jammu, Chennai, Guwahati or Kutch, you are riding the same state-owned monopoly. Unless you're thinking about Tejas Express, run by IRCTC, which is also under the railway ministry, hence owned by the people of India. So, what business risk does Railways run by disclosing how it calculates the fare for, say, the lower aisle-side berth in a 2AC coach of Paschim Express?

We are not surprised that Railways refused to share information. It's a govt body raised on the Official Secrets Act. But for CIC to buy its logic is odd. In another recent case, CIC agreed with the customs department that no public interest would be served by sharing details of businesses exporting limestone from Meghalaya to Bangladesh. But such information should be in the public domain anyway. Researchers, environmentalists, anyone might need it.

Twenty years ago, RTI was brought to increase transparency in governance, and CIC's job was to be its guardian. Back in 2017, it sided with an applicant who wanted govt to reveal why it had agreed to Russia's hiked bill for aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya – formerly Gorshkov. In 2011, it had overruled RBI's objection to listing the top 100 defaulters of PSU banks. But now, a similar request for a list of defaulters has been moved to a larger bench, even though RBI says the information should be public.

India in 2026 should be more transparent than it was in 2016. But it can't be if CIC blocks legitimate requests. Notably, it now has its full strength of 10 commissioners after nine years. But it has a backlog of over 32,000 cases. Deciding them without taking up any new cases would take over three years. That defeats the whole point of RTI.

Death In The Age Of App

Technology can tell us about the passing of loved ones, but why wait for that? Use it to say hello

Where there is a market, supply will follow. That an app monikerized 'Are You Dead?' exists, that moreover it's spreading in popularity from China to US, tells us something about how society is changing better than the intensest research paper can. In pursuit of fame and fortune, humans have been leaving their loved ones behind for millennia. But being left behind has never felt like this before. A parent growing old by herself in an urban highrise, who has good food and healthcare on tap on her phone, and may yet die without anyone finding this out for days – is not a nightmare scenario but familiar reality.

The app, called Si-le-ma in Chinese, requires users to check in daily by tapping a button, which has a ghost cartoon. If they fail to check in for two consecutive days, the app emails their emergency contact. Yes, the app could have been called, 'Are You Alive?' That the three developers who went the more morbid route are all Gen Zers (born after 1995) indicates how the app is not intended to ease just elders' fear of dying alone and unnoticed. It's not they alone who will be inhabiting the 200mn single-person households China expects by 2030. As someone has said on Weibo, the app also offers "the last bit of dignity" for young people living alone, for whom too the scariest thing isn't loneliness – it's disappearing.

In India, Census 2011 found 3.7% of "normal" households had a single person, a slight increase of 0.1% over a decade. But over in US, single individuals living alone are now the most common household composition: 28% in 2015. Other rich countries are also trending in this direction. So, yeah, the appeal of the 'Are You Dead?' app is totally understandable. What's not is the failure to value life more. Because those who do, they reach out, exchange messages, send flowers, talk a bit. Can't we just connect? C'mon.

Bengal's dolce vita

Bengali is one of the sweetest of languages – and there's a reason for that

Jug Suraiya

I've often been struck by how sweet the Bengali language sounds, particularly when it sings its inimitable Rabindra Sangeet.

It's a language seemingly full of rounded vowels which roll off the tongue, unimpeded by the angularity of consonants.

But linguists apart, could there be another reason that makes Bengali literally so sweet sounding, and which might be traced not just to the classroom of elocution, but also to the kitchen of Bengal, which showcases perhaps most notably its culinary virtuosity in the making of its incomparable confectionery?

In 2025 five Indian sweets got the prized Geographical Indication (GI) tag, out of which four are from Bengal.

The first of these is that special cold season treat, Nolen Gurur Sondesh, which incorporates liquid date palm jaggery into silky soft chhena resulting in a coalescence of texture and taste, ensnared sunshine to warm winter's chill.

Next on the GI list comes that dark delight, the Chhanabora from Bengal's Murshidabad. Chhena rolled into globes, fried to a crispy outer layer with a succulent soft centre, soaked in sugar syrup tinged with rose water.

Then comes the Motichur Laddoo from Bishnupur; tiny gold globules made from pyal tree seed flour, deep fried, immersed in syrup and moulded into laddoos that trace their history back to the Malla dynasty founded in the 7th century and famed for its terracotta temples. Befittingly, Motichur Laddoos make for perfect votive offerings for deities and privileged mortals.

The fourth on the GI list is a confection I'd never heard of, small wheat flour fritters fried and steeped in sweet syrup, which are called Sada Bonde, and hail from the village of Kamarapur, and to sample which provides me with an excuse to visit Bengal again.

I wait for GI to discover the Leddykeni, a sweet created in the 19th century and named after Lady Charlotte – wife of Governor-General Charles Canning – who was particularly partial to it, and the ambrosial Shorbhaja of Ballygunge's Mukherjee Sweets Bengal.

And I know that Bengal will continue to play mishti for me.

CONTRAPUNTO

Transparency is not about restoring trust in institutions.
Transparency is the politics of managing mistrust

- IVAN KRASTEV

Mumbai/Marathi: Asmita To Astitva

Whoever wins BMC poll today will have to contend with campaign-time sharp nativist rhetoric about who 'owns the city'

Sumeet Bhaskar



Mumbai will know today who'll run the city. What they already knew – and this will be true irrespective of results – is that this election was more than a contest between the BJP-led Mahayuti and the UBT Sena-MNS-led Shiv Shakti. Instead, it represents a fundamental shift in the Marathi political psyche. The battle lines were not merely drawn around Marathi *asmita* (pride), but around Marathi *astitva* (existence).

BJP's primary strategy has been to separate Hindutva from Marathi regionalism. Unlike in the rest of India, where BJP is the hegemon of Hindutva, in Maharashtra it has historically served as the junior partner to Shiv Sena. Since 2014, BJP has sought to usurp this space by delegitimising Uddhav Thackeray's claim to sole custodianship of Hindu and Marathi interests. By engineering a split in Shiv Sena and highlighting Uddhav's alliance with Congress-NCP and its support from Muslim voters, BJP hoped to alienate UBT Sena's traditional base.

Uddhav, however, has evoked his grandfather Prabodhankar's legacy of a Bahujan-rooted Hindutva distinct from BJP's "Brahminical" tradition. Simultaneously, Shiv Shakti alliance has aggressively tried to counter BJP's narrative by exposing its "double standards" and pointing to its own "Muslim appeasement" as evidenced by local-level alliances with AIMIM. By labelling these moves as BJP's own "vote jihad", UBT Sena-MNS aimed to dismantle BJP's moral high ground on Hindutva.

The clash of ideologies played out vividly in the run-up to the poll. BJP attempted to polarise the electorate by warning that a UBT-MNS victory would install a "Khan" – a Muslim – as mayor. At the same time, it linked Muslim voters to "Bangladeshi infiltration". It aimed to force UBT Sena-MNS to commit to a Hindu mayor. Instead, the Thackerays countered this communal ploy with a nativist ploy. They declared that the mayor would be theirs and Marathi. Hence, BJP was forced to retreat and match the Marathi pledge. This episode revealed a persistent reality that BJP in Mumbai remains uncomfortable with Marathi identity still supersedes generic Hindu consolidation.

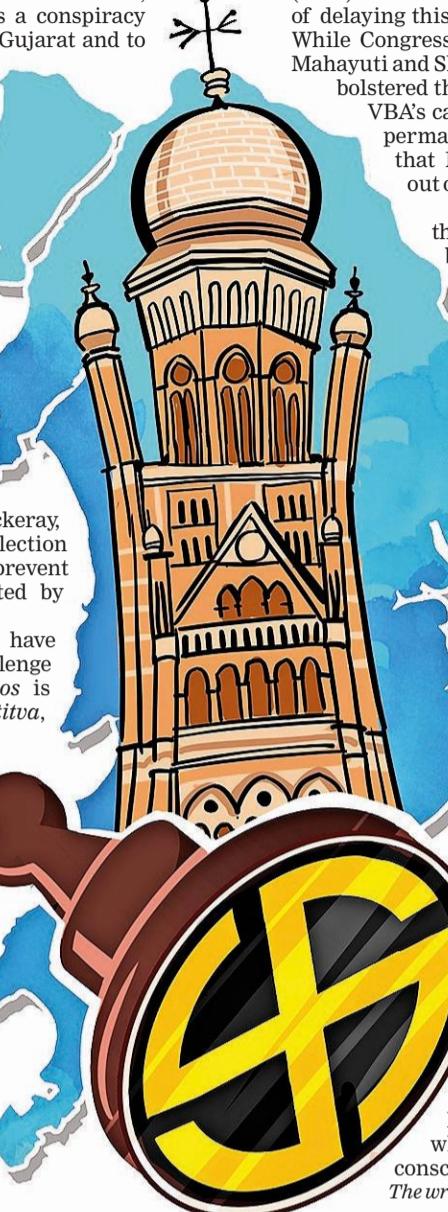
UBT Sena and MNS framed this election as a struggle for the city's soul: a defence of Marathi identity against external control. It's no longer just about Marathi *asmita*, but also about Marathi *astitva*, which has become vulnerable due to "outsiders" intent on taking over the city". For long, UBT Sena and MNS

highlighted the futility of the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train for the Marathi *manoos*. Now, the project is portrayed as a conspiracy to integrate Mumbai with Gujarat and to serve Gujarat's business interests at the expense of Maharashtra's development.

This echoes the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement in which mill workers and citizens rallied against central govt, Gujarati capitalists and political leadership to keep Mumbai the capital of Maharashtra. The handover of Mumbai airport and the Dharmaraj redevelopment project to the Adani Group was also a part of this political rhetoric. Raj Thackeray, in particular, framed this election as the "last chance" to prevent the city from being "looted by the outsiders".

UBT Sena and MNS have portrayed that the challenge before the Marathi *manoos* is real: if there is no Marathi *astitva*, there can be no *asmita*.

BJP tried to counter the Marathi *astitva* campaign by highlighting corruption in the UBT Sena-led BMC. But this likely had limited traction, given that BJP has also jointly shared power for decades. On the other hand, the corruption charges levelled against the BJP-appointed municipal administrator since 2022 did appear to gain traction because they occurred during a period of direct rule without democratic oversight.



Furthermore, Congress and Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) intensified this line of attack by accusing BJP of delaying this election to facilitate this corruption. While Congress and VBA are fighting against both Mahayuti and Shiv Shakti, their campaigns indirectly bolstered the Marathi *astitva* issue. For instance, VBA's call to end "contractor raj" and restore permanent jobs resonates with the idea that Marathi *manoos* are being squeezed out of the city's economy.

Shiv Shakti alliance relied heavily on the legacy of the undivided Shiv Sena led by Balasaheb Thackeray who shaped the contours of Mumbai's politics by firmly centring Marathi *astitva* at its core. That's why many of the people who would choose different parties for national and state elections have historically sympathised with the undivided Sena. Uddhav and Raj successfully demonstrated that they have united for the Marathi cause and to protect Marathi *astitva*. With the support of Marathi media, the Thackeray brothers successfully cultivated the sentiment that Mumbaikars need them to act as the city's protectors against perceived external threats.

BJP, meanwhile, was betting on consolidating non-Marathi, non-Muslim voters and peeling away Hindutva-leaning Marathi speakers. However, the presence of Congress, VBA, AIMIM, and various rebels in the fray likely posed significant challenges in specific pockets, turning many wards into multi-cornered contests.

Ultimately, this election was a referendum on the city's 'ownership'. While all political parties promised a better city for residents, the fear of the erasure of the Marathi *manoos* has once again gained prominence. Therefore, the BMC results today will not just decide who rules the civic body, but, in Marathi consciousness, whose city it remains.

The writer teaches at OP Jindal Global University

'Today, Many Indians Aspire To Be Job Creators'

As Startup India completes 10 years, its success is underlined not just by business growth. It's also delivered a major cultural shift in a country that used to chase select careers, writes the commerce minister

Piyush Goyal



India now has one of the world's largest startup ecosystems. The Startup India initiative has evolved into an inclusive and innovative ecosystem across the country, channelling youthful entrepreneurial energy to create jobs and accelerate economic growth, paving the way for the Viksit Bharat 2047 mission.

This transformation did not happen overnight. Startup India was announced by PM Modi from the ramparts of Red Fort on Independence Day in 2015. It was launched by the Department of Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) on Jan 16, 2016. Today, startups are energising some of the most critical sectors of the economy.

Innovation & AI | A defining shift over the past decade has been the growing focus on innovation and deep technology. India's rank in the Global Innovation Index has improved from 81 in 2015 to 38 last year, and govt support for deep tech ventures will improve it further. The number of AI startups is rising rapidly, building on the Digital India initiative.

A vision for building a deep-tech nation has led to the establishment of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, and the launch of the India AI Mission and the Research Development and Innovation Scheme. India's startups are also innovating across areas like aeronautics, aerospace and defence, robotics, green technology, Internet of Things and semiconductors.

A sharp rise in intellectual property creation reinforces this trend. Indian startups have filed more than 16,400 new patent applications, reflecting a stronger focus on innovation, long-term value creation, and global competitiveness.

Pan-India growth | From just four states with startup policies in 2016, there are now DPIIT-recognised startups in every state and UT, underscoring the depth

of institutional support and grassroots participation. More than 200,000 startups have been recognised so far, representing a decade of sustained, policy-led ecosystem development. In 2025 alone, more than 49,400 startups were recognised, the highest annual growth since Startup India began.

Inclusion has been a cornerstone of this journey. Women-led entrepreneurship has emerged as a major strength, with more than 45% of recognised startups having at least one woman director. About half the startups are based in non-metro cities, highlighting the growing role of Tier II and Tier III cities as engines of innovation and employment.



Local to global | As Indian startups scale, the world is increasingly their marketplace. To support global ambitions, Startup India has built strong international partnerships. Now, 21 international bridges and two strategic alliances facilitate market access, collaboration, and expansion across key economies, including UK, Japan, South Korea, Sweden and Israel. More than 850 startups have already benefitted from these initiatives.

In my recent visits to Sweden, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Israel, startups were an integral part of India's business delegations. These engagements provided a platform to showcase Indian innovation globally, while exposing our entrepreneurs to innovation and business practices in developed economies.

Reforms, market access | Improving the ease of doing business has been central to enabling this growth. Eligible startups can avail of a tax holiday for three consecutive years within their first decade. More than 4,100 startups have already received eligibility certificates. Over 60 regulatory reforms have reduced compliance burdens, facilitated capital raising, and strengthened domestic institutional investment. Abolition of angel tax and opening up of long-term capital pools to Alternate Investment Funds (AIFs) have further strengthened the startup funding ecosystem.

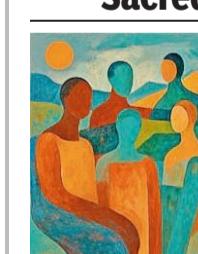
Access to markets has been prioritised. Through the Government e-Marketplace, over 35,700 startups have been onboarded, securing more than 5L orders worth over ₹51,200cr.

These efforts are complemented by strong financial support. Over ₹25,500cr has been invested by AIFs under the Fund of Funds for Startups scheme, benefitting more than 1,300 enterprises. Additionally, collateral-free loans worth over ₹800cr have been guaranteed under the Credit Guarantee Scheme for Startups.

Startup India Seed Fund Scheme with an outlay of ₹945cr provides financial assistance to startups for Proof of Concept, prototype development, product trials, market-entry and commercialisation.

Mindset change | Indian startups heralded a significant cultural change in the country, where children were once encouraged to aim only for jobs in a few sectors such as govt service, engineering or medicine. Today, many young Indians aspire to be job creators, not job seekers, and their families respect and encourage entrepreneurial ambitions.

India's startup journey is ultimately a story of confidence in our young entrepreneurs, in policy-led growth, and in India's capacity to innovate for the world. As we move confidently towards our mission to become a developed country by 2047, startups will remain central to building a prosperous, inclusive, and globally competitive India.

Sacredspace

When you are compassionate with yourself, you trust in your soul, which you let guide your life. Your soul knows the geography of your destiny better than you do.

John O'Donohue

**The Sun Is New Each Day, Why Get Bored?**

Osho

This is one of the most penetrating maxims of Heraclitus: The sun is new each day. Love is new each day. Life is new each day. To say 'each day' is not good. Each movement, gesture, moment, everything is new. So where does the old come from? Why do you get bored? If everything is so new and you cannot step in the same river twice and cannot see the same sunrise again; if everything is so new and fresh, why do you become dead and bored? – because you don't live out of the inner harmony. You live out of the mind. The mind is old.

Each sun, each morning, each hunger, each satiety is new; the mind is old. Mind is the past; mind is accumulated memory. If you look through the mind, it gives a deadness and oldness to everything.

everything looks dusty, dirty. It is because of the mind. Put aside mind, put aside memories. If you can put aside memories, your spouse is new every day...

How can you know a person? A person is freedom. Each moment he changes. If you cannot step twice in a river, how can you encounter the same person again? If rivers are changing, the consciousness, stream of consciousness, cannot be old... There is continuous excitement in your life, a continuous aliveness. This day you will feel hungry; that hunger is new. This day, when you eat again the food is new because nothing can be old in existence. Existence has no past. The past is part of the mind.

existence is always in the present, new, fresh, always moving, a dynamic

THE SPEAKING TREE

force, a dialectical movement; it flows like a river. If this insight happens to you, you will never be bored. Boredom is the greatest disease; it kills deeply, it is slow poisoning. By and by, you are so bored that you become a dead weight on yourself. The whole poetry of life disappears where no flowers flower and no birds sing. You are already entombed; you have entered your grave. It is said that people die nearabout 30 and are buried nearabout 70. Even 30 seems too long; this proverb must be from the ancient days. Now that's not true;



Editor's TAKE

Why Maharashtra's civic polls matter

From Mumbai's battle over the 'Marathi manoos' and redevelopment, the civic polls have become a referendum on who controls Maharashtra and how

Municipal elections are generally a low-key affair, as the stakes are local. Though political parties fight with vigour, people's enthusiasm is usually limited. But not in Maharashtra, where civic polls are gathering national headlines thanks to the vitriolic campaigns and high-voltage drama on streets. These elections are not just about who would control the local bodies but the whole of Maharashtra. It has touched upon larger issues of identity, alliances, and the direction of Maharashtra's urban development.

Another reason for the noise this election is creating, is that these polls come after a long hiatus – nearly eight years. People are voting to restore democratic control over institutions that directly affect their daily lives – water supply, roads, transport, and waste management – a bid to streamline urban planning.

Over these years, infrastructure has crumbled due to a lack of accountability and bureaucratic control over infra projects, which has left major cities like Mumbai and Pune clamouring for an overhaul.

Politically, these polls are testing the mettle of competing alliances. The ruling Mahayati and a fragmented opposition are harping on sharp rhetoric. In cities like Pune, the personal rivalries of Ajit Pawar and Devendra Fadnavis are in the open. Mumbai is indeed the place where the key battles are being fought with vigour.

The campaigns have gone beyond promises to upgrade local bodies – to questions of identity. The revival of the Marathi 'manoos' plank, triggered by the controversy over Hindi as a third mandatory language in schools, has placed linguistic and cultural identity at the heart of the contest. For the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the MNS, the election has become a question of Marathi pride and political relevance. For the ruling alliance, the counter-narrative has focused on unity and development.

This emphasis on identity reflects a deeper anxiety: the fragmentation of the Marathi vote. Once a consolidated political force, it is now divided among several parties. These polls are an attempt – especially by the Sena (UBT)-MNS combine – to reconsolidate this vote for this election and the Assembly elections as well.

Adding another layer to the campaign is the entry of big business into political discourse. Gautam Adani's name, particularly in relation to the Dharavi redevelopment project, is another highlight of these elections. Opposition leaders have sought to frame the election as a choice between people-centric urban renewal and corporate-driven development termed "Adanistan". The ruling alliance, in turn, has accused its critics of opportunism and hypocrisy.

These polls will decide whether identity politics regains dominance, whether development remains the central plank, or whether voters demand a more accountable, governance-focused politics.

In Maharashtra's metros, the civic ballot has become a referendum on two divergent approaches to governance and how people view the future of Maharashtra – shaped by local satraps or by the leaders based in New Delhi.

Trump, Venezuela, and the crumbling states

The recent Venezuela episode is not merely a story of American overreach or Trump's audacity; it is a mirror held up to societies that build politics around 'big men', fragile institutions, and ideological absolutism



NILANTHA
ILANGAMUWA

It is all too easy to criticise President Trump, American foreign policy, and its hypocritical authorities, because they are highly visible. Forget the moral and ethical jargon that hangs over every discussion; the most striking aspect is that President Trump is unapologetically blunt about what he will do, why he did it, and what he intends to achieve – unlike so many leaders of the United States who recite ethical rationales and moralistic rhetoric even as they drop bombs and loot. Trump exposes the raw mechanics of American power with gargantuan ambition; whether this turns into enduring success or spectacular failure is another matter entirely. But to comprehend the Trump phenomenon, we must confront it, not merely argue over its consequences. Like any imperial superpower, the United States has never been truly ethical or morally upright, because power itself refuses to be shackled by ethics or morality. History's paradoxical arc, from Babylon to the contemporary epoch, teaches us that might and strategic interest invariably outmuscle moral imperatives. Trump may be revitalising a 250-year-old strategy, one rehearsed by many empires before, without a clearly articulated alternative.

