

Surging gold prices

The question is whether the rally is sustainable

GOLD IS IN the spotlight as a hedge against heightened geopolitical uncertainties and adverse headwinds buffeting the world economy. There are concerns about inflation, interest rate cuts that reduce the appeal of holding government debt, and prospects of a US-China trade war—as a result of which stock markets are on the edge. The rally in gold has seen prices rise by 59% this year, hitting all-time highs of \$4,000-plus per troy ounce. If anything, it has been outmatched by sharper gains of 85% in silver that investors consider a proxy for gold. Gold’s allure is also growing as an avenue for profitable investments as its returns outpace equities and other asset classes. Investors are turning to this precious metal with record inflows of \$26 billion in gold-backed exchange trade funds in July-September. During this quarter, in India, too, inflows into these funds hit highs of \$1.35 billion, taking assets under management to \$10 billion. So far this year, inflows into such funds amounted to \$2.29 billion which are almost double the levels of \$1.28 billion in 2024 as a whole, according to the Association of Mutual Funds in India.

The big question is whether this rally, which has entered bubble territory, is sustainable. No doubt, it has been driven by global investors for fear of missing out on the price momentum but irrational exuberance has its limits. Rather than inexorably rise to \$5,000 a troy ounce, there could be a sharp correction in the months ahead if, say, inflationary conditions abate as happened in the early 1980s or 2011. Gold has an inverse relation to the US dollar and its good run has a lot to do with the weakening currency unit. All of this could change if the dollar strengthens with prospects of lower inflation and stronger US economic growth. But a more potent factor for a correction is if central banks, especially in developing countries, that have bought more than 1,000 tonnes of gold annually for the last three years decide to sell it. But there are no indications that this is likely to happen. If anything, the Reserve Bank of India—whose stocks of gold amount to 879 tonnes—has experienced favourable valuation effects. With soaring prices, the share of gold in foreign exchange reserves has risen to highs of 14%.

Whether the surging prices will dampen the insatiable appetite of Indians for this precious metal remains to be seen. India is no ordinary country as far as gold is concerned, as it is the world’s second-largest consumer after China. In the ongoing festive season, elevated prices may have taken the shine off jewellery purchases—with fixed budget buyers reportedly preferring lower-carat and lighter pieces—but investment demand is intact for pure gold in the form of coins and bars.

Indian households’ gold reserves stand at 25,000 tonnes, which contrasts with the 29,998 tonnes accumulated by global central banks, excluding the US Federal Reserve, according to the World Gold Council. With soaring gold prices, Indians are also taking out loans with this precious metal as collateral. Although the proximate factors behind our affinity for gold are imperfectly understood, there is no doubt that it has always been a long-standing safe haven in times of trouble although there are doubts as to how long prices will defy gravity.

THE 16TH FINANCE Commission (FC) begins its work at a defining moment for India’s federal compact. The economy now stands at roughly \$4 trillion, with states accounting for over 55% of total public expenditure, up sharply from less than half a decade ago. India’s fiscal structure has shifted the Union remains the architect of macro strategy, but states are now the primary executors of growth.

The FC’s role extends far beyond fiscal arithmetic. It must strike a constitutional balance between equity and efficiency, growth and justice, redistribution, and performance. With India targeting a \$10-trillion GDP within the decade, the principles of devolution must evolve to serve the India of today.

The 15th FC’s tenure coincided with a period of intense flux—pandemic shocks, global inflation, and strong tax buoyancy. Between FY21 and FY26 (E), gross tax collections reached ₹193.8 lakh crore, exceeding projections by 26%, while devolutions to states rose to ₹62.8 lakh crore, around 24% higher than anticipated. This surge reflected a resilient recovery and broader tax base. Yet, even as revenues have strengthened, the Union’s share of public spending has fallen to about 45%, with states leading the charge on infrastructure, health, and welfare.

However, this redistribution of fiscal power has not been matched by a structural rethinking of how resources are shared. The 16th FC faces a dual challenge—to ensure fiscal federalism remains equitable and sustainable, and to design a formula that empowers states to drive competitiveness in a globalised economy.

The tensions in India’s intergovernmental fiscal relations are well known but increasingly acute. Several high-performing states—Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu—argue that their economic weight and tax contributions are under-recognised in the horizontal devolution formula. As such, they face declining per capita transfers despite contributing disproportionately to GDP and

16TH FINANCE COMMISSION

INDIA'S FISCAL FEDERALISM MUST EVOLVE FROM BEING A SYSTEM OF CORRECTION TO ONE OF CO-CREATION

Devolution for \$10-trn decade

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FEDERAL FUNDING

Proposed weightages for divisible pool horizontal allocation in the 16th Finance Commission

Criterion	Weight (%)
Population	75
Ecology	2.5
Tax & fiscal effort	2.5
SDGs (group 1)	12.5
SDGs (group 2)	5.0
Redistributive Mechanism	2.5

Source: Computed by authors in report titled 16th Finance Commission Recommendations: Towards A Future-Ready India

exports. Southern states have long opposed the continued use of outdated population data (1971 and 2011), which effectively penalises their success in population control and governance. The formula also fails to reward fiscal discipline, administrative efficiency, or service innovation, while the growing use of cesses and surcharges—averaging 15% of gross tax revenue—has eroded the divisible pool, constraining states’ fiscal space even as their responsibilities grow.

These factors have deepened perceptions of a north-south divide in India’s fiscal architecture. Yet the true task for the 16th FC is not to reconcile grievances but to modernise India’s fiscal design to reflect an economy that is more complex, digital, and globally integrated. It must interrogate data, not perceptions—for instance, although southern states’ devolution has declined, populous northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have

also seen reductions, while smaller north-eastern states (except Assam) have gained disproportionately.

India needs a forward-looking fiscal design. The framework proposed in our report (www.3one4capital.com/reports) recommends retaining the 41% vertical devolution to maintain stability but refining the horizontal allocation to include new variables such as sustainable development goals-linked development outcomes, fiscal effort, and ecological resilience—aligning state incentives with national goals of sustainability, competitiveness, and inclusion. This would help rationalise outcomes: in the proposed model, most states cluster within a per capita range of ₹8,000-13,000, avoiding the extreme outliers that characterised the 15th FC. High-population, high-contribution states such as Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra would receive allocations more consistent with their economic weight, while smaller states like Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh would see rationalised reductions.

A key innovation lies in restructuring grants. The new model proposes compensatory grants to offset transitional shortfalls so that no state receives less than it did in the final year of the 15th FC; local government grants to strengthen rural development and urban governance; and untied grants that allow states fiscal autonomy to address local priorities without central prescriptions. This recognises that urban India—expected to reach 38% of the population by 2031—is a core driver of growth and must be financed accordingly.

The underlying shift is conceptual: devolution must move from compensatory to enabling, from reactive to for-

ward-looking. States should not merely receive transfers; they must be equipped to generate growth and resilience independently. India’s fiscal federalism must evolve from being a system of correction to one of co-creation, where the Centre and states act as joint architects of growth.

Three reforms are central to this transformation. First, the divisible pool must be protected. The unchecked rise of cesses and surcharges undermines cooperative federalism; introducing transparency and capping them at 10% of gross tax revenue would restore balance. Second, the devolution formula must become performance-sensitive. States that improve fiscal health, strengthen public services, or expand their digital public infrastructure should be rewarded. Third, the formula must internalise climate and demographic asymmetries. Ageing southern states face rising health and pension costs, while younger northern states will require more investment in education and jobs. Recognising these divergent pressures is essential to preserving fairness and sustainability.

The 16th FC must also navigate risks. Continued reliance on non-shareable revenues could widen fiscal imbalances; population-based criteria may trigger political friction ahead of delimitation; and underfunded local bodies could weaken last-mile service delivery, eroding the development dividend of devolution. Managing these tensions will demand both technical precision and political acumen.

Ultimately, the 16th Finance Commission must transcend its traditional five-year remit. It must lay the foundation for a new federal contract that can support India’s transition to a \$10-trillion economy. The challenge is formidable: to sustain equity while rewarding efficiency, to preserve solidarity while promoting success, and to ensure fiscal federalism becomes an engine of growth rather than a point of friction. If the 14th and 15th Commissions consolidated fiscal transparency and autonomy, the 16th must craft a growth-oriented fiscal design that transforms cooperative federalism into a strategic enabler of national competitiveness.

Nike should Just Do It and sell Converse

“**GOT CHUCKS ON** with Saint Laurent” declared Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars in their 2014 hit Uptown Funk. Yves Saint Laurent held its fashion show in Paris a few weeks ago. But where were the Chucks? Likely stuck on a retailer’s discount rack.

Elliott Hill, Nike Inc.’s CEO, revealed a day after the Saint Laurent show that sales at Converse, maker of the Chuck Taylor All Star sneaker, had fallen 28% excluding currency movements in the sports wear giant’s first quarter. Rather than suffer the distraction of trying to put the minor brand on a stronger footing, Hill should sell Converse — or at least be open to offers.

As the heat from Adidas AG’s Samba sneaker fades, consumers are looking for alternatives. Converse tends to go in and out of style. It was hot in the early aughts and so should be getting a lift from the adoption of other fashion favorites from that era, such as skinny jeans and khaki jackets. But so far, consumers don’t seem to be swapping the three stripes of Adidas for the starred ankle logo of Chucks.

Hill is trying to change that. He told analysts when he announced first-quarter earnings that he had installed new management at Converse, and that the Chuck Taylor shoe was in the “early stages of a global market reset.” Nike would take “aggressive actions to better position the brand for profitable growth in the future.” He didn’t specify what that meant, but it likely involves clearing out stale shoes before introducing new ones. Given the task of turning the Nike juggernaut, Converse is a distraction Hill doesn’t need.

The footwear brand is expected to generate revenue of \$1.4 billion this year, according to data compiled by Bloomberg, and could achieve a sales multiple of 1-2 times according to David Swartz, an analyst at Morningstar. Given that Nike bought Converse for just \$305 million back in 2003, it’s unlikely a sale at \$1.4 billion to \$2.8 billion would trigger any writedown.

For a company with expected revenue of almost \$47 billion this year, those sale proceeds won’t move the needle financially for Nike. The real value in offloading Converse would be allowing Hill to focus on his two most pressing tasks: addressing nimble upstarts such as On Holding AG and Deckers Outdoor Corp.’s Hoka in the athletic market, and taking on Adidas in more fashion-forward styles.

Hill would be in good company by disposing of a non-core asset. Last month, VF Corp. agreed to sell its workwear division Dickies to Bluestar Alliance for \$600 million in cash. Earlier this year, Levi Strauss & Co. offloaded Dockers to Authentic Brands Group for as much as \$391 million.

Brand management companies such as Bluestar Alliance, which last year also acquired Off-White from LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE, and Authentic Brands Group LLC, which owns Reebok, would be natural buyers for Converse.

Alternatively, private equity may be interested. After all, 3G Capital agreed to buy Skechers USA Inc. for \$9.4 billion in May. Although that deal was a smart play on an ageing population, Converse is just the right size for a financial buyer flush with cash. They might calculate that freed from the shadow of the Nike brand, Converse would unleash a wave of creativity and turbocharge sales. And by the time private equity needs an exit — typically three to five years — VF might be in a position to buy.

A sale of Converse wouldn’t be risk free. First, tariffs have depressed footwear valuations. Neither Foot Locker Inc., which in May agreed to be bought by Dick’s Sporting Goods Inc., nor Skechers achieved knockout prices. The fact that Converse is underperforming doesn’t help either. Second, there’s a danger that whoever buys Converse turns it into a success — and another competitor to Nike. Authentic Brands has invested heavily in Reebok, and this seems to be paying off, with sales rising to \$5 billion in 2023 from \$1.6 billion in 2020.

But Hill has so much on his plate that a disposal still makes sense. Faced with tariffs, many consumers staying cautious, and a competitor in Adidas CEO Bjorn Gulden, Hill doesn’t have many easy wins. Selling Converse would be one.



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THIS YEAR, COP30 will convene in Belém, marking the first climate summit to be held in the heart of the Amazon. The location is symbolic: the Amazon represents both the urgency of the climate crisis and the potential for transformative solutions. This COP summit in Belém is a reminder that climate action is ultimately about safeguarding life.

Shifting from commitment to implementation

The global climate dialogue is evolving. While past summits have focused on setting targets and making pledges, the emphasis is now shifting toward measurable outcomes. The following key questions are emerging: Which countries or regions are scaling clean technologies affordably? Who is investing in climate resilience? How is biodiversity being preserved alongside economic development?

The effectiveness of climate leadership will increasingly be assessed based on results rather than aspirations.

Technology & need for speed

Clean energy solutions like solar, wind, and battery storage have become more commercially viable and, in many cases, cost-competitive to new builds of conventional energy. In the Global South, these technologies are being rapidly deployed through large-scale infrastructure and decentralised systems like microgrids.

The primary challenge is no longer innovation but acceleration. Rapid scale-up of clean technologies is essential to meet climate goals while supporting economic growth in emerging markets and supporting renewed energy growth in developed markets.

Adapting to a changing climate

Today, energy transition is no longer only about reducing emissions but preparing for a warmer world. Adaptation is becoming a key focus of the climate agenda. Scientific projections suggest global temperatures may exceed 2°C, making resilience planning increasingly urgent.

In many parts of the Global South, adaptation is already underway. Cities are being redesigned to manage extreme weather, agricultural practices are shifting to climate-smart methods, and water infrastructure is being strengthened. These efforts reflect a broader trend toward integrating adaptation into long-term development strategies.

Resilience should be viewed as a long-term investment to survive in a world of increased climate volatility. Robust infrastructure, healthy ecosystems, and adaptive communities can form the foundation for sustainable growth. Greater

emphasis on adaptation will reduce vulnerability and unlock new opportunities in a warming world.

Integrating biodiversity into climate strategy

The Amazon highlights the close connection between climate and biodiversity. As one of the world’s most biodiverse regions, it faces growing pressures from deforestation, habitat degradation, and climate change. Globally, biodiversity loss is accelerating, with implications for food systems, public health, and economic resilience.

Forest ecosystems strengthen nature’s balance—absorbing carbon, regulating rainfall, and protecting communities from floods and extreme heat. Sustaining them means sustaining these vital benefits for generations to come. Ecosystems such as forests, wetlands, and oceans provide essential functions, including carbon sequestration, water regulation, and climate buffering. Protecting these systems should therefore be a key component of effective climate action.

Institutions like the Paulson Institute, through their work detailed in their report, Financing Nature, have demonstrated practical pathways to align conservation

with sustainable development. At COP30, biodiversity must stand alongside energy transition and resilience as a pillar of the core agenda.

For us, this is a moment to take the lead in demonstrating how protecting nature and advancing development can move forward together.

Towards result-oriented agenda

COP30 presents an opportunity to focus on delivery. A result-oriented approach would highlight the following: accelerating scalable clean energy solutions; adaptation strategies that support long-term development; and biodiversity protection efforts that align with economic goals.

Such an approach could help build confidence in climate solutions and encourage more targeted financial support from global institutions. There is a need for global finance to flow at the speed and scale they demand.

This is a call for recognition—that real solutions are already taking shape, and what they need now is finance that moves at their speed and scale. COP30 is our moment to prove it. If we do, COP30 will be remembered not as another pause in progress, but as the turning point—when climate action finally shifted from promises to proof of progress. By emphasising evidence-based progress, COP30 has the potential to mark a shift from aspirational commitments to actionable outcomes.

● Write to us at fletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Don’t let pride overtake partnership

Apropos of “Lessons from Tata-Mistry saga” (*FE*, October 16), the long and dramatic fallout between legacy and leadership reminds us that even the strongest business houses can stumble when pride overtakes partnership. The Ambani brothers’ split in Reliance, the Bajaj family divisions, and the Ranbaxy-Daiichi clash all tell similar stories—of

ambition, ego, and changing visions. The Tata-Mistry episode, beyond its boardroom tension, reflects a deeper struggle between tradition and transformation. Yet, such separations aren’t always failures; they can also mark moments of renewal. Sometimes, breaking away allows individuality to shine and fresh ideas to take shape. In the end, every split carries a lesson—that growth often begins where comfort ends. —A Myilsami, Coimbatore

Modernising food production

Apropos of “Better food, fairer trade” (*FE*, October 16), though our agriculture depends on the vagaries of monsoon, India stands tall in agriculture both in production and productivity. Improving food quality, environment-friendly farming practices, fair pricing, reducing chemical use, and agri trade policy reform with extended national

e-market are the need of the hour for fair agri trade. Augmenting digital application with district agri-cluster creation could help reap the benefits of research and development. The government gives food security to 81 crore people at subsidised prices under the National Food Security Act. Agri trade must support both domestic supply and export priorities. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

AI Heartland

In the global race for artificial intelligence supremacy, India is charting a path unlike any other, one that begins not in glittering metros but in its smaller towns and rural districts. The country's AI revolution is quietly taking shape in places once known more for ancient temples or cotton mills than for code and data.

These communities are becoming the unseen backrooms of the digital age, where thousands of young Indians are training, annotating, and fine-tuning AI systems that will shape the technologies of tomorrow.

This transformation represents far more than a new outsourcing wave. It signals a shift in how India's talent and geography are being reimagined for a digital future. What once required migration to urban hubs can now be achieved from one's hometown, powered by broadband connectivity, cloud infrastructure, and remote work platforms.

Firms operating from semi-urban and rural India are demonstrating that the quality of digital output is not defined by geography, but by discipline, training, and opportunity.

At the heart of this movement is inclusion. For many young Indians, particularly women, the arrival of stable, tech-enabled work has meant their first formal employment, steady income, and a chance to contribute to the digital economy without uprooting their families.

This is a quiet social revolution: one that replaces urban migration with local empowerment and reshapes the rural economy through skill and data rather than land and labour.

This decentralised rise of AI work also hints at a broader lesson - that technology's true power lies not in replacing people, but in redistributing opportunity to where it is needed most.

The global demand for human-labelled data - from speech transcription to image recognition - has placed India in a unique position. Every AI system, no matter how advanced, relies on millions of human decisions to learn nuance, context, and cultural diversity.

In this vast, multilingual country, where accents, idioms, and dialects vary every few kilometres, India offers the world's most natural training ground for inclusive AI. It is here that the future of "human-in-the-loop" intelligence truly belongs.

Meanwhile, global tech giants are deepening their long-term commitments to India's digital ecosystem. The establishment of a major AI data hub and cloud infrastructure centre in Andhra Pradesh is not merely an investment in capacity - it is an acknowledgment of India's central role in shaping global AI operations. Together, the rural workforce and high-end infrastructure form the two halves of a powerful equation: scale and soul.

The challenge now lies in sustaining this momentum. Reliable high-speed internet, data protection standards, and client trust must evolve as fast as the talent itself. If India can bridge these gaps, it will not only remain a preferred hub for AI services but also define how technology coexists with human aspiration. The intelligence of machines, refined in India's towns and villages, could yet carry the human touch that the world's digital future needs most.

Exhaustion leveraged

The Gaza peace declaration signed in Sharm el-Sheikh has the unmistakable air of theatre - grand, emotional, and designed for the cameras. Yet, beneath the pageantry lies the first credible truce in two years of relentless conflict, a deal that may finally give both Israelis and Palestinians a brief pause from grief. Whether it can evolve into something more enduring depends on what follows once the spotlight dims.

The images were meant to linger. The American President, smiling broadly at every cue, flanked by regional leaders, promising a "golden age for the Middle East." The exchange of hostages and prisoners, the embrace between adversaries, and the talk of "a new and beautiful day" all conveyed a sense of finality.

But history counsels caution. Every West Asia peace summit has begun with handshakes and declarations of hope, only to be undone by the realities of mistrust, politics, and power.

The choreography of diplomacy often conceals its contradictions. Every gesture, every handshake is layered with competing ambitions. In this peace show, symbolism can both inspire and deceive, offering a glimpse of hope even as deeper uncertainties remain unresolved beneath the surface.

This time, the calculation is different. The war in Gaza had reached a point where neither side could claim victory, and the humanitarian toll was intolerable even to Israel's allies.

The American intervention, equal parts personal diplomacy and political instinct, leveraged exhaustion into opportunity. The release of the last living hostages and the freeing of thousands of Palestinian detainees mark tangible gains, however asymmetric. For now, both sides have something to show their people.

But the structure of peace is more complex than the spectacle of peace. The Palestinian Authority's future role in Gaza remains uncertain, and the question of who governs the enclave once rebuilding begins will test the strength of the deal. For Israel, this is as much a domestic reckoning as a diplomatic one. Some in its political establishment believe the truce concedes too much; others see it as a necessary step to restore international legitimacy.

For US President Donald Trump, the Sharm el-Sheikh summit fits neatly into his broader narrative, that dealmaking, not idealism, delivers results. The "board of peace" he proposes to oversee Gaza's reconstruction mirrors his earlier attempts to fuse business logic with diplomacy.

It is an approach that thrives on momentum and personality but can falter when faced with the slow, grinding realities of governance.

Still, symbolism matters. A ceasefire that holds long enough to begin rebuilding could reshape regional dynamics and restore a measure of stability to a conflict that has defied all previous formulas. Yet if the truce collapses under the weight of old grievances and unmet promises, this too will become another fleeting chapter of peace deferred.

For now, the guns are silent, the flags are raised, and the speeches are done. What remains is the harder, quieter work - turning applause into permanence, and theatre into peace.

The Digital Dump

E-waste is not an intractable problem; it is a design and policy problem. Countries that have combined clear legal duties (producer responsibility, hazardous waste control, funding mechanisms and robust enforcement) while facilitating pathways for informal actors stand the best chance of turning obsolete gadgets back into raw materials rather than pollutants. For consumers, the imperative is simple: recycling electronics responsibly isn't just an ethical choice, it's a civic one. The law can push and cajole, but collective action will determine whether our devices' afterlives are circular ~ and clean ~ or toxic and tragic

When a smartphone that once felt essential is tossed into a drawer or a television is replaced for a marginally sharper picture, what follows rarely stays out of sight for long. Electronic waste - or e-waste - is one of the fastest-growing waste streams on the planet, rich in valuable metals and dangerous when mishandled.

The legal frameworks that govern its life after use are patchy and evolving; some nations lean on producer responsibility and take-back systems, others on hazardous-waste controls and fees. The result is a global tangle that challenges regulators, industry and consumers alike.

E-waste is unique because it is both treasure and threat. Devices contain recoverable commodities such as gold, copper and rare earths, but they also harbour lead, mercury, brominated flame retardants and other substances that can contaminate soil, water and air if dismantled or burned in informal settings. Managing this duality has pushed countries to adopt laws addressing collection, recycling, reuse and transboundary movement.

The United States, the United Kingdom and India - three very different legal ecosystems - offer instructive contrasts. Their e-waste management mechanism, including relevant laws highlight that there is no single magic bullet to address an issue that is turning into a universal health hazard, perhaps only secondary to atmospheric pollution.

In the United States there is no single federal "e-waste" statute. Instead, the Resource



Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) of 1976 remains the primary federal law that governs hazardous wastes - and by extension can touch on certain components of e-waste that meet hazardous-waste criteria.

RCRA gives the Environmental Protection Agency authority to regulate hazardous wastes "from cradle to grave," but electronic items that are not classified as hazardous may fall through regulatory gaps. That reality has left significant room for state action and has produced a mosaic of state laws and fees.

California offers a model of more proactive state regulation. The Electronic Waste Recycling Act of 2003 (SB 20) established a Covered Electronic Waste (CEW) recycling programme and an advanced recycling fee applied at retail for many video display devices; the initiative aimed to fund convenient collection and proper recycling across the state and to curb illegal dumping. Over time California's laws have expanded to cover more devices and to refine who - manufacturer, retailer or customer - carries responsibility. California's approach shows how subnational policy innovation can plug gaps left by federal law.

Across the Atlantic, the United Kingdom's legal approach is anchored in the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Regulations. Originating from European Union directives, the UK's WEEE Regulations (2013, as amended) place clear responsibilities on producers - including registration, marking, financing of collection and treatment, and reporting.

The regulations also create a framework for Approved Treatment Facilities and require evidence trails (WEEE evidence) to ensure that collected equipment is properly processed rather than exported illegally or sent to landfill. The WEEE regime is an example of a producer-responsibility model designed to push product stewardship upstream.

India's response has been shaped by both environmental urgency and the need to formalize a sprawling informal recycling sector. The E-Waste (Management) Rules, first notified in 2016 and subsequently amended (including significant amendments and a new 2022 notification), introduced extended producer responsibility (EPR), collection targets, mandatory authorization for dismantlers and recyclers, and measures to document the life cycle of equipment. The rules aim to move more e-waste into regulated channels and to phase out hazardous practices at the grassroots level. Government agencies including the Central Pollution Control Board have followed up with implementation guidance and Standard Operating Procedures for formal recyclers.

Laws alone, however, do not guarantee greener outcomes. In all three jurisdictions, enforcement, consumer behaviour and infrastructure remain limiting factors. In the US, the federal reliance on state initiatives has produced uneven coverage: some states have robust take-back programmes, while others have limited or no systems.