What have we produced in the name of socialism when the "big man" vanquishes his rivals or succumbs to the inevitable pull of mortality? In every instance, once the charismatic founder departs, he is succeeded by a coterie of robbers and oppressors. We are often unwilling to look in the mirror and ask what sort of system we have created, and what sort of society we truly require.

The so-called extrication of Nicolás Maduro – labelled a kidnapping in the media and decried as such by Maduro himself – is full of contradiction and ethical collision. Top US legal minds, Jack Goldsmith, the Learned Hand Professor of Law at Harvard and former Assistant Attorney General heading the Office of Legal Counsel, and Bob Bauer, Professor of Practice and Distinguished Scholar at New York University School of Law and former White House Counsel to President Barack Obama, have pointed out that, in terms of domestic legal jurisdiction, the President's power in this instance prevails, much as George HW Bush's invasion of Panama and the capture of Manuel Noriega did in 1989, or as US courts applied the Ker-Frisbie doctrine to uphold jurisdiction irrespective of how a defendant was apprehended. Maduro's defenders first called it kidnapping, then reframed it as the status of a prisoner of war. The fundamental contradiction here is stark: how can a sitting president, presumably holding legitimate power in his own state, be cut down by an American executive acting at will? Trump was never engaged in nation-building; he was there to do business and wield power as a form of profit and influence. Whether one



finds this justifiable or reprehensible, it is precisely what President Trump intended. His leadership of American power never hid its transactional essence.

Behind this operation lie years of build-up, rehearsal, and escalating pressure. Maduro was reportedly offered an exit to a third country, perhaps Turkey, to spend his remaining years, but he refused, demanding control of his nation's oil and rejecting any concession that would tarnish his hold on authority. Instead, he clung to power even as the world around him crumbled. The collapse of Venezuela's institutions was vividly illustrated in 2017 when Luisa Ortega Díaz, who had served as Prosecutor General of Venezuela for a decade, broke with Maduro's government and denounced constitutional overreach and human rights abuses. She was forcibly removed from office, threatened, and ultimately forced into exile.

This pattern – a charismatic founder followed by deterioration into kleptocracy – is not unique to Venezuela. Consider Salvador Allende, whose democratic socialist experiment in Chile was strangled by internal sabotage and external interference, culminating in his death amid bombardment and political turmoil. In Cuba, Fidel Castro, a revolutionary of formidable strategic acumen, was not deposed by internal moral failure but by relentless external pressure – the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and decades of embargo that forced him into Soviet patronage and militarised survival. These are not simple narratives of socialism's collapse; they are stories of geopolitical extraction and the endurance of power structures that devour even their own progenitors.

It is here that we confront the deeper analytic kernel. Socialist or leftist leaders were often coherent in their critique of capitalist domination and imperial interference, but the systems they built were highly personalised and lacked the institutional resilience necessary for success. Critical thinkers like Leszek Krakowski warned that attempts to institute socialist

systems without robust legal, ethical, and cultural foundations would inevitably succumb to authoritarianism or stagnation, precisely because they failed to create mechanisms for self-critique and renewal. In this context, Trump's Venezuela strategy is both blisteringly candid and ruthlessly strategic. He has signalled that the United States will direct Venezuela's oil reserves towards American interests, a move that Russia, China, and others condemned as a violation of sovereignty and international law. Some see the operation as a reassertion of American power in its "backyard"; others view it as a dangerous precedent that erodes the rule of international law. But to frame this debate solely around Trump is to miss a more profound reckoning: our own. We in the Global South have been complicit in romanticising the myth of an external villain while ignoring the internal rot of our governance systems, institutional weakness, and the penchant for personalised power that decays into predation once the strongman exits the stage.

Even the most revolutionary leaders, exalted as paragons of resistance, reveal an ugly truth through their successors: systems built around personalities, without accountability, internal checks, and vibrant civil liberties, are destined for decay. We may decry external intervention – and rightly so – but external actors exploit the very vulnerabilities that internal malfunctions create.

The Trump operation in Venezuela challenges the conventional moral binary. Trump did not mask his strategic intent; he wielded power in the most unabashed terms the world has seen in recent decades. Whatever one's view of Trump's moral compass, he has pulled back the curtain on power's true nature. The saga of Venezuela is not merely Trump's problem or America's imperial overreach; it is a mirror for all societies that have failed to cultivate governance structures robust enough to withstand the departure of strong leaders without descending into kleptocracy, repression, and systemic collapse. This is the fate awaiting any country where "big men" rule with iron fists, often arriving far sooner than expected. Change cannot come until those inside the system confront the fact that the problem is theirs to fix.

If there is any hope for societies shackled by personalist rule and ideological absolutism, it lies not in lamentation over external actors, but in the rigorous undertaking of internal reform – in building institutions that endure beyond any individual, in cultivating a civic culture that tolerates dissent, and in recognising that sovereign pride without systemic resilience is a path to ruin. Only then will societies possess the capacity to demand accountability from powers both near and distant, and only then will they be worthy interlocutors in the global arena where sovereignty, justice, and power intersect in the most unforgiving ways.

The Pioneer
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Why modern life forgets the art of rest and stability



RAJYOGI BRAHMA
KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

Most of us would agree that we are living life at a dizzying speed. There is a mad rush everywhere, from dawn to dusk – in public places, at home, and in our daily lives. People hurry to grab seats in public transport, jostle through crowds, and break queues to claim what they believe is rightfully theirs. This pervasive 'me first' approach, born out of a near-total absence of patience, lies at the root of many social problems, including the alarming rise in stampede-related deaths across the country.

The youth today wish to taste everything too soon and chase success at any cost. Working overtime, sacrificing sleep, and stretching themselves beyond healthy limits do not trouble them, as long as the rewards seem immediate. Health is willingly put at stake in the belief that one

must make hay while the sun of youth shines. Stability no longer appeals; instead, there is a craving for bigger, faster leaps. This high-speed lifestyle provides a certain thrill. Loud music, spicy food, fast cars and extroverted personalities dominate their preferences. The powerful virtual universe of showbiz, media and the cosmetic industry further reinforces the idea that youth and speed are the ultimate currencies.

Children now behave like wannabe youths, while the elderly struggle to appear young. Society has little patience for the slow, the tired or the old, rendering them increasingly invisible. There is a widespread perception that one cannot be noticed unless one is constantly running.

Walking, both literally and metaphorically, has gone out of fashion, and those who choose it risk being labelled outdated or unenthusiastic. Most people today manipulate their lifestyles to cope with this universal time deficit. The working class, neck-deep in professional commitments, find little time to cook or spend with family. Eating out, relying on ready-to-eat food, or hurriedly gulping meals has become routine. Even nourishment is sacrificed at the altar of speed.

This 'hurry up' mindset has seeped so deeply into society that consistency itself has suffered. Politicians abandon ideologies with ease, and defections have become commonplace. Employees change loyalties without hesitation.

Relationships are entered and exited in haste, contributing to rising divorce rates, broken families and the growing number of old-age homes – all symptoms of a use-and-throw culture.

Ironically, even attempts to escape this frenzy are noisy.

Breaks are filled with screens, loud entertainment and relentless socialising. Silence is almost absent, leaving the mind and body little opportunity to heal. Emotional breakdowns, lifestyle diseases and mental fatigue are the inevitable consequences of living perpetually in the fast lane.

The greatest tragedy of such a life is that it robs us of our ability to turn inward and make peace with ourselves. There is no time to pause, reflect or reassess direction. We run simply because others are running. By constantly gulping instant coffee, we forget the joy of slowly savouring a home-brewed cup.

True growth – spiritual and emotional – begins when we slow down. Rest is not weakness; it is wisdom. It is the courage to stop, to say 'no', and to recognise that we are not indispensable. Only then can we reconnect with our inner selves and choose a life that values depth over speed.

So what are we waiting for? It is time to begin the process of change – now.

The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist



Army Service Corps personnel show their skills on bikes during the 78th Army Day parade in Jaipur.

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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IRAN UNREST SIGNALS POWER SHIFT OR STRATEGIC MANIPULATION

Apropos 'Tectonic shift in people's power or a power play?' published on 15 January, this response reflects the gravity of Iran's current domestic crisis, marked by widespread unrest and deep economic distress. Rising inflation, increasing unemployment, and the sharp fall of the Iranian rial have made life extremely difficult for ordinary citizens.

Instead of addressing these issues, the authorities have relied on security crackdowns and communication restrictions, further fuelling public anger.

Iran has stated that it is prepared for both war and negotiations.

In this context, the United States and Israel must avoid exploiting Iran's internal turmoil, as any miscalculation could

escalate into a wider regional conflict. Iran's military capabilities are well recognised in the Middle East, and further provocation risks destabilising an already volatile region.

The protests and violence have claimed thousands of lives and caused significant destruction. Constructive engagement with dissenting voices and meaningful political and economic reforms are essential to restore stability.

For India, the situation poses strategic concerns. While reduced oil imports limit economic impact, New Delhi would find it difficult to support US military action against Iran.

The most serious concern remains the safety of nearly eight to nine million Indians living and working in the region.

BAL GOVIND | NAINITAL

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mohalla clinics and healthcare policy

The recent dedication of 81 new Ayushman Arogya Mandirs by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta has raised an important question: what will happen to the *Mohalla* Clinics established by the previous AAP government? These clinics were created as neighbourhood-level health facilities offering free consultations, medicines, and basic diagnostic services. The Ayushman Arogya Mandirs, introduced under the Centre's Ayushman Bharat scheme, promise wider services such as preventive health screenings, maternal and child care, chronic disease monitoring, and linkage with digital health records. While this expansion appears beneficial, there is clear overlap. Delhi already operates over 500 *Mohalla* Clinics, while 319 Ayushman Mandirs are functional, with a target of 1,100 centres.

Running two parallel systems risks duplication, confusion, and wasteful expenditure of public funds. Both models suffer from shortages of doctors, pharmacists, and support staff. It would have been more practical and economical to upgrade existing *Mohalla* Clinics by integrating them into the national framework. Unfortunately, this reflects a tendency to discard earlier initiatives for political rebranding rather than strengthening public health infrastructure.

O PRASADA RAO | HYDERABAD

Risks behind ten minute deliveries

The promise of ten-minute deliveries carries serious safety concerns for delivery riders. When riders wear uniforms or carry bags advertising ultra-fast delivery, the pressure to meet unrealistic timelines can encourage risky behaviour on busy roads. Recognising this danger, companies such as Blinkit, Zepto, and Swiggy Instamart removed prominent ten-minute delivery claims following discussions with the Labour Ministry.

This step has eased pressure on gig workers, many of whom had raised concerns about accidents, health risks, and declining incomes. The issue gained national attention after gig workers staged a strike on New Year's Eve in 2025, highlighting the unsafe conditions created by extreme delivery expectations. Although companies claim that riders are not shown countdown timers and that faster deliveries depend on proximity rather than speed, public perception still places riders under pressure. Human life is far more valuable than commercial experiments designed for competitive branding. Quick commerce should focus on safety, fair wages, and sustainable working conditions. The decision to step back from the ten-minute delivery model is a welcome relief for gig workers and a reminder that profit should never come at the cost of lives.

JAYANTH SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

Saluting India's brave army

On the occasion of Army Day, the people of India pay heartfelt tribute to the Indian Army, the nation's steadfast shield and symbol of courage, sacrifice, and selfless service. Army Day commemorates the historic moment in 1949 when General KM Cariappa assumed charge as the first Indian Commander-in-Chief of the Army, marking a defining step in independent India's military leadership.

On this day, we bow in gratitude to our soldiers, veterans, ex-servicemen, and their families, who continue to serve the nation with unwavering dedication. The Indian Army safeguards India's sovereignty by protecting its borders across some of the world's most challenging terrains.

It also plays a vital role in maintaining internal security and providing crucial assistance during natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

We remain forever indebted to the Army's indomitable courage, exemplary discipline, and spirit of supreme sacrifice.

Many brave soldiers have laid down their lives in the line of duty, ensuring that the nation remains safe and secure. The Indian Army stands as the strongest pillar of our national security. Jai Hind.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI



India's migration moment: Overhauling policy framework

India's emigration regime continues to rest largely on the Emigration Act, 1983 – a law crafted for a different economic era, when overseas employment was concentrated in West Asia and recruitment was mediated almost entirely through physical agents and paper contracts



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MITTAL

As India rapidly expands its network of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) – now spanning more than 50 countries, including the recently concluded pact with New Zealand on December 22, 2025 – a quiet but consequential opportunity is unfolding. Beyond goods and services, these agreements are opening pathways for India to position itself as a reliable supplier of high-end professionals and semi-skilled workers to ageing economies grappling with acute labour shortages.

From healthcare workers and technicians to IT professionals and skilled trades, demand for India's youthful workforce is rising across the developed world. Demography is firmly in India's favour. What is not, however, is its migration policy framework. The real constraint today is not excessive mobility, but inadequate governance.

A Policy Framework Frozen in the 1980s

India's emigration regime continues to rest largely on the Emigration Act, 1983 – a law crafted for a different economic era, when overseas employment was concentrated in West Asia and recruitment was mediated almost entirely through physical agents and paper contracts. The Act mandates emigration clearance through a limited number of Protector of Emigrants offices for workers classified as Emigration Check Required, largely those with lower educational qualifications or travelling to select destinations.

While the intent was worker protection, four decades on the outcome is a system that is cumbersome, unevenly enforced, and poorly aligned with modern labour markets. India today seeks to treat labour mobility as an economic asset-exporting skills, earning remittances, and integrating into global supply chains. Yet its legal architecture remains fragmented and control-oriented, treating migrants as administrative risks rather than economic contributors.

Recruitment channels have diversified, digital hiring platforms have emerged, and



INDIAN STUDENTS ABROAD INCREASED FROM ABOUT 13.35 LAKH IN 2023 TO NEARLY 13.8 LAKH IN 2025

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informal brokers continue to operate in the shadows. The regulatory framework, however, has not kept pace with these realities.

Migration Policy Without a Strategy

Recent efforts to consolidate migration-related laws through the Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025 may strengthen monitoring, security, and enforcement. But border management alone does not constitute a migration strategy.

Outbound labour migration is overseen by the India Centre for Migration under the Ministry of External Affairs, supported by grievance portals such as MADAD and Samadhan, and training programmes for workers and officials. These are useful administrative tools, but they operate in silos. What India lacks

is a coherent national migration framework that integrates overseas mobility, skill certification, bilateral labour agreements, and enforceable worker protections into a single policy logic.

Internal migration is treated even more diffusely. Welfare initiatives such as One Nation One Ration Card, PMAY, and Affordable Rental Housing Complexes provide partial relief, but they do not substitute for a rights-based internal migration policy grounded in social security portability and labour protections.

Exporting Labour in a Closed-Citizenship World

India is now the world's largest source of international migrants, with an estimated global diaspora of 35.4 million, including 15.8 million Indian citizens and 19.6 million persons of Indian origin.

Advanced economies facing demographic decline increasingly depend on migrant labour, yet remain reluctant to extend long-term political or citizenship rights. This contradiction is most visible in Gulf Cooperation Council countries and in hubs such as Singapore and Japan, where migrant workers power economies without social or political identity.

The risks are mounting. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, 3,258 Indian nationals were deported by the United States in 2025 alone – the highest annual figure so far, compared to 2,042 in 2019. Student migration has also surged. Indian students abroad increased from about 13.35 lakh in 2023 to nearly 13.8 lakh in 2025, making India the largest source country for universities in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and Germany. This largely self-financed migration exposes households to significant financial and emotional risk, yet policy oversight remains thin.

Remittances have masked policy gaps. India has remained the world's largest recipient for over a decade, with inflows crossing \$135 billion in 2024-25 for the third consecutive year above the \$100-billion mark. These flows support household consumption and strengthen the balance of payments, but they cannot indefinitely compensate for weak governance.

Remittances Cannot Substitute Reform

Migration persists because economic incentives are overwhelming. According to the International Organization for Migration, the India-US, India-UAE, and India-Saudi Arabia corridors are among the world's largest. Men constitute about 65 per cent of India's external migrants.

Multilateral frameworks such as the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services offer only broad principles. In practice, bilateral labour agreements determine access, rights, and protections and here India's coverage and enforcement remain uneven.

The Way Forward

India stands at a critical juncture. As FTAs expand and ageing economies look to India's workforce, migration must be treated as an economic enabler, not an administrative inconvenience.

India's migration framework is failing not because people move, but because institutions have failed to adapt to mobility. This requires a decisive shift from control to protection, and from fragmented schemes to enforceable rights. A credible national migration policy must integrate global mobility, align domestic skill certification with overseas demand, and ensure full portability of social security for migrants. Less-skilled and less-educated workers – those most vulnerable to exploitation – must receive the strongest institutional support, not the greatest bureaucratic burden.

Updating four-decade-old laws is no longer optional. If India's demographic dividend is to pay off, mobility must be governed with foresight, dignity, and economic logic. The cost of delay will not be borne by institutions, but by millions of Indians who move across borders in search of work and opportunity.

Startups: A boon for bold, jugaad and innovative India's economic growth



T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN

India is a country well known for its excellence in calculated investments, innovation, and infrastructure. It has been a decade since the startup policy was successfully launched on January 16, 2016. Indian startups are slow, smart, and steady growth ventures which have climbed the ladder of stunning and striking success by turning Indian problem statements into scalable and affordable solutions for the common citizen. Indian youth startups have turned unsolvable and unrealistic problems into real-time, realistic, and usable solutions which millions of Indian youths had been dreaming of for several decades. Indian startups have turned action plans into actionable, viable, feasible, and customised solutions. This includes the present era of Industry 4.0 / 5.0 / emerging 6.0 digital transformation technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Robotics, semiconductor chips, quantum technologies, unmanned aerial vehicles, 5G, and the emerging hyperloop of the present decade.

Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY), an iconic government initiative to Fund the Unfunded, and organisations such as SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India) have provided confidence and handholding support to young startups and Indian MSMEs. Initiatives such as Swavalambini have empowered female undergraduates to launch ventures, forming the basis of livelihood and self-reliance among them.

India has built extensive Digital Public Infrastructure, including startup incubators, research, and innovation parks across the nation, such as Atal Incubation Centres (AICs), MSME Incubation Centres, STPI (Software Technology Parks of India) incubation centres, BioNest, and several state-run centres to boost startup culture among youth.

India's startup culture is encouraging the power of Nari Shakti, which enabled women students in Kerala to build the nation's first women-engineered satellite launched by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The Indian youth startup mantra is Jugaad innovation. Indian agriculture has been refined by startups and jugaad innovators such as Niyo FarmTech, which developed frugal technologies like Neo Solar and Bahubali models affordable for marginal farming communities. These innovations help reduce the burden of traditional heavy backpack spraying systems.

Indian startups such as Skyroot Aerospace have created a dream of space innovation in the country, paving the way for advanced aerospace systems and encouraging ventures to enter the private space sector. These achievements highlight not only the power of India's technological infrastructure but also the strength of youth taking calculated risks and making smart investments, thereby building strong foundations for future generations.

Indian Startups: A Jugaad for Building Innovative India

Startup culture has been deeply rooted among young schoolchildren in India through initiatives such as Atal Tinkering Labs, enabling students to work on think-tank problems in school lab-



startups such as QNU Labs have developed Quantum Random Number Generators, demonstrating the power of the three Ts – Technology, Talent, and Temperament – among Indian youth. These products are listed on the MSMEs GeM portal, adding value to supply-chain commerce and boosting the economy. The dreams of Indian youth are no longer confined to childhood television fiction.

The IIT Madras-incubated startup TuTr Hyperloop, a student-run venture, has developed India's first indigenous hyperloop technology, marking a historic achievement in transportation technology. NeoMotion, another IIT Madras-incubated startup, has developed innovative and socially inclusive wheelchairs, giving mobility and dignity to persons with physical disabilities.

The DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade), under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, has recognised startup Ramuka Global Services Pvt. Ltd, which, in collaboration with CSIR-CRRI, developed ECOFIX, a sustainable solution for pothole repair. Biocon, a women-led innovative and integrated pharmaceutical venture, has been building foundational blocks for pharmaceutical development while promoting young startup innovators through smart investments.

Way Forward for Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat

India's vibrant startup culture stands as a defining icon for the nation. Indian startups have been transforming initiatives into impactful results. India's startup ecosystem has given wings to the dreams of youth to fly to greater heights. It has built resilience and confidence among young minds, grooming them to convert dreams into real-world products, thereby adding stepping stones and milestones towards Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat @2047.

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Cultivating a greener future



KANCHETI MRUNALINI

For decades, the story of Indian agriculture has been one of intensive growth, but this progress has come at a hidden cost to our most precious resource: the soil. Today, as we face the dual challenges of a growing population and a changing climate, the 'more is better' approach to chemical fertilisers is hitting a wall. To ensure our long-term food security, India must pivot towards Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) – a holistic strategy that marries modern science with traditional wisdom to restore our land's vitality.

The Crisis Beneath Our Feet

Indian agriculture is characterised by small and marginal landholdings and a heavy reliance on nitrogenous chemical fertilisers. Years of imbalanced use and continuous monocropping have led to severe soil degradation. We are now seeing 'multi-nutrient deficiencies', where soils are desperately short of secondary and micronutrients such as sulphur, zinc, and boron. When soil health declines, so does 'factor productivity' – meaning farmers have to apply more fertiliser just to achieve the same yield they once obtained with less. This cycle increases production costs and leaves crops more vulnerable to erratic rainfall and droughts, which are becoming more frequent under Indian climatic conditions.

What Is Integrated Nutrient Management?

Integrated Nutrient Management does not advocate abandoning chemical fertilisers. Instead, it promotes their judicious use alongside organic and biological inputs, creating a balanced nutrient regime for the soil. INM includes:

- Chemical fertilisers, applied in precise doses based on soil requirements
- Organic manures, such as farmyard manure (FYM), compost, vermicompost, and green manures
- Bio-fertilisers, including beneficial microorganisms like Rhizobium, Azotobacter, and mycorrhizae that fix nitrogen and mobilise phosphorus
- Crop residues, recycled back into the soil to enhance organic matter

The Pillars of Soil Health

To understand why INM works, we must examine the three pillars of soil health: physical, chemical, and biological.

Physical: INM improves soil structure and water-holding capacity. For a farmer in a rainfed region, this means the soil acts like a sponge, retaining moisture for longer during dry spells.

Chemical: It balances pH levels and ensures that

macro – and micronutrients are available to plant roots rather than being locked in the soil or washed away.

Biological: Perhaps most importantly, INM stimulates microbial diversity and earthworm populations. These 'tiny engineers' are critical for nutrient cycling and sustaining productivity in intensive systems such as rice-wheat or sugarcane belts.

Best Practices for the Indian Farmer

Moving INM from the laboratory to the field requires practical, site-specific strategies. National initiatives such as the Soil Health Card Scheme are already providing a roadmap by recommending fertiliser applications based on actual soil tests rather than guesswork. Key management practices include the split application of nitrogen to match critical crop growth stages and the use of slow-release options such as neem-coated urea. Simple, low-cost tools such as the Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) in rice help farmers decide exactly when to apply urea, reducing waste and environmental run-off. Furthermore, integrating legumes into cropping systems can naturally enhance nitrogen fixation, benefiting overall system productivity.

Field-Level Impact and Economic Gains

The relevance of INM is most visible at the farm level. Long-term field experiments across India show that the integrated use of fertilisers and organics sustains higher yields than chemical fertilisers alone.

For the average farmer, the benefits are tangible:

- Lower costs: Partial substitution of expensive chemicals with on-farm organic resources reduces dependence on external inputs.
- Resilience: Improved root growth and soil tilth make crops more 'climate-resilient', helping them withstand drought stress.
- Quality: The inclusion of micronutrients such as zinc and iron leads to visible improvements in both crop yield and produce quality.

A Sustainable Path Forward

Beyond the individual farm, INM aligns with India's national priorities for environmental sustainability. By minimising nutrient losses through leaching and volatilisation, this approach reduces environmental pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. As we look towards the future of Indian agriculture, it is clear that we cannot continue to 'mine' our soils indefinitely.

Integrated Nutrient Management provides a scalable, farmer-centric pathway that ensures farming systems remain viable for generations to come. It is time to treat soil not merely as dirt, but as a living system that requires a balanced, sustainable diet to feed the nation.

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comment

THOUGHT
FOR THE DAY

Democracy is the only system that persists in asking the powers that be whether they are the powers that ought to be
— Sydney J Harris, American journalist, author, columnist

For winners of the election, start dialling D for Deliver

The results of the 2026 BMC elections will be in today. Winners celebrate with responsibility and respect. We want to see that celebrations are not about hurting people with your revelry but thanking the electorate.

Thanking the electorate does not mean posing for photos with people. It is simple: the thanks should come in the form of work. Start working for the people from Day 1. So many citizen manifestos had called for on-ground

change — roads, water, greenery, garbage, the environment the challenges had a similar refrain. For the winners, it is time to Dial D for Deliver. Address the problems you promised you would in your pre-poll campaigning and start responding to the people.

The first of these is accessibility. The moot point is being available to your voters. Post-elections, you see representatives disappearing altogether and the people desperately trying to reach them, demanding answers and

action. Entire campaigns are built on promises of availability. Civic leaders and decision makers, you now have a responsibility to repose confidence in those fearing the emergence of familiar patterns that emerge during poll times, and become invisible post results. On-ground problems need presence, visibility and solutions. Be there to oversee any kind of action, make decisions and ensure follow-through.

Continue the big development dream, but the goal should be an even

greater stress on striking a balance between environment and development. We want a steady downturn in the perennial and familiar battle between these two sides, especially in the city where so many projects are to be completed.

People want a result-oriented civic body. The time for slander and verbal bashing was part of the run-up and is over. Back to desks, files and moving on, giving back to the people who have brought you to power.

LETTERS

Public parks must be protected from misuse

This refers to 'Politicians make a mess at Shivaji Park'. Neta's double standards confuse the common man. Public events must clearly forbid property damage, with heavy penalties for violations. Civic discipline must always be enforced strictly.

PERVYNN KAVARANA

Organisers must take care of post-rally clean-up

Shivaji Park often ends up in a mess after political rallies, raising concerns over such events. Either rallies should be restricted, or organisers must ensure the ground is restored, with heavy penalties for any damage done.

SN KABRA

Reckless kite-flying should be punished

This refers to 'Hum nahin sudhrenge!'. mid-day's report on deadly manja injuries is alarming. Strict action by BMC and police can deter reckless kite-flying. A zero-death policy must be enforced so the festival is celebrated safely and responsibly.

GODWIN D'Cruz

Sustainable waste mgmt must be enforced

This refers to 'Efficient waste management is not only about aesthetics'. Individuals, communities, and authorities must collaborate to reduce landfill waste, promote recycling, protect public health, and prevent environmental damage through sustainable urban waste management practices.

AMIT BANERJEE

have your say!



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To share your joy, or not?

SOCIAL BUTTERFLY



Aastha Atray Banan

The Golden Globes were held this week, and actor Mark Ruffalo wore a "Be Good" pin to honour the memory of Renee Good, who was fatally shot by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) last week. On the red carpet, he told a journalist, "As much as I love all this, I don't know if I can pretend like this crazy stuff isn't happening."

That's exactly how many of us must be feeling on social media, where we have a front seat to the best and worst of the world. We can hear concerts and connect with artistes we love, watch art, and read beautiful prose, get inspired and visit a country hundreds of kilometres away, but we can also watch people being killed, countries being burnt, and babies bearing the brunt of war.

So, the question arises: Can you post a story about the protests in Iran, following it up with a picture of your breakfast? Can you post about children being killed, and then share your opinion on what Priyanka Chopra Jonas wore to an award show? Can you share your joy, in the face of so much despair in the world? Is that terribly inconsiderate of you, or is it just life that goes on, no matter what?

It's a known fact now that doom-scrolling leads to a stress response, releasing cortisol, activating the amygdala (fear centre), and making you hypervigilant and anxious. So what can help reverse that, or at least slow it down? What can lead to you feeling some semblance of normalcy in this getting-crazier-by-the-minute week? I would think it's if you have enough beauty, art, culture, writing, and people just being people.

So, according to me, maybe this is exactly the right time to post, but post with discretion, post with some sort of internal editing, post with some love and affection. In these times, if you can eat breakfast, go for a workout, meet your friends, go on a vacation, all the while doing a job to earn that salary — it's all commendable. And maybe sharing those details will help others who are struggling to make sense of it all, and it will push them to get out of bed.



Go to a gallery, have a cup of coffee with a friend, drink wine as you watch your comfort show, or get into a cosy blanket as you listen to some mellow music. And don't go online for a few days. REPRESENTATION/ISTOCK

ble. And maybe sharing those details will help others who are struggling to make sense of it all, and it will push them to get out of bed. Maybe sharing how you are struggling every second, even as you try to hold yourself together, can help someone be brave enough to do the same.

If you are an artist of any kind, this is surely the time to create and share. Hearing you sing, watching you dance, reading something you wrote may connect with someone and their grief.

It may heal someone. It may help people understand why they are feeling what they are feeling. As Meryl Streep once famously said, "Take your broken heart, make it into art". Your art is needed the most at this time.

But, if this is not working for you, this could be the time you did all these things in an analogue world — go to a gallery, have a cup of coffee with a friend, drink wine as you watch your comfort show, or get into a cosy blanket as you listen to some

mellow music. And don't go online for a few days. Read a newspaper, get the basic news, but don't make the gloom and doom a running soundtrack for your life. This could be the time you take a break, to make sure your sanity stays intact. This doesn't mean you don't care. It just means you are dealing the best way you can. May we all survive this craziness.

See you next week.

Ranting and raving about all that's trending on social media, Aastha Atray Banan is an author, creator, podcaster, and the Editor of your favourite weekend read, Sunday mid-day. She posts at @aasthaatrav on Instagram.

Send your feedback to mailbag@mid-day.com

Message for today

The tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the façade of objective rationality.

Herbert Marcuse

The Assam Tribune

Significant visit

Given the current geopolitical climate, with US President Donald Trump going on a rampage to obliterate immigrant presence from American business and education, the significance of the maiden visit of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz to India cannot be overstated. What the US's loss is in terms of acquiring a skilled workforce, particularly of Indian talent, is Germany's gain, made explicit by the all too apparent objectives that Merz has set for himself. In the joint statement issued after the January 12-13 visit, for example, it was stated that "The two sides welcomed the growing exchange of students, researchers, skilled professionals, artists and tourists, and recognised the valuable contribution of the Indian community to Germany's economy, innovation and cultural life," an indication of that European country's desire to take full advantage of the prevalent situation. The statement also stressed the need to expand cooperation in education, research, vocational training, culture and youth exchanges to deepen mutual understanding, the pragmatic aim being to make the most of the lacunae forged by new American policies on Indian job-seekers and students – a win-win situation for both countries. In fact, considering the number of agreements signed, the German Chancellor's visit to India marked a strategic turning point in India-Germany relations, strengthening cooperation in defence, trade, green energy, climate action, Indo-Pacific strategy, technology, skilled migration and global governance reforms.

Merz also floated the possibility that the European Union and India could sign a landmark free trade agreement by the end of January, a move that could reshape global trade ties as protectionism rises and US-India talks remain stalled. Bilateral trade between India and the EU totalled 120 billion euros (\$140.21 billion) in 2024, making the bloc India's biggest trading partner, and a free trade agreement would boost this to offset any adverse impact made on both parties by Trump's tariffs. That no less than 19 MoUs or agreements, including those on defence projects, such as collaboration on the manufacture of submarines, helicopter systems, etc., as also partnership on building up a semiconductor ecosystem etc., indicate the two nations' wish to embark on profitable cooperation. Germany's desire to develop a global skills partnership with India, particularly with a focus on healthcare, is yet another instance of German pragmatism, considering that the US under Trump is willing to forego the benefit that country had been reaping so far from having Indian healthcare personnel in its system. Of late, Indian foreign policy has undergone a paradigmatic shift, no doubt fostered by contemporary compulsions, one which even embraces an amical relationship with a rival like China. In such a context, the move to closer cooperation with a dynamic nation like Germany, as testified by the outcome of Merz's visit, is certainly to be welcomed.

Tea and Iran crisis

The tea industry, which continues to be beset with ills, is staring at another disquieting spectre – that of a possible dip in exports in the wake of the escalating Iran crisis. With communication with buyers in Iran – a major importer of India's premium orthodox tea – getting snapped, it could leave a cascading effect on the industry itself in India, beginning with a slump in exports. Iran's crisis is severe and multidimensional, characterised by widespread nationwide protests, a collapsing economy, and heightened military tensions with the West. It will not merit surprise if the ongoing imbroglio assumes the shape of a prolonged conflict situation. With there being no communication with buyers for the past several days and the Iranian currency having a free fall, the situation is as worrying as it is uncertain. Tea producers of Assam, in particular, are heavily dependent on Iran for their exports and any disruption in this market would have a disproportionate impact on orthodox tea producers and exporters. Unless the world community intervenes to bring some semblance of normalcy to the Iran situation, any full-scale conflict stands to severely compromise a critical export market for Indian tea, leading to substantial financial losses and significant instability for the domestic tea industry as well. Between January and November last year, direct tea exports to Iran were 10.69 million kg, an increase of 28 percent compared to the corresponding period in 2024. A bulk of the exports is sold to Iranian buyers in the UAE, which had imported 45 million kg between January and November last year.

Assam will be hit harder by the developments, because out of the total tea production of Assam, about 9 percent is of the orthodox variety, and a majority of orthodox tea is exported, with Iran being one of the major destinations of Assam orthodox tea. In the event of any dip in exports – which now looks imminent – more volume of tea would be available in the domestic market, which, in turn, will create an imbalance in the demand-supply scenario. This demand-supply mismatch will have an adverse impact on price realisation at the farm gate level. Assam produces about 50 percent of the country's total tea, which also accounts for a major livelihood provider of the masses. The Iran crisis warrants the State's tea industry to have a relook at its export policy, so that it can offset the possible losses through the adoption of different, pragmatic strategies. While Assam's exports are facing difficulties, Sri Lanka, another major orthodox tea exporter to Iran, doesn't seem to be experiencing the same level of market decline, potentially due to different export strategies. Geopolitical volatility is known to impact trade and commerce and the vulnerability of Assam's tea industry to geopolitical events once again underscores the urgency of diversification of export markets.

Exploitation of women in India

BIPLAB KUMAR SHARMA

Any assessment of women has to start from the socio-economic framework, social structures, cultural norms and value systems that influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women, and determine women's roles and their positions in society. A society is composed of many institutions, and the most important of these are the systems of descent (including family and kinship), marriage, and religious traditions. They provide the ideology and moral basis for men and women regarding their rights and duties, and their status and roles.

The historical background of Indian society reveals that in Vedic times, women were accorded a high status. There is an old saying: "Gods reside where women are honoured." A wife used to be referred to as Ardhagini – one half of her husband's body. At the time of marriage, she, as a bride, was entitled to receive certain solemn vows from the groom before the sacred fire. It was believed that no religious ceremony performed by the husband could bear fruit without his wife's participation. As a mother, wife and sister, she occupied an honoured place.

In the Hindu *Dharmashastras*, husband and wife are referred to by several names. The husband is known as Bhartri, because he is supposed to support his wife. He is also known as Pati, because he is to protect her. On the other hand, the wife is called Jaya, as one's own self is begotten in her.

Side by side with these elevated ideas about the wife, there are other texts eulogising the supremacy of the husband, holding

It is not judicial or administrative weakness but socio-cultural degradation, coupled with economic exploitation, that mainly drives atrocities against women.

ing that he is the lord and master of his wife, and that she must adore and obey him, remaining faithful to him even after his death. Sage Narada, for the first time, recognised a woman's right to a second marriage when (i) her husband is missing; (ii) he is dead; (iii) he has become an ascetic; (iv) he is impotent; and (v) he is an outcast. However, in the course of history, women lost their honoured place due to social, economic and political factors. Evil customs like *sati*, *purdah*, child marriage, enforced widowhood and the dowry system crept into society, leading to a decline in women's status within and outside the home. In recent years, incidents of sexual violence, workplace harassment, eve-teasing, abduction and female foeticide have revealed disturbing patterns prevailing in society. A majority of women live lives of dependency, bereft of any self-identity. The struggle for equality, justice and parity between women and men continues, with more and more literature appearing on the empowerment of women.

Women form about half of India's population, yet their situation has long been grim. For centuries, they were deliberately denied opportunities for growth in the name of religion and socio-cultural practices. Before Independence, women were victims of many abhorrent customs, traditional rigidities and social vices, because of which their status touched its nadir and their situation was bleak on all fronts. Economic dependence, early subordination to husbands and in-laws, heavy and unrecognised domestic workloads, lack of career opportunities and mobility,

non-recognition of their economic contribution, poor working conditions and wages, and monotonous jobs that men generally refused to do, all contributed to their pitiable condition. On the socio-political plane, women suffered from denial of freedom even within their homes, repression and unnatural indoctrination, unequal and inferior status, rigid caste hierarchies, and untouchability.

At the global level, women and girls together carry two-thirds of the world's workload but receive only one-tenth of its income. They form 40 percent of the paid labour force. Women constitute half of the world's population, yet they own less than one percent of the world's property (UN Report, 2005).

The condition of women in India is particularly distressing in many fields of social life. According to a study carried out recently, India has the world's second-largest workforce, at about 478 million. Yet the proportion of women in the workforce is only 24 percent. The number of women in senior-level positions stands at about 5 percent, compared with a global average of around 20 percent. The 2011 UN Gender Inequality Index ranked India a depressing 134th out of 187 countries, based on factors such as labour-force participation, reproductive health and education.

Women are also disadvantaged when it comes to inheriting property. Although the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 gave women the right to own property, it was only in 2005 that the law was amended to give daughters the same inheritance rights as

sons. However, the Act does not apply to women of other communities, such as Muslims, Christians or Parsis.

In India, a battle is being waged between two cultures: the traditional Indian culture, which largely suppresses women, and Western culture, which by and large grants them greater freedom. The battle against male domination in India is also a battle against caste domination. Dr BR Ambedkar called for a battle for humanity when he said: "Ours is the battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality."

Over the years, laws have been framed to curb atrocities against women. However, there is a growing feeling that existing systems are ineffective in addressing them, and that the legislature and the judiciary are expected to make a meaningful difference. This also highlights the importance of ethical and legal principles being woven into the social fabric. No amount of law, preventive measures or vigilance can be effective in uprooting atrocities against women unless the moral and ethical values so strongly preached by our ancestors are internalised and practised. Our religious scriptures emphasise the universal dictum: "Truth, not falsehood, always triumphs." Let us strive to achieve that goal. A breakthrough in this field would be a triumph of morality and a crowning moment of moral justice in the effort to eradicate atrocities against women in India.

(The author is a former Judge of the Gauhati High Court)

States challenged by new fiscal laws

DR SUSMITA PRIYADARSHINI

On December 21, 2025, the President gave her assent to the VIK-SIT Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) – or the VB-G RAM (G) Act – which replaces MGNREGA. The MGNREGA (earlier NREGA) Act was passed in 2005 to ensure livelihood security for rural households. Subsequently, the NREGS was introduced as a demand-driven scheme to provide 100 days of unskilled work per year to every rural household that sought it. In 2009, it was renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The scheme proved to be a lifeline for nearly 11 crore workers during the Covid pandemic.

It is true that when MGNREGA was enacted, the profile of rural poverty was different from what it is today, and the government argues that a complete overhaul is therefore required. Moreover, over the years, several objections have been raised regarding its implementation – including misuse of funds, weak monitoring, payment delays and poor-quality asset creation. West Bengal, for instance, has not received funds since 2022 because of alleged misuse. According to an Action Taken Report on social audit published on March 29, 2025, Rs 193.67 crore was mis-

India's new fiscal framework may affect rural job guarantees, increase States' financial burdens, and affect timely access to work and wages.

appropriated across States during 2024-25. However, the new Act – introduced to fix loopholes and guarantee 125 days of work – has generated serious apprehension among the States regarding its implementation.

Under the new Act, the funding pattern between the Centre and the States will be 60:40 for all States except those in the Northeast and the Himalayan region, and this applies to all components, including wages and materials. This is likely to create difficulties. Since many States are already running multiple cash transfer schemes, most are not in a sound financial position to shoulder an additional burden. Poorer States, in particular, will find it difficult to contribute 40 percent. As a result, not all States may participate fully in the scheme. Under the previous system, the Centre bears 90 percent of the cost, enabling States to sanction projects with ease. That will no longer be the case now, and States are likely to think twice before approving projects.

The situation is further aggravated by the likelihood of continued wage delays. Pending or delayed payments have already been identified as one of the major problems under MGNREGA. Wage arrears fluctuated from Rs 512.75 crore in 2020-21 to

Rs 974.38 crore in 2024-25, even though workers are legally entitled to receive payments within 15 days.

According to Rural Development Ministry data, as of December 5, wage pending in Andhra Pradesh was the highest at Rs 402.93 crore, followed by Kerala at Rs 339.87 crore. This is despite the fact that wage payments are directly credited to beneficiaries' accounts through the Direct Benefit Transfer system. Delays also arise from the mandatory use of digital tools such as the National Mobile Monitoring System app and the Aadhaar-based Payment System, especially in areas with poor connectivity.