In the UK, compliance and traceability obligations have reduced illegal exports, but challenges remain with cross-border dumping and the economics of recycling low-value items. In India, despite stronger rules and EPR provisions, a large informal sector persists - driven by employment realities and the high value of recovered materials - creating health and environmental risks unless formalized and brought into compliance. Practical fixes require a combination of

policy instruments. Extended producer responsibility - where manufacturers must finance or operate take-back and recycling - is central across successful systems because it realigns incentives toward design for reuse and recyclability.

Financial mechanisms such as California's point-of-sale fees and the UK's producer compliance schemes help fund the logistics. Clear hazardous-waste rules, like RCRA in the U.S., deter unsafe disposal of the most dangerous components. And technology and standardisation - for tracking, certification of treatment facilities, and safer recycling methods - are essential to prevent leakage into informal streams or illicit export.

But the human dimension matters equally. Consumers need accessible, low-friction return options - curbside pick-up, storefront drop-offs or mail-back kits - paired with awareness campaigns. Informal recyclers need pathways into the formal economy: training, protective equipment, accreditation and fair procurement by licensed dismantlers. Governments must invest in enforcement and cross-border cooperation to stop illegal shipments. Industry can help by designing longer-lived, repairable products and by sharing responsibility for take-back logistics. Every link must do its part.

E-waste is not an intractable problem; it is a design and policy problem. Countries that have combined clear legal duties (producer responsibility, hazardous waste control, funding mechanisms and robust enforcement) while facilitating pathways for informal actors stand the best chance of turning obsolete gadgets back into raw materials rather than pollutants.

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Court ruling on tariffs a blow to US administration

As the US Supreme Court prepares to review the legality of the White House's flagship "reciprocal tariff program" next month, the incumbent administration faces mounting troubles both at home and abroad.

A ruling by the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit in late August found that the tariff program exceeded presidential authority under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act - a decision that, despite being temporarily stayed, has cast serious doubt on the administration's trade agenda.

Introduced earlier this year (hailed as "Liberation Day" tariffs), the program has ignited protests across the country and prompted at least 12 US states and many small businesses to file lawsuits against it. The Supreme Court is expected to hear the case in November.

Nevertheless, the ruling delivers a blow to the incumbent administration. Since taking office in January, it has repeatedly expanded the use of executive power

while sidestepping checks and balances, a trend now directly challenged by the judiciary.

On the global front, the unilateral tariffs have been vehemently opposed by major trading partners including China and the European Union.

The "reciprocal" framework has forced most US trade partners to either enter negotiations or face punitive tariffs widely viewed as violating WTO rules. In the face of the US' tariffs and bullying tactics, many affected countries bowed to the administration's demands or turned to the World Trade Organization Dispute Settlement Mechanism for justice, well aware that the US tariffs violate WTO rules. China has stood up to the US' reciprocal tariff policy. Even after three rounds of negotiations between China and the US in Geneva, London and Stockholm, the US couldn't force China into a deal. The Chinese government's

stance on the issue is clear: it demands that the US side provide a fair, open and nondiscriminatory market environment for Chinese enterprises. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that if the US side continued to impose punitive tariffs on Chinese goods, China will take appropriate countermeasures in accordance with the law. While the US Circuit Court ruling has dealt a blow to the administration, leaving it embarrassed before the international community, it also unwittingly lent support to Beijing in the recent fourth round of Sino-US trade negotiations in Madrid.

As a matter of fact, even before the fourth round of Sino-US trade talks, the administration had shown signs of backing down, as it had lost much of its advantage. One notable change was the unusual silence of the US' leaders before the talks - no tweets or public remarks to exert pressure on China ahead of the talks. This shift in attitude reflects a subtle

psychological change, indicating that the White House has realized that exerting pressure through public opinion or adopting a tough stance is ineffective against China, and could even backfire.

Faced with these challenges at home, the White House has one real option, that is, to withdraw the tariffs. Unfortunately, the White House has already shut this door by insisting that the tariff authority has been lawfully exercised to "protect the nation" and safeguard economic security against foreign threats. The US tariffs remain in effect.

The administration has vowed to continue the reciprocal tariff policy and the agreements it has reached with the affected countries, and already moved to appeal the Circuit Court's ruling to the Supreme Court. The final tilt of the US judicial system in this matter remains to be seen. But irrespective of the Supreme Court's ruling, the incumbent administration will certainly be seen as the destroyer of the multilateral trading system.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Unsafe city

Sir, This refers to the report, "SAU student sexually assaulted; Delhi police initiate investigation" (15 October).

A wave of outrage swept through the South Asian University (SAU) campus in Delhi late Monday after a female student was allegedly sexually assaulted. Prior to the incident, the survivor had been receiving emails and messages demanding sexual favours from an anonymous number.

The protesting students alleged institutional failure to ensure students' safety and demanded the resignation of the dean of students, Navanit Jha, and proctor Kapil Sharma. Following counselling by doctors, an FIR was lodged early Tuesday morning.

The caretaker blamed the victim and said she must have gone there because someone she knows very well had called her. The officials tried to hush up the case with



impunity. The incident comes days after an MBBS student was allegedly raped at a hotel in Delhi's Adarsh Nagar. Delhi police reports to the Union home ministry. The police said the hostel staff allegedly asked the woman to change her clothes and take a bath, and assured her that the matter would be handled internally. According to the latest NCRB date released last month, Delhi continues to retain the dubious distinction of being the most unsafe "mega city" for women for the third consecutive year.

Yours, etc., S S Paul,
Nadia, 15 October.

Delivering joy

Sir, Newspaper Vendors' Day is celebrated on 15 October. Newspaper vendors go about their job of bundling newspapers and delivering the copies before dawn while most of the city is in slumber. Although the publication of e-paper is on the rise, the advantages of reading a physical newspaper remain significant.

The strain which we have to undergo while reading a digital paper is not there when you read the hard copy. Moreover, keeping the newspaper in hand and browsing the pages is a good feeling and the paper's smell also brings freshness.

The quantum of news which we read in print is often much greater than we encounter in online copies. Old-timers cannot get rid of the newspaper addiction.

On this day, let's wish the newspaper vendors who set out in the morning, braving rain, heat or winter chill to deliver

newspapers every day.

Yours, etc., S.Sankaranarayanan,
Chennai, 15 October.

Not wrong

Sir, A propos the report "Mamata condemns Durgapur gangrape, orders strict action" (October 13), I am at a loss to understand what wrong Mamata Banerjee has done in advising female hostellers not to venture out late at night. The shocking incident clearly suggests that the private medical college concerned had no restrictions of entry and exit from the college for its students.

Otherwise, how could the victim come out of her college past midnight? To point out this basic lack of security does not mean that Ms Banerjee can be accused of defending "balatkari". The BJP must stop politicising the incident and should advise students to avoid risking their safety.

Yours, etc., Arun Gupta,
Kolkata, 13 October.

Small farmers lead way with natural methods

BHARAT DOGRA

At a time when the need for self-reliant development is being increasingly emphasised in India, small farmers from weaker sections including Dalits and Adivasis have come up with promising initiatives. They have shown how despite all the constraints, food production and yield can increase even on very small farms using natural farming and low-cost methods, an achievement that bodes well for sustainable rural livelihoods, availability of healthy food and protection of the environment, including meeting the challenge of climate change.

Maali Ram's small home and farm have been attracting many local people impressed by what this Bhil (tribal community) farmer has achieved with the help of his wife Dulkibai and other family members. When I recently visited this farm located in Kataron Ka Khera village in Pratapgarh district (Rajasthan), what impressed me most was the high level of creativity and intensity of involvement in his farming. On their small farm of a little over one acre, Maali Ram and Dulkibai have nearly 200 fruit and other trees, including guava, papaya, amla, lemon, jackfruit and chandan (sandalwood). Multi-layered pattern is used for growing over 15 vegetables. Natural farming methods are used in all this as well as grain, legume, oilseed and spice cultivation. Cows, bullocks, goats and poultry are integral parts of the farm and their excreta as well as other waste are used while preparing manure and natural pest repellants. Emphasis is on one activity or resource being

of assistance to some other activity or resource, and of waste being minimized to be used as a resource. A traditional well is just about able to meet the water needs of the farm. Maali Ram's creativity has come into play since he started turning his three-bigha farm into natural farming, one bigha at a time to avoid disruption. Alongside his shift towards natural farming also came multi-layer vegetable cultivation and fruit trees, making him very busy. But this is the kind of work that gives him satisfaction. Many of these changes came due to the active presence in this and nearby villages of Srijan, a voluntary organization involved in supporting sustainable livelihoods that has been a source of help and encouragement for this enthusiastic farmer. However, Maali Ram did not just take what was suggested to him, he also added his own creativity and experimentation.

Maali Ram says that his aim is to follow a path of farming which protects his and his family's health, which protects the health of others and the health of the soil. Following this path gives him happiness and satisfaction, he adds. He expresses delight that his brother who lives close by has now agreed to traverse this same path.

Balchand Ahirwar is a Dalit farmer of Madhya Pradesh who has similarly raised high hopes by combining a highly creative, satisfying livelihood with environment protection. He is happy working on his farm with his wife Guddi and other family members (see photograph) and exploring various creative possibilities. He is able to provide healthy food to his family through the year, apart

from earning cash for other essential expenses. He is able to educate his two sons in city colleges. He is able to help many other farmers in adopting similar natural farming methods and he has been selected as a trainer of natural farming on the basis of his achievements. At the same time, he is careful to avoid wasteful expenditure and stays away from liquor and intoxicants, holding liquor responsible for many problems in villages.

I met Balchand in his village Lidhoratal in Jatara block of Tikamgarh district. A key to the successful farming practiced by Balchand and Guddi is that they have reduced their farming expenses as much as possible. In recent years, expenses relating to chemical fertilizers, pesticides and weedicides have increased very sharply for most farmers. However, Balchand avoids these expenses by making natural fertilizers and pest repellants using local resources.

For natural fertilizer he uses manure and urine from his own cattle, to which he adds some besan (gram powder) and jaggery. For natural pest repellants, he uses leaves having a bitter taste from local trees, mixing these with cow manure and cow urine. While those buying market-purchased chemical inputs have to spend Rs. 6,000 on an acre of land, Balchand has to spend only Rs. 500. An additional Rs. 2,000 per acre is saved on irrigation water as the land using natural fertilizers needs lesser water compared to land using chemical fertilizers. Instead of using expensive tractors on his small farm, Balchand uses a power tiller which is several times cheaper but adequate for his



needs. In addition, he says, he is able to avoid the loss to soil fertility caused by tractors. While reducing his costs Balchand is careful to utilize every inch of his two-acre farm in creative ways. In the two seasons of rabi and kharif, wheat and groundnut are the two main crops. In addition, by using limited farm space wisely Balchand is able to grow a wide diversity of vegetables, legumes, fruits, millets, spices and flowers. We counted up to 44 crops grown within a cycle of one year by him, and there may still be some that we missed. The greatest diversity is in vegetables and a creative multi-layer garden has been created by him, installing bamboo, so that creepers get more support and the more vulnerable plants can grow in the shade of bigger and sturdier ones. Trees which will be yielding fruits soon also provide shade and moisture to soil and micro-organisms living in soil. Plants and trees on bunds add to the greenery as well as to water and soil conservation. When taking me around the field, Balchand dug up soil with his hands to show how many earthworms were at work within the soil to improve the farm. Balchand is

deeply committed to his farming. He says that this commitment and the willingness to put in a lot of caring work are essential for the success of natural farming. He emphasizes that he really enjoys this work. In fact, he is so committed to his work and farm that he has shifted his residence from the main village settlement to the farm.

Balchand has been greatly helped in his efforts by Srijan. Srijan has helped to establish a natural farming center called the Palak Center where Balchand and Guddi make natural fertilizers and pest repellants on a large scale and these can be purchased at a modest price by other farmers who face difficulty in preparing these on their own. Balchand has also been honoured by the district administration and plays a helpful role in natural farming programmes. Farmers like him and Maali Ram are leading the way forward for improved sustainable livelihoods based on a combination of increased production, reduction of costs and protection of the environment.

(The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Protecting Earth for Children, Man over Machine and India's Quest for Sustainable Farming and Healthy Food.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 17 October 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE end of the tennis season finds England modestly hoping, America thoughtfully satisfied and France almost exultant. The French swept the board at Wimbledon, easily won the European section of the Davis Cup competition, disposed of Australia in some fiery games at Forest Hills and so for the first time after twelve years of trying won through to the challenge round. There America held its own, but had many anxious moments, and Borotra who lost to Tilden achieved a magnificent personal triumph. In their meeting Tilden, who has not in the last six years lost any match of importance pulled through by three sets to two and 27 games to 23 ; but there is general agreement among those who saw the game that but for mistakes at a critical juncture Borotra had his colours lowered. Mistakes however have a way of counting. Johnston disposed of Lacoste with comparative ease. Borotra was the wonder of the end of the season. He won two great victories over the Australians, and in his match with Tilden gave the tennis world something to talk of for years. He has inspired other countries with the hope that America will not always be invincible.

News Items

COAL COMMISSION

“MORE MINERS EMPLOYED: OUTPUT LESS”

LONDON, OCT.

THERE was a large attendance at the first public sitting of the Coal Commission at Westminster Hall, which was attended by representatives of the Miners' Federation and the Mining Association.

Mr Ernest Gowers, Permanent Under-Secretary for Mines, stated that the present output of British coal had descended to the level of 20 years ago, but the industry was employing upwards of 250,000, or more, persons. Consumption by Russia, Germany, and Austria was reduced by 46,000,000 tons.

Replying to Mr. Beveridge, Mr. Gowers mentioned that seven men were now employed where previously there were six. He agreed that the pre-war standard of wages could be maintained only by an increased output per head of employees, or a material increase in the price of coal relative to other articles.

He said that he realized that be painted a very gloomy picture.— Reuter's Special Service.

OFFICER SENTENCED

WILD NIGHT DRIVE ENDS IN MANSLAUGHTER CHARGE

LONDON, OCT.

SENTENCE of twelve months in the second division was passed at Berkshire Assizes on Captain Hugh Spooner, polo pony breeder, and formerly of the Indian Cavalry, who was indicted for the manslaughter of a labourer named Charles Rance, who was run down and killed by Spooner's motor-car while cycling to work.

The evidence showed that the defendant was returning from London after a night at the Cabaret Club, and was driving at excessive speed on the wrong side of the road.—Reuter.

RUBBER ESTATES

U.S. FINANCIER'S BIG DEAL IN LIBERIA

NEW YORK, OCT.

Mr. Harvey Firestone, President of the Firestone Tyre Rubber Company, has announced that he has signed an agreement with the Republic of Liberia, by which he has obtained a 99 years' lease of a million acres suitable for rubber-growing, and 2,000 acres of rubber plantation fully matured and bearing rubber.

It has been planned to spend a hundred million dollars for developing the lease; Mr. Firestone adds.— Reuter.

Nepal's Gen Z must be heard, understood

JAMES SHARROK

It is natural to want to analyse the events of September 8-9 in Nepal. Newspapers, online forums, webinar discussions and podcasts have all discussed the meaning of what happened. However, as with the post-earthquake discussions, people's responses tend to follow prior assumptions about how Nepal works. The biggest challenge is not to generate more 'hot takes' but to listen, understand what happened and why, and to question our assumptions about Nepal and Nepali politics, starting from the point of what and who we don't know, instead of what we think we already do.

With some excellent exceptions, most explanations have been predictable and well-worn. One explanation is that this was chaotic and nihilistic violence generated by young, poorly educated and inarticulate smartphone warriors and that it has, for that reason, already failed, and has no lasting or wider meaning. Another, from the Left: As it is not an obviously class-based alliance representing the poor and there are no leaders or party organisations, the movement will fracture and again, not create lasting change. Third, this protest was orchestrated by foreign powers via NGOs, aimed at destabilising Nepal and/or removing KP Oli from his position of Prime Minister. Fourth, the protest was a continuation of the pro-monarchy riots of March 2025.

The first explanation fails to explain the organisation behind the initial protest, including the levels of coordination needed to

produce consistent messaging (young people interviewed on Nepali news channels repeatedly pointed out that it was about corruption, not the social media ban), as well as the huge support for the protesters in wider society.

The Left's explanation implies that we know best what political action entails, but also really struggles to explain the politicisation of urban youth and the role played in the protests by a newer type of NGOs (not oriented around donor-focused 'projectisation'). Predictably, the Left's explanation presumes the truly authentic poor Nepali to be a farmer in "remote" Karnali, not an urban jobless youth who speaks English and repurposes global memes.

The third explanation wildly overstates the importance of Nepal in global affairs, whilst ironically understating the global influence that Nepal does possess (in UN peacekeeping, via the diaspora and, after the protests, young people in faraway countries took inspiration from Nepal).

The fourth explanation doesn't do the basic journalistic homework of typing 'riots, protests' + 'youth' + 'Nepal' into an internet search engine. Riots didn't begin this year: There have been a series of riots and protests in recent years involving young people over access to migration permits, foreign language exams, road traffic accidents and more, most of which were considered marginal to 'Serious Politics'.

Before I impose my own 'hot take,' what deeper assumptions are animating people's op-eds and opinions? The deepest assumption

is, of course, that, even though no one saw this protest coming, we can confidently know what will or should happen next. The next most common assumption is that old political parties are too powerful and too deeply networked across Nepal to be removed from Nepali public life. This assumption, even in the view of many Gen Z-ers, is likely to be true, but it has imprisoned columnists in pouring scorn on any change that dares to think of politics beyond the internal squabbles of the traditional parties. Hot takers also assume that anyone who lives in urban areas and speaks English in Nepal is basically elite.

Another assumption: You need to be articulate to enter politics. Arguably, no one understands this better than the very online Gen Z protesters themselves, many of whom were obviously ill-prepared for sudden public attention. But what kind of articulation is really valued and by whom? Fluency in idioms? Use of big words? The assumption is really asking protesters to play by the known rhetoric of those they oppose.

Finally, there is a weird assumption about social media from some commentators in which the protesters are assumed to be blindly following clickbait and algorithms, rather than critically engaging with each other on social media or using messenger forums and tools like Discord for their own ends. There is a legitimate problem about online misinformation, which several organisations in Nepal are doing fantastic work on, but the assumption here is different - namely that



without online instructions, the young people wouldn't be protesting. The common thread animating all of these takes is that the protesters are puppets of some other actor and can't think or act for themselves.

The only hot take I have is that we still don't know, in my view, much, if anything, about the Gen Z groups. We, outside the movement, still know little about what happened on September 8 and 9, or about the origins of the protest groups, or what happened in protests in areas outside Kathmandu, or how Gen Z groups organised themselves. The myth that Nepal or Kathmandu is a sano sansar was well and truly smashed by a movement and groups that weren't widely known beforehand, didn't meet many foreigners like me, didn't write many op-eds, and, by and large, weren't noted or networked personalities but were clearly incredibly active, political and engaged.

They have told us their problems: They have to support both their parents and themselves, often unsuccessfully; they live in urban

areas and attend private school at a massive cost to their families; they don't get that next chance that all their struggle is for despite being smarter than peers who do; and yet they have to try again and again to make it with no safety net or plan B. But these are not problems many analysts and commentators understand, prioritise, or even take seriously. Everyone has had a struggle period, but not everyone's struggle period is the same.

Some media houses have sought to interview and meet some of the Gen Z protesters, leading to fascinating discussions which, in one 'take', single-handedly refute most of the explanations above. Sometimes newness is overstated, and it is right to maintain a critical eye. But what happened in two days in September does appear to stem from a different and original movement, whose participants deserve a fair hearing and not a repetition of the same old guff.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN.

Crossword | No. 293265

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 9

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

Yesterday's Solution

STAIYICATION LOCK
E E L N A O O
GARLIC TAPEWORM
S L A H K I M
ZERO PEEPING TOW
S I N F O N I A L R
T E E M D N N
K T E V E L O N G A I T E
N E S B U A
H E A R T T H R O B R O A M
R I A E T R M
V A L L E T T I A F R I D A Y
N A A U T U E T
S T A B S C H O L A S T I C

ACROSS

1 Trade in continent (5,7)
10 In seconds, posh wine is protected (7)
11 Farmer, say, succeeded spreading manure (7)
12 Join revolution before the French (6)
13 Some articles say I stalked writer (8)
15 Offal soup's first, then we film sitcom (10)
16 Film villain has nothing on corona (4)
18 Pert, following kiss (4)
20 Narrow escape when bird bites husband and dog runs free (5,3,2)
23 Appreciate fashionable pleat (8)
24 Work from Poet Laureate: four letters, having eight rhymes (6)
26 Most of his meat not on this uncovered grill (7)
27 Cruel chums stripped man naked in pub (7)
28 The gutless star karate chopped raw meat (5,7)
DOWN
2 Cubs cycling through Oregon drug complex (7)
3 Time Telstar broadcast what Hollywood produces? (8)
4 Third eye oddly substantial (4)
5 First to replace middle of song in poet, Owen's sort of rhyme gets help (10)
6 In part, Dubya wrong about country (6)
7 Singer and model paired over a beer (3,4)
8 I see cop baffled before robber returns carrying scrap of gold and silver (6,2,5)
9 Not much in clothes shop - changed into thong (4,2,7)
14 Rod's witchcraft? (10)
17 Suffers hard in test for promotion (8)
19 Incomplete arrest following one northern copper's nightmare (7)
21 Best in The Beatles, once? (7)
22 Right key starts to unlock everything - salvation! (6)
25 Pass is in Virginia (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



EDITORIAL

SPARKS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Every year, as Diwali draws near, the familiar debate resurfaces — the celebration of light versus the cost of pollution. In cities like Delhi, where the festive glow is often overshadowed by a thick blanket of smog, the question of how to celebrate responsibly has become more urgent than ever. This year again, the conversation turns to “green crackers” — India’s scientific compromise between tradition and environmental concern. Developed in 2018 by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) in collaboration with the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), these eco-friendlier fireworks were born out of necessity. The air quality in urban centres had reached alarming levels, particularly during the post-monsoon and winter months when temperature inversion traps pollutants close to the ground. The situation in Delhi was especially dire — Diwali fireworks, stubble burning, and weather conditions combined to turn the air toxic. It was clear that something had to change. Green crackers emerged as an innovation meant to preserve the spirit of celebration while mitigating environmental harm. They were designed to cut emissions by roughly 30 per cent compared to traditional firecrackers. This reduction is achieved by modifying the chemical composition of the explosives — using less toxic raw materials and eliminating harmful substances such as barium nitrate and aluminium, both known to release fine particulate matter and toxic gases.

These new-age crackers are also engineered to emit water vapour or dust suppressants when ignited, helping to control the spread of particulate matter in the air. In laboratory conditions, this technology has shown promise, offering measurable reductions in emissions. Beyond air pollution, another critical improvement has been the reduced noise levels — a feature particularly beneficial to children, senior citizens, and pets. The traditional, deafening explosions that often accompany Diwali festivities contribute to noise pollution and health stress. Green crackers, by contrast, are intended to bring the festival’s brightness without its characteristic blast. The CPCB and the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO) now regulate and certify these green fireworks. Authentic ones are identifiable by a special CPCB logo on their packaging. Three main variants have been approved — SWAS (Safe Water Releaser), STAR (Safe Thermite Cracker), and SAFAL (Safe Minimal Aluminium Cracker) — each designed to reduce emissions through scientific intervention. These acronyms may not yet be household names, but they represent India’s effort to reconcile faith, festivity, and environmental responsibility through indigenous innovation. Yet, the story of green crackers is not one of unqualified success. The biggest misconception surrounding them lies in the name itself. “Green” does not mean “clean.” These are not zero-emission or harmless fireworks; they are merely less damaging than their predecessors. The combustion of any firecracker inevitably produces smoke, carbon monoxide, and fine dust particles that linger in the atmosphere. The improvement, while meaningful, cannot undo the larger ecological cost of mass-scale bursting.

Moreover, implementation remains patchy. Despite clear guidelines, illegal and uncertified crackers often flood the market, especially in smaller towns and outskirts, where monitoring is difficult. Many consumers remain unaware of how to identify genuine green crackers, and some unscrupulous manufacturers mislabel conventional ones. Without robust enforcement, the purpose of regulation is easily defeated. The Supreme Court has attempted to strike a balance. This week, it allowed the use of green crackers in Delhi-NCR under strict conditions — limiting the permissible hours to one hour in the morning and two in the evening on Diwali and the day before. The decision echoes an earlier attempt in 2014–15 when the Court imposed a blanket ban on conventional firecrackers due to the city’s hazardous pollution levels. But regulation alone cannot substitute for awareness. True change depends on how citizens perceive their role in the environment they inhabit. It is tempting to view green crackers as a convenient middle ground — a way to appease both environmentalists and traditionalists. But the larger question persists: can festivals that celebrate the victory of light over darkness truly justify the darkness they bring to the air? Diwali is not just about fireworks; it is about renewal, joy, and illumination. Over time, we have conflated sound and spectacle with spirit. The challenge now is to rediscover the essence of celebration without leaving behind a trail of toxins. The introduction of green crackers represents a step forward, a recognition that science and culture need not be adversaries. But it is only a partial solution. The goal should not be to create a slightly less harmful pollutant but to move toward alternatives that eliminate harm altogether. Community light shows, drone displays, or collective diya-lighting events offer sustainable ways to reclaim the festive glow.