Although the new Act clearly states that compensation must be given to workers for wage delays beyond 15 days, the fact that liability rests with the States creates uncertainty. Moreover, in the new supply-driven framework, allocations will be capped by the Centre, and any expenditure beyond this limit will have to be borne by the States. In contrast, MGNREGA was a demand-driven legal entitlement that compelled the Centre to provide funds based on actual demand.

Under the new law, the Centre becomes the sole authority to decide where and to what extent the programme will

operate. Panchayats will lose their power to allocate jobs in response to demand. This, effectively, is a "switch-off" mechanism. Now, a State may simply deny work if it lacks the funds to meet demand beyond the allocated number. MGNREGA funding is classified as revenue expenditure and many States are already suffering from revenue deficits. A CAG report on State Finances released in September categorised 12 States as revenue-deficit ones. They are Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Punjab, Haryana, Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra and Meghalaya. Hence, in order to avoid further financial stress, the States may be forced to suppress demand. Again, State-wise allocations will be based on the Centre's own parameters, potentially disadvantaging Opposition-ruled States.

In their effort to finance 40 percent of the rural employment programme, States may also be compelled to cut expenditure in critical sectors such as health and education, which could indirectly have a bearing on the job demand. Altogether, these issues may transform the new employment guarantee scheme into a budget-constrained welfare scheme without a genuine legal guarantee of work.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Executive intimidation during ED raid in WB

Sir, – The recent spectacle surrounding the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raids in West Bengal marks a disturbing departure from constitutional restraint. A Chief Minister personally intervening at a raid site, flanked by senior officials, is not democratic vigilance – it is executive intimidation. In a constitutional democracy, investigations are tested in courts, not overwhelmed by political presence. At the heart of this episode lies a foundational principle: no one is above the law. When political authority intrudes into an ongoing probe, it sets a dangerous national precedent, signalling that power can supersede process. Today it is justified as protecting party interests; tomorrow it may be invoked to shield graver improprieties. That slippery logic corrodes public faith in institutional neutrality. Casting the ED as politically motivated does not legitimise obstruction. Federalism demands balance, not brinkmanship. By blurring the line between party, State, and self, Mamata Banerjee risks normalising conduct that weakens accountability and diminishes the rule of law for all. Yours etc., **Bikram Singh Chettri**, Nagaon (ii)

Sir, – The recent ED raid on the IPAC office in West Bengal has started a new

political drama, bringing into question the federal structure of the State. The baring of CM Mamata Banerjee to the IPAC office during an ongoing raid, in the name of securing the party's confidential documents, blurs the line between preserving democratic space and personal intervention. It manifests the unbridled power possessed by the West Bengal CM, who remains immune to any action taken by law enforcement agencies. The conduct of a State head driven by personal motives rather than those defined by the Constitution risks reducing the individual's image to that of a mere party leader, rather than one sitting in the highest office of the government. However, though the action taken by the ED was procedurally correct, the inadvertent timing of the raid just before the election is now targeted by the TMC as a political vendetta. Yours etc., **Kabir Ahmed Saikia**, Rajbari, Jorhat

Magh Bihu

Sir, – The present-day Magh Bihu re-

flects significant changes influenced by urbanisation and modern lifestyles. Celebrations have become more commercial and individualistic. Ready-made food items have replaced homemade ones, and community feasts are gradually declining. In many places, Magh Bihu has turned into a social event with loud music and excessive spending, often neglecting its original cultural and environmental essence. Moreover, the use of non-biodegradable materials and unnecessary extravagance raise concerns about sustainability. While change is inevitable, it is important to preserve the soul of Magh Bihu – simplicity, community bonding, and respect for tradition.

The younger generation must be made aware of the festival's true significance so that modern celebrations remain connected to our rich cultural roots. Yours etc., **Krishna Dutta**, Silikhari Grant, Titabar

LACHIT-1 mission

Sir, – The anomaly during the PSLV-C62 mission should not overshadow the historic achievement of Assam Don Bosco University's LACHIT-1 project. For the first time, the Northeast stepped into India's space ecosystem through a student-led satellite mission, an accomplishment in itself.

The views expressed in the articles, columns and letters published on this page are solely those of the authors, and do not represent the views of the newspaper.

In space science, setbacks are part of progress, and every major success is built on lessons from failure. The dedication of students, faculty, and mentors who planned, built, and prepared LACHIT-1 deserves recognition, not discouragement. Named after Lachit Borphukan, the mission reflects resilience and courage. The true legacy of LACHIT-1 lies not in orbit, but in inspiring the Northeast to dream bigger and aim higher. Yours etc., **Nibir Kauchik**, Golaghat

Compassionate soul

Sir, – Hollywood legend Brigitte Bardot's life reminds us that true greatness is measured not by fame, but by the courage to care when caring is inconvenient. She chose to step away from applause and the spotlight and instead stood beside the voiceless with unwavering compassion. Her kindness crossed borders – geographical, cultural and emotional – reaching animals and communities who could never repay her except with trust and survival. Her legacy feels deeply human – quiet acts of empathy, persistent action and moral clarity in a world that often looks away. In a time when activism is reduced to words, Bardot's life teaches us that responsibility means showing up, again and again. She leaves behind more than memories; she leaves a reminder that compassion, when lived honestly, can change lives and restore dignity where hope once felt absent. Yours etc., **Aditya Kamble**, Kalaburagi, Karnataka

Articles (within 950-1000 words) and Letters to the Editor (within 150 words) for publication on the Editorial Page may be sent exclusively to the email ID: editor@assamtribune.com.

OPINION

The 'Affordability' Setup



Democrats believe they have a magic wand in the word "affordability." Its sudden prevalence is the innovation of an economic illiterate, New York Mayor Zohran

Mamdani, whose grinning articulacy was enough to distract a bare majority of voters from the word's foginess.

Nonetheless, Democrats, hoping to encourage the belief that they can bring prices and incomes into some theoretically ideal relationship with each other, have lately been sprinkling the word into their talk like pepper. On Monday Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.) delivered an address to the National Press Club in which she spoke of Donald Trump's "betrayal of working people on affordability issues" and of her "affordability agenda" to "make life more affordable for working people" and build "more affordable homes" and provide "affordable child-care."

You don't have to deny the pain caused by recent inflation to acknowledge that affordability in the abstract, detached from any circumstance, is meaningless. Ms. Warren may as well speak of an "achievability agenda." Achievement is good; people feel healthier and stronger when they achieve things; therefore government must launch programs designed to boost Americans' capacity to achieve. Don't give her any ideas, I hear someone say. Well, exactly.

Progressive politicians, almost by definition, believe they

know more or less the right prices for goods and services at any given time: namely, below whatever they are in the real world. At no time are prices about right for the "working families" whose feelings and attitudes Ms. Warren claims to understand.

Media analyses of affordability issues, to use Ms. Warren's term, regularly and inadvertently highlight the subjectivity of the matter. A piece last month in Politico, headlined "New poll paints a grim picture of a nation under financial strain," begins by announcing that "Americans are struggling with affordability pressures" and goes on to note that "nearly half of Americans said they find groceries, utility bills, health care, housing and transportation difficult to afford."

Ordinary people are rarely delighted with the prices of things in general, which tend to go up over time. Affording things is never easy, because a growing economy offers so many worthwhile but nonessential goods and services to spend one's money on. Among the article's amusing lines: "More than a third—37 percent—said they could not afford to attend a professional sports event with their family or friends, and almost half—46 percent—said they could not pay for a vacation that involves air travel."

I don't dismiss the stress and suffering occasioned by rising prices—especially prices unnecessarily elevated by stupid political decisions. The salient point, rather, is that politicians' talk about "affordability" involves the tacit premise that they know the morally just price of products and services. To grant

them that premise is to give them the authority to punish supposed bad guys—corporations, the wealthy—and cut governmental checks to their favored constituencies.

Republican officeholders know there's something amiss about debating "affordability," but most don't know how to reject the premise without sounding cold. Mr. Trump, rightly sensing a setup, initially called the affordability

explanation is hard. In the case of healthcare, 17 House Republicans last week joined Democrats in voting to extend ObamaCare subsidies. Easier to spend more of other people's money and make the problem seem to go away.

Vice President JD Vance also senses guile in the affordability rhetoric, but he answers with demagoguery. Speaking in rural Pennsylvania last month, he blamed inflation on Biden-era policies but mostly picked the wrong ones. Mr. Vance rightly faulted the Democrats' energy regulations but otherwise blamed illegal immigration and, in a flourish Ms. Warren would have liked, the avarice of pharmaceutical executives.

The contention that illegal immigrants drove up housing prices made its debut in the 2024 vice presidential debate. Mr. Vance has honed it since then. Joe Biden let in 20 million of them, the veep told his listeners in Pennsylvania, and "those criminals, those gang members" took "homes that ought by right go to the people in this room and your children and your grandchildren." Of all the reasons for rising home prices, Mr. Vance prefers the least plausible one. Granted, he isn't in a position to point out the role of tariffs in raising construction costs, but he might have named building regulations or mortgage lock-in or environmental rules. Easier to fulminate.

Unaffordability is a feature of human life in a fallen world. That Democratic policies have lately exacerbated it doesn't liberate Republicans from the obligation to explain some basic economics.

Don't let a meaningless word make you forget what caused prices to spike.

question a "hoax" (unhelpful) and more recently asserted that things are better since he took office (not wrong but also unhelpful). His other solution, to browbeat the Federal Reserve into lowering interest rates and so juice the economy, is a fine way to aggravate inflation and keep the word "affordability" in the news.

The first thing to say about affordability, or rather heightened unaffordability since that's the problem, is that its causes are governmental. Inflation, another word for rising prices, exploded in 2022 and peaked in June of that year at 9.1%, the highest in 40 years—because the Biden administration and Democrats flooded the economy with cash. Housing, energy and healthcare prices are higher than they might have been otherwise, similarly, because Democratic regulations on all three make their provision more expensive.

Republicans know this, but

BOOKSHELF | By Meghan Cox Gurdon

Exile and the Communist Party

Fly, Wild Swans

By Jung Chang

Harper, 336 pages, \$35

In 1991, Jung Chang's "Wild Swans" hit the world like a meteor. Tracing the lives of three "daughters of China"—the author, her mother and her grandmother—the book illuminated 20th-century Chinese history in a way that was at once thrilling and alarming.

Back then, China was a secretive and still largely peasant society. Only a few years earlier had the country begun to experiment with market liberalizations under Deng Xiaoping. His phrase, "to get rich is glorious," was the slogan of the day. An impoverished people who had survived Japanese occupation, civil war, the dictatorship of Mao Zedong (with its economic disaster, starvation and waves of violent repression) were in the early stages of building the colossus that strides the globe today.

Mao was a tricky subject. Many of his closest allies, not to say his enemies, had suffered ghastly persecutions under his rule. Yet

even in old age, long after Mao's death in 1976, they remained loath to reject him. His legacy was the legacy of the Communist Party, and few Chinese wanted to get on the wrong side. Meanwhile, admirers in the West had swallowed the adulatory coverage of the Red Army from leftist dupes such as Edgar Snow (whose 1937 book, "Red Star Over China," did much to buffer Mao's image abroad). Sinologists in academia pored over the scant information

available outside China, talked to their contacts in the country, and tried to parse what was happening (and what had happened).

And then came Ms. Chang's astonishing bestseller—part memoir, part history—to throw a hard light on it all. At once intimate and sweeping, "Wild Swans" gave faces to the faceless millions and told the truth about what "the masses," in that odious communist phrasing, had experienced.

Through the story of Ms. Chang's grandmother, Yu-fang, the author showed us China in the early 20th century, when toddler girls had their feet broken and bound; when a young woman might be given in honorable marriage or shameful concubinage; when warlords contended for power. An occupying Japanese army swept into Northeastern China and, under the quisling emperor Pu Yi, established the puppet state of Manchukuo.

Through Ms. Chang's mother, Bao Qin, we saw what happened during the bloody Chinese civil war, as Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists contended with Mao's Communists (whose leaders traveled on the Long March in comfys). Through the recollections of Ms. Chang herself, who was born in 1952, we had a child's-eye view of the Great Leap Forward and the ensuing famine; a teenager's experience of the burgeoning cult of Mao and the violent explosion of the Cultural Revolution; and we saw how even committed, high-ranking Communists such as Ms. Chang's father were repeatedly denounced, tortured and detained as it suited Mao's political needs. "Wild Swans" would seem to have laid bare every cruel irony of the volatile times it compassed. It remains banned in China.

But, as we learn from Ms. Chang's touching sequel, "Fly, Wild Swans," in the first book she engaged in some inadvertent understatement. Still under the influence of the propaganda she had absorbed as a child, she had not then grasped the degree of Mao's cruelty and cynicism. Her subsequent research, for a 2005 book on the tyrant,

Around the turn of the 21st century, Jung Chang easily traveled in and out of her native China. The rise of Xi Jinping made it harder to visit.

taught her that the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward (and that killed some 37 million people) had been no accident. "I had thought that it was largely the result of incompetence, and had not expected it to be deliberate," Ms. Chang writes. "Now I found out that Mao had known his people would be starved to death *before* it happened, as he was planning to export the food they depended on for survival to the Soviet bloc to pay for the military industries he was buying."

"Wild Swans" ends as Ms. Chang is leaving to study in Britain. "Fly, Wild Swans" picks up her story in 1978 in London, where she and a small cadre of fellow Chinese students, in their shapeless cotton "Mao suits," move about under party supervision, insulated from the surrounding society. As China liberalizes, some 5,000 miles away, the constraints relax and Ms. Chang sneaks off to enjoy a little Western decadence. She goes to the movies, visits a pub and stretches out on the ground in Hyde Park. "While I was in raptures exploring the city," she writes, "my nerves were on high alert, watching out for possible informers. Many a Chinese-looking person who wore clothes remotely resembling a Mao suit scared me into hiding my face."

Throughout "Fly, Wild Swans" we see how events in China exert a push-pull effect on Ms. Chang. Through the 1990s and well into the new century, the author flies in and out of China without difficulty to visit her aging mother, who stayed behind in Chengdu. With the ascension to power of the neo-Maoist Xi Jinping in 2012, visas become harder to procure for the author, a naturalized British citizen. Surveillance when she's in China increases. The reader feels the noose tighten and shares Ms. Chang's distress as it becomes evident after 2018 that she can no longer visit her home country—or her mother's deathbed. As her mother's health deteriorates, the only contact between mother and daughter is through the screens of their cellphones. "When I gazed at her enfeebled but still strong face," Ms. Chang writes, "a thousand memories surged in my head, of this extraordinary woman, my mother, and of how much I owed her in my life: my freedom, my happiness, my career as a writer, and being the person I was—and I am."

Mrs. Gurdon, a Journal contributor, is the author of "The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction."

By Karl Rove

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Where's Congress on Russia Sanctions?

Americans are swiveling their heads between Iran and Venezuela and wondering what the turmoil in these countries means for the U.S. Allow us to connect the dots among Iran, Venezuela, Russia and China—and explain why Congress can help the world by passing a languishing sanctions bill on Moscow's oil.

President Trump last week "greenlit" a Russia sanctions bill with more than 80 Senate co-sponsors, according to GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. Mr. Graham's bill would allow Mr. Trump to impose tariffs of up to 500% on countries that purchase Russian oil.

The main purchasers of Russian oil are India and China, though New Delhi has been hunting for other sources. Mr. Trump would have flexibility in his implementation of the tariff sanction, but having the tool in his pocket could help in negotiations. Tariffs aren't without economic risk, but there are other sources of oil in the world for these buyers.

Vladimir Putin still refuses to make any concessions for peace, or even for a temporary cease-fire. The Russian dictator is firing ballistic missiles at cities and thundering about variants that carry nuclear weapons. Mr. Putin has also rejected the possibility of Western forces in Ukraine after the war ends. America's allies in the U.K. and France are answering the call for troops in Ukraine to help sustain a peace after a deal is struck, but the problem is the man in the Kremlin.

Mr. Trump deserves credit for his current campaign of boarding shadow oil tankers and not being deterred by the pretense of a Russian flag on a ship. The Journal reports that more than 15 tankers have suddenly announced their affiliation with Mother Russia in the past two weeks alone as a way to dodge U.S. sanctions enforcement. By seizing ships anyway, the Trump

Administration is exerting pressure on Moscow, Iran and Venezuela.

This will increase U.S. leverage in Ukraine talks, though perhaps still not enough after a year of U.S. negotiating policy that has amounted to toxic empathy toward Mr. Putin and his grievances. Russia's economy is under increasing strain, and the sanctions bill is a chance to raise the costs of refusing to

make peace.

Yet despite Mr. Trump's apparent approval and strong bipartisan support, the sanctions bill remains in limbo. Congress is preoccupied trying to pass government funding bills before a deadline at the end of the month. Given current Congressional dysfunction, even showing that America can pass appropriations would be an achievement. But Congress can't sleep on a window of opportunity to improve the U.S. position vis-a-vis Mr. Putin and his friends in Beijing and Tehran.

What's happening in the world isn't a series of coincidental, unrelated events. Under Joe Biden an axis of U.S. adversaries arose that is working together against the West—China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela. Iran has fed Russia drones for its war in Ukraine, and Russia returns the favor with military training jets and cash. North Korea provides artillery shells and troops, while Russia protects Pyongyang's nuclear program. China buys oil from Russia while supplying vital parts for the Kremlin's military.

In Venezuela and Iran, Mr. Trump is targeting the weak links of this coalition of hostility. The Russia sanctions bill is an attempt to raise the costs of their cooperation by cutting off a major source of finance for Russia's war of conquest. Congress can help the Commander in Chief play every card in this larger strategic contest by giving him the ability to impose sanctions on Russian oil purchasers.

Next Up for Higher Taxes: Rhode Island

As federal pandemic largesse ebbs, Democratic-run states are eyeing higher taxes rather than reform spending programs. The latest example is Rhode Island Gov. Daniel McKee, who is flirting with a millionaire tax. This would be an in-kind gift to Connecticut.

Mr. McKee opposed raising taxes on the rich last year. But he's under increasing pressure from government unions to do so as he runs for re-election this November. The state faces a \$100 million deficit in the coming fiscal year. Revenue hasn't kept pace with spending, which has increased by more than 50% since the pandemic.

"We are in a spot where we're going to have to address some of those headwinds that are coming our way from D.C.," the Rhode Island Governor said last week, shifting blame to Washington for not continuing the Biden spending blowout. He said he's open to a public-union proposal for a three percentage point income-tax surcharge on households with more than \$1 million in income.

Rhode Island has one of the lowest top tax rates in the Northeast at 5.99% on income over \$186,450. The union proposal would raise Rhode Island's top rate to nearly match the 9% next door in Massachusetts. In November 2022, voters in the Bay State approved adding a 4% rate on income over \$1 million, on top of the state's 5% flat tax.

Progressives say Massachusetts' millionaire tax has generated a revenue windfall and hasn't caused the rich to flee. Not so fast. Income tax collections in most states are running higher than forecast thanks to a buoyant stock market, which has lifted capital gains. Even Rhode Island is projecting a smaller deficit than it did six months ago for this reason.

But in the event of a market downturn, much of the revenue from the higher tax will evaporate. The higher built-in spending will then lead to bigger budget gaps, prompting more tax increases. That's the history in other states with so-called millionaire taxes such as California, New York and New Jersey.

Most of Rhode Island's top earners are small businesses that pass through income to individual owners. Raising their taxes will suppress investment and hiring at a time when the state is losing jobs and population. The millionaire tax will affect whether and where small businesses choose to expand. Connecticut's top rate of 6.99% will look relatively attractive.

A poll last November showed Mr. McKee trailing former CVS executive Helena Buonanno Foulkes, a pro-business Democrat, by double digits in the party primary. Mr. McKee may hope that endorsing a millionaire tax will increase his support among progressives, but even many Democrats understand that higher taxes aren't a prescription for prosperity.

Scott Adams and Cancer Progress

“D”ibert” cartoonist Scott Adams died on Tuesday at age 68 after battling an aggressive form of prostate cancer. It's a tragedy as every death is, but a note of hope amid the sadness is that the odds of surviving advanced cancers are fast improving thanks to new treatments.

An American Cancer Society report out Tuesday finds that the five-year survival rate hit a milestone of 70% for all cancers diagnosed between 2015 and 2021. Survival increased to 69% from 54% two decades earlier for “regional” cancers that have spread beyond their primary tumor, and to 35% from 17% for metastatic cancers that have spread elsewhere in the body.

Over 20 years, the report notes “people with high-mortality cancers and advanced diagnoses had the largest gains, including increases from 32% to 62% for myeloma, 7% to 22% for liver cancer, 16% to 35% for metastatic melanoma, 8% to 18% for metastatic rectal cancer, 20% to 37% for regional lung cancer, and 2% to 10% for metastatic lung cancer.”