If Diwali is to remain a festival of light, it must adapt to the realities of our age. The smog that cloaks northern India each November is not just the price of winter; it is the cumulative outcome of unchecked indulgence. Each act of restraint, each conscious choice to celebrate responsibly, adds its own flicker of hope. India’s experiment with green crackers has shown that innovation can temper tradition. But the ultimate victory will come when the skies of Diwali sparkle — not with chemical fire, but with clear, breathable air and the shared light of responsibility.

CIVIC SENSE



ANUSREETA DUTTA

THE WRITER IS A COLUMNIST AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY RESEARCHER WITH PRIOR EXPERIENCE AS AN ESG ANALYST

If India wants to breathe during its most cherished festival, it must handle the pollution season as a national emergency rather than a cultural argument. Only then can the Light Festival restore its air

Fighting Pollution, Not Tradition

India doesn’t need another prohibition on fireworks; it needs a permanent, legally empowered Air Quality War Room to coordinate states, act pre-emptively, and protect citizens’ right to breathe

Every year, in late October, Diwali’s spectacular lights begin to flicker against a dreary, grey sky. In the northern plains, the joy of the season is increasingly obscured by a thick blanket of haze that arrives not after the festival but before the diyas are lit. India’s “air emergency” is no longer a post-Diwali tale; it is a prelude. This year, the national capital is already gasping as the Air Quality Index (AQI) reached the “severe” level in the first week of October.

The annual smog crisis is presented as a struggle against firecrackers. However, the truth is far more complicated — and far more uncomfortable. The festival of lights has become an annual litmus test for India’s environmental leadership. Fireworks are only a spark. The true fire is being fueled by legislative inertia, lax enforcement, a fragmented state response, and the absence of any cohesive, national emergency mechanism to address predictable seasonal pollution. Every winter, particularly in North India, dropping temperatures, standstill breezes, and temperature inversions trap pollution closer to the ground. However, unlike unexpected natural disasters, this is not an unpredictable crisis. The causes are well understood: post-harvest stubble burning, unregulated construction dust, vehicular emissions, power plant smoke, industrial pollutants, and household biomass burning.

Satellite data from Delhi-NCR repeatedly reveal that stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana is responsible for 40% of particle pollution during this time period. Another 30-35% is ascribed to urban sources such as transportation, construction, and manufacturing. Crackers contribute to short-term surges, but they are not the main cause. However, each year, policy attention is almost entirely focused on prohibiting or regulating firecrackers, enforcing token “Graded Response Action Plans,” and issuing last-minute public advisories. This performative cycle perpetuates itself, yielding little more than headlines and court rulings. Meanwhile, the smoke becomes thicker.

Banning crackers has become the default political move — simple to proclaim, difficult to implement, and even less effective in altering the AQI trend. Enforcement on the ground is spotty, local policing is stretched thin, and illegal transactions continue unabated. More importantly, it undermines accountability. Governments avoid structural reforms in agriculture, construction regulation, transportation planning, and interstate coordination by portraying fireworks as the major villain. The pollution story is limited to a few days of cultural debate rather than a long-term environmental strategy. However, Diwali



Every year, we outlaw firecrackers but not apathy. Until India fights its pollution season like a national emergency, the air will only grow thicker

is not the cause of India’s pollution crisis. It has become the most visible mirror. Each state operates in isolation, frequently pointing fingers at others. Punjab claims that Delhi does not control its automobiles. Delhi blames Punjab for the stubble, while Haryana highlights industrial growth. Uttar Pradesh looks away. This governance fragmentation ensures that each winter is a replay of the previous one.

The Commission for Air Quality Management in the National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas (CAQM) was set up in 2020 to deal with this issue. While it remains essentially toothless, it gives advice instead of orders and suggests steps instead of making them happen. India needs an Air Quality War Room, which is a seasonal command center that makes real-time decisions, makes the state government legally responsible for lowering emissions, and quickly responds to pollution spikes. According to the World Health Organisation, air pollution causes approximately 1.6 million premature deaths in India each year. Data from the Central Pollution Control Board indicates that particulate matter (PM 2.5 and PM 10) levels in Delhi frequently exceed 700 µg/m³ during Diwali week, which is about ten times the acceptable limit. But, more importantly, pollution builds up weeks before Diwali, implying that emergency intervention during the celebration is too little, too late.

This isn’t a cultural issue. It’s a public health emergency. Emergency situations necessitate war-room control rather than dispersed firefighting efforts. The seasonal smog crisis is rooted in agricultural policy failure. Post-harvest paddy residue burning is a sound economic decision for farmers who do not have economical alternatives for clearing fields promptly for the next sowing sea-

son. For years, the state has relied on prohibiting stubble burning and subsidising expensive machinery. Neither strategy has been effective at scale. A more successful technique would be to directly procure or buy crop leftovers, generating economic value through biomass energy or composting.

A farmer paid to collect rather than burn will not refuse. This requires financial commitment, supply chain planning, and real-time implementation, not court rulings. While stubble burning makes news, construction dust and automobile emissions contribute significantly to pollution. India’s construction boom is inadequately controlled; sites frequently lack dust containment, and infractions are rarely punished.

Similarly, the increase in private vehicles, along with insufficient public transportation connectivity, contributes to large exhaust emissions during the holiday season, when urban mobility peaks. Banning crackers does nothing to address this continuous flood of contaminants. What India requires are temporary mobility initiatives, such as dedicated clean transport days, enhanced bus and metro services, and congestion pricing zones during high pollution times. Most Indian cities respond to smog outbreaks with ad hoc measures, such as prohibiting building for a few days, closing schools, and encouraging residents to stay indoors. This is reactive governance. A legally enforceable AQI Trigger Protocol would be a more effective solution. When pollution levels exceed predefined criteria, automated, graded response systems kick in, reducing emissions at the source rather than just encouraging people to wear masks.

This protocol must be supported by enforcement capabilities and punishment systems designed to deter non-compliance. While air quality is making

headlines, public health systems remain dangerously unprepared. Seasonal pollution is associated with increased hospital admissions, yet few communities have respiratory emergency protocols, targeted public advisories, or real-time health monitoring systems. A national approach must integrate health and environmental concerns, including ensuring that hospitals have surge capacity, air filtration devices, and early warning systems for vulnerable populations. India does not require another ban. It requires a centralised, empowered war room for October-December, supported by legal authority and real-time information.

A national clean air policy must be based on an interstate command structure that allows for daily coordination between Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and government agencies, supported by legally binding emission objectives. It should include a crop residue procurement system supported by the national clean air mission pool and linked to biomass energy, as well as temporary clean mobility campaigns, stringent dust control measures, and real-time AQI-triggered protocols with clearly defined duties. Crucially, it must improve health readiness by implementing hospital surge plans, mobile respiratory units, targeted public notifications, and transparent dashboards that track emissions, enforcement, and compliance. This isn’t an unachievable vision. Many countries, including China and portions of the EU, use this method to deal with seasonal smog occurrences. When Beijing was suffering from harmful smog in the early 2010s, the city set up a real-time emergency command center model that included shutting down factories, limiting transportation, stopping construction, and coordinating health advisories. As a result, after ten years, the PM 2.5 level dropped by 40%.

India’s air pollution problem is more complicated because it affects many states, political leaders, and socioeconomic levels. However, a coordinated response mechanism is within grasp. What is lacking is political will. Diwali should not be regarded as the time for coughing fits, hurting eyes, and disguised parties. It should not serve as a metaphor for state failure. The event has long symbolised the triumph of light over darkness. However, it now clearly demonstrates how India’s environmental governance has slipped into a cloud of inertia. A country that aspires to be a climate leader cannot allow its citizens to choke in October. It’s time to stop fighting the wrong battles. Bans on crackers are symbolic. War-room governance is structured.

Views expressed are personal

SILENT LAUREATES



MOUSUMI ROY

THE WRITER WRITES ABOUT POLITICS, MATERIAL CULTURE, AND ECONOMIC HISTORY

A century after Tagore, Indian literature continues to dazzle in a thousand tongues. Yet the Nobel remains distant — not for want of brilliance, but for the world’s unwillingness to look beyond its own lens

The Nobel Disconnect

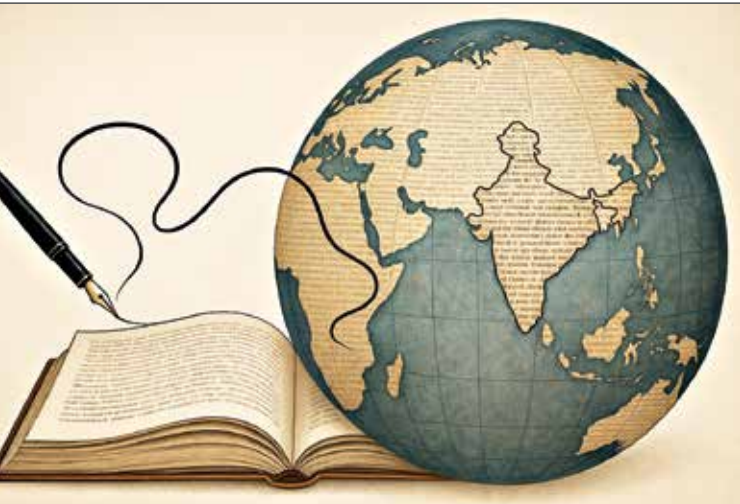
India’s absence from the Nobel roll says less about talent and more about cultural geography, translation politics, and Western literary gatekeeping

When Rabindranath Tagore received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for Gitanjali, he not only became the first Indian but also the first Asian to be recognised by the Swedish Academy. His award symbolised the entry of an Eastern literary voice into the canon of world literature. Yet, more than a century later, India has not produced a second Nobel laureate in literature. This absence invites reflection in a country with hundreds of languages, a vast reading public, and a remarkable literary heritage.

It would be absurd to suggest that India has not produced writers of Nobel calibre since Tagore. On the contrary, the list of prominent Indian authors in English and regional languages is extensive. In just the past few years, Indian writers have twice claimed the International Booker Prize: Geetanjali Shree in 2022 for her Hindi novel Tomb of Sand (translated by Daisy Rockwell), and Banu Mushtaq in 2025 for her short story collection. Figures such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Jhumpa Lahiri have won numerous international awards and are regularly featured on global shortlists. If literary merit alone determined Nobel outcomes, India would have produced multiple laureates by now.

The explanation lies less in the quality of Indian writing than in the geography of recognition. The Nobel Committee has long favoured the Euro-Atlantic literary tradition. Statistically, most laureates have come from France, followed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Even Sweden, home to the prize’s founder, has produced several winners — perhaps an inevitable case of institutional proximity.

By contrast, Africa has produced only five Nobel laureates in literature, two of whom, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, belong to the European literary lin-



From Tagore’s Gitanjali to today’s polyphonic voices, India continues to write its place in the world’s literary imagination

eage rather than the indigenous African one. Asia’s record is marginally better, yet countries with rich literary histories, such as India, China, and Japan, remain far behind the European giants’ representation. The Nobel’s pattern thus reveals an implicit cultural preference: European literary aesthetics, individualism, irony, and existential introspection are often treated as the universal standard, while other literary traditions are viewed through an ethnographic lens rather than a philosophical one.

The Committee’s institutional composition partly explains this imbalance. It remains anchored in a European interpretive framework, more attuned to the stylistic and thematic conventions of the continent’s literature than the narrative modes of Asia, Africa, or Latin America. Works steeped in oral traditions, collective memory, or mythic temporality tend to resist easy translation into the modernist idioms the Committee prizes. Recognition also depends on circula-

tion. While ostensibly celebrating literary achievement, the Nobel Prize also functions as a mechanism of global visibility. Its winners are rarely the most commercially successful authors but rather those considered “writers’ writers” — complex, demanding, and stylistically innovative. The award amplifies rather than discovers such voices.

Indian authors, by contrast, already possess substantial domestic readerships and often command transnational followings across South Asia and the diaspora. Yet their entry into Western literary markets, especially for works written in regional languages, depends on translation. Until recently, few Indian works outside English reached the global literary circuit. The success of Tomb of Sand demonstrates that translation, when done with cultural sensitivity, can bridge this divide. Still, the global market tends to privilege certain narratives: postcolonial trauma, spiritual exoticism, or diasporic displacement frames that fit

comfortably within Western expectations of “Indian literature.”

The Nobel Committee, in turn, rewards such recognisable forms of otherness while neglecting the full diversity of India’s literary modernities — its political satires, linguistic experiments, feminist regional fiction, and Dalit autobiographies that challenge canonical hierarchies. Thus, India’s absence from the Nobel roster reflects not a scarcity of genius but a misalignment between literary value and cultural visibility.

Treating the Nobel Prize as the ultimate arbiter of literary worth is a colonial hangover. The prize reflects not only aesthetic judgment but also geopolitical hierarchy. Yet the growing international recognition of Indian writers in translation suggests a slow erosion of that hierarchy. As more regional voices reach global audiences through digital publication, translation collectives, and small independent presses, the European centre of literary gravity is beginning to shift.

When India eventually produces its second Nobel laureate, it will not be a return to Tagore but a redefinition of what global literature means.

Tagore’s Gitanjali was celebrated for transforming the mystic lyric into a universal idiom. The next laureate’s work, perhaps drawn from the tangled polyphony of India’s linguistic landscape, will likely reflect a different kind of universality: one born not from transcendence but from multiplicity. Until then, India’s writers continue to shape world literature without needing Stockholm’s sanction. The Nobel remains a powerful symbol, but the vitality of Indian letters lies in the living languages of its people in novels that bend syntax, in poems that cross caste, gender, and geography, and in stories that remind us that literature’s greatness is never confined by geography, prize, or translation.

Views expressed are personal



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Redlines for a green Diwali

The onus is on the administration to enforce the court order on firecrackers

The Supreme Court’s order allowing the sale and bursting of so-called green firecrackers in Delhi (and the National Capital Region), during designated days and within specified time windows, signals a conditional relaxation of the blanket ban on firecrackers in the national capital. The onus is now on the Delhi government, which had sought a relaxation of the ban on grounds of “public sentiments”, and the Delhi Police (under the Union government, which too supported the move) to enforce the order not just in letter but in spirit as well. The level of pollutants emitted from these firecrackers is relatively lower than the regular ones, but it is still quite high. Given the scale at which Diwali fireworks take place in the national capital, the air quality index (AQI), which is already registering unhealthy levels of dangerous pollutants, could worsen and trigger health emergencies. Against this backdrop, a strict implementation of the Supreme Court’s order is the only hope for citizens.

That said, the apex court’s directives are likely to test the Delhi administration’s capacities. As per the Court, only green crackers are to be sold, and can be burst only on Diwali and the day before, from 6 am to 7 am and between 8 pm and 10 pm. The blanket ban on firecrackers was in full trust of the Delhi government’s abilities to monitor for compliance and penalise violations. The first test for the administration will be sales. As this newspaper reported, based on a mystery shopping expedition, the markets are flooded with firecrackers that have nothing “green” about them other than their labels. Given the short window for procuring temporary licences for selling green firecrackers and stocking goods, it is anybody’s guess how the administration would regulate the market. If the apex court’s nuanced order is to mean something, the administration has to monitor the market better, deploying more personnel for checks to differentiate between authentic “green” firecrackers and mislabelled ones: Every green label has to be validated, and those that fail the test, removed from the market.

Next, the administration must ensure that the time windows for bursting the firecrackers are strictly adhered to. Given the policing capacity to ensure compliance, this will require the cooperation of citizens. A public campaign about the conditions set by the Court and urging consideration of the effects of pollution on health needs to be carried out. Given that it sought the relaxation, the government has to muster the required political will and show administrative determination to see it through. Diwali is a festival of joy; post-Diwali days should also stay so.

Trump’s Brics angst is of his own making

The Brics grouping, which brings together several key emerging economies, has been the frequent target of the ire of US President Donald Trump, with his latest tirade against the bloc opening a new front in his economically ruinous tariff wars. With India set to assume the presidency of the 10-member grouping shortly, Trump repeated his claim that Brics is “an attack on the dollar” and threatened tariffs on all products from member States coming into the US if the bloc challenged the dollar’s preeminent position as a global currency.

The truth is Brics, which struggled for long to frame a cohesive agenda, has been gaining in salience because of the trade policies of the US, as countries seek alternative supply chains and markets to compensate for the impacts of American tariffs. With important economies such as Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates becoming full members of the grouping, and others such as Malaysia, Nigeria and Thailand becoming partner countries, the building blocks are in place to allow Brics to take on a more meaningful role in a multipolar world. India has maintained that it does not perceive Brics as a grouping intent on “de-dollarisation” but various member States now conduct a sizeable amount of trade settlement in national currencies.

The actions of the US, both on the economic plane and as a security partner that cannot be relied on, are forcing countries around the world to hedge and look towards partnerships with groupings such as Brics. India should focus on framing an agenda for its presidency of Brics that bolsters its position as an emerging power and as a reliable partner for nations of the Global South.

Why some nations achieve prosperity

The work of 2025 Nobel Economics Prize winners offers lessons for India

Every Nobel Prize in Economics tells a story about how we understand prosperity. This year’s winners — Joel Mokyr, Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt — have been honoured for explaining how knowledge powers economic growth and how economies renew themselves through creative destruction. Their research answers an age-old question that has puzzled thinkers from Adam Smith to Amartya Sen: Why do some nations grow while others stagnate? And it offers timely lessons for countries like India with aspirations to rapidly climb the growth ladder.

For centuries, economists have debated: What truly drives economic growth?

Early theories pointed to geography; the claim that tropical climates bred lethargy, disease and poor soil. Others emphasised natural resources, until Japan, almost barren of them, proved the theory wrong after its Meiji Restoration in 1870.

Later, scholars blamed a lack of capital or ignorance of sound policies, giving rise to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and their prescriptions for growth and stability. More recently, the focus shifted to institutions. Last year’s Nobel honoured Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson for showing

how strong, inclusive institutions underpin prosperity. Yet none of these theories offers a fully satisfactory explanation. Geography explains location, not dynamism. Institutions matter, but they do not by themselves generate ideas. This year’s Nobel adds a crucial layer — the cultural and policy foundations that sustain continuous innovation.

Mokyr shows that societies flourish when they prize curiosity and knowledge. Aghion and Howitt explain how those ideas drive productivity through relentless competition and renewal. Together, they reveal not just why growth happens, but why it keeps happening.

For most of human history, economic growth barely existed. A peasant in 1500 lived much like one in 500 BCE. Then, in the mid-18th century, something extraordinary happened: the world’s output and living standards exploded. In *A Culture of Growth* (2016), Mokyr argues that this turning point was not about geography or resources, but about a shift in values. Beginning in 17th century Europe, societies started treating knowledge as a collective good that was to be pursued, shared and applied. A “*Republic of Letters*” emerged, where scientists and inventors corresponded across borders, building upon one another’s discoveries.

Mokyr’s insight is simple but profound: Growth is a cultural achievement. It demands a society that values

learning, tolerates dissent and believes that tomorrow can be made better than today.

If Mokyr explains how knowledge accumulates, Aghion and Howitt explain how it powers economies. Their 1992 model of creative destruction formalised Joseph Schumpeter’s idea that progress depends on churn — new firms and technologies replacing the old.

Innovation, in their world, is both a blessing and a disruption. It raises productivity but displaces jobs and industries. Growth thrives where competition is vigorous and where policy cushions the transition without freezing it.

Their message is bracing: Economies that cling to incumbents in the name of stability often end up stagnant. True stability, paradoxically, comes from continuous renewal.

Emerging Artificial Intelligence (AI) now presents a 21st century test of creative destruction. Like the steam engine or electricity before it, AI promises immense productivity gains but also upheaval. Entire industries may fade while new ones arise.

The lesson from this year’s Nobel is clear: Progress needs both the churn and the compassion to manage it. Societies that resist change or fail to share its benefits will struggle; those that embrace innovation while supporting those disrupted by it will advance.

What do these insights mean for



Duvvuri Subbarao



Growth flourishes where curiosity meets opportunity — in small towns, local enterprises and state universities.

BLOOMBERG

India? The country has the ingredients of dynamism — a young workforce, a growing digital economy and entrepreneurial energy. But it also risks getting caught in partial modernity — innovation at the frontier, inertia at the foundations.

To sustain growth, India must not just produce more, but think better. That requires building a genuine culture of curiosity — in classrooms, laboratories and public life. Education should teach problem-solving, not just test-taking. Bureaucracies must see experimentation not as chaos but as discovery.

India also needs to embrace competition. Too often, policy shelters incumbents — public or private — in the name of stability. As Aghion and Howitt remind us, protecting the old suffocates the new. Transparent competition rules, easier market entry and the courage to let unproductive firms exit are the real engines of progress.

At the same time, India must equip its people for change. Creative destruction is disruptive. The humane response is not to block innovation but to help people adapt. Lifelong learning, retraining and portable safety nets can turn dislocation into opportunity.

Finally, India must broaden innova-

tion beyond big cities. A culture of growth flourishes where curiosity meets opportunity — in small towns, local enterprises and state universities as much as in top end research parks. These are not lofty prescriptions; they are pragmatic steps for a country on the cusp of becoming the world’s third-largest economy.

When Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, he showed how the invisible hand of free markets could lift prosperity. Two centuries later, Gunnar Myrdal’s *The Poverty of Nations* (1976) reminded the world that progress remains uneven. The Nobels of 2024 and 2025 — first to Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson for institutions, then to Mokyr, Aghion and Howitt for innovation and creative destruction — complete that story. Good institutions make progress possible; a culture of ideas and competition turn that possibility into reality. For India, the lesson is clear. Sustained growth will not come from subsidies or slogans, but from nurturing minds that question, firms that compete and systems that allow both to flourish.

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Higher education policy perpetuates a paper mill

The call was from an unknown number and my colleague picked it up by mistake. The person on the other end, instead of hawking property in Noida or Gurgaon, mentioned that she belonged to a research organisation. This piqued my colleague’s curiosity. He was stuck in one of the perennial rush-hour traffic jams in Delhi and so he continued the conversation.

What he found out was astonishing: The person told him that their organisation is in the business of getting one’s research published in Scopus-listed or those listed by the University Grants Commission Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (UGC CARE), for a fee. This was not all; you didn’t need to actually do anything. They would even write the paper for you (of course, for an additional fee) and you could decide on the month when you wanted the paper to be published. When my colleague asked her to send all the details, she messaged him the details of the offer and continued a WhatsApp conversation subsequently with many messages regarding choice of journals, negotiations on fees, etc. This was not a cloak-and-dagger operation. It was all open and brazen.

The organisation had sensed a huge market opportunity, and was making the most of it — courtesy the mandarins who decide our higher education policy.

The first opportunity for such organisations came when the UGC mandated a certain number of research papers for promotion of teachers in colleges and universities. It then came out with a fairly comprehensive list of refereed journals (the UGC CARE list) in which they could be published. This obviously was meant to encourage research among the teachers and improve our ranking in the global pecking order of number of papers published — something that has become a fetish with our planners.

Clearly, the policy makers seemed to be completely ignorant of the conditions under which teachers, especially college teachers work in our country — poor or non-existent infrastructure, poor access to libraries (electronic or otherwise) as well as being overburdened with teaching and administrative work. This is not just the state of affairs in some *moffusil* college — faculty in colleges of

Delhi University face similar issues. Teachers rarely have a decent place to sit (not to speak of laboratories), teach more than 16 hours in a week, grade and have to spend enormous time and energy keeping records and other administrative stuff. With all this, to expect the person to do cutting edge research and publish a number of papers to advance in her career could only have been thought of by a bureaucrat who was oblivious of the educational landscape.

In this state of affairs, it was only natural that some dodgy entrepreneur would step in and provide a useful service. Teachers paid a small fee to get the required number of papers, the organisation facilitating this made money and everyone was happy. What was more, the “research output or papers” would add to the overall number of papers published by Indian researchers, thus making the rankings-obsessed bureaucrats happy. Never mind the quality of the “research”.

This was the state of affairs till the much-awaited National Education Policy (NEP) was introduced. The undergraduate programme now offered students to continue for a fourth year. Colleges are supposed to handle an increase of 25% in student strength with no extra funding for infrastructure or for faculty. When asked about how this will be managed, one of senior functionaries of Delhi University had a bizarre suggestion — the colleges should have their classes till 8.30 pm. Clearly, he was blissfully unaware of the fact that Delhi is almost at the very bottom of the list of cities considered safe for women.

The main emphasis of the fourth year in NEP is research where the students are supposed to carry out original research and either publish their findings in refereed journals or apply for a patent. The objective is clearly a noble one. Unfortunately, the objective conditions are not conducive. First, there is a selection effect for students who have opted for the fourth year. The good students have moved on to do their post graduate degrees and the majority of the students left to undertake this challenging task are precisely those who could not go anywhere. Lack of infrastructure and an over-worked faculty means that the students face an uphill task in doing the envisioned research.

Enter our publishing messiah as a saviour. Research publications (though, thankfully, no patents yet) can be delivered to the students who can then claim to have fulfilled the requirements for an Honours degree with research. And as the UGC has specified, if their performance is good enough, be eligible for a direct PhD.