The overall cancer mortality rate also ticked down by 1.5% in 2023 from 2022, despite increasing incidence of some harder-to-treat cancers like pancreatic and kidney. Pancreatic cancer is pernicious, but five-year survival has increased three-fold since the 1990s to 13%, which the report attributes to more cancers being detected incidentally at earlier stages when they are easier to treat. Five-year survival is 44% for localized pancreatic cancer versus 3% for metastatic.

Treatments like checkpoint inhibitors, CAR-T Cells and antibody conjugates have improved survival for metastatic cancers. Genomics and artificial intelligence enable doctors to better target treatments to patients based on biomarkers. Novel immunotherapies have shown prom-

ise in trials to help patients who don't benefit from other therapies.

Screenings are also catching breast, lung and colon cancers at earlier stages. But advanced prostate cancer has increased in recent years as fewer men receive prostate-specific antigen tests. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force last decade recommended against PSA tests for men 70 years and older.

For those ages 55 to 69, the panel recommended doctors “not screen men who do not express a preference for screening” on the wrong-headed rationale it could lead to “overdiagnosis and overtreatment.” Healthcare bureaucrats believe the health system spends too much to treat slow-growing prostate cancers, but that's a decision for doctors and patients.

ObamaCare empowered the task force to determine what screenings must be covered by insurers, so doctors tend to follow its recommendations. The panel has also been slow to revise its recommendation despite mounting evidence that less screening has increased mortality. One problem, if you can believe it, is that no oncologists are on the 16-member task force.

Despite rapid biomedical advances, government could slow cancer progress. The Inflation Reduction Act's price controls have prompted manufacturers to scrap dozens of experimental cancer medicines and studies into whether existing treatments approved for advanced diseases could benefit patients in earlier stages.

Vinay Prasad, who runs the Food and Drug Administration's biologics shop, is skeptical of novel cancer treatments because he believes their incremental benefits aren't worth the cost.

He wants manufacturers to run longer and bigger trials, which could delay launches by years and cause companies to drop experimental treatments. Is that what President Trump wants?

He died at 68, but more patients are living longer with the deadly disease.

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OPINION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We Are Being Forced to Compete Against Men

I am a female athlete who was forced to compete against males during high school in track and field and, as a result, was robbed of medals and championships. As one of the first to champion the fight for women's sports, I applaud Dr. Chad Carlson's recent op-ed on the subject ("Men in Women's Sports Are Unfair—and Dangerous," Jan. 13).

I know firsthand the profound implications the Supreme Court's decision in *West Virginia v. B.P.J. and Little v. Hecox* will have on women's rights. Beyond the obvious issues of fairness and safety, however, men competing on women's teams underscores a fundamental, biological truth: Men and women are different—irreversibly, insurmountably different and distinct in anatomy and physiology. Men are bigger, faster and stronger in ways drugs and feelings can't change.

Ignoring those facts puts female athletes at risk of injury or injustice, and it reverses 50 years of advancement on and off the athletic field. I sincerely hope the Supreme Court will allow states to enact laws that protect women's sports and restore common sense, fairness and safety.

SELINA SOULE
Orlando, Fla.

I am a freshman at Walla Walla Community College in the state of Washington and a female athlete who has to live with the reality that I might compete against male athletes. Washington lets male students who identify as female compete in women's sports, and I've seen the results: A male athlete who used to compete in high school boys' track and field began dominating the girls' 400-meter race—an event I ran in high school. This athlete ended up winning the state championship in the girls' 400-meter two years in a row, including this past May.

In high school, I was named Female Track & Field Athlete of the Year three years in a row by my school's coaching staff. I knew in the back of my mind that, if I ever had to compete against a male athlete, I was at greater risk of losing placement and risking injury.

Now I'm on a soccer scholarship in college, and I'm at greater risk of injury playing against men. The safety concerns expressed in Dr. Carlson's op-ed are on my mind almost every time I step on the field. Seeing how dangerous it is, I have to consider my future carefully. No girl should have to face this.

SOLEIL HOEFER
Walla Walla, Wash.

Has Sen. Kelly Spoken With Bosnia Veterans?

The editorial "The Kelly-Hegseth Grudge Match" (Review & Outlook, Jan. 6) mentions Sen. Mark Kelly—leading me, a veteran of service in Bosnia, to wonder if Sen. Kelly has ever spoken to actual Bosnia veterans about our experiences with fuzzy Rules of Engagement.

On the ground in Bosnia, we were handicapped daily by extremely contradictory and restrictive orders written back in the U.N. Headquarters in New York. We had briefings on terrorist and war-criminal suspects and were encouraged to catch them—but were also bombarded with ridiculous rules ranging from, in effect, "Ask the war criminals to voluntarily surrender themselves while we radio back to the U.N. in New York for permission," to "No use of deadly force to defend American troops; allow the enemy to open fire first." We were

even told to remove our combat boots in deference to local custom before entering homes to capture war criminals.

As the Journal editorial notes, American servicemen and women "have to make snap, real-time judgments with imperfect information." Having been in some of these hazy situations, I heartily agree that "what they need from the likes of Mr. Kelly isn't incitement to a court martial, but rather confidence that both parties will back up decisions made in good faith."

I wonder if Mr. Kelly, encouraging soldiers to disobey unclear rules from the comfort of his cozy Washington office, has contemplated the real-world issues that American soldiers face in real-world deployment.

CHRISTIAN M. DEJOHN
Newtown Square, Pa.

We Need Welfare Solutions, Not More Money

Allysa Finley's column, "The Scandal of American Welfare Goes Beyond Fraud" (Life Science, Jan. 5), is one more in a frustrating queue of reports that describe the problems in social-assistance while avoiding the presentation of tangible solutions.

The situation has been known for decades. Those in need aren't being systematically helped. The poverty rate has remained flat since the mid-1960s, despite what is now combined federal, state, local and private spending of more than \$3.4 trillion annually. Related metrics are equally bad. Recent levels of homelessness, food insecurity, depression, drug overdose deaths and suicide are all up—in most cases by record numbers.

More money isn't the answer. Five years ago, my company was asked by HUD to deliver a solution to improve self-sufficiency among those in need. Almost immediately, we learned that the social-assistance sector was more concerned with service providers instead of the poor.

Soon after the Trump administra-

tion came in, many at the federal level lost interest in the self-help nature of our initiative. But we persisted, and the result is a simple, low cost, cloud-based toolkit that is now being adopted by many local governments and thousands of regional service providers. It's a for-profit approach to a massive nonprofit problem.

America needs to understand that merely pointing out the problems of current welfare programs isn't enough. The nation needs to reduce spending significantly, maximize tangible community benefits and create an assistance system in which everyone wins.

JIM HILL
CEO, Organizational Performance Systems, Inc.
Los Altos, Calif.

Government Isn't a Solution

William Galston's column, "America's 25 Years of Decline" (Politics & Ideas, Dec. 31), concludes: "We need political leaders to take on these tough problems and bring both parties to the table to solve them."

I am reminded of these Ronald Reagan's quotes: "Government is not a solution to our problem, government is the problem." And "If more government is the answer, then it was a really stupid question." The solution to our problems in America is more leaders like Reagan in our local, state and national levels of government.

STEVE KING
Oak Creek, Wisc.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Ed, I'm your financial adviser, not your fairy godmother."

DANIEL J. SAMET
American Enterprise Institute
Washington

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OPINION

Selling a Home Is Too Taxing

By Jeff Yass
And Stephen Moore

President Trump says one of his top priorities is to bring down the cost of buying a home. Among his proposals are a prohibition on institutional investors' buying houses and an expansion in the loan portfolios of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

Here's a much better idea—one that would make homes more affordable and raise at least \$100 billion of federal revenue: index capital gains on the sale of residential real estate for inflation. The tax on investment profits, which runs as high as 23.8%, is based on nominal gains. If you bought an asset 40 years ago for \$2,000 and sell it for \$6,000, you'll pay tax on the \$4,000 gain—even though the value of the asset has only barely kept up with inflation.

To translate that into real-estate terms, suppose you and your spouse live in a house you bought in 1986 for \$400,000, and that today the property is worth \$2.5 million. If you sell it for a paper gain of \$2.1 million, you get a \$500,000 exclusion (assuming you file jointly) and pay taxes on the remaining \$1.6 million nominal gain.

Indexing capital gains for inflation would free up the housing market and raise billions in revenue.

But the \$400,000 you paid for the house in 1986 dollars is the equivalent of around \$1.2 million today, so the inflation-adjusted appreciation in value is only \$1.3 million. Your real taxable gain would be \$800,000—half of the currently taxable nominal gain. (The \$500,000 exclusion, which Congress enacted in 1997, was meant in part to compensate for this, but it isn't indexed for inflation either.)

Americans are sitting on roughly \$55 trillion in nominal unrealized gains in the value of homes and other real estate. That's one reason why, as home values rose during the recent inflationary period, sales declined from more than six million homes in 2021 to a little over four million in 2025.

Millions of empty-nest baby boomers want to downsize and retire but are discouraged from doing so by the prospect of a huge tax bill. That's called the lock-in effect of the capital-gains tax. It denies the government massive tax revenue and creates a perverse incentive to store wealth away untouched for decades. A 2020 Brookings Institution analysis put it this way: "Lock-in encourages investors to retain their assets when the economy would benefit from a redeployment of investment capital to higher return ventures or properties."

Investors and homeowners react quickly to changes in capital-gains tax rates. The Steiger Amendment of 1978, which reduced the top rate from 49% to 28%, had a large unlocking effect. So did the tax cuts signed by Presidents Reagan in 1981 and Clinton in 1997, both of which cut the rate from 28% to 20%. (The Tax Reform Act of 1986 raised it back.)

One reason aging homeowners don't sell is because there's one way of avoiding the capital-gains tax: by dying. When your house passes to your estate, a tax-code provision called the step up in basis at death kicks in, and your gain forever goes untaxed. When your heirs sell the house, they pay tax only on the difference between the value at your death and the sale price.

Indexing would give the government a piece of the gain while freeing up homes for young families. Mr. Trump should urge Congress to enact this win-win tax cut immediately.

Mr. Yass is a co-founder of Susquehanna International Group. Mr. Moore is a co-founder of Unleash Prosperity and a former senior economic adviser to Donald Trump.

America Is the Sole Superpower Again

By Arthur Herman

It happened after World War II and after the Cold War—and it is happening now. President Trump has thrust the U.S. into another "unipolar moment," a time when a single great power dominates the globe and crafts a new world order.

The strike against Iran's nuclear sites, the cease-fire in Gaza, and the capture of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro together show that the U.S. controls the tempo and direction of world events. Which may also come to include regime change in Iran.

It has long been recognized that the U.S. is a superpower, a sovereign state able to exert its influence and force on a global scale. But it now stands alone among the current great powers, with China sliding into a distant second place.

Superpower status depends on economic as well as military strength. The U.S. economy is poised for a strong 2026, with predictions of gross domestic product growth ranging between 2% and more than 5%. In addition, from artificial intelligence to quantum computing and space, the U.S. is reclaiming the heights of high tech after ceding too much advantage to China over the past two decades. The U.S. is also taking major steps to close the rare-earths gap with China, which will deprive Beijing of one its principal claims to global economic dominance.

Meanwhile, America's economic muscle includes domestic oil production that has reached almost 14 million barrels a day. While lowering energy prices worldwide, this output underpins global economic growth and undermines Russia's hopes for long-term regional hegemony. By bringing Venezuela's oil exports—which China received at a discount—into play, the Trump administration will be holding



RICHARD MIA

a dagger aimed at China's energy heart.

Another important aspect of this revived superpower dominance has been the role of tariffs. Mr. Trump has used them to restore fair trade and put more revenue in the U.S. Treasury. But he has also used them to control the direction and details of global trade by taking advantage of

China could have been a contender, but Trump has led the U.S. to a new 'unipolar moment.'

the U.S. economic advantage as the world's biggest consumer. His policy on energy, tax cuts and deregulation will reinforce that advantage from the supply side while setting a manufacturing boom in motion.

The last time the U.S. enjoyed primacy as the sole superpower was a quarter-century ago, for a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. But

Washington allowed that opportunity to slip away as the U.S. industrial base declined and China stepped into the power vacuum left by the Soviet Union.

An overconfident Washington expanded the government, depending on a "peace dividend" while trading away our military strength and defense industrial base. Then, after the shock of 9/11, America's sole-superpower status was further sapped by military commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. China moved into contention as the next great economic and military power, and Russia found new purpose in trying to restore the Soviet empire.

After a further decline of U.S. power during the Obama years, the first Trump administration aimed at a policy of global stability as the great-power competition heated up again. Thanks to Mr. Trump, Russia's ambitions in Eastern Europe were put on hold, and China's posture in East Asia and the South China Sea became less menacing. Iran was paralyzed by U.S.-led international sanctions, almost to the point of bankruptcy.

Then the Biden administration threw stability to the winds, first with the cataclysmic withdrawal from Afghanistan, then with its diffidence while Russia invaded Ukraine. At the same time, the administration enabled Iran to re-exert its influence in the Middle East via terrorist proxies, culminating in the massacre in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

Now, after only a year in office, Mr. Trump has asserted U.S. dominance on a scale not seen since the 1990s—or even World War II.

China had its chance to win the superpower sweepstakes, but it is slipping away. Economic woes, its failure to protect client states Iran and Venezuela, and the growing sclerosis of the Belt and Road initiative are putting paid to the idea that the 2100s might be "the Chinese century."

China remains formidable. But from Europe and the Middle East to South America and Southeast Asia, the U.S. sets the agenda while China struggles with a leadership crisis. Beijing's one remaining strategic initiative is its threat to Taiwan. Although very real, this threat is directed at an island less than 100 miles off its coast with 1/60th of its population, which perfectly sums up China's shrinking influence.

The most recent era of great-power competition is over, and the U.S. won. History shows, however, that such unipolar moments are fleeting. It is up to the second Trump administration to make sure it doesn't slip away—that America's status as the dominant superpower becomes a bridge to a more secure and more prosperous future for the rest of the free world.

Mr. Herman is author of "Freedom's Forge: How American Business Produced Victory in World War II" and "Founder's Fire: From 1776 to the Age of Trump," the latter forthcoming in April.

The Supreme Court and Minnesota's Welfare Fraud

By Philip Hamburger

Many individuals deserve blame for Minnesota's welfare fraud, but a key underlying failure is institutional. Federal funding of state programs creates a dangerous moral hazard. Washington provides money, but the state controls its disbursement. When the federal government subsidizes states, it lets them spend other people's money. And the Supreme Court has blessed it all.

The opportunities for corruption are bad enough within any single governing body—federal or state. But when a state can spend federal dollars, political accountability becomes even more tenuous. U.S. voters can't be expected to monitor each state's handling of federal funds, and the people of Minnesota clearly don't worry sufficiently about the misuse of money that isn't theirs. Not having to foot the bill for improper use of funds, they have little incentive to hold their politicians accountable.

The Constitution sought to avoid such problems. It empowered Congress to tax Americans only for national purposes: "To pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United

States." This meant Congress couldn't use tax dollars to provide for the states. Even Alexander Hamilton—never shy about claiming expansive federal power—didn't try to use federal funding to support the states or pay their debts.

He held a relatively broad understanding of what Congress could do under the General Welfare Clause. But when the states in 1790 couldn't pay back the loans they had taken on to pay for the Revolutionary War, he led the campaign for a federal assumption of the state debts—so Congress would pay a federal debt, not state debts. His plan respected the prevailing view that Congress couldn't directly fund the states.

The Supreme Court, however, has forgotten that history. In *U.S. v. Butler* (1936), the justices, like Hamilton, interpreted the Constitution to include a power to spend for the country's general welfare, expanding Congress's spending ability beyond its enumerated powers. In so doing the court ignored what Hamilton recognized—that the General Welfare Clause was widely understood to bar federal tax spending for the states.

The court transformed the clause from a limitation into a woolly endorsement of spending for any pub-

lic purpose. In *Helvering v. Davis* (1937), the justices concluded that they should defer to Congress about what the "general Welfare" required. "The discretion belongs to Congress, unless the choice is clearly wrong, a display of arbitrary power, not an exercise of judgment," the court said.

The justices undermine accountability by wrongly allowing federal funding of state government.

Contemporary doctrine is extremely permissive. As the court put it in *South Dakota v. Dole* (1987), the General Welfare Clause merely requires federal spending to serve "public purposes," and judges "should defer substantially to the judgment of Congress" about what that means. The court in *Dole* even questioned "whether 'general welfare' is a judicially enforceable restriction at all."

The net result, summarized in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius* (2012), the ObamaCare case, is that Congress

has a nearly unlimited spending power that it can use to grant federal money to states. The court has thereby, contrary to an explicit constitutional limitation, licensed vast federal spending for the states, leaving us to live with the consequences.

The court's evisceration of the General Welfare Clause is profoundly damaging. Federal aid to the states drains resources from essential federal missions, such as defense. It enables the federal government to subject states to regulatory conditions, undermining federalism and our ability to govern ourselves at a local level. When conditioned on matching state funds, federal spending encourages state spending, even to the point of near bankruptcy. And now we can see that federal dollars diminish financial accountability, opening opportunities for brazen fraud on an unimaginable scale.

In the wake of the Minnesota debacle, the court should reconsider its gutting of the General Welfare Clause. It could spare us the costs of the increasingly destructive division between federal funding and state control over its distribution.

Mr. Hamburger teaches at Columbia Law School and is CEO of the New Civil Liberties Alliance.

Grave Robbery Spreads Across America

By Faith Bottum

Acemetery in Compton, Calif., is being stripped day by day, month by month. Thieves have damaged or stolen nearly 1,600 headstones and plaques since 2023. "We got hit in January. We got hit in December. We got hit in November," says Celestina Bishop, 51, operator of Woodlawn Celestial Gardens. "We won't be replacing them. We can't afford that. We can barely take care of the cemetery," Ms. Bishop says.

It's happening across the country. More than \$170,000 worth of bronze vases and markers were stolen from New Crown Cemetery in Indianapolis in August. In Brooklyn, N.Y., 1,300 grave markers have been taken from Most Holy Trinity Cemetery, according

to memorialist Michael Hirsch. Rolling Green Cemetery in Camp Hill, Pa., lost \$26,730 of bronze vases in 2024. Police arrested a suspect who they said was stealing 20 to 30 a day.

West Virginia, Massachusetts, South Dakota, Louisiana, Iowa, Illinois—these isolated local stories are combining to mark a nationwide desecration of the dead. Demand for scrap metal, used in industry, construction and home decor, has risen in recent years. Bronze can be sold as scrap for more than \$3 a pound, and the market, \$8.7 billion in 2024, is projected to reach \$12.4 billion by 2034.

That makes graveyards easy pickings, especially military graves, which often have bronze plaques. "People sell those markers, even those little vases you put on them, and melt them down for money," says Rebecca Meyer, 48, a gravestone conservationist and president of Epoch Preservation. "It is very much tied to the up-tick of the opioid epidemic." In August a man less than a year out of jail was arrested in Harnett County, N.C., for stealing nearly 100 bronze vases from graves. "Cemeteries are the last places people care about," Ms. Meyer says. "Those people aren't thinking about the dead."

Cemeteries are taking defensive measures. In Cincinnati, the Sons of the American Revolution are now recommending flat granite markers flush with the ground. "Our hope is that these markers will stay there," the organization wrote online. "They are heavy and have little to no scrap value."

And after nearly 500 reported cases of scrap-metal theft in 2024, the Denver City Council passed new rules for scrap sales. Cash transactions are banned, and businesses must obtain signed affidavits from sellers attesting where the metal was obtained and keep copies of photo IDs and license-plate numbers. Massachusetts state lawmakers have introduced a bill that would make it a crime to possess or sell any object "placed or designed for a memorial of the dead" with "reasonable cause to know that it has been unlawfully removed from a cemetery or burial ground."

Opioid abuse and the rising value of bronze are among the factors driving thieves to loot cemeteries.

There are also technological solutions. A Texas family used an Apple AirTag to help police find \$62,000 worth of stolen vases. A ragtag online group, the "Grave Marker Recovery Team," hunts down gravestones that have been stolen, typically to sell at antique shows as accents for upscale decorating.

Missing in all this is any reverence for or even superstitious fear of the dead. Ms. Bishop owns dogs—including a Cane Corso named Ghost—that patrol her cemetery. But thieves are giving her dogs "sleeping pills or something," and other measures

such as guards are "expensive, especially for a cemetery that doesn't generate income." Starting to sound forlorn, she says, "At this point, I'm just ready just to say, 'stop tearing up my gates. I'll just open it up and let you just have at it,' since I know the police don't care. No one cares anymore."

Across the country, the criminal-justice system should take desecration of the dead far more seriously as an aggravating factor in thefts, with stronger prosecutions and harsher penalties. Federal involvement would also help, at least for veterans' graves. "It's illegal to sell a military marker of any kind," says Doug Compton, 62, a member of the Grave Marker Recovery Team who calls himself "The Cemetery Man." "Those are government property. Those are supposed to be returned to the National Cemetery Administration," which is an arm of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Ms. Bishop's cemetery in California is home to some 900 soldiers' graves, including veterans of the War of 1812, the Civil War and the Gulf War. "It surprises me that the federal government has not gotten involved," she says.

Add in recent cemetery thefts in Nebraska, North Dakota, New Mexico, Washington: Across the nation, American graveyards are being pilfered. Local governments and federal agencies should join to develop a national response.

Ms. Bottum is an assistant editorial features editor at the Journal.

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EDITORIALS

If you believed the McRib was a real rib, we have some chicken nuggets to sell you

Another day, another class-action lawsuit, this time about what kind of meat is in a sandwich.

Four lead plaintiffs, including Chicagoan Dorien Baker, are suing McDonald's, claiming the fast-food giant is misleading customers over what kind of meat it uses in its cult classic "McRib" sandwich.

"Despite its name and distinctive rib-like shape, it does not actually contain any pork rib meat," the lawsuit states.

Consumer protection law isn't meant to shield people from every assumption a brand name might invite, but from genuine deception on which a reasonable buyer would rely.

Does anyone truly believe the McRib is real rib meat? Does anyone pretend to know what part of the chicken is used to make a McNugget?

Do we really want to know?

In November, McDonald's announced that the McRib would make a limited-time return to select restaurants in cities across the country, including Chicago.

McRib lovers are in it for the taste and — yes — the mystique. Much of the allure of this weird sandwich stems from its irregular availability.

It's not as if McDonald's hasn't been fairly forthcoming about the makeup of the sandwich. If you must know, the McRib is a seasoned pork patty. More specifically: It's restructured pork (ground pork formed into that rib-shaped patty) slathered in barbecue sauce. McDonald's simply calls it a "pork sandwich" online.

Whether this lawsuit ultimately succeeds is for the courts to decide, but this complaint would seem to stretch consumer protection beyond its intended purpose.

Yes, retailers should be forthcoming about what's being sold. We don't take too kindly to farm-raised salmon being sold as "wild caught" or "extra-virgin olive oil" that isn't. Products labeled as halal or kosher must actually be those things, otherwise companies can deceive devout Jewish or Muslim customers into violating their faith traditions.

But it doesn't strike us as a truth-in-advertising scandal that the McRib consists of part of the pig other than the rib. If it were turkey meat passed off as pork? OK then!

Want real ribs? Head to Twin Anchors in Lincoln Park, Jameson's in the suburbs, Green Street Smoked Meats in the West Loop or Lem's Bar-B-Q on the South Side. We've got enough great pork rib options in Chicagoland that you could hop around for weeks trying different spots.

And if you're in too big of a rush to grab the real thing — and a handful of napkins to wipe off the sauce — there's always the McRib. (While supplies last.)



A McRib at a McDonald's restaurant in San Francisco.

DAVID PAUL MORRIS/GETTY

ON THIS DAY 41 YEARS AGO PAY RAISES WITHOUT GUILT

Just before the new General Assembly took over last week, Illinois legislators concluded a year-long game of their own invention. It is called "Don't Blame Me" and has rather complicated rules, but the object of the game is to get a pay raise without being criticized for it.

First, the Senate heard a motion to block the pay raise bill, and failed by a single vote to pass it. ... The effect was to let stand a recommendation by the Illinois Compensation Review Board providing \$8 million a year in raises while allowing the maximum number of senators — 29 — to vote "no" without killing it. ... And since both chambers have to concur in voting down a board recommendation, the Senate vote gave House members a free throw. ... 76 of the 118 representatives did just that.

Teamwork like this does not just happen. The legislature prepared for it last spring by creating the Compensation Review Board — modeled on a congressional one — and giving it power to decide how much elected officials should be paid. Under its rules, what the board says goes, unless both houses reject or reduce the pay levels it recommends.

That happened last month; House and Senate members overwhelmingly rejected a proposal much like this one. But they thought better of it. There is a persuasive case for giving judges and cabinet officers salaries big enough to compete with private practice. Compared with these increases ... the \$4,500 legislative raise may not be much; still, it's better than nothing, which was their alternative. ... A tempting prospect.

The game may yet go into extra innings. A Cook County Circuit Court has been asked to enjoin money for the raises until some questions are settled. Can the legislature constitutionally hand over to a nonelected body part of its authority over state funds? ... Is this elaborate buck-passing what lawmakers are elected to do?

Granted, the General Assembly is in a no-win situation with pay raises. It will be criticized no matter how it handles them. But this elaborate system of camouflage can't be a healthy answer. ... The finger-pointing procedure is cowardly; that much is clear now.

Tribune editorial board, Jan. 15, 1985



Wetlands at Milan Bottoms Preserve in Rock Island County on July 31, 2025. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A Supreme Court ruling has put Illinois' wetlands at risk. Springfield should respond

Idaho residents Michael and Chantell Sackett got a shock from the Environmental Protection Agency when they began backfilling a lot with dirt to build a new home.

Their site contained wetlands, the EPA declared, and their backfilling violated the Clean Water Act, which protects "the waters of the United States" from pollution. Sure enough, the Sacketts' wetlands were near a ditch that fed into a creek, which flowed into the much-larger Priest Lake, putting it under EPA jurisdiction via an interpretation of the law that prevailed for decades.

Then along came the U.S. Supreme Court. Justice Samuel Alito and four other conservative justices had been itching to rewrite environmental regulations. The Sackett case, decided in 2023 by a 5-4 vote (with one conservative justice, Brett Kavanaugh, dissenting on the main issue), tossed out a standard supported by the EPA, Army Corps of Engineers and multiple administrations.

Much of the nation's wetlands that previously enjoyed federal protection suddenly were vulnerable. Some states, including Michigan, were backstopped by their own laws that duplicated at least part of the federal protection.

But not Illinois.

The Land of Lincoln's wetlands remain mostly unprotected, and intense lobbying from a coalition of farming and business groups has succeeded so far in keeping it that way, overcoming equally intense lobbying from environmental and conservation groups.

Something should be done. But restoring the same protections that wetlands enjoyed under the EPA is complicated, requiring a significant state investment to expand its oversight — and potentially creating costs for farmers and other landowners.

What's needed is a thoughtful discussion and, for now, both sides are dug in. We think the environmentalists have a strong case, and Illinois' landowners opposing strict new rules protecting wetlands need to think about compromising before the General Assembly overrides their interests.

Every resident of Illinois has an interest in protecting natural habitats that support game fish and migratory birds, among other beloved creatures. But the wetlands issue isn't solely about tree-hugging, and that's what makes it so compelling.

The state's wetlands play a critical role in flood control, for instance. Averting wet basements and swamped roadways is one reason why Cook County and four other counties in the Chicago area have passed wetland protections specific to their jurisdictions.

Given the prevalence of heavy rainstorms as the climate warms, this flood control is becoming ever more essential. As it stands, many of the flood-prone areas along the state's major rivers have no protection for wetlands that help soak up downpours today.

Wetlands also serve as natural filters and reservoirs. Acting like sponges, they capture water and slowly release it, sustaining streams and lakes during dry periods and replenishing underground water tables. That includes the aquifers that much of the state depends on for drinking water.

Effectively, they are a natural form of infrastructure. To our minds, the strongest argument for protecting them is that, if they go away, we'll have to build man-made structures to perform the same functions.

"This is a long-term, slow-burn sort of thing," Paul Botts, president of The Wetlands Initiative, told us in a recent meeting we had with supporters of the proposed Wetlands Protection Act, which would establish a state permitting process for protecting wetlands. "Down the road, we'll have to spend a lot of money, or our descendants will, replacing those values."

About 563,000 acres of Illinois wetlands lie outside any county, state or federal protection, according to a research study cited by environmental lobbyists. That sure sounds like a lot of land. But it's a drop in the bucket compared with the 36 million acres that make up the state's entire land mass, with three-fourths of it devoted to farming.

The farm lobby, however, has objected to restoring the protection lost in the Sackett decision as if it's an existential threat. The state bill favored by environmentalists is too broad and burdensome, they say, and the expanded oversight it requires would cost Illinois several million dollars a year.

We get it: Expanding state bureaucracy with new rules could indeed complicate life for the state's landowners. But the Sackett decision left a gap that cannot continue to go unfilled. Illinois' wetlands deserve the same protections they had for decades under the EPA — or at least close to the same.

It's worth noting that an activist Supreme Court can be expected to continue foisting new responsibilities onto the states by overturning settled law governing federal regulation — as in the 2024 "Chevron Deference" decision that significantly limits the power of federal agencies. In other cases, the court has reinforced federal powers over the states, making this a challenging time for state lawmakers across the country.

For years, Illinois counted on the feds to take the lead in curbing water pollution. These days, the state needs to act when court rulings upset long-standing practices and undermine compelling public interests.

The proposed Wetlands Protection Act is a good starting point for Illinois to respond to the Sackett case. Tweaking it to provide clear, reasonable rules for landowners makes sense. Standing by while a vulnerable resource goes unprotected is reckless and costly.

Illinois needs its wetlands, now and into the future.

EDITORIAL CARTOON

SHENEMAN TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY



"WHY BOTHER ANNEXING GREENLAND IF YOUR ENERGY POLICY IS GOING TO MELT IT?"

DREW SHENEMAN

OPINION

Who deserves credit for the drop in Cook County's opioid overdose deaths?

By Todd C. Smith

In recent months, Chicago and communities across Illinois have experienced something that renews hope: signs of progress in the fight against opioid overdose deaths and poisonings.

The Cook County medical examiner's office recently released preliminary data for 2025. One of the most significant highlights was the dramatic decrease in opioid overdose deaths recorded in the county.

While results from approximately 180 toxicology tests remain pending, 683 deaths throughout Cook County were attributed to opioid overdoses last year, down from a record high of 2,001 in 2022. The dramatic decrease represents lives not lost, families spared grief and futures still intact.

This also raises an important question: Who deserves the credit?

The most honest answer is that progress such as this is never the result of a single action or institution. It reflects sustained effort across enforcement, public health, education, policy and community advocacy, working in parallel toward the same goal.

At the Drug Enforcement Administration's Chicago field division, our responsibility is to enforce our nation's drug laws by reducing the supply of illicit fentanyl before it can poison another family member, another classroom or another neighborhood. Over the past year, DEA agents and our task force partners seized nearly 2 million illicit fentanyl pills and 915 pounds of fentanyl powder in Chicago and across Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. Those are record-level seizures, but their real significance lies in what never happened: fatal drug poisonings that did not occur because lethal drugs never reached the street.

Our work represents one piece of the equation in combating illicit supply and trafficking. It disrupts criminal networks, raises the cost of doing business for traffickers, and removes dangerous substances from circulation. Just as importantly, it creates space for the other parts of the equation to work.

Strong law enforcement and prosecutorial partnerships remain essential to this effort. Local, state and federal agencies work side by side every day, from street-level investigations to long-term conspiracy cases. Prosecutors ensure traffickers are held accountable and that fentanyl distribution is treated with the seriousness it demands. These partnerships weaken supply chains and reinforce the rule of law.

At the same time, lives are being saved because public health professionals focus on survival and access to care. The Chicago Department of Public Health has expanded naloxone distribution and overdose response efforts, placing lifesaving medication into the hands of those most



Outreach workers distribute supplies of Defent One, a fentanyl detection device, and Narcan along West Lake Street on Dec. 30, 2025, outside the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force offices in Chicago's West Garfield Park neighborhood. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Education has become another critical line of defense. Illinois took a forward-looking step by making fentanyl awareness education mandatory in classrooms statewide. This policy reflects a hard reality: Fentanyl is appearing in counterfeit pills and substances young people mistakenly believe are safe.

likely to encounter an overdose.

Education has become another critical line of defense. Illinois took a forward-looking step by making fentanyl awareness education mandatory in classrooms statewide. This policy reflects a hard reality: Fentanyl is appearing in counterfeit pills and substances young people mistakenly believe are safe. Accurate, age-appropriate information empowers students to make informed decisions and helps prevent tragedy.

Policymakers also play an important role in shaping the environment in which prevention succeeds. At the federal level, the HALT Fentanyl Act strengthened the ability of law enforcement to respond to a rapidly evolving drug threat by ensuring fentanyl-related substances are treated

with urgency. At the state level, legislation supporting education and prevention has reinforced local efforts. Policy does not replace enforcement or public health; it enables both to operate more effectively.

These efforts are being aligned through the DEA's Fentanyl Free America campaign, a national prevention initiative designed to bring enforcement, education, public health and community engagement together. The campaign reflects what experience has shown repeatedly: Progress is strongest when institutions and communities move in the same direction rather than in silos.

And then there are the angel parents.

No dataset can capture the courage of mothers and fathers who have lost children to fentanyl poisoning and refused to

let their grief be the final chapter. We've seen firsthand how parents throughout Chicago have transformed loss into purpose — educating other families, advocating for accountability and pushing for change so no parent, family member or friend has to endure the same pain.

It took all these efforts to reach this moment, and it will take continued collaboration to sustain it. Fentanyl remains the deadliest drug threat this country has ever faced, and progress can reverse if attention fades.

The recent decline in overdose deaths is encouraging, but it is not a finish line. It is a reminder that when enforcement, public health, education, policy and community advocacy operate together, lives are saved. The task ahead is not deciding who gets credit but ensuring that no family ever has to grieve losing someone they love to a drug poisoning. That responsibility belongs to all of us.

Todd C. Smith is the special agent in charge of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Chicago field division, which covers Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin.

What the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would encourage us to do today



Willie Wilson

On Thursday, we honor what would have been the 97th birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. If King were alive today, I believe he would encourage us to fight against injustice and inequality. He would inspire us to love our neighbors.

King was a prophet and master of language, sent by God at a time in history when race relations were deeply fractured. He understood that words had the power to heal or hurt, to tear down or build up.

His last speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," delivered at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, was prophetic and profound. He sensed death was imminent. King was in Memphis to support striking sanitation workers. He rallied against injustice and unfair treatment of sanitation workers.

"We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord," King said.

He gave his life for racial equality, justice and human dignity.

Because of King's leadership, the following major bills were passed and signed into law:

- The Civil Rights Act of 1964: This law outlawed segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination based on race, color, gender and national origin.
- The Voting Rights Act of 1965: This act eliminated discriminatory voting practices, such as literacy tests and poll taxes.
- The Fair Housing Act of 1968: Passed just a week after his assassination, this



The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., seated on right, meets with a group of residents of an apartment building, including Ruby Keys, Louis Mitchell and Rosie Townes, at 1321 S. Homan Ave. in Chicago on Feb. 10, 1966. The group had gathered in Townes' apartment to talk about the poor living conditions for Black people in Chicago. Al Raby, second from left, and Ralph D. Abernathy, background, accompanied King. STEVE MARINO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

legislation prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of property.

Large numbers of African Americans and Latinos elected to political offices can be traced back to the work of King around the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black and brown CEOs are beneficiaries of King's work.

Since the death of King, landmark laws he championed have been weakened by executive orders, the Supreme Court and Congress. There has been an attempt to pit racial groups and economic classes against each other. The United States of America is at its weakest point when we are divided.

We are all born innocent. Our parents and environment shape our thinking. Imagine if in every home children were taught to love their neighbor and follow the Ten Commandments. My mother taught me to love everyone irrespective of color or ethnicity.

The challenges today seem insurmountable for those who have suffered long years of poverty, hurt, neglect and disinvestment. I am reminded — God is at work in our difficult seasons.

Where are the modern-day prophets — those fighting for racial harmony, equity in health care, and education, housing, employment and contract opportunities? Where are those fighting for equity in technology and the cannabis industry?

King would be appalled to learn that the largest big-city gap in life expectancy in the U.S. is in a community on the West Side of Chicago — West Garfield Park.

He would be outraged to hear that three predominantly Black communities — Lawndale, Garfield Park and Englewood — experienced the highest increase in property tax bills.

King would be saddened to know that the leading cause of death for Black teens

and men ages 15 to 44 is homicide.

The poverty of spirit and hopelessness across Black communities would trouble King. Low voting participation by Black and brown citizens would cause King to ask: What did I give my life for? He would be disappointed to learn of communities where there are no grocery stores within walking distance.

King would be concerned about the persistent achievement gap among minority children. He warned against the prison industrial complex that has become the new Jim Crow. King saw firsthand some of the problems in Chicago when he lived on the West Side in Lawndale.

Where is the sense of urgency to make life better for the poor and those suffering? As a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, King understood that the spirit of the Lord was upon him, and he was anointed to deal with the problems of the poor.

The following are suggestions to help usher in King's dream:

■ All people should share the message of nonviolence and love with someone outside your comfort zone.

■ Congress should pass the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

■ Faith leaders must speak out against injustice. The church and other institutions should promote nonviolence in the community as a way of conflict resolution and teach the history of King.

■ Cook County elected leaders should fight to ensure detainees in Cook County Department of Corrections get a speedy trial.

The prophets of today must fight for independence of public agencies and institutions. They should advocate for access to information — books, the internet, public television and fair reporting by the media. They must fight for access to health care and lifesaving therapeutics.

King completed his mission and left an indelible print on the soul of America.

New Zion M.B. Church, 1252 S. Wolcott Ave., is hosting a community celebration at 10 a.m. Monday honoring the life of King.

I write this commentary to make those comfortable with forgetting the sacrifice King made uncomfortable.

Willie Wilson is a business owner, philanthropist and former mayoral candidate.

OPINION

Navigating the quiet tyranny of the LinkedIn 'like'

By Tania Zamorsky

We hate them for not liking our LinkedIn posts.

Of course, not really. But who hasn't refreshed their browser repeatedly to see how many likes their latest post has — or hasn't — garnered, and from whom?

While it's not life or death, it isn't pure ego either. With layoffs in the U.S. now reaching their highest levels since COVID-19, stakes and tensions are high. The site has become more than a networking tool; it's a public scoreboard for professional potential, and even one like can make a difference.

Low engagement can also trigger a cringey mix of self-consciousness, status anxiety and old social hierarchies we thought we'd outgrown.

We note, but scan past, the loyal few who like everything we do. While we appreciate them, alas, the likes are always greener on the other side, and these can feel akin to taking our cousin to the dance.

Intellectually, we get it: It often comes down to timing, feed-crowding or other algorithmic magic. We tell ourselves that what other people think of us is none of our business. Even that person from our professional past who pointedly likes all other mutual connections' posts but ours. (This has itself turned into a kind of compliment — as Taylor Swift might sing it, "actually romantic.")

And yet, we fret. A watched post never likes.

Some folks just have it — that undeniable charisma. Now part of the workforce, former quarterbacks and homecoming queens are no doubt awash in online adoration. The "Seinfeld" character Kramer had the kavorka, a (fake) Latvian word meaning "the lure of the animal." Virility begets virility; he would have owned LinkedIn.

But us? Not so much. We are skilled and hard workers, but not natural networkers. Whereas some folks casually amass thousands of connections, we can be hard on people, assessing them as critically as Marie Kondo did clothes or clutter.

Or perhaps it's that all social media, like most of life, is high school, with its subtle cuts and casual cruelties. Scrolling the halls, clicking through the cafeteria



A LinkedIn office in San Francisco on July 26, 2023. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY

Whether you're 18 or 80, everyone wants to be liked, especially on a platform that is, at least officially, all business. So, it smarts when the "Mean Girls" (everyone's got some, men among them) seem to prop up only each other in an endlessly congratulatory closed loop system.

ria, it is evident who temporarily holds power and who does not.

Whether you're 18 or 80, everyone wants to be liked, especially on a platform that is, at least officially, all business. So, it smarts when the "Mean Girls" (everyone's got some, men among them) seem to prop up only each other in an endlessly congratulatory closed loop system. Gaining admission can feel as unlikely to happen as the word "fetch."

In our defense, the fashion keeps changing. While it was

briefly haute to humblebrag, stern missives from social media experts now warn us never to utter the words "thrilled," "honored" or "proud" again, even (especially?) if we mean them. What does one do when actual authenticity may not ring true?

Granted, we don't like everything our connections post either. But when all someone ever posts are their corporate employer's news releases, what is there for us to actually like, love, celebrate or declare insightful or funny? When

someone shares their personal thoughts, aspirations, efforts or accomplishments, we like the hell out of it!

We will occasionally, impulsively, remove a notorious non-liker from our network. After all, we reason, if we have consistently engaged with their content, but they have never responded in kind, were we ever truly "connected"? If a tree falls in the forest without ever having been liked, did it ever stand at all?

Admittedly, this is awkward. But we must resist the urge to send out a new connection request the following morning. No one's buying our sheepish "I don't know how that happened."

With the new year upon us, let's resolve to make the most of what is ultimately, undeniably, a powerfully beneficial platform.

For starters, we'll stop assuming the worst. While we can take steps

to improve the odds, a lack of likes likely isn't personal. Most people scroll, maybe stop and skip, but then move on. No malice. No meaning. No one's really thinking about us all that much.

Next, likes or no likes, and on LinkedIn and beyond, we'll keep posting anyway, for the sake of our own creative expression, the practice and pleasure of the words. Sure, we'll strive to provide value — not only with our content, but by connecting authentically with others, on the platform and (more importantly) off. But, after that, we'll let it go and let karma take the wheel. Deal?