The NEP has been lauded as the best thing that happened to Indian education. Many respected academics have pointed out several shortcomings in the policy. One would expect that the education policy makers would take heed of these genuine criticisms and do a course correction. Moreover, as they say, the real test comes when the rubber meets the road. Noble intentions and utopian ideals are laudable. Unless attention is paid to the ground realities, the net result would only make a mockery of the stated goals.



Shobhit Mahajan



The emphasis of the fourth year of graduation is research. Students must publish findings in refereed journals.

HT ARCHIVE

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{ S JAISHANKAR } EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER



It is no longer a question of whether women can do peacekeeping. Rather, it is whether peacekeeping can succeed without women

Addressing the conclave of the United Nations Troop Contributing Countries in New Delhi



Securing a happy Diwali for farmers amid climate crisis

The country is getting ready for Diwali with lights illuminating homes, markets bustling with record sales and global e-commerce giants accelerating their Indian appeal. Diwali, the celebration of light over darkness and prosperity over hardship, is a celebration rooted in India’s agrarian heritage. For centuries, Diwali has marked the time when farmers across much of India rejoice in the completion of harvest, offering gratitude to the land, the rain, the cattle, and the deities that bless them with abundance.

India’s cultural calendar has always been synchronised with its agricultural cycles. Diwali coincides with the kharif harvest. Close to 60% of India’s food production is done in this season when paddy, pulses, cotton, sugarcane, and oilseeds are brought home after months of toil. For millions of farmers, the festival symbolises prosperity and economic security. In Gujarat and parts of western India, Diwali also marks the end of the financial year for traders and farmers alike — a fitting symbol of how agriculture, economy, and culture were once inseparable.

The lighting of lamps in villages once symbolised the light of a new agricultural year — the hope of a better season to come. Families prayed for rains, fertility of soil, and above all, fair prices in *mandis*. Diwali, in essence, was a farmer’s festival long before it became a consumerist celebration of wealth and gifting especially in urban India.

This cyclical harmony between festival and harvest is now under strain. The Indian monsoon — the backbone of agriculture — has become increasingly erratic. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the frequency of extreme rainfall events has risen by nearly 75% over the last three decades, while spatial distribution has become more uneven. Delayed monsoons, mid-season droughts, and late floods have altered sowing and harvesting timelines.

The climate crisis is disrupting the cropping and harvesting cycles that culminates in the celebrations. Unpredictable monsoons, delayed sowing, erratic rainfall, and untimely floods or droughts have shifted the timing and success of harvests. In many parts of India, including this year, farmers no longer reap their crops in sync with Diwali. What was once a season of joy and abundance is increasingly becoming one of anxiety and uncertainty and delayed harvest.

A changing climate means that while the festival date remains fixed by the lunar calendar, the harvest no longer does. The soil’s fertility, crop yields, and even the quality of produce have become unpredictable. This disconnect between nature’s rhythm and cultural traditions is not merely symbolic — it reflects the deeper instability of the agrarian economy.

A successful harvest alone no longer guarantees prosperity for farmers. The true Diwali moment for India’s agrarian community comes when the fruits of their labour fetch fair prices in the market. The gap between the harvest and the market — between production and price realisation — determines prosperity and thus its celebrations as Diwali.

Good yields are a means to an end. Even when yields are good, farmers often face distress sales due to low or fluctuating prices, weak storage and processing infrastructure, and market inefficiencies. The absence of timely access to markets or transparent price discovery systems often means that farmers cannot capitalise on their produce. For them, the celebration of wealth that Diwali symbolises remains incomplete until the harvest is matched by fair value.

In an era of changing climate and volatile markets, ensuring farmers’ access to markets, credit, and information has become as important as ensuring a good monsoon. Digital marketplaces, farmer-producer organisations, and better agri-infrastructure can help bridge this gap. Platforms like eNAM and private agri-market apps are already reaching over 17 million farmers, enabling better price discovery and transparency. India’s 10,000-plus FPOs, if well supported, can become the backbone of local agri-markets and rural entrepreneurship allowing farmers to realise the true worth of their produce and experience Diwali not just as a ritual, but as a real festival of prosperity.

So, as India lights its *diyas*, it is worth remembering that Diwali began as a thanksgiving for the land’s bounty. The most meaningful tribute we can offer is to ensure that every farmer’s field glows with opportunity, every harvest finds a fair price, and the abundance of India’s hard-earned food security translates to prosperity.



Purvi Mehta

Purvi Mehta is an agriculture policy specialist. The views expressed are personal



Editor's
TAKE

AF-Pak conflict: Durand Line on fire

The Af-Pak conflict flare-up has exposed unresolved border disputes and enduring mutual distrust – posing a serious threat to regional stability

Afghanistan is again in the news, and as always, not for the right reasons. A low level war, but war nevertheless, is raging on the Durand Line, the demarcation that divides Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was drawn by the colonial masters arbitrarily without taking into considerations the aspirations of the people. Pashtuns were divided by the international border but remained culturally united across the line. All along they have resisted Pakistan's will to segregate them leading to violent protests and armed struggle. As Pakistan went into overdrive by carrying airstrikes, it became an international crisis with widespread ramifications. Though a 48-hour ceasefire between Pakistan and Afghanistan is in place but it is fragile peace. The clashes erupted after Pakistan carried out airstrikes inside Afghan territory – reportedly in Kandahar and Kabul – targeting hideouts of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Afghanistan retaliated by striking Pakistani border posts and capturing some positions.

The roots of this conflict run deep. Right from the very beginning, from Partition onward, Kabul has refused to recognise the Durand Line. Pakistan, in turn, has long harboured anxieties about "Pashtunistan" and fears that Afghan influence could stir discontent in its frontier belt. The Pakistani state has repeatedly accused the Afghan regime of sheltering TTP militants who periodically strike within Pakistan's borders. Pakistan's fears are not ill founded as Pashtun movement has been steadily growing on both sides of Durand line. Pakistan has dealt with Pashtun Tahafuz Movement with brute force. The escalation of hostilities may have been Pakistani airstrikes but the discontent has been simmering in the region for years. Pakistan's designs of gaining "strategic leverage" in Afghanistan has not materialised adding to its frustration. When Taliban took over in 2021, Pakistan intelligence was upbeat that it would neutralise this dilemma but contrary to their expectations, it became even more pronounced. Kabul's embrace of the TTP has resulted in a full blown war.

Though not directly connected to India, this war must not be overlooked, and the response must be measured and well calibrated. New Delhi must not see this conflict through the lens of its rivalry with Pakistan but as a regional flashpoint that can disrupt the whole region. India's interest lies in a stable Afghanistan. Unstable Afghanistan means eventual superpower involvement which does not augur well for India's sphere of influence in the region. Therefore India should engage with the Taliban regime and help bolster Afghanistan's capacity in border management, and counterterrorism. India's recent move to re-open its embassy in Kabul and host the Taliban foreign minister indicates a recalibration of policy. But deeper still, India should work to promote a mechanism that rules out the use of Afghan territory for hostile proxies, supports credible border monitoring, and ensures dialogue between Islamabad and Kabul. A prolonged war in the region is in nobody's interest.

Are we true to our Constitution?

The generation that saw independence witnessed India's transformation from food scarcity to surplus, from 400 million people to 1.4 billion, and from Gandhian simplicity to a politics often driven by privilege and power



JS
RAJPUT

It would be pretty interesting for the millennials, or the Generation Z, to interact with the octogenarians, born subjects of the British Empire, but who were fortunate enough to become citizens of free India, and are still active and alert! They learnt the basics of democracy in universities in the late fifties and early sixties of the last century!

These senior citizens have witnessed the great Indian demographic transition from 400 million to 1,400 million, and all of the natural consequences that followed it. They grew up in an environment full of the fragrance of the values and principles preached and practiced during the unique freedom struggle. They could recall how the Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri had to appeal to the nation to "miss a meal every week", as we were short of food grains!

Today, India feeds a hundred crore more, and is also an exporter of foodgrains! This select group of Indians is also, sadly enough, a witness to the erosion of the proudly treasured Gandhian values and democratic principles. It has quietly observed the emergence of an apolitical class, with varied party affiliations, falling prey to perks, privileges and pelf! To them, democracy is just winning elections, getting a position of power, and then using it unashamedly – exceptions apart – for the accumulation of riches. One of the funniest episodes that says it all is that of a former Chief Minister, who was unseated by the Court within forty-eight hours! When he found the environment congenial – I need not elaborate – he approached the Court that he be declared a 'former Chief Minister'. The plea was, however, rejected. Numerous privileges are now legally available 'for life' to the 'ex-benefactors' of the people, in which all of the ex-CMs are included! These were awarded to themselves by the honourable lawmakers, aka, the elected representatives of the people!

One wonders how Mahatma Gandhi would have reacted to such a state of affairs! Think of an Indian delegation addressing the UN General Assembly on "Gandhian Values in Indian Democracy"! It could be led by veteran politician Sharad Pawar, and could comprise Lalu Prasad Yadav, Arvind Kejriwal, Ajit Pawar, A Raja, Partha Chatterji, Madhu Koda, great inheritors like Akhilesh Yadav, MK Stalin, Kanimozhi, Supriya Sule, Tejasvi Yadav, Misa Bharati, Ajay Chautala, and several others. Imagine their presentations on Peace, Non-Violence, Truth, social cohesion, service of man is the service of God! I am sure some of them would certainly refer to Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Gulzari Lal Nanda, and certainly APJ Abdul Kalam! India's eternal strength is exemplified by the fact that this list still remains long! One is confident that none



The Pioneer SINCE 1865

THERE IS SO MUCH
TO BE LEARNT
FROM THE STUDY
OF THE INDIAN
POLITICAL
SCENARIO DURING
THAT FIVE-YEAR
PERIOD;
IMPOSITION OF
EMERGENCY IN
JUNE 1975, TO THE
RETURN OF INDIRA
GANDHI TO POWER
IN THE JANUARY
OF 1980!

Professor Rajput works in education, social cohesion, and religious amity

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 The Pioneer

of the delegates would make any reference to their own meteoric economic rise, including the Swiss bank accounts, etc. When the elected representatives take the oath of allegiance and secrecy, one could just speculate regarding the stirring within! Often people observe the transition of solemn pledges into sheer hypocrisy!

The voter, who knows his five-yearly adulation, is by now well familiar with how the elected representative would get so busy with the matters of family and friends, preparation for the next elections, and preparing his own son or daughter as his successor, that there would be little time and space for the elector! The elector had indeed exercised his autonomy in 1977, when Indira Gandhi was unseated, and within two years, the anger erupted again against the successor government that failed miserably in coming anywhere near the expectations of its electors. In fact, the return of Indira Gandhi – and Sanjay Gandhi, is indeed a great area of research for future researchers. It is said that the entire planning for the historic return was developed and executed by Sanjay Gandhi, who was the most hated person in 1977! There is so much to be learnt from the study of the Indian political scenario during that five-year period: from the imposition of Emergency in June 1975, to the return of Indira Gandhi to power in January 1980!

The voter was alert and executed his own choice. The only other occasion of that level was the 2014 general election, in which voting was not on party lines, but for a person who had proved that in spite of all possible odds, one who works for the people steals their hearts. One had the gracious privilege of interacting for over six decades with young persons, fellow teachers, researchers, and also educational administrators and policymakers. It is but natural to recall the days of unprecedented adulation and admiration for Pandit Nehru, who was the hero of the young of those days. The Chinese invasion shattered his aura, but there were others in the political arena whose honesty, integrity, commitment and purity in public life were reassuring to one and all. During the 1962 and 1965 attacks on India,

one participated as a volunteer, mostly serving tea and snacks to the soldiers moving in special trains to their assigned destination. The ideological differences amongst the student wings in universities had coalesced into a dedicated national effort. Everyone was supporting the government, no one was asking for any proof on the claims made by the then government.

The demoralisation of 1962 was gloriously replaced by a newly found confidence in 1965 and 1971. Everyone was proud of Indian defence forces, our admired heroes, but everyone was giving total credit to the leadership of Indira Gandhi, and this included her staunch detractors in the political arena. All that stands fully forgotten at this stage. Politicians do play their own games, depending upon being in power, or ousted from it. None need assume the authority to challenge the facts and figures presented to the nation by the Indian Army. It is a serious situation that reveals the presence of negative forces, being in collusion with the stooges of the notorious destabilising forces. Negativity, arising out of a bunch of frustrated politicians, is trying its best to overshadow the rising stature of the Indian nation. And this is not unexpected.

This apprehension was so succinctly foreseen by Dr Rajendra Prasad as the President of the Constituent Assembly in his speech delivered on November 26, 1949: "Whatever the Constitution may or may not provide, the welfare of the country will depend on the way in which the country is administered. That will depend upon the men who administer it. It is a trite saying that a country can have only the Government it deserves. If the people who are elected are capable, and men of character and integrity, they will be able to make the best even of a defective Constitution. If they are lacking in these, the Constitution cannot help the country. After all, a constitution, like a machine, is a lifeless thing. It acquires life because of the men who control it and operate it. India needs today nothing more than a set of honest men who will have the interest of the country before them." India needs awakeners in every section of Indian society.

PIC TALK



An artisan works on an idol of Goddess Kali ahead of Kali Puja, in Nadia
PHOTO: PTI

Inner flame Of Diwali guides peace and joy



RAJYOGI BRAHMA
KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND THE PIONEER OPINION

Every year, as Diwali night arrives, our homes burst into light. Thousands of lamps shimmer on balconies, in courtyards, and on terraces. Families gather with laughter, children run around with sparklers, and sweets flow endlessly from plate to plate. It is indeed a time when hearts feel lighter and the air seems charged with celebration.

But amid all this external brightness, a quiet question arises – is the light within us glowing as brightly as the one outside? That humble clay lamp burning silently on the threshold carries within it the real essence of Diwali. The lamp reminds us that the true beauty of light lies not in its intensity but in its consistency. Just as the flame needs oil to burn, our soul too needs the oil of divine wisdom to stay luminous. Without that nourishment, the glow fades,

and darkness once again finds its place. Traditionally, Diwali marks the triumph of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, and virtue over vice. The various legends connected with the festival – like Shri Ram's return to Ayodhya after 14 years of exile, the emergence of Goddess Lakshmi from the churning of the ocean, Lord Mahavira attaining the nirvana, or the day of Goddess Kali's worship – all point to one underlying truth: Diwali is the festival of inner victory. Today, it has become a social and economic celebration. Cities compete in illumination; markets overflow with luxury goods, and people measure joy in gifts. Yet, loneliness is growing, relationships are weakening, and peace seems missing. Why? Because outer brightness cannot erase inner darkness. Hence, we need to understand that true Diwali begins not when you light the first lamp outside your home, but when you light the first lamp within your heart. That inner flame is kindled through introspection, meditation, forgiveness, and self-purification.

So, this year, as millions of lamps illuminate the world, pause for a moment and ask yourself: Have I lighted the lamp of peace in my own mind? Have I helped someone who lives in the darkness of poverty, loneliness, or despair? Has my celebration brought hope to even one forgotten soul? Instead of spending thousands on fireworks that burst and vanish in seconds, light a lamp of happiness

in someone's heart; it will glow far longer. Visit an old-age home, share a meal with someone hungry, speak kindly to a person who has been ignored, or forgive someone who once hurt you. Each of these acts is a flame that will never die out. When even a single person's heart lights up because of your kindness, your own Diwali becomes divine. For the

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truth is simple: darkness doesn't disappear by fighting it; it disappears when light enters. So this Diwali, cleanse not just your home but also your mind. Remove the cobwebs of ego, jealousy, and anger. Polish the walls of your heart with gratitude

and humility. And then, light that eternal lamp of the soul by connecting to the Supreme Light through meditation. You will feel a radiance that no electric bulb can match. When each soul lights up from within, the world will transform. There will be no envy, no hatred, no sorrow – only peace and purity. Then every home will become a temple, every heart a sacred shrine, and the earth itself will glow like a paradise once again. So, let this Diwali be a festival of enlightenment. Light the lamp of knowledge, burn anger and greed, and spread compassion. When one soul awakens, it inspires thousands. That is how darkness disappears – not through criticism, but through illumination.

The writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist

IS THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT SLOWLY DYING?

When the Right to Information Act came into force in 2005, it ignited hope for a more transparent and accountable India. Citizens believed that simply filing an RTI would ensure truth prevailed over secrecy. But today, that powerful spirit seems to be fading fast.

The decline of RTI is not due to the absence of a law but the lack of will to implement it effectively. Many Government departments delay or deny responses, while information commissions remain understaffed and overburdened with huge backlogs. Whistleblowers and RTI activists face threats without adequate protection, discouraging others from seeking information.

In the age of digital governance, when data should be easily accessible, opacity still prevails. Public interest has also

waned. Fear, frustration, and lack of awareness have turned this empowering right into a mere formality.

RTI was meant to enable citizens to question the system, but silence has replaced curiosity. The time has come to revive that spirit. Awareness drives, stronger penalties for delays, and protection for applicants can restore the Act's power.

After all, democracy flourishes only when its citizens dare to ask questions. Transparency is the lifeblood of democracy; without it, accountability fades. Reviving the RTI spirit means restoring faith in governance and empowering citizens to demand answers once again. Without an active and empowered citizenry, the promise of democracy remains incomplete.

AYUSHMAN PANDEY | LUCKNOW

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

JANG BAHADUR SINGH | JAMSHEDPUR

Strengthen oversight on drug safety

The recent World Health Organisation alert about tainted liquid medicines sold in India exposes grave weaknesses in our drug regulatory system.

A nation that proudly calls itself the "pharmacy of the world" cannot afford such lapses. This is not an isolated case – the 2022 Gambia tragedy, where Indian-made cough syrups caused the deaths of children, remains a painful reminder of negligence. Despite this, outdated laboratories, lax inspections, and delayed recalls persist.

The Drugs and Cosmetics Act exists on paper, but without strict implementation, it is toothless. The consequences are most severe for the poor, who rely heavily on low-cost generics and Government-supplied medicines. Effective regulation demands modern testing infrastructure, consistent inspection, and accountability at every level.

Pharmaceutical companies must also be held responsible for maintaining quality standards. Medicines are meant to heal, not harm, and every failure of oversight costs human lives. India's credibility as a global pharmaceutical hub depends on transparency, ethics, and strong enforcement. We must ensure that no family loses a loved one because of greed or negligence.

NAMRATA D | KARNATAKA

Green crackers still pollute Delhi air

Apropos the news report "SC Green Lights Crackers in Delhi with Riders" (The Pioneer, 16 Oct 2025). Though the Supreme Court has allowed the sale of green firecrackers in Delhi-NCR from October 18 to 20, the Delhi Government's move to reintroduce them undermines years of struggle to improve the Capital's toxic air.

The idea of a "green" cracker is deceptive – these still emit harmful pollutants, even if 30 per cent less than conventional ones. Every winter, Delhi turns into a gas chamber, and any concession worsens an already hazardous Air Quality Index.

Moreover, enforcing the rule is nearly impossible. Experience shows the market floods with counterfeit "eco-friendly" versions, making regulation meaningless. Instead of allowing diluted restrictions, the Government should focus on public awareness and promote eco-conscious celebrations through diyas, lights, and cultural events that do not harm the environment. Protecting public health must take precedence over misplaced notions of festivity.

Delhi deserves clean air, not cosmetic compromises disguised as tradition. The Government must prioritise health over hollow symbolism. True celebration lies in breathing clean air, not burning it.

SANJAY CHOPRA | PUNJAB

ISKP-Lashkar: Pakistan’s new terror matrix

Pakistan’s renewed alliance with ISIS-K signals a dangerous revival of its decades-old jihad strategy — blurring lines between global and regional terror. As Islamabad plays its proxy games once more, the Indian subcontinent face escalating security concerns, ideological dilemma and geopolitical challenges



ABHINAV
NARAYAN



SRIJAN
SHARMA

ISIS's Khorasan Province, a regional branch of Daesh responsible for Central and South Asia, has begun expanding its influence in the region, as the Pakistan-based terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) has formed an alliance with Daesh's Khorasanis. Perhaps after a long period, Pakistan has renewed its terror strategy to develop and strengthen its terror networks, which will have serious impacts not only on India but also on the broader subcontinent.

The Imprints of Pakistan's Global-Regional Jihad

Pakistan has a decades-old strategy of mixing global and regional jihad to sharpen its terror capabilities against India. Pakistan employs a double terror strategy, which is driven by three main factors: first, countering forces on the internal front (TTP and Balochis); second, recalibrating its strategic depth in Afghanistan by countering Taliban leadership; and third, providing a substantial basis for the global jihadist organisations to establish a logistical network, thereby strengthening India-centric jihadist groups. A fourth element involves a degree of plausible deniability, allowing Pakistan to shift blame to global jihadists — an approach where Pakistan acts partially but covertly maintains relations with these groups.

Allowing ISKP to operate in Pakistan will give it an opportunity to further expand its operations by striking at TTPs and Balochis. This will, to some extent, help Pakistan to clean its internal front, which was mired by BLA and TTP woes. The reason that ISKP will go aggressive against TTP and have an upper hand is due to decades of factionalism — ISKP was earlier part of disgruntled TTP members who defected to the more extreme, global Islamic State ideology. According to some reports, ISKP had targeted TTP key leaders in Afghanistan last year.

The Afghanistan strategy is reflected in the 2017 secret agreement between Pakistan and ISKP, where Pakistan agreed not to act against ISKP. In return, ISKP would carry out



APART FROM PROVIDING A BREEDING GROUND FOR THE GLOBAL JIHADIST NETWORK, PAKISTAN'S ISI WORKED ON STRENGTHENING ITS TERROR STRATEGY AGAINST INDIA

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attacks in Afghanistan targeting the Taliban. Recently, ISKP has successfully targeted the Taliban's core, attempting to destabilise its rule in Afghanistan. The assassination of Khalil Haqqani last year by the Islamic State demonstrates its ability to weaken the Taliban's political stability. ISKP also seeks to disrupt the Taliban's global outreach efforts; the bombing of the Russian Embassy in 2022 is a key example of its broader strategy against the Taliban. ver recent years, ISKP has expanded its limited presence beyond Nangarhar and Kunar provinces to include areas in the north and west. Strengthening the Lashkar-ISKP alliance will help ISKP extend its reach and develop its operational capabilities in Afghanistan, using Pakistan as strategic depth to rally against the Taliban, echoing a similar strategy that was used by the Afghan Mujahideen to wage a sustained guerrilla campaign against the Soviets.

Interestingly, Americans would use this as a limited strategic tool to weaken and deter the Taliban, as the US is pressing hard for the Bagram Base.

This limited opportunity will help Pakistan increase counter-terror cooperation with the US and ease the US's over-

sight of its counter-terror operations, much like during Operation Cyclone, when the US supplied weapons and finances to Pakistan's ISI to fight the Soviets. In exchange, the US turned a blind eye to Pakistan's efforts to pursue its own strategic interests in Afghanistan, such as supporting a hardliner Islamist leader like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose militant group was heavily funded by ISI despite Hekmatyar not achieving significant success against the Soviets.

Similarly, Pakistan used the funds of the CIA's Operation Cyclone in building a jihadist network against India and cultivating logistical networks of Al-Qaeda by opening training camps and madrassas for Arab Afghans who took up global Jihad.

Interestingly, the precursor of Al-Qaeda, Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK), or the "Services Bureau", was founded by Osama Bin Laden in Peshawar in 1980, just a year after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In an effort to make a centre of global Jihad, Pakistan further cultivated cross-terror relations with global and regional jihadist organisations, especially Indian-centric ones.

The Proxy Games

Apart from providing a breeding ground for the global jihadist network and supporting them with financial and logistical aid, Pakistan's ISI worked on strengthening its terror strategy against India. Zia's 'bleed India with a thousand cuts' doctrine began to take shape in Kashmir by the mid-1980s. In the 1980s, infiltration and

terror incidents increased. The reason was clear: Pakistan had started to strengthen its Kashmir-centric jihadi proxies by creating a platform through

cultivating their finances, logistics, and operational capabilities. Al-Qaeda perhaps played a major role in establishing a financial and logistical network — Al-Qaeda's South Asia Branch and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's (KSM) network — a key financial and operational network of the outfit operated by its influential and high-profile leader, who is also said to be the principal architect of 9/11, along with covert support from Pakistan's ISI, formed a web of finances and logistics. A report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) explains that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has a history of backing groups like Al-Qaeda.

This network was used to fund and effectively operationalise JeM and LeT. The most notable instance is that in return for a safe operational environment for training and a financial-logistical network, Al-Qaeda provided specialised training and ideological legitimacy to JeM and LeT. The 2002 kidnapping and murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl was allegedly a joint operation involving JeM and Al-Qaeda members.

Pakistan's ISI Covert Action Division has a long history of arranging alliances among global and regional jihadists through two methods: first, ideological negotiations, and second, strategic negotiations, where it exploits opportunities to link a network of jihadists despite ideological differences. Overall, a key aspect of Pakistan's terror strategy is the use of coordinated efforts among global and regional jihad organisations against India. Decades ago, they did this using Al-Qaeda, and now they are doing it with ISIS-KP. However, there is a double-edged sword to this strategy, at least with ISIS-KP. The Daesh are strong hardliners at the ideological level; they will only commit to an alliance till their tactical objectives are met, post which they will pay allegiance to their larger goal — Islamic rule in South Asia, which will dangerously damage Pakistan's own security and ideological calculations, as it once faced with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda post 9/11, and that could lead to a dangerous security situation for the subcontinent.