Finally, we'll focus more on liking ourselves. Everyone and everything else, if it's meant to, should follow.

Tania Zamorsky is a New York-based public relations and communications consultant.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Data center proposal issues

The proposed Naperville data center raises serious unanswered questions regarding fiscal responsibility, transparency and risk to taxpayers. Residents have repeatedly asked whether the project has a committed operator, secured financing, a concrete power delivery plan with enforceable timelines, and clear responsibility for costly off-site grid upgrades. Tax revenue projections based on near constant peak load also depart from industry norms and remain unexplained.

This project would directly impact four, soon to be five, neighborhoods representing more than an estimated 1,000 residents, and a petition opposing the proposal has gathered nearly 5,000 signatures. Despite extensive testimony and detailed submissions from resident and nonresident experts, many core issues remain unresolved, including discrepancies in noise studies, emissions, home value pricing impact analyses and projected tax analyses. Residents are increasingly concerned not only about the lack of answers but also whether all submitted information is even being fully reviewed.

How does a proposal that generated standing-room-only opposition and failed to meet required conditions still pass the Planning and Zoning Commission with only one dissenting vote? What changed after early indications the project would be denied? And how can a data center be sited next to homes and forest preserves at all, let alone without full transparency?

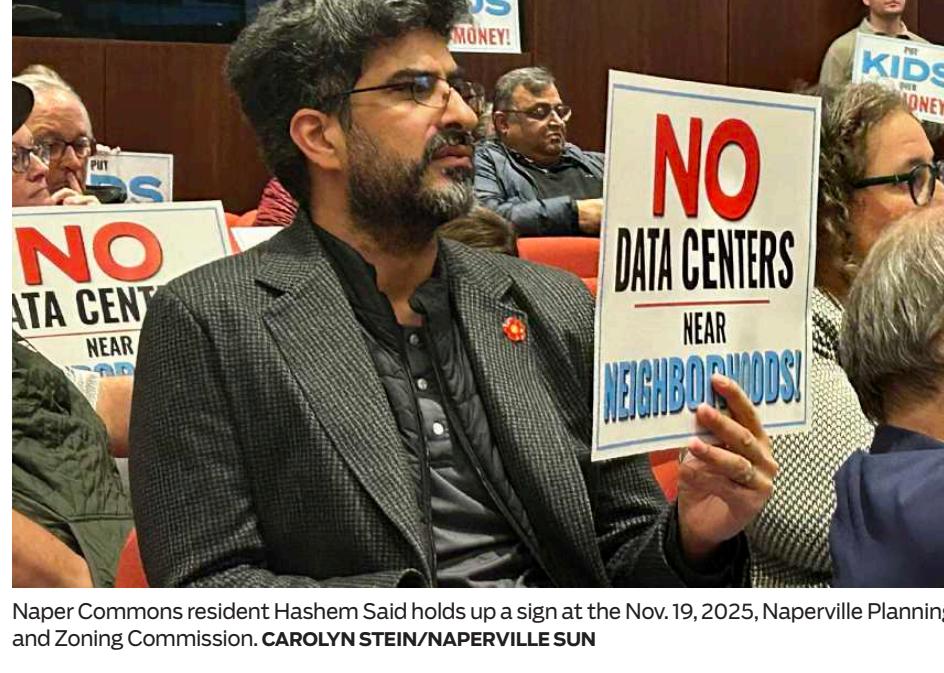
If these fundamentals remain uncertain, approving the project would shift legal, financial and planning risk onto the city rather than the developer. Even if these questions were fully answered and the project shown to be viable, it should be located on a site consistent with the city's land use master plan, not on a parcel currently designated for future medium-density residential use.

Public confidence depends on decisions grounded in complete information, careful review and sound policy, not personal or partisan considerations. A project of this scale warrants caution, not haste.

— Sarah Baugh, Naperville

Renewable energy needs

The Jan. 11 editorial ("Ready or not, the data centers are coming. We must keep our electric bills from soaring") rightly raises concerns about how the explosive growth of data centers will affect the reliability and affordability of electricity in Illinois. Requiring data center owners to shoul-



Naper Commons resident Hashem Said holds up a sign at the Nov. 19, 2025, Naperville Planning and Zoning Commission. CAROLYN STEIN/NAPERVILLE SUN

der the cost of new power generation and grid upgrades — rather than shifting those costs onto ratepayers — is essential. Households, seniors and small businesses already struggling with rising utility bills should not be forced to subsidize energy-intensive corporate users.

The Tribune Editorial Board weakens its argument, however, by downplaying renewable energy while pointing to nuclear power as an alternative. Climate change is already imposing real costs on Illinois residents, from extreme weather to higher insurance and infrastructure expenses. Nuclear power carries unresolved risks, including the potential for accidents, the absence of a proven long-term solution for radioactive waste, serious dangers to uranium miners and the decades required to bring new plants online. It is also the most expensive form of energy to build.

Renewable energy is not only cleaner and safer — it also is the cheapest and fastest way to curb rising electricity rates. The recently enacted Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act provides funding for virtual power plants, battery storage and energy-efficiency rebates that can quickly increase supply, reduce demand and lower customer bills.

Illinois has been a national leader in clean energy policy. As electricity demand grows, the solution is not to retreat from renewables but to double down on them

— and to ensure that large corporate users pay their fair share.

— Mardi Klevs, Third Act Illinois, Evanston

Consuming land and water

The Tribune Editorial Board writes in its Sunday editorial, "Energy-intensive data centers are the backbone for artificial intelligence," and then it goes on to present information about the centers' dramatically increasing energy hunger. This presents difficult challenges for both energy providers and consumers.

But there's another major concern that legacy media may pass over — the use and consumption of water and land for these centers. Data centers are resource-ravenous; even a midsize data center may consume as much water as a small town, while larger ones may use up to 5 million gallons of water every day — as much as a city of 50,000 people, according to the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

The Lincoln Institute notes: "Some of the largest data centers being built today will cover hundreds of acres with impermeable steel, concrete, and paved surfaces — land that will no longer be available for farmland, nature, or housing — and require new transmission line corridors and other associated infrastructure as well."

Further, and unfortunately for all of us,

lawmakers aren't just opening the door for these new developments; they are seeking them. The Lincoln Institute reports: "In Loudoun County (in Virginia), which has over 27 million square feet of existing data center space, officials expect the total real and property tax revenues collected from local data centers in fiscal year 2025 to approach \$900 million, nearly as much as the county's entire operating budget."

Data centers need more than electricity, they also need significant amounts of water to keep cool. It may seem like we have an abundance of water in our nearby lakes, but each of us needs to take a look at our weather, our climate, our land, our electricity use and our water use and decide how much artificial intelligence we really want and need. Will our environment, our neighborhoods and our health be sacrificed to provide profit for developers and energy providers?

If it is true that "ratepayers shouldn't be taking the risk on these massive investments," then I hope the Tribune Editorial Board and the people of Illinois will consider that these massive developments for AI threaten more than just our pocketbooks. They will take our land and our water, too.

— Patrick Comer, Clarendon Hills

Dialogue on agreements

Thank you so much for the Sunday editorial on data centers. Chicago and Illinois simply avoided this necessary conversation on how best to proceed with data centers. The editorial will set the stage for important public dialogue on our technology, water, energy and land agreements with private industries.

— John Paul Jones, president, Sustainable Englewood Initiatives, Chicago

They need their own supply

So that Illinois ratepayers will not have to bear the cost of the increase in electricity demand by data centers, the legislature needs to pass legislation that requires data centers to build renewable energy facilities on their sites. If the centers need so much electricity, then make them pay for their own supply.

— Joanne Zolomij, Evanston

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الدار ليست بالبناء جميلة
إن الدار جميلة بذويها
(شاعر مجهول)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
The house is beautiful because of its residents, not its construction.
Anonymous

Opinion

The failure of Iran's 'forward defense' strategy

DR. ABDEL AZIZ ALUWAISHEG

Iran's famed "forward defense" strategy appears to be backfiring. That strategy was meant to shield its territory from attack by moving the potential battlefields away from its borders. However, some of Tehran's so-called forward allies are today either gone or seriously weakened, while its home front is burning and the economy is in shambles.

Protests are now sweeping the country, more widespread and violent than other waves seen since 1979. Thousands of protesters and security forces have been killed in bloody confrontations engulfing places far and wide.

The current protests should not be surprising when you consider the worsening living conditions in Iran, tightening sanctions and declining confidence in the country's ability to defend itself against external attacks.

Iran's forward defense strategy was meant to project its power beyond its borders,

deter threats and prevent attacks on Iranian soil, using proxies in other countries, advanced missiles and drones, and cyber-warfare to create greater strategic depth and keep war away from its lands.

For some time, that strategy worked. After the so-called Arab Spring, Iranian officials beamed with satisfaction that they were in control of four Arab capitals. Tehran succeeded in making Hezbollah in Lebanon a powerbroker, while lethal military forces engaged throughout the region in serving Iran's interests.

It propped up Syria's Assad regime, which in exchange swore blind allegiance to Iran's interests. In Yemen, it backed the Houthi militia, which staged a successful coup against the democratically elected and internationally recognized government. The Houthis were used later to disrupt international trade in the Red Sea between 2023 and 2025. In other places, Tehran armed and funded nonstate groups to undermine its perceived adversaries.



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Iran amassed an impressive missile and drone arsenal. Ballistic missiles and drones served as key deterrents and power projection tools, capable of striking regional targets, including in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Relying on what it thought to be formidable weapons, Iran had little use for diplomatic, economic or other soft power tools. Its neighbors were frequently on the receiving end of attacks from Iran directly or through proxies. Beyond its neighborhood, it also adopted an uncompromising attitude toward other nations and was often defiant with the international community. One case in point is its dealings with the International Atomic Energy Agency. With so many antagonists, Iran became isolated, often labeled by its adversaries as a pariah or rogue state.

Some of its early successes proved to be Pyrrhic. In December 2024, the Syrian people got rid of the Assad regime, depriving Iran of one of its most important

bases for forward defense. Iran lost another proxy when Hezbollah was decimated by Israel. The group is now being challenged by the Lebanese government to disarm.

Last year's 12-day Iran-Israel war exposed the fatal weakness of its forward defense doctrine. Israel, supported by the US, brought the battle to Iranian territory and was able to expose its vulnerability.

If Iran can get out of its current crisis, it should pursue a strategy other than forward defense. Starting with its neighbors, which have offered it a grand bargain, Tehran should prioritize diplomacy and eschew the use of force in reshaping its regional ties. Should it agree to live by the international norms that govern relations between nations, the Gulf countries are ready to normalize relations with Iran and integrate it within the regional economic and social fabric. That should not be difficult, because it was the state of affairs between the two shores of the Gulf for thousands of years.

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Relying on what it thought to be formidable weapons, Iran had little use for diplomatic, economic or other soft power tools



COURTESY: AMAND RASMUSSEN/AL-AWAIS

•••
The casual use of derogatory labels risks shutting down legitimate discussion rather than improving it

Britons should welcome debate, not shut it down

PETER HARRISON



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For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

For some time, debate in the UK over immigration has been increasingly reduced to accusations. Too often, those who raise concerns about immigration levels or integration are dismissed as "racist" or "fascist," as though questioning government policy was a moral failing.

While racism undoubtedly exists in this debate and beyond — and should be challenged wherever it appears — the casual use of such labels risks shutting down legitimate discussion rather than improving it.

The UK remains a country shaped by immigration and most people largely seem to accept and welcome that. But it is also clear that immigration has become an important trigger for a general anxiety over the future of British society.

Many believe that newcomers should be expected to respect British laws and values, learn the language and have some

understanding of the culture they are joining. These views are not inherently racist — indeed, some might argue they are not far removed from the "you play by my rules as long as you live under my roof" philosophy of parents with unruly children.

Nonetheless, those who ask these questions are increasingly treated as such. And that is where the bonds of British society can start to unravel.

When concerns are dismissed rather than addressed, people draw the conclusion that they are not being listened to.

Whether people agree with these views or not, they do form part of the social reality in which politics now operates.

Brexit is often cited as evidence of a turn toward intolerance. The argument for Brexit did cite immigration as one of the apparent problems that needed to be tackled. Others have argued it reflected a wider sense of disconnection — a belief that national identity, community cohesion and democratic accountability were being

eroded without public consent.

Outlining this solely as an outpouring of racism overlooks the complexity of the vote and risks repeating the same mistake.

Traditional British and English symbols have become part of this confusion. The Union Flag and St. George's Cross are viewed by some as expressions of patriotism and by others as signals of exclusion. The former leader of the Labour Party, Neil Kinnock, once argued that progressives should not surrender national symbols to extremists but reclaim them as expressions of shared civic identity. That argument remains relevant today, as both flags have been hoisted up lampposts and flagpoles across England, some say as a celebration of their nation, while others claim the motive is more sinister, marking territory and letting it be known — "this is England."

When people who feel unsettled by cultural change are told their concerns are illegitimate or morally suspect, they do not disappear. They separate themselves from

the mainstream, often gravitating toward parties or movements that promise to take them seriously.

None of the concerns raised today about British culture being under threat require people to indulge in prejudice or excuse genuinely racist rhetoric.

Boundaries matter. But so does a willingness to distinguish between hostility and unease, between hatred and uncertainty. A politics that relies on ridicule and dismissal is unlikely to persuade anyone and may instead deepen the divisions it claims to oppose.

If the UK is serious about defending its values, then inclusivity must mean more than tolerance for differences. It must also include patience, civility and a readiness to engage with uncomfortable questions.

Few wars have ended without some level of conversation and compromise. Listening is not surrender, but refusing to do so may carry consequences far more damaging than engaging in debate and discussion.

Opinion

Trump's approach creates opening for Palestinians

HADY AMR



With talk that President Donald Trump is set to launch the Gaza "Board of Peace" imminently, and names on the Gaza technocratic committee becoming public, this is an important moment to consider what Americans, Palestinians and key players in the region can do to improve both the catastrophic situation on the ground and the medium-term prospects for progress toward freedom, security and prosperity for all.

The devastation in Gaza and the killing of tens of thousands of Palestinians, combined with the erosion of Palestinian political legitimacy, have reinforced a belief on all sides that US-Palestinian diplomacy has little constructive role left to play. Beyond the immense human toll, Gaza's destruction has hollowed out Palestinian institutions, deepened fragmentation and reduced international engagement to crisis management.

Yet a paradox is emerging. Trump's unconventional, transactional approach to the Middle East, often dismissed as chaotic or indifferent to long-term outcomes, has created a narrow but real opening for renewed US-Palestinian engagement around a pragmatic agenda. Whether this opening leads to progress or closes quickly will depend less on

lofty principles and more on political agility, credible proposals, regional alignment and overdue Palestinian political renewal, all under the hard constraint of Israeli politics.

The Trump administration's core concerns are not Palestinian statehood or final-status negotiations but regional stability and commercial advantage. Yet, embedded in Trump-era frameworks, including the widely discussed "20-point

plan," is a recognition often overlooked by critics: no sustainable postwar arrangement in Gaza is possible without a credible Palestinian partner and meaningful regional buy-in.

A potential game-changer is the creation of the US-led Civil

Military Coordination Center, which marks the first sustained international role in on-the-ground governance and security in Palestine in the modern era — with the Trump administration stating it would be "calling the shots." It reflects a pragmatic realization that security, governance and reconstruction cannot be separated and that Palestinian lives cannot be indefinitely bypassed without undermining stability itself.

For the Palestinian leadership, opportunity comes with risk. There is a deep trust deficit toward both Democratic and Republican administrations in Washington, shaped by decades in which US policy enabled Palestinian suffering

while reframing a national struggle for freedom as a humanitarian management problem. Yet the US remains the indispensable arena for tangible gains, given its influence over Israel and its ability to mobilize regional actors. The dilemma is how to engage pragmatically with a transactional Trump administration without reinforcing perceptions of collaboration or further eroding domestic legitimacy.

Indeed, the Palestinian legitimacy crisis is structural. Since the Oslo Accords were signed in the 1990s, the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization have been trapped between acting as a national liberation movement and functioning as a security

partner to Israel under Israeli occupation. Governance reform is necessary but insufficient; no amount of reform alone will convince Israel or the US to endorse Palestinian statehood.

Re-legitimation requires political renewal. National elections are essential but must take place under a structure that Palestinians view as legitimate — which we do not have right now. Most Palestinians, especially the majority aged under 35, have never voted in national elections and remain disconnected from existing political structures. Palestinian municipal elections scheduled for this spring are important, but they cannot substitute for broader renewal.

Yet without a tangible political horizon, Palestinian leaders cannot maintain public buy-in. In this context, harm reduction becomes a necessary — if deeply unsatisfying — objective. Even limited Israeli restraint, such as easing movement restrictions or releasing withheld revenues, could materially improve conditions and preserve the possibility of future progress. A different Israeli government in or after 2026 may not endorse statehood, but it could be less actively obstructive.

The path forward is fragile and uncertain. If Palestinian leaders choose to seize this opening, they should engage Washington pragmatically, with

proposal-driven diplomacy adapted to Trump's preference for speed and visible outcomes. This means: advancing credible security frameworks; staged approaches to weapons control linked to civilian gains; and pilot governance arrangements that reconnect interim Gaza mechanisms to national institutions.

None of this guarantees success. But if the US and the Palestinian leadership can work together to create a legitimate, effective and unified Palestinian political body, that body can, in turn, help build regional stability. That would be a win-win, not only for Americans and Palestinians but the entire Middle East.

No sustainable postwar arrangement in Gaza is possible without a credible Palestinian partner and meaningful regional buy-in

Hady Amr previously served as US Special Representative for Palestinian Affairs and as Deputy Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations for Economics and Gaza.

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Palestinian municipal elections scheduled for this spring are important, but they cannot substitute for broader renewal

The demographic battle for East Jerusalem

OSAMA AL-SHARIF



In the decades-long Palestinian struggle for self-determination, one issue towers above the rest: the fate of Arab East Jerusalem, with the Old City at its heart.

Israel swiftly annexed East Jerusalem following the 1967 occupation, declaring it the unified, eternal capital of the Jewish people.

Yet annexation failed to resolve Israel's core challenge: demographics. Palestinians formed the vast majority in the Old City and surrounding Arab neighborhoods, with their population within Jerusalem's municipal borders growing from 68,000 in 1967 to about 330,000 by 2016. Today, roughly 350,000 Muslims and 11,241 Christians comprise East Jerusalem's Palestinian population.

This Arab majority posed a crucial question for Israeli policymakers: How to alter the demographic balance in East Jerusalem? In the post-Oslo period, under Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert, Israel floated scenarios granting

Palestinians limited sovereignty over parts of the city. Palestinians rejected these offers and no such proposals have resurfaced since.

Israel's current far-right government has abandoned compromise, intensifying earlier strategies. It severs territorial links between East Jerusalem and the West Bank through settlement expansion while deploying planning, legal and economic pressures aimed at forcing Palestinians out and establishing a Jewish majority.

This demographic struggle unfolds through economic pressures, the denial of building permits, home demolitions, residency revocations and security measures. Since 1967, more than 14,000 East Jerusalem Palestinians have lost residency rights. Confined to just 13 percent of municipal land, with 87 percent reserved for Israeli development, Palestinians often build without permits to accommodate natural population growth — resulting in demolition orders for an

estimated 15,000 to 20,000 units in Palestinian areas by 2004 alone.

Settlement construction intensifies these pressures, expropriating land to isolate East Jerusalem from the West Bank. Two plans exemplify this approach: the confiscation of hundreds of dunums from the Qalandiya airport area for Jewish settlements, severing Ramallah's connection to the city, and plans to demolish thousands of homes in Silwan — adjacent to Al-Aqsa Mosque and home to more than 30,000 Palestinians — to build what proponents call the "City of David." Thousands in Silwan face eviction.

Official Israeli planning documents have reportedly targeted a 70:30 Jewish-Arab ratio, requiring the displacement of substantial Palestinian populations through sustained pressure. Critics argue such forced displacement violates international law.

With East Jerusalem's demographics

remaining contested, Israel's far-right Cabinet has prioritized West Bank settlement expansion alongside the city's "Judaization."

The far-right Cabinet has prioritized West Bank settlement expansion alongside the city's "Judaization"

International consensus holds that a viable Palestinian state requires East Jerusalem as its capital. Israeli leaders who reject Palestinian sovereignty over the city prioritize on-the-ground demographic changes over international recognition of Palestinian statehood. Palestinians remain the primary obstacle to these plans — but the pressure intensifies daily.

The reality is stark: Israel is advancing toward displacing tens of thousands. The two-state solution appears increasingly distant. East Jerusalem faces what critics describe as demographic engineering, its transformation proceeding largely unchallenged. The heart of Palestinian identity hangs in the balance.

Israel's current far-right government has abandoned compromise, intensifying earlier strategies

Osama Al-Sharif is a journalist and political commentator based in Amman.