India's Strategy

At both strategic and tactical security levels, India should be concerned as the convergence of global-regional jihadist networks has become a nightmare for the Indian security landscape, especially from the 1980s to the mid-2000s. India's strategy should be more assertive — moving beyond a minimal functional relationship with the Taliban and using the upcoming visit of the Taliban's foreign minister as a key opportunity.

This will help disrupt Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth in Afghanistan and enable India to expand its influence, thereby increasing its operational reach across the Af-Pak and Central Asian region. While strengthening ties with the Taliban is a necessary option, India must also adopt integrated deterrence and advance network-based operations—including in-depth counter-terrorism strategies in J&K to foil terror plans.

Punjab’s journey from the Indus Valley to modern times



RAMESH
DAVESAR

The Apeiron Legacy of Punjab traces its roots back to the Indus Valley Civilisation. Having passed through numerous epochs, it has finally evolved into its present form — The Punjab. It is fascinating to journey through this rich historical evolution spanning countless eras and generations. Originally known as “Sapta Sindhu” during the Rig Vedic Period (1500-1000 BCE), the term means “the land of seven rivers.” These rivers were the Sindhu, Vitasta (Jhelum), Asikni (Chenab), Parusani (Ravi), Vipasa (Beas), Shatudari (Satluj), and Saraswati. It is believed that during the Later Vedic Period (1000-500 BCE), the Saraswati River — flowing between the Yamuna and Satluj — began to dry up and eventually disappeared. Simultaneously, the Indus River became geographically linked. Consequently, the Sapta Sindhu, now left with five rivers, came to be known as “Panchnaad” (land of five rivers) during the Puraatan Kaal Period (500-300 BCE).

The earliest evidence of a spoken language emerged during the Middle Indio-Aryan Period (600 BCE-1000 CE), known as Prakrit. Over time, through successive refinements, an evolved form called Apabhramsa (“mixed”) developed. Historical records suggest that by the end of the 10th century CE, Apabhramsa gave rise to Hindi, Panchnaad (Punjabi), and various South Asian dialects. Around the 8th-9th centuries CE, the Sharada Script — the mother of many later scripts — was developed. It derived its name from the ancient University and Centre of Learning at Sharda Shakti Peeth (located in Kashmir's Keran sector near the LoC in PoK), which played a pivotal role in its creation and popularisation.

From this base evolved a variety of derivative scripts, one of which was Landā, primarily known as the merchants' script. It was widely used for literary and administrative purposes and was soon adopted by the Panchnaad language. Around the same period, Saint Matsyendranath (Machhindernath) founded the Nath Yogi sect. His disciple, Yogi Gorakhnath, propagated his teachings and spiritual disciplines in the Panchnaad language, further strengthening its cultural roots.

In the 14th century, two landmark developments took place. First, the Sufi poet Amir Khusro, seeking to bridge the linguistic gap between Sanskrit-influenced Hindi and Persian,



created a new hybrid lexicon known as “Zubane-Urdu” (Urdu), written in the Perso-Arabic script. It soon gained widespread acceptance and was referred to as the Shahmukhi Script in northern and north-western regions, eventually becoming the primary script of the Panchnaad language.

The second milestone was marked by Ibn Battuta, the Maghrebi explorer and polymath from Morocco. Between 1325 and 1354, he travelled over 73,000 miles across Asia, Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula. He arrived in India in 1334 and stayed until 1342. During his travels, he is believed to have renamed Panchnaad with the Persian term “Punjab”, as documented in his travelogue Rihla. Consequently, the region's language came to be known as Punjabi.

Concurrently, the Sufi movement, led by Sheikh Farid, flourished in Punjab and was later carried forward by Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Shah Muhammad, Shah Hussain, and Damodar Das Arora (the original author of Heer-Ranjha). Their poetry and philosophy, expressed in Punjabi, deeply enriched the spiritual and cultural fabric of the newly named Punjab.

A monumental chapter followed — the emergence of Sikhism between the 15th and 18th centuries. This era ushered in profound spiritualism, consecration, and social unity among Punjabis. During this time, the Punjabi language acquired its distinct script — Gurmukhi — devised by the Second Sikh Guru, Sri Guru Angad Dev Ji.

During the Mughal era, significant administrative reforms were introduced. Among these, Raja Todar Mal, the financial genius in Emperor Akbar's court, reorganised Punjab into five Doabs (lands between two rivers), naming them after the rivers that bounded each. From east to west: The area between Satluj and Beas was called Bist Doab (Jalandhar-Hoshiarpur).

Between Beas and Ravi lay Bari Doab (Majha, including Amritsar and Lahore).

Between Ravi and Chenab was Rachna Doab (Faisalabad-Sialkot).

Between Chenab and Jhelum lay Chaj Doab (Sargodha-Gujarat).

The westernmost region between Jhelum and the Indus was Sind Sagar Doab (Rawalpindi-Chakwal).

The rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1801-1839) is remembered for his social, political, and egalitarian reforms. The decline of the Sikh Empire followed the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49), culminating in Punjab's annexation by the British in April 1849.

Under British rule, efforts were made to enhance irrigation and agriculture. Until 1875, only one major canal existed - the Bari Doab Canal in the Majha region. Vast fertile lands, known locally as Baar regions, remained uncultivated due to the lack of irrigation. These included the Ganji and Neeli Baar (in Bari Doab) and the Saandal and Kirana Baar (in Rachna and Chaj Doabs).

To stimulate economic development, the British launched a massive canal colonisation project between 1880 and 1940, constructing nine major canals and settling nearly one million people, primarily from the Majha and Bist Doab regions. This system became one of the largest canal networks in the world and laid the foundation for Punjab's later Green Revolution.

Punjab underwent three major partitions: first in 1901, when the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) was carved out; then in 1911, when Delhi became a separate capital territory; and finally, the tragic Partition of 1947, which divided the land into East and West Punjab — a watershed moment that forever changed the course of its history.

Revival of India’s waterways as trade highways



SUNIL
KUMAR SINGH

India's rivers, once central to trade and civilisation, are witnessing a quiet resurgence. Once viewed as a dated concept, moving cargo through inland waterways is now re-emerging as a practical, sustainable, and economically viable solution to the country's modern infrastructure challenges. For centuries, India's rivers connected cities and trade centres. But with the advent of road and rail, that network faded. Now, rising fuel costs, traffic congestion, and growing environmental concerns have prompted a fresh look at this natural alternative. The numbers tell a compelling story. In just over a decade, cargo movement on national waterways has grown from 18.1 million metric tonnes in 2013-14 to 145.84 million metric tonnes in 2024-25. This shift is not just about logistics, it signals a broader economic recalibration. Waterways offer measurable advantages: lower freight costs, higher fuel efficiency, and significantly reduced emissions. For instance, a litre of fuel can move 105 tonne-km by water, compared to just 24 by road. Inland water transport (IWT), therefore, holds strong promise for both the economy and the environment.

IWAI's Expanding Footprint

The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, has played a key role in this transition. Through projects such as the Jal Marg Vikas Project on National Waterway-1, stretches of the Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly are now functional cargo routes. With support from the World Bank, the initiative has led to the creation of major terminals at Varanasi, Sahibganj, and Haldia, along with community jetties and navigational infrastructure. Cargo traffic on NW-1 has tripled in the past decade. Efforts are underway to improve integration with rail and road networks. Terminals at Kalughat, Varanasi, and Sahibganj are being developed as multimodal hubs in collaboration with agencies like NHLM. In the North-East, National Waterway-2 on the Brahmaputra is unlocking new trade possibilities. The Pandu and Jogighopa terminals, tied to key logistics parks and connected via the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol Route, are improving market access for Assam and neighbouring regions. Heavy cargo movement through these channels is already underway. For instance, Numaligarh Refinery's expansion project is leveraging river transport to move oversized equipment that would have posed challenges on road.

Incentivising the Shift

To make this shift commercially attractive, IWAI has launched the Jalvahak Cargo Promotion Scheme, offering up to 35 per cent cost reimbursement on eligible routes. Scheduled cargo services on routes like Kolkata-Varanasi and Kolkata-Pandu are helping demonstrate feasibility.

IWAI has also introduced the Jal Samridhhi Portal to simplify approval processes and encourage private participation in terminal development. So far, 29 entities have registered on the platform.

Encouraging Early Signs

The private sector is beginning to respond. Lower costs, better fuel efficiency, and a lower carbon footprint are proving valuable to businesses pursuing both cost optimisation and ESG goals. Employment generation in river-based logistics, from cargo handling to vessel operations, adds another layer of economic impact.

The partnership with Rhenus Logistics to develop 100 new barges across national waterways is one example of increasing investor interest in the sector.

Addressing the Challenges

Of course, challenges remain. These include depth fluctuations, dredging needs, and vessel availability. IWAI is responding with long-term dredging contracts, vessel upgrades, and digital tools like CAR-D, PANI, and Navic to streamline route planning, tracking, and navigation. Green mobility is also a focus. IWAI has taken early steps towards cleaner vessel technology, including India's first hydrogen fuel cell-powered craft and a growing fleet of hybrid-electric catamarans.

Looking Ahead

India has over 20,000 km of navigable river routes, but only a fraction is fully tapped. With the country's Net-Zero goal for 2070 and growing logistics demands, inland waterways offer a scalable and sustainable solution. The upcoming India Maritime Week 2025 in Mumbai will spotlight this transformation. It will bring together policymakers, investors, and global experts to shape the next phase of India's riverine logistics. The goal is not only to revive the past but to build a greener, more efficient future for India's supply chains. As India reimagines its rivers, from folklore to freight, the inland waterways sector may well be the quiet disruptor in the country's growth story.

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None too soon

The timely arrival of the northeast monsoon bodes well for farmers

The timely arrival of the northeast monsoon, which benefits many parts of the southern peninsula, especially Tamil Nadu and the coastal and Rayalaseema regions of Andhra Pradesh, has brought relief to the region, given its importance from an agricultural as well as a disaster management perspective. Against its normal arrival date of October 20 (plus or minus seven days), the monsoon set in on October 16. The India Meteorological Department has forecast “above normal” rain with more than 112% of the long period average. Going by the data for 1971-2020, the season’s share in the annual rainfall is 48% for Tamil Nadu and over 30% for Andhra Pradesh. The monsoon also witnesses at least three cyclonic disturbances over the Bay of Bengal. There is also the added factor of cloudbursts, which are more frequent now, according to an Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology study. Consequently, coastal States face urban flooding with residents of Chennai living in dread of it, going by their experiences of the past 10 years.

Keeping this in mind, the Tamil Nadu government is putting in place a real-time flood forecasting system for Chennai to calibrate excess water discharge from the reservoirs in and around the city. In addition, the authorities, as in other southern States, are preparing the official machinery to handle any situation. Over the years, the loss of lives has dropped after effective coordination among the agencies concerned. However, there are still many areas in need of more focused attention. The state of stormwater drains and water courses through cities leaves much to be desired, but State governments alone cannot be held responsible for this. That sections of people still use waterbodies as dumping yards only aggravates the problem, highlighting the near absence of community ownership among urban residents. In the farm sector, the shortage of fertilizers, particularly urea, has been bothering agriculturists. About a month ago, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, flagged the issue. Other States which are dependent on rainfall during the southwest monsoon, had also complained of urea shortage. The Union Ministry of Agriculture is reported to have enhanced urea demand for October – it was 36.65 lakh tonnes a year ago. Looking at the macro picture of the monsoon, the message is that as rainfall is expected to be more intense, the authorities at every level have to be vigilant and act in unison so that any adverse impact is reduced, if not eliminated.

New dawn

Peace in West Asia hinges on resolution of the Palestine issue

While addressing the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, U.S. President Donald Trump declared that the ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel, which he had helped broker, marked “the historical dawn of the new Middle East”. In Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, Arab and Muslim leaders joined him in praising his 20-point peace plan. While all sides hailed Mr. Trump’s role as a peacemaker, the declaration of a new era of peace in West Asia, claiming to end a “3,000-year-old” conflict, glosses over deep and enduring complexities. The Gaza ceasefire, which appears to be holding with Hamas and Israel releasing hostages and prisoners, is undoubtedly a relief for Palestinians and hostage families. But the greater challenge lies in implementing the next phase, let alone building “a new Middle East”. A notable outcome of the Sharm el-Sheikh summit was the joint declaration by Egypt, Qatar, Türkiye and the U.S., also calling for the safeguarding of the fundamental rights of Palestinians and Israelis. It recognised the region’s historical and spiritual significance to multiple faiths, and committed signatories to dismantling extremism and radicalisation. But the declaration was silent on more contentious issues – Hamas’s disarmament, one of the central objectives of the Trump plan, or of Israel’s continuing military presence in Gaza.

Mr. Trump later claimed that Hamas had promised to disarm, warning that “If they don’t disarm, we will disarm them..., perhaps violently”. But Israel, despite its two years in Gaza, has still failed to disarm Hamas. How then does Mr. Trump plan to disarm them? He also claimed that the Iran threat had been neutralised, and urged more Arab countries to join the Abraham Accords. While Iran’s regional influence has been denied, it remains an influential regional player. Hezbollah, despite military setbacks, continues to be a powerful socio-political actor within Lebanon, and U.S.-led attempts to disarm the Shia group have gone nowhere. In Yemen, despite relentless Saudi, American, British and Israeli bombing campaigns, the Houthis, another Iranian ally, still control key population centres, including Sana’a. Moreover, Arab countries now have growing security concerns about Israel, particularly after its bombing of Qatar in September. Against this background, Mr. Trump’s sweeping claims of regional peace ring hollow. What he should prioritise instead is ensuring that the Gaza ceasefire holds. The next step should be forcing Hamas to give up power in the enclave while pressing Israel to withdraw. Once peace is consolidated and reconstruction begins, the U.S., with its Arab and European allies, should work towards a practical road map for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Unless the Palestine question is resolved and the Israeli occupation ends, grand declarations about remaking the region will remain little more than empty rhetoric.

A quiet revisionism in constitutional history is being seeded. Some commentators now argue that Sir Benegal Narsing Rau, the Constitutional Adviser to the Constituent Assembly, was the real architect of India’s Constitution, while Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, merely polished an already finished product. This argument may sound academic, but it is not. It represents an attempt to diminish Dalit agency in India’s founding story and to erase the moral force that B.R. Ambedkar brought to the making of the Republic.

Complementary, not competing

Both men were indispensable to the Constitution’s creation, but their roles were entirely different. Sir B.N. Rau, a distinguished civil servant and jurist, was appointed Constitutional Adviser in July 1946. His assignment was technical and preparatory. Rau had in British India, helped in the drafting of the Government of India Act of 1935. Eleven years later, he had to prepare a working draft of the Constitution based on reports of the Constituent Assembly’s committees and his study of other constitutions. He examined the American, Canadian, Irish, Australian and Weimar models, and consulted jurists such as Felix Frankfurter and Harold Laski. In October 1947, he submitted his draft with 243 articles and 13 schedules. Rau’s document provided the Assembly with a starting point. He had no seat in the Constituent Assembly and no political mandate. His authority was scholarly, not representative.

Ambedkar’s task was of a different order. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he had to turn a legal draft into a political covenant. He carried the Constitution through the turbulence of Partition, the murder of the Mahatma and had to defend its provisions, clause by clause, in the Assembly. His responsibility was not only to refine the text but also to build consensus among sharply divided interests. Rau built the framework. Ambedkar made it a living instrument of justice.

Ambedkar never denied Rau’s contribution. In his concluding address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, he said: “The credit that is given to me does not really belong to me. It belongs partly to Sir B.N. Rau, the Constitutional Adviser to the Constituent Assembly who prepared a rough draft of the Constitution for the consideration of the Drafting Committee.”

He also said, “A part of the credit must go to the members of the Drafting Committee who, as I have said, have sat for 141 days... Much greater share of the credit must go to Mr. S.N. Mukherjee,



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The campaign to elevate B.N. Rau and sideline B.R. Ambedkar as the real architect of India’s Constitution is misplaced

A reading of a revisionism in constitutional history

the Chief Draftsman of the Constitution. His ability to put the most intricate proposals in the simplest and clearest legal form can rarely be equalled, nor his capacity for hard work.”

Thus the words which are often used to claim that Rau, not Ambedkar, was the real author of the Constitution in fact, show the opposite. Ambedkar called Rau’s work a “rough draft”, not a finished text. The Drafting Committee and the Assembly turned that raw material into the document that finally came into force in January 1950. Nor does any evidence exist to show that Rau ever claimed to be the Constitution’s author. His correspondence at that time with Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru conveys respect and cooperation. The current effort to crown him as “Father of the Constitution” distorts both the record and Rau’s own modesty.

The political motive

The campaign to elevate Rau and sideline Ambedkar is not driven by scholarship alone. It reflects a discomfort with the idea that a Dalit thinker could stand at the centre of the Republic’s founding moment. Recasting Rau as the Constitution’s principal author is an attempt to reclaim authorship for caste privilege. It tames Ambedkar’s radical legacy and turns a social revolution into a bureaucratic exercise. The Constitution is not a sterile legal document. It is, first and foremost, a social manifesto which promises the dignity of the individual. It was born out of conflict, hope and redemption. It represented the arrival of the oppressed at the table of power. To detach Ambedkar from it is to rob it of its soul.

Ambedkar’s presence in the Constituent Assembly was itself the result of a decisive act of political wisdom. He had originally been elected from Bengal, but after Partition, that seat went to Pakistan. Many within the Congress were hesitant to bring him back because of past disagreements. It was Mahatma Gandhi’s intervention that settled the question.

Though Gandhi and Ambedkar had clashed over separate electorates, Gandhi insisted that Ambedkar must be part of the Assembly. He told Congress leaders that no Constitution could claim legitimacy if the Scheduled Castes were excluded from its making.

As a result, Ambedkar was re-elected from the Bombay Presidency. Gandhi’s insistence was an act of foresight. In 1947, when the nation was fractured by religion, an alienated Dalit leadership could have deepened the divide. By ensuring Ambedkar’s inclusion, Gandhi prevented a crisis that could have weakened the new Republic at its birth. Ambedkar’s subsequent leadership proved that inclusion right. He turned the making of the Constitution into a moral

enterprise that bound the country together.

Rau’s draft provided the order and structure. Ambedkar gave the Constitution its moral depth. The provisions on Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles, and affirmative action bear his imprint. His speeches in the Assembly made the Constitution a living moral philosophy.

Ambedkar warned that political equality would fail without social and economic equality. He said, “How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.” That warning still remains the most powerful moral statement in India’s constitutional history.

The peril of forgetting

Every Republic must guard its memory. The attempt to raise Rau above Ambedkar is part of a larger effort to drain the Constitution of its radical spirit. It presents the founding as a matter of technical competence rather than social transformation. To honour Ambedkar is not to diminish Rau. Both served the Republic faithfully. But the Constitution is more than a legal framework. It is a statement of national purpose. It needed a scholar’s precision, but it also needed a reformer’s conviction. Ambedkar was that reformer.

When the Constitution was adopted, leaders across the political spectrum, including Nehru, Patel and Prasad, publicly acknowledged Ambedkar’s central role. None suggested that Rau was the Constitution’s principal author. They understood the difference between drafting a text and shaping a nation’s conscience.

Rau deserves admiration as a brilliant adviser. Ambedkar deserves reverence as the Constitution’s moral architect. The Constitution was not written in the calm of colonial offices but in the shadow of Partition, the Mahatma’s assassination and caste oppression. To place Ambedkar at its centre was not symbolic generosity but a statement that India’s new order would belong equally to those once excluded.

Ambedkar never claimed sole authorship. Yet, his leadership of the Drafting Committee, his defence of every clause, and his vision of liberty, equality and fraternity have defined the Indian Republic. To diminish his role is to betray the Republic’s founding promise. Rau built the structure; Ambedkar filled it with justice. Sir B.N. Rau deserves gratitude as the constitutional engineer. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar remains the architect and moral founder of modern India. To deny that truth is to deny the Republic.

Ensure safeguards for India’s carbon market



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As India builds its carbon market, the lessons from global failures show why protecting farmers and communities must come first

this to weak farmer engagement, training and follow-up, especially among smallholders and marginalised caste groups.

Carbon markets and the risk of exploitation

Carbon projects are meant to reward communities at the frontlines of climate action. But without safeguards, they risk replicating extractive power structures, echoing the logic of colonial plantations. Rising carbon prices only heighten this risk. The Northern Kenya Rangelands Carbon Project offers a cautionary tale. Launched in 2012, it spanned 1.9 million hectares and sought to remove 50 million tonnes of CO₂ over 30 years. Though framed as community-led, the project has drawn scrutiny for bypassing consent and weakening local land rights, raising critical questions about who truly controls and benefits from carbon projects. The project introduced rotational grazing and rangeland restoration, but cracks soon appeared.

In 2023, Verra suspended credit issuance after advocacy groups highlighted flaws in soil carbon measurement and a lack of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from indigenous communities. Petitioners alleged that the conservancies were created without public consultation, on unregistered community land, and enforced through armed rangers. In 2025, a Kenyan court confirmed that key conservancies had bypassed public participation, prompting a second suspension by Verra. Community conservancies, common across Kenya, are locally managed bodies meant to promote sustainability and protect livelihoods through elected governance. In principle, they embody decentralised, community-driven resource management. Critics argue that the project’s top-down grazing restrictions and opaque governance structures mirror colonial-era resource control, infringing on pastoralist land rights and underscoring the urgent need for community-led, decolonised carbon initiatives.

Similarly, the Lake Turkana Wind Power project (Kenya) fenced 1,50,000 acres of community rangeland, cutting off herders from grazing routes and water; it raised the question of

whether sustainability is advancing at the expense of the vulnerable.

India could face similar risks. Carbon projects in afforestation, reforestation and agriculture often extend into areas with customary land use. Plantations on village commons or forest fringes could disrupt access to grazing, fuelwood and forest produce without community consent. Agricultural projects have already shown signs of bypassing marginalised caste farmers while delivering few benefits. The Kenyan judgment is a timely warning: unless land rights, consent and fair benefit-sharing are secured, India’s carbon market risks reproducing extractive models under the guise of climate action.

Why carbon projects are vulnerable

Carbon projects can slip into “modern plantations” when powerful companies dominate and local communities are sidelined. In India, farmers and tribal communities often face information and power asymmetries that enable opaque deals and unfair benefit-sharing. Developers are not required to disclose benefit-sharing arrangements, and practices are often imposed top-down, with little regard for local contexts or consent.

India’s Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, while ambitious, focuses mainly on procedures and compliance, with scant attention to land rights, FPIC, and equitable revenue distribution. These blind spots may expose vulnerable groups to exclusion and exploitation as the market expands.

Overregulation is not the solution, as burdensome legal frameworks could discourage even well-intentioned actors. What India needs is a balanced, lightweight regulatory architecture that guarantees transparency, formalises benefit-sharing, and protects community rights, without creating bureaucratic choke points.

Achieving this will require stakeholder consultation, adaptive regulation and a clear-eyed recognition of risks. Only then can India build trust and integrity in its carbon market while ensuring that climate action does not come at the cost of justice.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A case against firecrackers

In permitting the sale and bursting of green crackers, the Supreme Court appears to have given precedence to public sentiment over public safety. Green crackers can be harmful too. The worsening of air quality on Deepavali will only mean an

aggravation of health problems. There is also no guarantee that certified green crackers alone will be used by revellers. People in a festive mood tend to flout guidelines, and there is no real chance of punishing a mass of people. The wisdom of allowing the widespread bursting of

firecrackers, that affects senior citizens, infants, and patients on treatment or recuperating, is indeed questionable. **G. David Milton,** Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

In my childhood, most of us did not have the luxury to “burn money” on fireworks.

With our father who was the sole breadwinner, and a large family of six children, our Deepavali budget for crackers barely touched ₹25-₹40. Delhi was more greener, less crowded and the smoke hardly made an impact.

N. Nagarajan, Secunderabad

Bengaluru’s roads

The debates on the pot-holed roads of Bengaluru never seem to end as the basic question of how these potholes appear and reappear despite repeated repairs costing crores, and why no one is held accountable, is a mystery. Unless heads roll

no improvements will be possible. With Bengaluru gaining importance as a world-class technical capital, there has to be action.

V. Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

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

Is landlockedness the reason for Bihar’s underdevelopment?



R. Nagaraj
Economist and retired professor from the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai



Manindra Nath Thakur
Professor , Centre for Political Studies, JNU, Delhi

PARLEY

It is election season in Bihar. While the Opposition often speaks about the lack of development and industrialisation in the State, in its campaigns, the National Democratic Alliance, which is in power, argues that a change of government will bring back the ‘Jungle Raj’ of the earlier decade. What makes Bihar one of India’s most underdeveloped States? Is landlockedness a reason for its underdevelopment, as some argue? R. Nagaraj and Manindra Nath Thakur discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Saptaparno Ghosh**. Edited excerpts:

It is often argued that Bihar is disadvantaged because it is a landlocked State. Punjab and Telangana are landlocked as well, and they are doing relatively well. So how is being landlocked a constraint for Bihar?