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The far-right Cabinet has prioritized West Bank settlement expansion alongside the city's "Judaization"

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OPINION

EDITORIAL

HK's biotech hub aim advanced by pacts with national agencies

Hong Kong has taken an important step towards turning itself into an international biotechnology hub with the signing of two landmark agreements with national health authorities. The pacts deepen collaboration on traditional Chinese medicine and cancer research, and mark the official launch, side by side at Tseung Kwan O, of the Chinese Medicine Hospital and the permanent home of the Government Chinese Medicine Testing Institute, which opened last month.

Their significance was underlined by the presence of the country's top health official, National Health Commission head Lei Haichao, who called on the city to serve as a pillar of promotion of traditional Chinese medicine. "Hong Kong should leverage its technical strength in Chinese medicine testing and quality control," he said, while also urging the development of Chinese-Western treatments.

There is no question about demand for the hospital's services. Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said the hospital had been so popular with the public it had already increased its service quota three times. That is just the beginning. Lei also said the hospital positioned Hong Kong as a talent hub for Chinese medicine and helped deepen regional cooperation. He added that the hospital's opening "is a catalyst to establish a Chinese medicine medical consortium and cluster in the Greater Bay Area" and "should also provide workstations for Chinese medicine masters to attract experts from all over the world".

What set this week's ceremony apart were developments to further the hub status of the Chinese Medicine Hospital and testing institution – the signing of contracts to boost collaboration on both Chinese medicine and cancer research. The city's Health Bureau and the National Cancer Centre signed up to deepen collaboration in basic cancer research, screening, early diagnosis, standardisation of diagnosis and treatment, and public education. That will come to be seen as a landmark in Hong Kong's transformation into a biotech hub. Far from being a supplementary treatment, Chinese medicine is increasingly being seen as targeted and less intrusive.

With the signing of these agreements there is potential for collaboration, aided by artificial intelligence, for the more precise diagnosis and targeting of treatment. Already, AI has played a role in this regard on the mainland. Thanks to greater awareness and technological and medical advances, cancer is becoming more curable. Further advances in prevention and cure will depend on comprehensive collaboration across the board with mainland professionals. Hong Kong can play an important role in developing more effective and less intrusive treatments.

Scam victims need mental health support

The damage caused by scammers has long been measured in financial terms. Around HK\$14 million was lost to internet fraud in the first week of this year alone. However, an alarming new study indicates that Hong Kong must widen its response to address the mental welfare of scam victims.

Nearly a third of the victims who sought counselling through crisis hotlines last year had possible suicidal tendencies, the Caritas Family Crisis Support Centre said on Sunday.

The welfare group studied calls to its hotline service in 2025 and found 31 per cent of the 3,983 debt-related cases handled involved individuals at risk of suicide and in need of crisis intervention.

Sally Choi Wing-size, senior social work supervisor at the Caritas Family Crisis Line and Education Centre, said callers usually were under extreme stress coping with scams and related debt. Some were at higher risk of suicide, according to the support centre.

Recorded signs of suicidality among callers included changes in eating and sleeping habits and feeling like a burden to others. Many victims felt "shame and guilt" and a sense of "sudden loss" and "hopelessness".

The distress is understandable among victims, many of whom faced psychological manipulation by scammers. Already traumatised by a loss of money and trust, they might even be blamed by family and friends for falling into the hands of scammers. By the time they call for help, many victims are at a breaking point.

Authorities and industry players deserve praise for their efforts. A police "Scameter" app and new bank methods to freeze accounts or issue warnings can only help, but prevention and prosecution do little to mitigate the psychological toll of such crimes. An integrated response at the time of a scam report could involve referral pathways to counselling and other support services.

Recovering cash and catching scammers is important, but if the community loses a person, the system has failed. The city must work to create better safety nets for victims as it fights against scams.

Bank accounts can be replenished, but lives lost cannot be regained.

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Policy pivot looms

Michael Han says as property curbs to boost spending hit practical limits, a push to stabilise assets is now seen as a prerequisite for consumer confidence

For years, Beijing attempted to trade flats for microchips, a bold effort to rewire the economy. But 2025 showed that a hi-tech superstructure cannot be built on the crumbling foundation of a middle-class balance sheet. Now, in the opening 2026 issue of *Qiushi*, the Communist Party's most influential journal, a new signal has emerged, indicating that the leadership is prepared to halt the decline.

A key commentary in the journal presents a notable analytical shift. It reaffirms real estate as a foundational industry of the national economy and a primary store of household wealth, while emphasising its characteristics as a financial asset. Beyond acknowledging changes in supply and demand, the article concedes that restoring confidence will be a gradual process. Consequently, it advocates all-out policy implementation, rejecting the piecemeal approaches of the past to stabilise expectations.

This marks a strategic departure from the rhetoric of the past five years. It suggests the policy pendulum, which had swung decisively towards cost containment, is recalibrating towards asset stability.

To understand this shift, one must recognise the two rival schools of thought that have shaped Chinese macroeconomic policy.

The asset school treats real estate as the economy's primary credit multiplier. In this view, rising valuations create a wealth effect for families and a high-octane fiscal engine for local governments. This camp dominated the decade leading up to 2015, particularly after the declaration of property as a pillar industry in 2003.

Conversely, the cost school, which gained the upper hand in 2016, viewed property as a structural impediment to productivity. By advocating the principle that houses are for shelter rather than speculation, it sought to lower labour costs and redirect capital towards innovation. Its logic culminated in the "three

red lines" policy of 2020, which sought to systematically moderate the financial intensity of real estate.

The *Qiushi* article arrives as the cost school experiment faces a moment of empirical reckoning. The hope was that cheaper housing would free up consumer spending. Instead, it triggered a cautious hunkering down as household balance sheets began to shrink.

With property values declining substantially from their 2021 peaks, the negative wealth effect has moved from economic theory to the shop floor. High-end restaurants in Beijing and Shanghai are seeing shorter queues, and Ikea has trimmed its footprint. Starbucks, a near 30-year fixture of the middle class, sold a 60 per cent stake in its China operations to Boyu Capital – a development that suggests even the most resilient consumer brands are adjusting to a leaner reality.

The theory that cheaper houses lead to more spending has encountered a crisis of faith. When around 70 per cent of a family's wealth is tied to their home, a significant price decline feels like a reduction in life choices, not a discount on living. This psychological headwind continues to pose an obstacle to the consumption-led recovery Beijing is pursuing.

This downturn has created a dual challenge for stability, one that hits both the kitchen table and the local treasury.

Local governments are feeling a historic fiscal squeeze. Land sale revenues, which once provided about half of local budgets, have shrivelled to less than a quarter. While the growth in hi-tech manufacturing is impressive, it offers a different kind of tax base. Semiconductors and electric vehicles generate steady revenue over time, but they cannot replace the massive, upfront capital infusions that land auctions once provided.

At the household level, the notable decline in real estate asset values has produced a shortfall that cannot

be offset by income growth alone. For the average citizen, a salary increase would be welcome but seems insignificant amid the depreciation of their principal asset.

The *Qiushi* article represents a significant evolution in the narrative. It implies that curbing property to stimulate consumption has encountered practical limits. Stabilising the asset has now apparently been recognised as the prerequisite for restoring consumer confidence. It is a vital acknowledgement that hi-tech growth and a stable property market are not rivals, but partners. In short, while hi-tech is the engine of the future, property remains the bedrock of the present.

For global investors, the most critical takeaway is the call for decisive and comprehensive action. This suggests an end to the incremental "drip feed" approach that has characterised recent years. Beijing seems to realise that piecemeal measures only encourage the market to wait and see. To restore faith, the next move needs to be a big bang.

Clearly, one article alone does not complete the task. A full consensus at the highest levels of the party may still be in its formative stages. However, this is the first instance in years that a key party organ has published such a focused defence of the property sector's systemic importance.

With export markets facing renewed geopolitical headwinds, Beijing is prioritising a robust internal market as its most reliable anchor. This embrace of asset realism marks a commitment to stabilising the national balance sheet.

The real test comes in March at the "two sessions", China's annual parliamentary meetings. If the theoretical shift in *Qiushi* translates into a high-magnitude stimulus package, 2026 may be remembered as the year the floor finally held. We may not be returning to the era of hyper-growth, but we may well be witnessing the start of a more pragmatic, grounded recovery. The question remains: has the floor finally been laid, or is the foundation itself still being rebuilt?

Michael Han is assistant president and Shanghai general manager at Yuepu Technology Group

Why Russia is gambling on protracted war in Ukraine

Jon Yuan Jiang says despite a stagnating economy and mounting casualties on the battlefield, Moscow believes it can wait out Kyiv and Western resolve

When countries committed to supporting Kyiv met in Paris earlier this month to discuss Ukraine's post-war security, Russia answered with fire. Just days after the summit, Moscow launched a strike that killed civilians and plunged Kyiv into darkness and cold, while also firing its nuclear-capable hypersonic Oreshnik missile towards Ukraine's Lviv region, attacks widely seen as intimidation. The world wants peace. So why does Russia keep firing?

Moscow is playing a different game. US President Donald Trump needs a deal before the US midterm elections, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky needs security guarantees to rebuild a shattered country and Europe wants relief from aid fatigue and energy costs; they're all racing against time. Russia bets that it can outlast them all.

Russia has structural advantages that make this gamble rational. Unlike other major powers, it's barely integrated into the global financial system. Its economy runs on commodities that people need regardless of geopolitical tensions. While sanctions hurt, Russia has increased trade with India and China.

The messier the world gets, the more valuable Russia's disruptive capacity becomes. Prolonged conflict keeps energy prices volatile, distracts Western attention and strains alliances.

Politically, Moscow has time without accountability. Russian President Vladimir Putin faces no real electoral challenge. Meanwhile, Trump needs political victories before voters judge him. European leaders face parliaments questioning endless aid. Russia can

sustain years of grinding conflict, free from the political costs that might cripple other Western leaders. This asymmetry is Russia's core bet: Western impatience will crack before Russian endurance does.

To Moscow, the stakes are existential. A fully Western-oriented Ukraine that could potentially join Nato is seen as striking at the core of Russian security. These aren't manufactured concerns; they're deeply rooted in Russian strategic thinking. If Russia can wait out Western resolve, it preserves not just territorial gains but its entire security architecture.

However, there is an uncomfortable truth that Moscow doesn't advertise: this isn't a game Russia can play indefinitely. The waiting strategy works only if Russia's own structural weaknesses don't catch up first. And they're catching up fast.

Economic headwinds are already building. Growth is projected to slow to around 1 per cent in 2026. Interest rates at 16 per cent – designed to tame inflation – are choking investment. Meanwhile, labour shortages deepen as mobilisation drains the workforce.

Foreign reserves are thinning. Most critically, oil revenues have reportedly fallen by 50 per cent over the past year, hit by sanctions on shadow fleets, enforcement against major firms and shifting trade dynamics. Russia's economy is not on the brink of collapse, but it is no longer built for a prolonged confrontation.

Russia has made gradual advances into Ukrainian territory, reportedly gaining 14.4km last month, but at an enormous human cost. According to a Ukrainian commander, Russia suffered 33,000 casualties in

December alone. The war has exposed persistent weaknesses: logistics failures, industrial bottlenecks and mobilisation strains. Russia's edge isn't superiority; it's a willingness to absorb losses that would break others. However, even that willingness has limits.

Meanwhile, Western support isn't collapsing as Moscow would have hoped. Last month, the European Union approved €90 billion (HK\$17.3 billion) in interest-free loans for the next two years. Countries supporting Ukraine have agreed to a ceasefire-monitoring framework, commitments to a multinational force from willing nations and legally binding security guarantees to deter renewed aggression.

Zelensky says US security guarantees are "essentially ready". Even Trump, frustrated with Putin's delays, greenlit new sanctions while agreeing to security guarantees. Western fatigue is real, but it's producing pragmatic adaptation, not abandonment.

Essentially, Russia's strategy is a high-stakes race: can Moscow outlast Western political will before its own economic and military limits force a reckoning?

Strikes, continued barrages and rejection of peace-keepers aren't signs of unassailable strength. Moscow is gambling on Trump's impatience, European fatigue and Ukrainian desperation. It's a gamble rooted in genuine security fears – expansion of the transatlantic security alliance, buffer zones and existential vulnerability. But it's still a gamble.

As Russia faces mounting internal strain, the West adapts to the strains of supporting Ukraine. What decides the outcome isn't who wants victory more but who will break first.

Dr Jon Yuan Jiang is an analyst who holds a PhD in media and communication from Queensland University of Technology. He is fluent in Chinese, English and Russian

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Japan should put more eggs in the renewables basket

Japan's restarting of the world's biggest nuclear power plant is a bold response to energy insecurity, economic stagnation and climate imperatives. In contrast to intermittent, weather-dependent renewable sources such as wind and solar, nuclear power offers reliable 24/7 electricity – crucial to bolstering Tokyo's industrial competitiveness.

In the face of structural constraints on large-scale renewable deployment, the restart could reduce Japan's reliance on imported coal and liquefied natural gas, which cost about US\$67 billion last year, while helping Tokyo to mitigate geopolitical risks by limiting exposure to external shocks.

Yet nuclear power alone cannot secure Japan's energy future. Renewables must expand faster. Removing approval delays, overcoming land-use challenges and reducing market uncertainties are essential in scaling solar, wind and other proven technologies.

The country's strategic energy plan for 2040 – with an energy mix including renewables at up to 50 per cent and nuclear at 20 per cent – offers policy stability to businesses and promotes decarbonisation.

Tokyo's focus on next-generation technologies like perovskite solar cells and nuclear fusion reflects a desire to reduce dependence on Chinese-made solar panels. China dominates the manufacturing and supply chains of solar panels and wind turbines and is rapidly becoming a nuclear powerhouse, with substantial investments in fusion. But perovskite and fusion remain years from commercial viability.

Nuclear energy can deliver high-capacity, low-carbon baseload power but the financial challenges cannot be ignored. Taking into consideration the construction and lifetime operating costs of nuclear plants, the levelised cost of electricity for advanced nuclear power was estimated at US\$110/MWh in 2023 and is expected to remain unchanged up to 2050.

While next-generation technologies could lay the foundation for Japan's long-term resilience, the country should not lag behind in a critical sector like renewables in the near term.

Azhar Azam, Lahore, Pakistan

City can do better on paper and plastic bottle recycling

The waste statistics for 2024, released last month, show both encouraging progress and pressing challenges in Hong Kong's waste management. The per capita disposal rate fell to 1.4kg per day, the second lowest level in a decade, yet several trends require close scrutiny.

Foremost among these is a surge in paper waste. While the phasing out of single-use plastics led to plastic tableware waste falling by a notable 14.8 per cent to 207 tonnes per day, many businesses appear to have substituted plastics with paper-based alternatives. Consequently, paper waste rose by about 12 per cent to 2,431 tonnes per day and is the second largest category of landfill waste.

The forthcoming EcoPark recycling plant is expected to process much of this locally. However, reports indicate the suppliers' minimum price of HK\$1,200 per tonne is insufficient to sustain the entire used paper supply chain.

The authorities must stabilise the frontline recyclers' price to defend both environmental objectives and the livelihoods of grass-roots workers, including scavengers, and ensure the plant represents a genuine step forward.

Food waste trends are more positive. The daily amount of food disposed in 2024 was 3,001 tonnes, 6 per cent down from 2023. By the end of 2024, about 1,200 smart recycling bins had been installed, collecting around 75,040 tonnes of food waste – nearly three-quarters of the total recycled. Overall, 104,800 tonnes of food waste were recycled.

While public participation is strong, further policy measures are required to maximise the efficiency of existing infrastructure.

Plastic bottles remain a significant concern. The amount disposed rose by 9 per cent to 217 tonnes per day, despite the reverse vending machine pilot scheme. In 2024, Hong Kong used an estimated 1.6 billion plastic bottles, yet only 64.5 million bottles were collected through 120 machines, representing a recycling rate of 4 per cent.

The government is suggesting a rebate of at least 10 cents and aiming for a 30 per cent recycling rate for plastic containers and 10 per cent for cartons.

Singapore's Beverage Container Return Scheme, to be launched this year with 1,000 return points and refunds of 10 Singapore cents (60 HK cents), targets a return rate of 80 per cent by 2029.

Hong Kong should adopt similarly ambitious measures, with refunds between 50 HK cents and HK\$1, to align with the goals of the Waste Blueprint for Hong Kong 2035.

Rico Wong, executive director, The Green Earth



A pile of sorted rubbish in Tsuen Wan. The per capita disposal rate fell to 1.4kg a day in 2024. Photo: Jelly Tse

China's chance to lead

James Borton says the High Seas Treaty will boost Beijing's power and also hold it accountable

On Saturday, a quiet revolution will take place across around two-thirds of the world's oceans. A landmark United Nations agreement known as the High Seas Treaty will formally enter into force, creating the first legally binding global framework to protect marine biodiversity in international waters.

For the first time, activities beyond national jurisdictions – from industrial fishing to deep-sea mining – will be subject to environmental impact assessments, marine protected areas and shared scientific oversight.

Signed by 145 nations and ratified by 81 and counting, the treaty represents one of the fastest and broadest mobilisations of multilateral environmental diplomacy in UN history. It reflects a growing global consensus that the high seas – long treated as an open-access frontier – can no longer remain a regulatory vacuum.

While the treaty is written in the language of conservation, it will have geopolitical consequences, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. China has ratified the agreement and will be bound by its rules. The US, by contrast, remains outside, having signed but not yet secured Senate approval. That divergence gives Beijing a powerful new diplomatic position at a moment when ocean governance is becoming as strategically important as naval power.

This matters because the ocean is no longer just a theatre for warships and trade. It is now the frontier of food security, climate resilience, genetic science and resource extraction. Who defines the rules for that frontier will shape not only environmental outcomes but political legitimacy.

China understands this. It has invested heavily in marine science, satellite monitoring, polar research and ocean engineering. It operates the world's largest distant-water fishing fleet, is a leader in deep-sea submersible technology and plays a role in the International Seabed Authority. Ratifying the High Seas Treaty places China inside the emerging legal architecture governing all of these domains.

Critics will rightly point out the tension. Beijing's construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, its fishing subsidies and its assertive maritime patrols have damaged its environmental reputation in Southeast Asia. Yet international leadership is not built solely on spotless records. It is built on taking part in the rule-making process.

By stepping into the High Seas Treaty, China now helps shape how marine protected areas are designated, how environmental impact standards are applied and how genetic resources from the deep ocean are governed. These rules will influence everything from seabed mining to fisheries management across the Western Pacific.

This is where the treaty becomes strategically important. Southeast Asia depends on healthy oceans for food, tourism and coastal protection. Its nations lack the capacity to monitor distant waters or enforce sustainability standards alone. A binding global framework gives them leverage. China's participation means that Beijing is now committed, at least on paper, to the same conservation rules that its neighbours want applied.

Meanwhile, Washington remains the dominant naval power in the Pacific and a major funder of marine science, but it is not

legally bound by the most important oceanic agreement in a generation. That weakens its ability to claim leadership on ocean governance even as it presses China on maritime conduct.

Environmental diplomacy is becoming a form of soft power. Countries that present themselves as responsible stewards of the global commons gain influence in international forums, trade negotiations and climate talks. China's ratification gives it credibility in these arenas, especially among developing coastal states that see conservation as tied to economic survival.

Ratifying the High Seas Treaty places China inside the emerging legal architecture governing all of these domains

The High Seas Treaty also intersects with a deeper shift in how the ocean is viewed. For centuries, the high seas were treated as a lawless expanse where whoever arrived first could extract the most. That era is ending. Advances in technology now allow humanity to exploit the deep ocean in ways never before possible – from mining polymetallic nodules to harvesting genetic material for pharmaceuticals.

Without rules, this blue economy risks becoming a race to the bottom.

China has a stake in preventing that. Its own investments in ocean science and

sustainable fisheries depend on long-term stability. It has much to lose from collapsing ecosystems, illegal fishing and unregulated extraction. Ratifying the treaty aligns China's environmental interests with its geopolitical ambitions.

None of this erases the disputes in the South China Sea. However, it changes their context. The next phase of maritime competition will not be fought only with ships and lawyers. It will be fought through environmental standards, scientific cooperation and regulatory frameworks.

If China uses its role within the treaty to promote strong protections, transparent data sharing and marine reserves, it will strengthen its claim to global leadership regardless of regional disputes. If it does not, the contradiction between rhetoric and reality will become even more visible.

For Southeast Asia, this new legal landscape offers opportunity. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations can now link their calls for restraint and sustainability to a binding global agreement in which China is a full participant. That subtly shifts the diplomatic balance.

The High Seas Treaty will not solve South China Sea tensions. However, it does something equally important: it changes what responsible power looks like on the ocean. In 2026 and beyond, maritime leadership will be measured not just by fleets and bases, but also by who protects the planet's last great commons.

On that score, China has just positioned itself where it wants to be – at the centre of the rules, not outside them.

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