R. Nagaraj: If you look at the success of Telangana, especially Hyderabad, it is mostly because of the tertiary sector; it has nothing to do with geography. If a State has an educated workforce and good infrastructure, being landlocked will not be an issue. Punjab, too, has a developed network of railways and roads, and has FCI (Food Corporation of India) godowns across the country to help with export of crops.

Manindra Nath Thakur: Let us look at Bihar’s prominent exports: makhana, litchi, and corn. It has been difficult for Bihar to transport these items from Patna to West Bengal or to any port. These, alongside the vegetables Bihar exports, are perishable. Moreover, significant costs are incurred due to road transport; time and distance are crucial factors in agrarian exports. One way Bihar is attempting to resolve this issue is by launching projects along the Ganga. So, it is not that concerns about being landlocked are not genuine, but they cannot be cited as a major reason for the State’s economic backwardness.

Prof. Nagaraj spoke of the tertiary sector; you spoke of agrarian exports. Bihar has been assessed as an agrarian economy. What should be its imperative going forward: industrialisation or agriculture?

MT: In the last 10 years, the Chief Minister has tried to engage with industrialists. However, industrialists have often raised concerns about access to ports, citing the need to spend more on transportation. Having said that, I do think that in this modern capitalist system, no society can think of surviving with just agricultural products. While Bihar should capitalise on its potential in terms of agricultural production and



A women shucks corn in Virpur village in Begusarai, Bihar. R.V. MOORTHY

processing, it must ultimately transition to industry. Without that, there is no future.

RN: Before we think of high-technology and/or manufacturing industries, we should consider where the comparative advantage lies. Four-fifth of Bihar’s labour force is in agriculture. But despite Bihar having fertile land and irrigation facilities, agricultural productivity is mostly less than the national average. Why is agriculture not picking up? That is the big question.

In the 1970s or 80s, a committee set up under the agricultural economist, S.R. Sen, was figuring out how to take the Green Revolution to the Indo-Gangetic belt. It came up with a plan for massive State investments in infrastructure and electrification to ensure that States have abundant water for the cultivation of wheat and rice. Surprisingly, the Green Revolution spread to the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh rather than the Indo-Gangetic belt. We must understand what went wrong.

I think it will be both in Bihar’s interest and the national interest to get basic wheat, rice, and sugarcane cultivation going. This way, western India will be burdened less; it can conserve more water and move to value-added crops.

MT: On the agrarian front, I don’t think Bihar should repeat the mistake that Punjab made during the Green Revolution, which produced a water crisis. Although Bihar has abundant water, it may face the same consequences as Punjab if water is overused. Moreover, increasing agricultural production is linked with the heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides, creating a health crisis. Therefore, I don’t support the shifting of agriculture to eastern India. Agriculture is not profitable anywhere in the world unless it is heavily supported by the State.

RN: Madhya Pradesh was also seen as a backward State. It does not have the same water



It is not that concerns about being landlocked are not genuine, but they cannot be cited as a major reason for the State’s economic backwardness.

MANINDRA NATH THAKUR

resources as Bihar, yet the Green Revolution expanded there. Prosperity in the Malwa region is amazing. Therefore, I am sceptical about the idea that agriculture has no potential.

So what do you think are the factors that contributed to Bihar’s underdevelopment?

MT: Apart from what I have said, there are also notions that the Centre is not interested in Bihar’s growth. The State, I think, is frozen in its transition from feudalism to capitalism. One of the reasons for this is the internal colonisation of the State. Earlier, Bihar supplied raw materials, but due to policies such as freight equalisation, it suffered significantly, and industries didn’t develop locally, despite having the advantage of raw material availability. Bihar ultimately lost revenues and its natural advantage. Now, with a supply of labour from Bihar, nobody is interested in developing the State.

RN: A commodity where freight equalisation was done and which benefited eastern India was cement. Steel did not accrue the same advantage. Cement has heavy transport costs compared to steel so the freight equalisation policy for it helped eastern India.

Furthermore, why Biharis are leaving Bihar has no element of capitalist conspiracy. In fact, when investments in agriculture were made in Bihar, migration to Punjab declined. It is clear that if people have more options at home, they will not move out.

Literature often suggests that Bihar has a ‘socialist hangover’, and that entrepreneurship does not draw confidence.

RN: The socialist ideology in Bihar is often equated with caste politics and caste in general – basically, distributing limited resources across various castes. If the focus shifts to productive investment, it will do a lot of good for Bihar. Policy must focus on how to augment production rather than looking at redistributing the limited resources more equitably or in a manner that helps people stay in power.

MT: Bihar has never really followed the socialist model. It also failed to understand the logic behind India’s shift to capitalism. Bihar is

currently at a significant disadvantage. For any structural change, there must be a solid commitment to reinvestment by the Union government. Unless that is done, the transition to capital will not take place. With respect to migration, if there are good working conditions and a decent income, no Bihari would like to migrate. The amount of investment required to help Bihar move out of this ‘frozen transition’ phase has not been made. It could be linked to general societal politics. One argument, as Shaibal Gupta used to make, relates to the lack of a distinct Bihari identity. Or as Prashant Kishore says, of the concept of Bihari asmita.

Would special status be of any help to Bihar?

RN: I am not sure it would help. The bigger question relates to whether it will be utilised productively or not. Bihar lacks the state capacity to use it. Whereas, if you give the same money to Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, they will grab it and use it better.

Being among the poorest states, Bihar gets a considerable amount of resources from the Finance Commission on considerations of its backwardness and to bring greater equality among States. When those are not utilised, the money lapses. Many of these grants are performance-based – meaning the State must raise its own share of resources to access the full amount. This often doesn’t happen in Bihar.

MT: If a good amount of money is invested, it would certainly be beneficial. However, no change will come unless we make sure that the money we reinvest is not appropriated by a small number of people – elites, politicians, and contractors. If the money is invested properly, it leads to capital formation. But this also requires a kind of social revolution, one that raises public awareness that these funds are not free gifts, but more like loans. People must understand that we need to rebuild and strengthen our society in order to repay that investment.

About state capacity – many funding packages include a clause requiring the state to contribute a portion of the investment. Now, suppose you give me ₹100 and tell me that I have add to it to utilise the amount. I can’t do that as I don’t have the money. In a way that amounts to forcing me not to use the money. The special status might be of help – it might remove these conditions and allow us to access the support without being held back by limited state capacity.



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NOTEBOOK

The women who fought their way into the Afghan Embassy

The fight in the briefing hall of the Embassy last week was not primarily for gender justice or equality, but for media access

Suhasini Haidar

Women hold up half the sky, but in the room at the Afghanistan Embassy in New Delhi last week, there wasn’t space for even one.

The team of the visiting Taliban Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, which used the premises to hold a press conference, did not think it necessary to invite a single woman. The Ministry of External Affairs did not think it was necessary either. Earlier that day, Mr. Muttaqi was hosted at the grand official venue, Hyderabad House, without a woman, official or otherwise, in sight. Whether this was mandated by the Taliban leader, a former Minister of Education for a regime that doesn’t allow girls in school beyond Class 6; or a genuine oversight; or a “technical error”, as he termed it, it wasn’t allowed to pass.

Reportage of the ‘men only’ press meet, followed by public outrage, forced the government to distance itself from the event and the Taliban delegation to rethink. Two days later, I received a call, inviting me to another press conference. Everyone was invited, with no conditions laid on attire, as they may have been in Kabul. Inside the briefing hall, male journalists, who had attended the previous press conference, had cleared the front row for female journalists, to ensure that Mr. Muttaqi would have no choice but to see them and take their questions. “This is your day,” said one of my male colleagues. “We will not be asking any questions, so as to ensure you will all be able to.” I smiled, protesting that we should behave as we normally do, sitting together without any gender distinction, and compete for the official’s attention, but I was also touched by the gesture.

That day, as Mr. Muttaqi faced a fusillade of questions about the Taliban’s denial of basic rights to women in the country, the solidarity of journalists against the prior injustice, however small, sent a powerful message: women cannot and

should not be left out of the room.

The truth is, most journalists see their profession as gender-neutral, although there are circumstances and countries where they face different impediments to doing their jobs. In the heat of a conflict, or a riot, or even during a raucous election rally, women will often find that they are not assigned the “tough” stories; discouraged from the front-lines and trenches in a war; or face sexual harassment in the newsroom or in the field. During the protests in the capital against the brutal rape of “Nirbhaya” in 2012, I remember young female colleagues returning ashen-faced from India Gate with horrifying stories of being manhandled or groped by the protesters themselves. On assignment in wars, I have often been told, “this is no place for women”, or been asked to stay back. These are all battles women face in every field, not just in journalism, and learn to fight them.

I will also admit that women journalists are sometimes treated more politely and with more consideration than their male counterparts. I once fought my way onto an Indian warship going on an evacuation mission. As the only woman on-board, I got my own cabin, while five colleagues were cramped into one room on hard bunks.

Let us be clear, though: the fight that day in the briefing hall of the Afghanistan Embassy was not primarily for gender justice or equality, but for media access. It is a fight that journalists wage on a daily basis, and increasingly in democracies such as India and the U.S., where leaders shy away from press conferences, or restrict the media that can attend or the questions they can ask. That battle for access may have been won on that day, in that hall, but the fight continues. Sadly, the much larger, and in some ways, more vital battle for millions of Afghan women to go to school, college, or work, and even gyms and public parks has not even begun to be fought.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

An adrenaline rush



A mountain biker races downhill in Gulmarg in north Kashmir. India’s first international downhill mountain biking event was held in Gulmarg from October 9 to 12. Top national and international athletes participated in the event, Zabarvan Legends Series. Brazilian biker Douglas Viera won the race. IMRAN NISSAR

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 17, 1975

Three Americans share Nobel Prize for Medicine

Stockholm, Oct. 16: Two native-born Americans and an Italian who became a United States citizen were awarded the 1975 Nobel Prize for Medicine to-day for cancer research discoveries showing “the interaction between tumour viruses and the genetic material of the cell.”

Dr. David Baltimore, 37, of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dr. Howard Martin Temin, 40, of the University of Wisconsin and Dr. Renato Dulbecco, 61, a naturalised

The Hindu

American who was born in Italy and works at the Imperial Cancer Fund Laboratory in London, shared the 1,43,000-dollar prize. At Madison, Wisconsin, Dr. Temin said: “I am overwhelmed and I am honoured to receive this award.”

Dr. Dulbecco said in London the “fantastic” prize took him by surprise. “It came so suddenly I haven’t had time to think about it yet,” he remarked.

Dr. Temin was one of Dr. Dulbecco’s students at the California Institute of Technology in the 1950s while Dr. Baltimore was part of Dr. Dulbecco’s research team at the Salk Institute at La Jolla, California.

Dr. Dulbecco said, “I know them very well and see them frequently. But it’s only recently that we realised our efforts were converging.”

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 17, 1925

The war on communism Arrest of leaders

London, Oct. 15: Following a police raid on the British Communist Party Headquarters in London, when three lorry loads of literature were removed, six prominent Communists were arrested, including the Secretary of the Party, Mr. Inkpin, Mr. Harry Pollitt, who is the Party’s principal orator, and Mr. Campbell, editor of *The Workers’ Weekly*, notorious last year during the Labour Government’s regime, when the prosecution abandoned the sedition charge against him.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Rise in reported POCSO cases in India from 2017 to 2022

94 in per cent. India has shown a rise in reported sexual offences against children under POCSO between 2017 and 2022, from 33,210 to 64,469 cases, but the prosecution rate remains above 90%, signalling stronger enforcement, according to Into the Light Index 2025. PTI

Penalty imposed by DoT on Airtel for norms violation

2.14 in ₹ lakh. According to the licence agreement, the company is required to ensure adequate verification of customers before enrolling them as subscribers. The Department of Telecom alleged violations of terms by Bharti Airtel with respect to verification norms. PTI

Beneficiaries selected for Maharashtra govt.'s Agri scheme

32.67 lakh. The beneficiaries selected for the Maharashtra government's Agricultural Mechanisation Scheme through the MahaDBT portal is the highest ever chosen, State Minister Dattatray Bharane said on Thursday. PTI

People apprehended under Operation Aaghat 2.0 in Delhi

500 The Delhi Police on Thursday claimed a 20% reduction in PCR calls related to street crimes over the last month in the Southeast Delhi district. According to an official, around 500 people were apprehended under Operation Aaghat 2.0. PTI

Number of persons in India affected by wildfires in 2024-2025

15 million Uttar Pradesh was also found to have experienced its most severe wildfire season on record. Regional fires contributed to severe haze episodes in New Delhi in November 2024, with PM2.5 levels reaching 13 times the standard set by the WHO. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Restoring fiscal space for the States

With rising public aspirations and widening service gaps, States' expenditure commitments are steadily increasing; GST introduction has altered the resource position of the States, in addition to centralising the authority to levy tax

ECONOMIC NOTES

K. Shanmugam

The journey of Goods and Services Tax (GST) implementation has entered a major new stage with the latest restructuring of tax slabs, a move expected to pass on over ₹2 lakh crore in tax benefits to consumers. With this, the GST compensation cess stands abolished as it merges with the regular tax, marking the end of an era of compensation under GST. The decision is likely to boost local demand, and the consequent growth in revenue may reduce the expected revenue loss. However, certain States feel that no proper estimation of this loss has been made, and that the actual loss could be much higher than projected. They are aggrieved that their demand for compensation has been ignored. Though studies show that GST implementation has largely benefited all States through liberal compensation mechanisms, the post-compensation tax structure is expected to raise concerns in some of them. The cess and surcharge mechanism gives the Centre additional leverage over the States. With significant changes in the fiscal policy landscape in recent years, including the introduction of GST, which has effectively shifted taxation power from the States to the GST Council, there is an increasing demand to revisit the fiscal policy on tax sharing to live up to the principle of 'cooperative federalism.'

Evolving tax landscape

Fiscal policy in India, particularly on revenue sharing between the Union and State governments, is an evolving story. Article 246 of the Constitution (subject-matter of laws made by Parliament and by the legislatures of States) demarcates the areas of taxation power between the Centre and the States under the Union List and the State List, respectively, with residuary power reserved for the former. Using this residuary power, Parliament amended the Constitution in 2016 through Article 246A for the levy of Service Tax. The tax landscape changed with the introduction of the Service Tax through the 92nd Amendment, and further with the 101st Amendment, through which GST was launched in July 2017.

For the first time, GST introduced a destination-based tax instead of an origin-based one, besides allowing the Centre and the States to share a common tax base. With GST being a contributor of substantial own tax revenue to States, this new regime has led them to suffer a significant erosion in their fiscal autonomy, as the power on taxation is shifted to the GST Council, where the Centre dominates the decision-making process.

As India is a multi-tiered government, design asymmetry arises in assigning resources and responsibilities between the Centre and the States. Normally, the power to raise resources is largely centralised for efficiency and economic reasons. The expenditure responsibilities are decentralised for better accountability and efficient delivery of public services. The resulting fiscal imbalances are corrected through re-assignment and redistribution, enabling the government at each level to command resources to discharge its responsibility. Such an adjustment must remain dynamic to address changes in the fiscal landscape.

Role of Finance Commission

Articles 268 to 293 of the Constitution define the Centre-State financial relations.

Table 1 shows how the actual devolution of Central taxes to States has fallen short

Finance Commission	Recommended share on shareable pool (in %)	Actual share on GTR (in %)
13Th FC	32	28
14th FC	42	32
15th FC up to 2023-24	41	31

The Finance Commission (FC) is constituted under Article 280, which has been constitutionally assigned the task of determining transfers to all States. However, there are grievances regarding the manner in which the Central Finance Commission applies its tax-sharing criteria, which, according to some States, penalise progressive ones. There are also complaints of inconsistency among the Finance Commissions in adopting criteria and applying relative weights.

The Commission's grants are supplemented by grants under various Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), Central Sector Schemes, and, earlier, by the Union Planning Commission (PC) grants, which ceased after the abolition of the Planning Commission in 2014. Article 282 provides for direct grants by the Union government, while Article 275 provides for statutory grants through the Finance Commissions. Some States feel that the flow of funds through these channels is neither fair nor transparent.

Falling devolution share

The earlier system of sharing individual taxes was replaced by a global sharing principle, thanks to the 80th Amendment that came into effect during the 11th Finance Commission (2000-2005). The Commission recommended 29.5% to the States out of the proceeds of shareable Central taxes, which was steadily enhanced to 30.5% by the 12th Finance Commission, 32% by the 13th Finance Commission and 42% by the 14th Finance Commission. In view of Jammu and Kashmir having ceased to be a State, the share came down to 41%. However, despite higher recommendations, the actual devolution to the States as a percentage of Gross Tax Revenue (GTR) has consistently fallen short (Table 1).

The shortfall is attributed to the ever-increasing cesses and surcharges, which are not part of the shareable pool of revenue. The cess and surcharge accounted for ₹3,86,440 crore as per the Revised Estimates (RE) 2024-25. It is expected to be ₹4,23,456 crore under the Budget Estimates (BE) for 2025-26, excluding the GST compensation cess. States have been constantly pressing for their merger with the shareable pool, a demand the Union government has not accepted. This resource gives additional leverage to the Centre in managing its expenses over and above its usual tax share, as the proceeds from cesses and surcharges often fund the Central share in various schemes.

Dependence on Central transfers

Central transfers still account for 44% of the States' revenue receipts. It ranges from 72% for Bihar to 20% for Haryana with nine States – Haryana (20%), Telangana (21%), Gujarat (28%), Maharashtra (28%), Karnataka (31%), Tamil Nadu (31%), Goa (33%) Kerala (34%), and Odisha (41%) – getting less than the overall average figure of 44%. This indicates heavy dependency of States on Central transfers and, to that extent, a compromise in their fiscal autonomy.

A look at the proportion of tax revenue shared between the Centre and the States during pre- and post-GST periods reveals a clear trend: the power to levy taxes is getting centralised, while the expenditure responsibilities on the States are on the



Growing concerns: With the end of GST compensation, States fear a loss of fiscal autonomy. REUTERS

Share of central Transfers in State Revenue Receipts (₹ In crore)							
Year	Revenue receipt of States (RR)	Central tax devolution (CD)	% of CD to RR	Grants in aid (GA)	% of GA to RR	Total transfers (TT)	% of TT to RR
2012-13	12,52,024	2,91,530	0.23	1,88,682	0.15	4,80,212	0.38
2013-14	13,69,187	3,18,273	0.23	2,05,952	0.15	5,24,225	0.38
2014-15	15,91,583	3,37,835	0.21	3,30,847	0.21	6,68,682	0.42
2015-16	18,32,886	5,06,191	0.28	3,25,896	0.18	8,32,087	0.45
2016-17	20,46,401	6,07,861	0.30	3,56,091	0.17	9,63,952	0.47
	80,92,081	20,61,690	0.25	14,07,468	0.17	34,69,158	0.43
2017-18	23,21,241	6,05,186	0.26	4,05,958	0.17	10,11,144	0.44
2018-19	26,20,353	7,46,894	0.29	4,39,869	0.17	11,86,763	0.45
2019-20	26,70,138	6,50,687	0.24	5,34,567	0.20	11,85,254	0.44
2020-21	25,86,622	5,95,227	0.23	6,43,841	0.25	12,39,068	0.48
2021-22	32,25,165	8,83,100	0.27	6,22,628	0.19	15,05,728	0.47
2022-23	36,54,408	9,48,982	0.26	6,61,457	0.18	16,10,439	0.44
	1,47,56,686	38,24,890	0.26	29,02,362	0.20	67,27,252	0.46

rise (Table 2).

For the five years from 2012-13 to 2016-17, the pre-GST period, the Centre collected 67% of the total tax revenue, while the States collected 33%. During the post-GST period (2018-19 to 2022-23), the ratio remained unchanged. As for revenue expenditure, the Centre incurred 47% and the States 53% in the pre-GST era. During the post-GST period, the figures were 48% and 52%, respectively. Increases in the Centre's revenue expenditure in recent years are largely attributed to the expansion of CSS on subjects that mostly fall in the domain of the States.

The expenditure commitments of the States are comparatively higher, as they are responsible for tackling the subjects of law and order, health, education, agriculture, and local self-government. As a result, States seek power to collect higher tax revenues, as the present fiscal policy of taxing power does not adequately address their requirements. Further, heavy dependence on Central transfers also creates problems such as liquidity management and the fear of political vendetta on the Opposition-ruled States.

As a way out, some States suggest that the example of Canada be followed where the federal government collects 46% of tax revenue and spends 40%, while sub-national governments collect 54% and spend 60%. Such a system gives more financial autonomy and flexibility to the States.

With rising public aspirations and widening service gaps, States' expenditure commitments are steadily increasing. GST introduction has altered the resource position of the States, in addition to centralising the authority to

levy tax. The heavy dependence of the States on the Centre is creating friction, especially in the Opposition-ruled States. This is why many States and economists are calling for a restructuring of the tax sharing principle to enhance the States' fiscal autonomy.

Towards fiscal autonomy

States like Tamil Nadu have appointed a committee to examine Centre-State relations. It is against this backdrop that the recommendation is being made to share the tax base on personal income tax (IT) between the Centre and the States, on the lines of the GST. For instance, the share of Central tax devolution to States as per the 2025-26 Budget Estimates is ₹14,22,444 crore. If the personal IT base of ₹13,57,000 crore (BE 2025-26) is shared on a 50:50 basis with States where tax is collected, the Central tax devolution share to the States would effectively get reduced to ₹ 7,43,944 crore.

Alternatively, it is also suggested to empower the States to top up IT, without major changes to the current system of levy and collection.

Such an arrangement would reduce States' fiscal dependence on the Centre, improve liquidity, and allow progressive States – which contribute more tax revenue – to directly benefit from their higher tax base. The Centre will still have substantial leverage in resource sharing to correct fiscal imbalances, if any, through Central schemes, grants and usual tax devolution.

K. Shanmugam is a former officer of the Indian Administrative Service. He served as Chief Secretary of the Tamil Nadu government during 2019-21, after being the State Finance Secretary from 2010 to 2019

THE GIST

▼ The restructuring of GST slabs merges the GST compensation cess with regular tax, ending compensation under GST and potentially boosting local demand.

▼ Central transfers still account for 44% of the States' revenue receipts, with several States receiving less than the overall average, indicating heavy dependency on the Centre.

▼ Progressive States contributing more tax revenue can directly benefit if the personal income tax base is shared or States are empowered to top up IT, reducing fiscal dependency.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



(L-R) Tomoko Aran, Miki Matsubara, Mariya Takeuchi and Taeko Ohnuki. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The tragic nostalgia of Citypop and its legacy of melancholia

In the wake of Miki Matsubara's death anniversary, we revisit the lush, metropolitan sound that defined '80s Japan; tracing the tragedy of its doomed rise during the bubble economy, and its modern resurgence as a nostalgic soundtrack for a generation longing for lost optimism

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury

Two decades ago, Miki Matsubara died quietly in Osaka, far from the lights that once shimmered off her stage-ready smile. She was only forty-four, but her voice was already immortal. The woman who had given Japan one of its most enduring pop elegies – *Mayonaka no Door (Stay With Me)* – was gone, leaving behind an anthem that felt like a conversation between a nation at the height of its optimism and the generations born into its aftermath.

In the years since her death, Matsubara has become something of a ghostly emissary for an entire sound: Citypop, the gleaming, metropolitan dreamscape of late-70s and 80s Japan. Now revived through internet nostalgia, her song has become the entry point for millions who know nothing of the economic miracle it scored, nor the melancholia of the disillusionment that followed.

To understand Citypop is to understand the brief and blinding promise of the Japanese bubble years. The 1980s were a time of vertigo – Japan had remade itself into an economic superpower and its cities were pulsing with fluorescent excess. The middle class was swelling, the yen was strong, and an entire generation found itself equipped with disposable income and imported dreams. The thriving metropolises of Yokohama, Osaka and Tokyo had evolved into prosperous statements of arrival.

The soundscape of that ethos followed suit. The transistor, the Walkman and the high-fidelity stereo – all these inventions gave sound a new intimacy, and a way to carry the city in your pocket. Citypop thrived on that intimacy. It was sophisticated, smooth, cosmopolitan music made by city people, for city people, in an attempt to emulate the

Western idea of the 'good life'. It borrowed from American funk, AOR, disco, and jazz fusion, yet what emerged was refined, melodically lush, emotionally ambivalent and distinctly Japanese. But most importantly, it captured a feeling of suspended euphoria – the feeling that the night, and perhaps history itself, would never end.

Birth of a moment

The genre's origins trace back to an unsuccessful folk-rock band with little influence at the time, Happy End, and their 1971 album *Kazamachi Roman*. By singing rock in Japanese, they broke the "language barrier" that had divided authenticity from aspiration. Music could now be proudly domestic while still looking outward. Their members – Haruomi Hosono, Eiichi Ohtaki, Shigeru Suzuki, Takashi Matsumoto – would go on to shape the entire sonic blueprint of modern Japanese pop.

From this lineage came the glittery sophistication of Sugar Babe's *Songs* (1975), where a young Tatsuro Yamashita began experimenting with harmonies borrowed from Steely Dan and the Beach Boys. Yamashita would later perfect the form in the early 80s with the seminal *Ride on Time* and *For You*, whose brass flourishes, chorused guitars, and boisterous optimism became shorthand for the bubble decade.

Alongside him rose formative artists like Mariya Takeuchi, whose *Plastic Love* (1984) captured the seductive loneliness of Tokyo's nightlife, and Taeko Ohnuki, who collaborated with Ryuichi Sakamoto on the rich, diaphanous *Sunshower* (1977). Anri had polished the breezy vocals of 1983's *Timely!!* into a blueprint for the modern urban romance that radiated confidence even if she couldn't stop the loneliness. The same year Tomoko Aran's *Fuyu no Mirage* brought a cool, nocturnal

sophistication, with evocative layered synths and subtle disco inflections that The Weeknd reproduced in 2022's *Out of Time*. Junko Ohashi's *Magical* (1979) leaned into soft rock and orchestral pop, that lent the genre a cinematic sweep. Meanwhile, the likes of Toshiki Kadomatsu had become architects of Citypop's groovy elegance, with albums like 1982's *Sea Breeze* fusing jazz, funk, and R&B into an aural, high-rise soundtrack for ambition and contemplation.

But it was Miki Matsubara's genre-defining Shōwa-retro nostalgia piece that drew a more subtle bridge between youthful exuberance and urban melancholy. *Stay With Me* is deceptively bright, but its syncopated grooves betray tremors of longing and an ache for permanence in a city that never sleeps long enough to remember your name.

By the late 80s, the optimism had reached its crescendo. Tokyo's skyline bloomed with cranes, and champagne flowed through karaoke bars and glass-walled penthouses. The buoyant production and immaculate arrangements of Citypop, with songs about driving, loving and leaving; mirrored that lifestyle. And then, almost overnight, it was gone.

When Japan's economic bubble burst in 1992, the neon shine waned and the country entered its "Lost Decade." Youth unemployment rose, land values collapsed, and the language of ambition began to sound absurd. That once soundtrack of prosperity had suddenly begun to feel tone-deaf.

Some artists adapted, moving toward R&B or electronic music, but most faded into obscurity. Matsubara, who had already begun retreating from public life, stopped recording altogether by the late 90s. Her final years were spent in limbo, as the music she helped define drifted

into the background of convenience stores and retro compilations.

Today, Citypop has found its second life in the digital century. Since the late 2010s, listeners around the world began stumbling upon the genre through online serendipity. A thumbnail of a neon skyline or a summery beach, a looping animation of a girl in headphones, or even a YouTube playlist titled *Citypop-core* – the aesthetic curiosities of this wistful decade bloomed into a global phenomenon.

Matsubara was barely twenty when she sang her song about a love that refused to fade with the dawn, and now decades later, that simple refrain has become the accidental epitaph for an entire genre. *Stay With Me* crossed millions of streams overnight and *Plastic Love* spurred a renaissance for that lost moment in time. The sound of a country dreaming itself modern has become the balm for a generation disillusioned with the modern world. For listeners scrolling through late-night feeds, these songs promised an elegia of imagined stability. The music of a vanished optimism had become the refuge for those who never knew it, and that once dismissed "music for salarymen," now circulates as the polished ancestor for vaporwave, sampled and re-contextualised into digital melancholia.

Citypop never truly died. It's been waiting in dormancy for the world to feel again what Japan felt at the end of its bubble, with the vertigo of decline and the ache of deferred futures. Perhaps that is why it resonates so much now, in this new era of evaporated certainties and algorithmic detachment. We too, live in a society obsessed with images of happiness it can no longer afford. The genre's longing optimism was fragile and its sadness is often disguised in groove, but we keep listening perhaps to stay with the night a little longer.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Diane Keaton passed away on October 11 at the age of 79. A quiz on the American actor

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1

This film, starring Keaton, was an adaptation of a novel by John le Carré. In the film, Keaton plays an actress who is sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Name the film.

QUESTION 2

Keaton and X played a married couple in an iconic film and later dated on and off. The town that was part of the name of X's character was also where his grandfather was born, in Sicily. Name X and the character.

QUESTION 3

This film starring Keaton is about a communist activist who chronicled the Russian Revolution in a book titled *Ten Days that*

Shook the World. Name the film.

QUESTION 4

In this film, Keaton plays a career-driven woman whose life turns upside down when she "inherits" a baby. The name of the film is also the term used when a large number of babies are born among a particular group of people at a particular time. Name the film.

QUESTION 5

Keaton frequently collaborated with X, a writer and comedian and director of more than 50 films. There were several allegations of sexual abuse against X, including by his adoptive daughter. Keaton stood by him through all of it. Name X.



Visual Question:

This role was written specifically for Keaton and she won an Academy Award for it. It not only defined her career but also made her a fashion icon. Name it.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The first question pertains to K.S. Ranjitsinhji. Name the English county for which the Indian prince turned out the most in his first-class career. **Ans: Sussex** 2. This Ranji great, who never played a single Test for India, is currently the coach of the Indian women's cricket team. **Ans: Amol Muzumdar** 3. Who holds the highest batting average (98.35) in the Ranji Trophy? **Ans: Vijay Merchant** 4. The person with the second-highest batting average (85.62) was also the youngest to score a century on debut in the Trophy. But another youngster, who tragically passed away in a road accident just after he turned 18, held the record of being the youngest to score 1,000 runs in the Trophy. Name him. **Ans: Dhruv Pandove (and Sachin Tendulkar)** 5. Which Bengal player holds the record for the most wickets in an innings (10/20) in an innings, which he achieved against Assam in 1956/57. **Ans: Premangsu Chatterjee** Visual: Vidarbha won the Ranji Trophy for the third time in the previous season (2024-25). This bowler played a key role in this tournament win by picking 69 wickets, the highest in any Ranji season. **Ans: Harsh Dubey** **Early Birds:** Haridas Pal | Arun Kumar Singh | Tamal Biswas | Siddhartha Viswanathan | Sukdev Shet



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

Upendran

"My cousin has joined Brahmachari and Sons."

"Why has he joined that Mickey Mouse company?"

"It's not a Mickey Mouse company! It's owned by Mr. Brahmachari."

"When you call a business organisation a 'Mickey Mouse,' it means it is small and unimportant. For example, my cousin has a Mickey Mouse business set up in Hyderabad."

"Your cousins may be a Mickey Mouse company, but I can assure that Brahmachari and Sons is no Mickey Mouse company."

"Mr. Brahmachari calls himself the Managing Director, but the so called company is actually a Mickey Mouse operation which he runs from his house."

"What about your company? Is it a...."

"No, no! We have branches in all the Southern States. But unfortunately, I work in a department which is the Cinderella of the company."

"A 'Cinderella' department! "

"It's CindeRELLa, with the stress on the third syllable."

"I see. But what does 'Cinderella' mean?"

"A person or a thing that receives little attention or respect is often referred to as 'Cinderella.'"

"Just like the Cinderella in the fairy tale!"

"That's right. "

"With the way our hockey team is doing, hockey may become the Cinderella of Indian sports."

"That's true. When my father was studying in college, I believe Physics was the Cinderella of the sciences. "

"Your father was a lucky man indeed."

"English literature and Home Science are considered to be Cinderella subjects."

"Meaning subjects which many people think are not important?"

"That's right!"

"Can I say, for some time Sujatha was the 'Cinderella' of our school debating team?"

"You certainly can. Many people believe that the Department of Education is the Cinderella department of our State Government."

"Who cares about education these days? No one! Who are you going to talk about next? Goofy?"

"Not a bad idea, actually! Considering the fact that I have a goofy person like you sitting next to me."

"What does 'goofy' mean?"

"It means a silly or a crazy person. For example, my boss gets some really goofy ideas sometimes."

"And one of his goofy ideas was to hire a goofy person like you, I suppose?"

"Maybe! By the way, how did you do in your test? Did you as usual goof in many places?"

"Goof?"

"One of the meanings of 'goof' is to make a mess of something."

"No, I didn't goof up in my test."

"Here's another example. Monica Seles had a chance of winning the French Open. But she really goofed up in the finals."

"In the play that I saw yesterday, the actor kept goofing up his lines. Can I say that?"

"You certainly can, goofy!"
Published in *The Hindu* on June 23, 1998

Word of the day

Conjecture:

an opinion or conclusion formed without complete information

Synonyms: guess, speculation, belief

Usage: *Everyone's conjecture about the election results was wrong.*

Pronunciation:

newsth.live/conjecturepro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /kəndʒektʃər/

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

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Provident fund: RBI has offered splendid advice

As a retirement fund, the EPFO must keep its investment corpus stable. This is a good time for it to rethink its practices, as suggested by an RBI report, to better align payouts with earnings

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has undertaken a fresh round of reforms designed to help subscribers access their retiral funds ahead of time. Notable among these is its easing of premature withdrawal rules: one can withdraw up to 75% of the money in one's account, with the rest held back as a prudential measure for future release. Apart from a job loss or voluntary exit from a payroll, the reasons one could present for it have been re-slotted into three broad categories: one, essential needs, defined to include illness, education and marriage; two, housing; and three, special circumstances, which one need not explain to secure the EPFO's approval. Plus, members can tap their provident funds (PFs) with greater frequency: up to 10 times for education and five times for marriage-related expenses. Besides, all it takes is 12 months of membership to apply for a partial PF withdrawal. These moves give this retirement scheme a valuable dose of liquidity. Sure, the EPFO was set up to save a monthly slice of every subscriber's salary—with an equal sum put in by the employer—for old-age expenses, but letting it serve as a fallback for financial needs that may arise earlier is the right approach. One's own money should not be subject to locks-ins that are too strict. This explains why the EPFO has had to clarify that in case of unemployment, the 25% held back can also be taken out after a year of going without pay. This is a longer wait than before, but will keep out claims filed by those who join new payrolls within months.

As the broad purpose of PF is to restrain earners who would squander all their earnings if left to themselves, India's EPFO reforms

stand out for the trust they invest in the judgement of account holders. Since PF balances earn a far better rate of interest than fixed deposits do at banks, or what government bonds yield, the default position of its members should be to stay invested and watch the sum grow over the years. Plus, it is tax-free up to a limit. As this is a state-run fund, investment safety is not a consideration. Yet, PF safety also demands sound fund management. What subscribers get back must be funded by the earnings of its corpus. If yields on top-rated bonds, the EPFO's mainstay, drop below its annual payout rate, then the returns it gets on other assets must cover that gap. If not, commitments would go underfunded. In recognition of this risk, the EPFO had asked the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to study its investment practices. As reported, an RBI report has flagged the gap between high PF payouts and its low debt earnings being funded by sales of capital assets (such as equities). As a stop-gap, this may work, but for corpus stability, its earnings and payouts must align. Roughly, if 10-year government bonds yield under 7%, payouts above 8% call for a savvy investment strategy. Among other things, RBI has suggested an actuarial assessment of liabilities with relation to each EPFO scheme's assets. Also, the use of sophisticated expertise for asset management. And to minimize scope for conflict, RBI would have the EPFO split its roles as regulator and fund manager apart.

For the EPFO to keep payouts above 8%, its allocation cap on equity must go up from the current 15%. Critically, its fund management would still need to be calibrated in favour of safety. Transparency would help. If the risk-reward balance shifts, so must public scrutiny.

How Joel Mokyr's insights could guide India's quest for prosperity

We need an 'enlightenment' fostered by innovation-oriented institutions and a new social contract



ADITYA SINHA is a public policy professional.

The 2025 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences has brought innovation to the centre of the global growth debate. The award committee split the award between two distinct but connected visions of progress: Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt were honoured for formalizing a theory of growth through creative destruction, while Joel Mokyr received the other half for uncovering the historical and institutional roots of sustained technological progress. Let's focus on Mokyr's work because it explains why innovation happens and how it endures.

Mokyr's lifelong project has been to answer a deceptively simple question: why did the Industrial Revolution happen in Europe and why did it last? His answer, developed across *The Lever of Riches* (1990) and *The Gifts of Athena* (2002) fundamentally reshaped our understanding of economic history. In *The Lever of Riches*, Mokyr drew a sharp distinction between propositional knowledge, the theoretical 'know why' of science, and prescriptive knowledge, the practical 'know how' of engineering and craftsmanship. These two streams have mostly existed in isolation.

The modern age began when these spheres finally converged, creating self-reinforcing feedback loops between discovery and application. In *The Gifts of Athena*, Mokyr expanded this framework by defining useful knowledge as

humanity's "equipment in the game against nature." While technology may appear mechanical, its evolution is social. Knowledge grows when institutions make it easier to generate, test, share and apply ideas. He identified four channels through which societies convert knowledge into growth. The *first* governs how new knowledge is created: i.e., who gets to inquire, how research agendas are set and what incentives shape discovery. The *second* determines how knowledge is validated and diffused—through peer review, reproducibility and open communication. The *third* connects scientific understanding with practical use—through trust, communication and collaboration between scientists and engineers. The *fourth* decides how innovations are adopted or resisted, depending on whether vested interests block new techniques or entrepreneurs and capital markets enable risk-taking. When these channels are aligned, technological progress becomes self-reinforcing. Otherwise, knowledge and prosperity stall.

Mokyr also quantified 'access costs' to knowledge—raised by social and institutional barriers that prevent ideas from circulating. 'The Enlightenment' lowered those costs dramatically. Printing presses, scientific societies, patent systems and journals turned ideas into

public goods. Patents, often criticized as monopoly licences, also made technical knowledge visible to others.

India should pay heed to Mokyr. We have achieved scale in production and digital infrastructure. Yet, we have not built a comparable ecosystem of sustained innovation. Economic reforms and incentive schemes can improve efficiency, but they cannot produce the feedback cycle of learning.

India's next developmental leap must focus on building institutions that make knowledge flow as easily as capital. The first task is to bridge the gap between universities and industry, between laboratories and markets, and between academic ambition and commercial risk. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation and the new Research and Development Innovation Fund have created a scaffolding for this. What's left are the finer details. We need research parks shared by scientists and startups, doctoral programmes that embed students in industry labs and procurement systems that reward innovation rather than compliance. India must design a system where curiosity is financed, collaboration is career-enhancing and failure is a sign of experimentation, not incompetence.

India becoming a developed economy by 2047 will depend on achieving an 'Industrial Enlightenment.' For this, our social contract must treat knowledge as a public good and innovation as a civic responsibility. The institutions that matter most will be those that connect, not control. Universities must evolve into engines of experimentation. Industries must view research as an investment in competitiveness, not a discretionary expense. Policymakers must build trust-based systems where information flows freely. Global fragmentation makes intellectual openness harder, but also more valuable. If we design institutions that make discovery cumulative and collaboration habitual, we could dramatically reshape our prosperity prospects for the better.

QUICK READ

The Nobel laureate's work outlines the feedback loops between innovation and growth that take effect once practical knowledge converges with a scientific understanding.

India can gain from his insights. But we need universities to promote experimentation, industries to invest in research and policies to foster the creation and sharing of knowledge.



GUEST VIEW

Farmers mustn't bear the cost of wildlife conservation

GURUDAS NULKAR & MILIND WATVE



are, respectively, director, Centre for Sustainable Development, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune; and retired professor, IISER Pune.

The vagaries of monsoon rains and volatility of market prices are not the only factors that eat into farmer incomes. Raids on crops by wild herbivores, a less visible but growing crisis, are also contributing to it. Fleeting blackbucks and dancing peacocks might charm city folk, but they are a nightmare for farmers. Attacks on humans by carnivores, particularly tigers, are newsworthy, but financial losses inflicted by wild herbivore raids often go under-reported.

At the Centre for Sustainable Development at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, we surveyed over 1,200 affected farmers across Maharashtra and conducted in-depth interviews of farmers in the Konkan region. We accessed multiple data sources and studied the damage inflicted by macaques, langurs, blackbucks, chinkaras, Indian gaur, deer, nilgai, sambar, wild boars, giant squirrels, porcupines, elephants, peacocks and parakeets. With this data, we computed estimates of net farmer income losses in Maharashtra.

While earlier studies used visual inspections to estimate crop damage, the losses don't stop there. Expenses on guarding and fencing and seasonal delays also need to be accounted for. Indirect effects, like specific crops abandoned or restricted, or the use of suboptimal practices in the face of an impending risk, also add to farmer losses. Wildlife raids have significantly curtailed traditional household kitchen gardening in the Konkan belt. This forces families to incur additional expenses on buying vegetables. Society suffers losses too. Farm employment is a source of income for landless and marginal farmers. When a crop is destroyed mid-season, the income of labourers and other stakeholders gets wiped out.

We accounted for invisible damages and farm protection costs to estimate the net agricultural loss caused by wildlife. Our estimate is that Maharashtra's farmers lose between ₹10,000 crore and ₹40,000 crore per year. Crop damages are compensated by the state's forest department. However, in the years from 2020 to 2024, it disbursed a total of just ₹210 crore. This difference can be attributed to lack of standard damage assessment procedures, farmer ignorance, complex bureaucratic procedures and the fact that compensation covers only visible

damages and not indirect losses. Thus, what farmers receive is a tiny fraction of the actual loss and does not reveal the enormity of the problem.

We studied the Maharashtra government's resolution on compensation and its protocols. It mandates a *panchanama* (or official declaration of facts) in the presence of one official each from the departments of forest, revenue and agriculture. This is neither easy nor time efficient, as the procedure sets a 14-day timeline for completion. On one hand, there is poor awareness among farmers, especially those who are illiterate, and on the other, we have some cultivators who prefer to stay away from such bureaucratic procedures. State government data between 2020 and 2024 shows that only 48% of the claims were accepted and 37% were paid. The affected farmers, our study found, were highly dissatisfied with the compensation protocol of the state's forest department. Many said

that such damages are often undervalued; in some cases, even the amount recorded on the *panchanama* was not fully reimbursed. Among our 1,200 respondents, 24% identified wildlife crop raids as the primary reason for their income losses, while 54% reported a discontinuation of at least one crop.

Our Konkan estimates suggest that this coastal region's farmers have borne annual losses of between ₹17,000 and ₹33,000 per hectare on account of wildlife raids. If we include the damage to kitchen gardens, the combined annual losses in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts is estimated at ₹5,677 crore per annum. Studies from around the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve suggest that crop yields at a distance of 5km from the forest boundary can be double what farmers closer to it obtain. Even with actively guarded farms, wild animals are a major menace.

Support-cum-reward experiments by Milind Watve have shown that appropriate incentives

can increase agricultural output near protected areas by 2.5 to 4 times. Our survey also shows that crop raids are not just a problem around protected forests. Farmers across the state have been affected.

For the sake of remunerative farming in India, compensation protocols need to be fair and simple, with timely payments. Using behavioural economic approaches like support-cum-reward schemes can significantly reduce the forest department's work. Moreover, we need deeper research on the root causes of herbivore raids to formulate long-term mitigation measures. India is a highly diverse country. A clear policy for human-wildlife coexistence and a practical management system are critical for both wildlife conservation and crop security.

This is not about placing economics above ecology, but a call for policies that do not impose the costs of conservation on farmers. Our research shows that farmers are willing to participate in resolving human-wildlife conflicts. If long-term solutions are found, the forest departments of states would be relieved of the burden of handling these problems, which would leave them with more time for conservation work. We must spare no effort in working out how best to secure Indian farms from raids.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Naxal-Maoist sunset

Lend a helping hand to reformed extremists

MASS surrender by Naxalites and Maoists in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra this week has raised hopes that the decades-long fight against Left Wing Extremism (LWE) is finally nearing its end. Malloju-la Venugopal Rao alias Bhupathi, a key Naxal strategist, laid down arms before Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis along with 60 of his associates in Gadchiroli district, while 78 Maoists — including 43 women — surrendered in three districts of Chhattisgarh. It took a month of back-channel talks to persuade Bhupathi, who had helped spread the Maoist movement across the Maharashtra-Chhattisgarh border as a founding member of the banned People's War Group. His return to the mainstream indicates that the Central and state governments are on course to eradicate Naxalism by the deadline of March 31 next year. The judicious strategy of combining counter-insurgency operations with people-oriented development initiatives is bearing fruit.

The challenge from here on is to rehabilitate the extremists who have shunned the path of violence. It's heartening that a private firm, Lloyds Metals and Energy Ltd, is keen to train and employ ex-Naxalites in Gadchiroli, which is being developed as a steel hub with investments of around Rs 3 lakh crore. The goal of creating over one lakh local jobs looks promising. Indeed, the prospect of gainful employment can encourage more Naxalites and Maoists to surrender. The main reasons for the decline of LWE are disillusionment of the cadres with Maoist/Naxal ideology; lack of support from tribal people who have suffered at the hands of extremists; and the growing dominance of security forces. Now, the State must ensure that these prodigal sons and daughters are not left in the lurch.

It is equally important to delve deep into the causes that fuelled this armed movement and helped it survive and thrive for so long. Denial of land rights, social injustice, State apathy — these ills drew tribal communities and the rural poor towards LWE. Good governance and equitable growth hold the key to preventing such a prolonged onslaught on India's internal security.

Drones and dealers

Punjab feels the heat of Pakistan's covert offensive

THE five-fold surge in arms smuggling across Punjab's border with Pakistan signals a dangerous reactivation of Pakistan's covert playbook. With 362 weapons seized so far this year compared to 81 last year, Punjab once again finds itself on the frontline of a shadow war. Intelligence agencies link this escalation to Operation Sindoor, India's precision strikes on terror hideouts in Pakistan and PoK earlier this year. Retaliation has come not through open confrontation but through drones and couriers ferrying Glocks, AK-47s and grenades into Punjab's border districts.

In the past two months alone, multiple crackdowns have exposed cross-border networks backed by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. Each seizure underscores how swiftly the line between organised crime and terrorism is blurring. Handlers operating from across the border use a web of gangsters and drug smugglers to deliver weapons and narcotics. These cartels, often funded from safe havens in Canada and the US, exploit Punjab's geography and diaspora links to sustain an illicit pipeline of cash and arms. While the Punjab police have shown commendable coordination with Central agencies in intercepting these consignments, the magnitude of the recoveries suggests that what is being caught is only a fraction of what slips through.

This is not just a law-and-order issue. It is hybrid warfare — an assault on Punjab's internal stability and India's national security through proxies and technology. The proliferation of drones and the merging of drug and arms cartels demand an upgraded border doctrine: real-time surveillance, AI-based interdiction systems and enhanced community intelligence. Punjab cannot afford to become the testing ground of an old enemy's new tactics. A concerted national response — backed by technology, intelligence and political will — is the only firewall against this infiltration. The time to treat these smuggling networks as national-security threats, not local crimes, is now.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1925

An interesting function

THE interesting function, which took place in the Lahore High Court on Thursday, when the Hon'ble Judges and the members of the Bar assembled in the first Bench Room to bid farewell to Hon'ble Mr Justice Abdul Raoof on his retirement, is of importance in a more than conventional sense. At a time when the atmosphere of the province is literally surcharged with the spirit of communalism, it is pleasant to reflect that there is at least one great institution in the province which is free from this spirit, at least one place where men can forget that they are Hindus or Mussalmans or Christians and remember that they are men and Indians, where Hindus and Mussalmans and Christians, whether on the Bench or at the Bar, can not only fraternise with one another but admire and respect one another freely and unreservedly. This, in our opinion, is the outstanding lesson of the function, and so we have deemed fit to make a brief reference to the speeches made on the occasion, after having already paid our own tribute to Mr Justice Raoof. Bakshi Tek Chand, as President of the Bar, was naturally the first to speak. After referring in eloquent terms to the retiring judge's innate sense of justice, his calm and serene temper and his keen desire to grasp the broad facts of a case and the points of law involved in it, he said: "Your lordship has administered the law honestly and conscientiously, and every litigant, whatever his caste, creed or colour, has got impartial justice at your hands."

From Net to AI, a story of non-regulation

The objective of the Delhi summit must be to lay down foundational ground rules for the AI era



MANISH TEWARI
LOK SABHA MP AND
FORMER I&B MINISTER

THE Internet was the most audacious experiment in anarchy, and it has succeeded beyond the wildest imagination of its initial progenitor, the US Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). It represents the largest ungoverned space on earth. Never before in the history of humankind has so much power concurrently resided on 5.5 billion fingertips around the world.

There is more data that is chummed out daily than from the dawn of civilisation to the turn of the third millennium. The future of humankind lies on the intersection of a brick-and-mortar civilisation that evolved over an eternal length of time and a virtual civilisation that is still metamorphosing.

The Internet that came in vogue in the mid-1990s was truly transformative in the way it has shaped life, leisure and work patterns. However, it has also been weaponised by state, semi-state and other nefarious characters, including people who have a grievance as to why they were born in the first place.

The Dark Web or the Deep Net is a classical manifestation of the Internet. However, despite a host of acronyms that ostensibly govern the Internet — Internet Governance Forum (IGF), Internet Architecture Board (IAB), Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), to name a few — there are no agreed rules of engagement in this virtual civilisation.

The First Amendment absolutists of the Silicon Valley and other innovation hubs did not allow a cohesive global gover-



BRIGHT SIDE: It must be acknowledged that the AI-driven disruption is inevitable and, in many forms, desirable. ISTOCK

nance structure for the Internet to get institutionalised. This has led to myriad challenges, including the balkanisation of the Internet into spheres of influence.

If the Internet was transformative, artificial intelligence (AI) is transmogrifying. The critical difference between the dotcom boom and the AI explosion is the substrate upon which it is built. The Internet required a quarter-century to achieve its current ubiquity, a period of gradual, albeit rapid, adoption and infrastructure development. AI, in stark contrast, is being grafted onto the existing, globalised digital nervous system that the Internet created.

The devices, the networks, the data streams — the entire kitchenware, as it were — are already in place, pre-heated and ready for this new recipe. This pre-existing infrastructure, coupled with a global population already accustomed to digital immersion, removes the natural friction that once slowed technological adoption.

The acceleration is not merely linear; it is geometric. This very fact places a Herculean burden upon governments, which must now comprehend and regulate a force whose ultimate societal and economic impacts are still unfathomable. To leave this force to its own devices, to allow a repeat of the laissez-faire approach of the

The fuel for AI is data.

A global consensus on data governance and privacy is paramount.

1990s, would be an act of profound historical negligence.

Successive global AI summits, commencing in the UK under then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and progressing to France under President Macron, have served as vital, yet ultimately preliminary, diplomatic soundings. They have confirmed a universal recognition of the transformative power cascading from AI, but have thus far failed to forge the substantive, binding consensus required to steer this force.

The current landscape is a patchwork of fragmented and often contradictory approaches, a precarious situation that undermines global security and stalls innovation. The European Union, displaying characteristic regulatory ambition, has not waited for the dust to settle, enacting its comprehensive AI Act.

This is a significant step, but

one taken largely in isolation. Across the Atlantic, the US maintains a stance of pronounced antagonism towards stringent regulation, favouring a sectoral, innovation-centric model that risks creating a dangerous regulatory vacuum.

Meanwhile, the technological reality accelerates, indifferent to these political machinations. The proliferation of foundational models, from ChatGPT and Claude to DeepSeek, has been succeeded by the deep integration of AI into the very operating systems of our lives through Apple Intelligence and Google Gemini. This is no longer a niche tool for developers; it is a pervasive layer being woven into the minutiae of human functions, from how we communicate and create to how we navigate our daily tasks.

The stage is, therefore, set for the third act in this consequential trilogy of conclaves, with the India AI Impact Summit to be hosted in New Delhi on February 19-20, 2026.

The objective of the summit must be to lay down the foundational ground rules for the AI era. The objective is not, at this juncture, to draft a monolithic exhaustive legal code attempting to govern every conceivable application of AI.

Such an endeavour would be both futile and counterproductive, stifling the very innovation that promises so much progress.

Instead, the aim must be to establish the first principles upon which all future national and international AI governance can be built.

It must be acknowledged that the AI-driven disruption is inevitable and, in many forms, desirable. The role of regulation is not to limit this growth, but to channel it, to ensure that the creative forces vastly outweigh the destructive ones, and that the benefits are distributed equitably across the globe.

The framework for these first principles must be built upon several core pillars. First, there must be a global commitment to safety, security and robustness, particularly for the most powerful, frontier AI models. This necessitates international standards for rigorous testing and evaluation, a shared understanding of critical risks, and protocols to prevent catastrophic misuse.

Second, the principles of transparency and explainability should be enshrined. Citizens and regulators alike must have insight into when and how AI systems are being used, especially in high-stakes domains like justice, finance and healthcare. Opaque algorithms making life-altering decisions are anathema to democratic accountability.

Third, a global consensus on data governance and privacy is paramount. The fuel for AI is data, and the unchecked harvesting and utilisation of personal information without clear, harmonised rules represent a fundamental threat to individual autonomy.

Fourth, we must confront the profound ethical dimensions, establishing red lines against uses of AI that violate fundamental human rights, such as pervasive social scoring or lethal autonomous weapons systems operating without meaningful human control.

The term 'to Google' is on the cusp of becoming an archaic relic, a testament to the breathtaking velocity of this shift. This is merely the opening salvo, the software-based uprising. The true revolution, the confluence of AI with physical robotics and a fully realised Internet of Things, promises a radical reordering of our physical world within the coming decade itself.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The future of AI is not about replacing humans, it's about augmenting human capabilities. — Sundar Pichai

Let wonder, wisdom coexist

RACHNA SINGH

I have a confession to make — one tucked away like a secret Horcrux in a corner of my heart. I am, and always have been, a Harry Potter devotee. When *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was released in 2001, I was the "responsible adult" taking my children to the cinema hall. But the truth was that I was every bit as spellbound as they were.

During a 2007 trip to London, I stumbled upon Harry Potter audiobooks in a library. I borrowed them and listened to them on repeat. These audiobooks are a part of my library even today and serve as my loyal companions on long drives and sleepless nights. When life feels daunting, I press play and let Stephen Fry's warm narration remind me that courage, friendship and a touch of mischief can conquer any darkness, even our modern-day Voldemort. I also spotted Platform 9¾ at King's Cross Station. This is the magical platform for Hogwarts Express. Back then it was just an inconspicuous, forlorn-looking yellow brick wall with a luggage trolley jutting out. The Potter mania had not struck then.

On a recent trip to London, nostalgia led me back to King's Cross Station and Platform 9¾. But what I found flummoxed me. The quiet corner had transformed into a bustling wonderland. Warner Bros had created a full-fledged Harry Potter shop beside it — an Olivanders twin, shelves brimming with wands, house scarves, keychains and enough Butterbeer merch to float the Hogwarts Express.

The old wall with its half-hidden trolley vanishing into the brick wall was still there. But now, there was a long, serpentine queue beside it that could easily outrival any ride at Disneyland. Grandmothers clutching grandkids, teenagers in Gryffindor robes and families grinning behind round glasses were all waiting to take a picture of the iconic wall. I was tempted to join the queue. But my staid self reprimanded me. Surely at 58, I'm too old for this?

Then I saw a grandmother ahead of me, giggling with her grandson as she adjusted her Gryffindor scarf. That settled it. I joined the line.

I waited almost two hours. When my turn came, I grabbed the trolley handle, leaned forward and for that one delicious instant, with my Slytherin scarf fluttering behind me, I was young again; eyes sparkling, ready for adventure.

As I walked away, feeling elated but a little silly for giving in to a childish whim, I realised something simple yet profound. We speak of age as if it were a threshold where wonder gives way to wisdom. But perhaps the secret lies in letting them coexist. The years may add lines to our faces, but they needn't dull the sparkle in our eyes. After all, age isn't measured in years, but in moments like these — when you still believe, if only for a heartbeat, that magic is real.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A silent resolve, not verbosity

Refer to 'The rhetoric worsens'; the writer has given a broad view of the prevailing unpleasant geopolitical conditions which affect every Indian citizen in some way. The powers that be should silently, yet decisively, focus on employment so that our youth are not swayed by arms and drug smuggling, violent protests, etc. Wary of the intent of the big powers to fish in troubled waters, India must pre-empt their moves by realigning its policies, keeping geopolitical interests in mind. Public sentiments should be addressed before they escalate. A silent strength should replace rhetoric for upholding stability, security and a strife-free world.

VIJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

Farmers' incomes can be enhanced

Refer to 'Punjab needs a food-processing push'; for decades, the state has focused mainly on the paddy-wheat cultivation cycle, which has led to declining soil fertility, groundwater depletion and stagnant farm incomes. Food processing can offer a viable alternative by diversifying agriculture, reducing post-harvest losses and generating rural employment. By encouraging processing units for fruits, vegetables, dairy and agro-based products, Punjab can significantly enhance farmers' incomes while creating linkages between farms and markets. The government should facilitate this transformation through incentives, simplified regulations, cold-chain infrastructure and skill development programmes. Public-private partnerships and support for small-scale entrepreneurs can help.

HARJINDER SINGH THANDI, MOHALI

Defying voices of hostility

Refer to 'Hockey handshake'; the players from India and Pakistan have done what our celebrated cricketers could not. They reminded us that a sport is meant to unite, not divide. Their spontaneous handshakes and high-fives were not just courteous acts but a quiet action signifying courage, defying fear and hostility that have come to shade

over every India-Pakistan encounter. The contrast between the two sports is telling: while young hockey players upheld the spirit of the game, cricket has become a spectacle of submission to political sensitivities and populist outrage. The hockey teams showed that dignity, discipline and mutual respect can coexist with fierce competition.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

Gesture of sportsmanship

With reference to 'Hockey handshake'; the handshakes in Malaysia was a good gesture of sportsmanship. The players did not carry any ill will, hatred or any political message. Hockey is a popular game among Punjabis on both sides of the border, with 70-80 per cent players from Punjab. Punjabis on both sides of the Line of Control have a commonality of culture, language, food, temperament, music, etc. Besides, with Jay Shah as the chairman of the International Cricket Council, the young cricketers would perhaps have been guided by him.

BM SINGH, AMRITSAR

Dheer supported cine workers

Refer to 'Actor Pankaj Dheer, Mahabharat's Karna, passes away'; his apt portrayal of an iconic character in BR Chopra's epic TV serial was memorable. The veteran actor said in interviews that he was worshipped as 'Karna' in two temples, one in Kamal, Haryana, and another in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. As former chairman of Cine Artists Welfare Trust and ex-general secretary of the Cine & TV Artists' Association, he worked tirelessly for the welfare of TV and cine workers.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Use Made-in-India Diwali products

Amid the festival season, it is important to gently remind ourselves to shop locally to be part of India's growth story. Let's buy India-made earthen *diyas*, *mirchi* lights, Diwali chandeliers, crackers, *rangoli* colours and decorative items. What better way than this to promote *atmanirbhar*?

KIRTI WADHAWAN, KANPUR

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ON MONDAY, THE Employees' Provident Fund Organisation announced several tweaks that make it easier for members to dip into the corpus in times of need. This is a welcome move. Members can now not only withdraw upto 100 per cent of the eligible balance, but can also withdraw multiple times with the limits being liberalised. For those who may need to draw on their savings to meet, for instance, the educational needs of their children — fees to educational institutions are paid over several years — or to cover their health expenses — in some diseases like cancer, the treatment is spread out over several weeks and months — these changes will bring about greater flexibility, easing liquidity constraints.

In the case of partial withdrawal, the existing categories have been streamlined into three groups: Essential needs (this includes illness, education and marriage), housing and special circumstances (under this, members can apply "without assigning any reason"). In the last category, as members formerly had to clarify the reason for withdrawal and it often led to rejection of claims, this is a significant change. Considering that during the Covid pandemic, members had extensively dipped into their EPFO corpus under the special facility provided — till May 21, 2021, it had settled around 76.31 lakh Covid-19 advance claims (in 2021, there were 25.88 crore members and 4.63 crore contributing members), perhaps for meeting their income shortfalls and/or their health expenses — this new framework will greatly facilitate ease of living. A young and growing workforce — as per the latest data, net payrolls have averaged around 1.3 crore over the last three years, with roughly half of them below the age of 25 — should have the facility of being able to seamlessly dip into their savings. After all, a large number of subscribers are left with a corpus of around Rs 1 lakh close to their retirement, implying that they tend to make early withdrawals from their PF.

The EPFO's board has approved the formation of a committee with members from the Finance Ministry, the RBI and the Ministry of Labour and Employment following the central bank's report on its fund management and investment practices. This is a welcome move as it could bring about greater clarity and transparency in its functioning. The RBI has, reportedly, recommended the separation of the EPFO's regulatory and fund management functions. It has also called for a rigorous assessment of its liabilities with regard to assets. Considering its past investments in companies such as IL&FS, there may be scope for its risk management systems to be strengthened. There is also a call for diversifying the portfolio, increasing exposure to equities, to increase returns. Any such move should be carefully considered. The EPF is a vital part of the social security architecture in India. Any change in its portfolio allocation strategy, which will translate to a change in the risk-reward profile, warrants careful analysis.

MARKING A SHIFT

Maoist leader Mallojula Venugopal Rao laying down arms, advocating cessation of armed struggle, is a major success story

THE SURRENDER OF Mallojula Venugopal Rao (alias Sonu), along with 60 other Maoist cadres, in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, is a significant moment in the decline of Left Wing Extremism in the country. It is, on the one hand, the result of a multi-pronged strategy to tackle what former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had called "the greatest internal security threat" to India. The crackdown by security forces — both central and in states affected by LWE violence — has kept Naxals on the back foot. Over the last decade and more, LWE violence has been declining: According to the Home Ministry's 2024 report, there was a 48 per cent drop in incidents of Maoist-related violence between 2013 and 2023 and a 65 per cent decline in related deaths, from 397 to 138. The killing of CPI (Maoist) General Secretary Nambala Keshava Rao, alias Basavaraju, in Chhattisgarh in May dealt a severe blow to the organisation. The success of that operation indicated that the state had breached — and had the support and intelligence network to do so — the heart of the "red belt". If Basavaraju's killing signalled a strategic and tactical success, Rao's surrender shows gains on the political-ideological front.

Rao, a CPI (Maoist) Politburo member, was part of the party's senior leadership and one of its primary ideologues. In the days before his surrender, letters between him and other leaders underlined the deepening rifts on ideological and, flowing from these, tactical questions. Rao, and reportedly a significant number who sympathise with his view in the Maoist ranks, want to discard violence as a political tool. The call for the "cessation of armed struggle" marks a major shift. The disillusionment with violence as a means to ensure social justice must be welcomed and built upon. The Centre's surrender policy, and trust in that process, have also played their part in this. From 2022 to October this year, 1,850 Maoists laid down arms — the figure was around 800 in 2023 and 2023.

The Centre has set March 2026 as the deadline to "eradicate Naxalism". Part of that mission has been the security forces' push deeper into Maoist strongholds. On the political front, victory may well be declared when erstwhile votaries of violence and armed struggle against the state "fight shoulder to shoulder with all political parties and struggling organisations as far as possible on public issues", without resorting to violence, as Rao suggested. But this is also a time for vigilance. There are prominent leaders in the CPI (Maoist), still, who continue to advocate violence. In the long run, the only way to defang Left Wing Extremism is an approach that balances the security imperative with a development policy that involves the people.

LIKE CAPE VERDE

The 2026 FIFA World Cup qualification of this island country is inspiring

FOOTBALL IS NO stranger to fairy tales. Yet, Cape Verde's World Cup qualification is remarkable. It has little footballing heritage and has barely produced a talent of note. Some of them, like France's Patrice Evra and Portugal's Nani, had remote Verdean ancestry. None of their diasporic players playing in the European leagues are A-listers. The only familiar name in the group and entourage is technical director Rui Costa, the former Portugal midfielder with the most silken of first touches.

But their moment of glory was not an alignment of favourable stars. It came from systematic planning. The biggest challenge was population. Only 5.25 lakh inhabit the island, the second least populated country to have qualified for the world's grandest sporting spectacle. Nearly as many have migrated to different corners of the globe. The 25-member squad was made of members born in France, Ireland, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Cape Verde. All 25 play for 25 different clubs in 16 different countries. Uniting them was one of the stiffest challenges they faced in establishing a competitive side capable of World Cup qualification. But the federation officials personally reached out to players of Cape Verdean ancestry and coaxed them into turning up for them.

The recruitment drive was not an overnight process — it began in 2019 under the watch of former coach Rui Agas. The biggest unifier was language, a Cape Verdean dialect of Creole. Their families, wherever they went, preserved and passed on the language. Local music blared during practice sessions to strike a cultural chord. With the funds from FIFA, they built a state-of-the-art stadium. The president wanted to name it after Pele, before someone told him that the Brazilian had never visited the country. Whether they succeed on the biggest stage or not, they offer valuable lessons to all nations with sporting ambitions. That size and population, heritage or history, are no excuses for unfulfilled dreams. For Cape Verdean footballers, it is not the end of a dream, but the start of a new one.

A cut in the right direction



SURJIT S BHALLA AND RAJESH SHUKLA

The much-needed GST reduction could be a signal that big-bang reforms are ahead

THE GST CUT that kicked in on September 22 has been near-universally applauded for its boldness in drastically reducing taxes on most consumption items. It is estimated, officially and by most analysts, that this cut, while large, will only result in a net tax loss of Rs 1 trillion for the next 12 months.

Using unit-level NSS 2022-23 consumption data, the effective GST tax-rate (defined as GST revenue from each item of consumption divided by consumption expenditure) pre-reform was 11 per cent and post-reform 6.2 per cent. This result is also supported by the analysis of PRICE's ICE 360 survey for 2022-23. We undertook this extensive two-survey analysis precisely because of the huge divergence in our results from official and expert commentary (hereafter the experts) on the tax cut. The experts suggest a base-case loss of Rs 1 trillion, which is less than half a per cent of the pre-reform expectation of Rs 23 trillion GST collection [estimated as 11 per cent of PFCE of 209 trillion in 2025-26]. Our result of a Rs 10 trillion loss is close to 10 times the result obtained by the experts. As the old cowboy movie line goes, "This town isn't big enough for both of us", i.e. either the experts are broadly right, or we are broadly right — both cannot be on the same page (or town!).

How did we get our estimate? A recent MoSPI-NSS conference asked the important question — how can unit-level NSS surveys help in the formulation of policy? Our analysis would not have been possible without recourse to extensive analysis of unit-level data. Household-level consumption data from the NSS 2022-23 consumption survey were matched with pre- and post-GST tax rates for 364 consumption items in 37 consumption categories. Tax rates were obtained as published by the GST Council, PIB and other reliable sources in September 2025. Household consumption was defined to be market-purchased consumption (excluding household production).

Results suggest that the tax cut is progressive. For example, the effective tax rate (ETR) on food, which accounts for 43 per cent of total consumption, falls from 9.5 to 3.4 per cent; for education and medical expenditures — 11 per cent of consumption — the

Given half a chance, most Indian reformers point to China's growth outperforming that of India. But not one of these growth critics (including experts from the IMF, senior Indian finance professionals, senior government officials and the RBI!) has pointed out that the average all tax-GDP ratio in India is now very high (around 18-19 per cent), whereas the average for East Asian economies is around 13 per cent, and that of China around 15 percent. A low taxation ratio helps higher growth and productivity. The GST cut, along with the February income tax cut, is likely to reduce India's tax-GDP ratio to around 15.5-16.5 per cent (close to China's!) and for this reason alone is a very positive move.

ETR declines from 12.4 to 4.8 per cent. For household services — 15 per cent of total consumption — the ETR declines from 39.5 to 11.3 per cent.

For analysis and forecast for 2025-26, we make the safe assumption that the consumption pattern has not changed over the last three years. Projecting all variables (PFCE, GDP, etc.) to 2025-26 yields, as shown earlier, Rs 23 trillion GST collections. If the new effective GST tax rate is 6.2 per cent, as suggested by both the NSS and PRICE's ICE survey for 2022-23, post-cut tax revenue will approximate Rs 13 trillion [obtained as 062*209 = 13]. Hence, the projected tax loss is 23 minus 13 or Rs 10 trillion.

The experts' reasoning for their optimistic little tax loss estimate is that they are allowing for all the tax cut effects to play out. Their argument is that there will be increased consumption and compliance, which will result in higher GST revenues. But is this argument correct? Econ 101 suggests that the tax cut will result in an increase in post-GST tax income of Rs 10 trillion. Instead of this money going to the government to spend wastefully, it will be spent "efficiently" by private individuals. This increase in income will be allocated to both consumption and savings, approximately in a 50-50 proportion (middle-class and above have a higher savings rate). Hence, consumption increase is likely to be about Rs 5 trillion, which with a consumption tax rate of 6.2 per cent will result in an increase in GST revenue of Rs 0.31 trillion. Adding this to the base case of Rs 13 trillion yields a net tax collection of Rs 13.3 trillion; adding Rs 1 trillion due to input tax credit not passed on in the new system yields Rs 14.3 trillion. This is still almost Rs 9 trillion less than the government-expert estimate!

For governments around the world, one source of (cold) comfort is the inflation tax. However, the world has changed and is changing. One likely safe assumption is that present and future nominal GDP growth is declining because inflation is declining (not just in India but in the entire world). There is demographics, AI, increases in productivity especially in services, increasing global uncertainty, a lack of real wage increases be-

cause of sharp increases in global supply of educated labour, etc. Take your pick, but you will reach the conclusion that inflation is steady to declining — a low inflation trap if you will. All this means that nominal GDP and consumption growth is likely to be in single digits — hence, tax revenue lower than initially assumed.

Is the GST cut a bad policy move? No. One of us (Surjit) has consistently argued that one of the important factors constraining Indian growth was the very high tax-to-GDP ratio. The recommendation of ever-higher tax collection is flawed and leads to lower than potential GDP growth. Given half a chance, most Indian reformers point to China's growth outperforming that of India. But not one of these growth critics (including experts from the IMF, senior Indian finance professionals, senior government officials and the RBI!) has pointed out that the average all tax-GDP ratio in India is now very high (around 18-19 per cent), whereas the average for East Asian economies is around 13 per cent, and that of China around 15 per cent. A low taxation ratio helps higher growth and productivity. The GST cut, along with the February income tax cut, is likely to reduce India's tax-GDP ratio to around 15.5-16.5 per cent (close to China's!) and for this reason alone is a very positive move.

While announcing the tax cut, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a point of explicitly mentioning the dampening effects of trade tensions as an important reason for the large stimulus. The PM now needs to tread the path of minimum government, maximum governance. And the government needs to deliver on trade, tariff and investment reform. We should realise that self-reliance is not the mantra for growth, and even less of a mantra for Viksit Bharat. Many of us are hoping that the tax reform is a signal that the government is intent on big-bang structural reform. If that does happen, and only if that happens, will India have the correct policy mix for scaling Viksit Bharat.

Bhalla is chairperson of the Technical Expert Group for the first official Household Income Survey for India. Shukla is CEO of PRICE. Views are personal



NAVAMI KRISHNAMURTHY

FOR THE PAST decade, commuting in Bengaluru has never been merely about travelling from point A to point B. It has evolved into a meticulously orchestrated daily exercise: Mapping the route, calculating traffic snarls, and leaving hours early in a vain attempt to arrive on time, only to discover that no strategy can shield you from the city's true nemesis: Potholes. The moment you think you've mastered the rhythm of the city, the ever-present potholes, now emblematic of Bengaluru roads, turn even the most familiar route into an unpredictable situation. They serve as a reminder to every commuter that in this city, punctuality is optional, patience is mandatory, and reaching your destination is never a certainty.

Over 25 years of navigating Bengaluru's streets, I've learned something crucial: Potholes are not all the same. Each one has a personality, a story, and a way of making you feel, sometimes annoyed, sometimes helpless, but always alert.

There are "familiar potholes", the ones I know like old friends, though not the kind you'd wish to see every day. They've been around forever, ignored by the public, neglected by the government and invisible to all but those who traverse them constantly.

There are 'familiar potholes', the ones I know like old friends, though not the kind you'd wish to see every day. They've been around forever, ignored by the public, neglected by the government and invisible to all but those who traverse them constantly.

They are familiar because they refuse to vanish, having existed long enough to fade into the city's background hum, almost as if silently mocking me.

Then there are the potholes that suddenly become famous, which I'd like to call "celebrity potholes". These are the ones that attract attention from both the public and the government, either because an accident or two has occurred at their location or because they reside in the busiest, most strategic parts of the city, contributing to unruly traffic. I remember the commotion near Cubbon Park metro station in September, when the Deputy CM personally came to inspect the potholes, promising repairs with a hard deadline of October 31. Overnight, these once-ignored dents in the road were popularised, featured in news articles and Instagram posts. Suddenly, their existence mattered, not because of commuters like me, but because someone was finally watching.

And finally, there are the "rainy-day" potholes, the unpredictable, treacherous surprises that appear overnight, filled with water and danger, waiting to test your luck. You ride along cautiously, never sure if the next puddle will swallow the wheel of your car or just cause a harmless splash. You never know

what damage they might do or whether you'll end up making it to your destination unscathed. Every commute becomes a test of luck, patience, and your reflexes.

What worries me most, though, is that the situation keeps getting worse. As a commuter, I can't help but fear the next accident waiting to happen or the next set of rains in the city that will worsen an already battered set of roads. Untreated, "alive" potholes are hazards for autos and two-wheelers alike, and they've already caused more than enough damage.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to romanticise the chaos or justify it with these categories of mine. Everyone has their own pothole coping mechanism. Some people have created live maps of the city's most dangerous roads where people can upload reports and call attention to unsafe stretches. Or they continue to rant about it to their fellow commuters. For me, this categorisation is a way to make sense of the madness, to tell myself, albeit sarcastically, that maybe, someday, things might get better. And maybe, one day, I might even look back at these potholes with a strange sense of nostalgia.

The writer is a Bengaluru-based lawyer and is currently with Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

OCTOBER 16, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

EXTRADITION TREATY

INDIA AND BRITAIN have agreed in principle on the broad outlines of an extradition treaty regarding terrorists, the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi said. Addressing a press conference at the end of his two-day official visit to Britain, Gandhi said he and the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had agreed to curb terrorism and, "Now we have to see how we can bring about this treaty and implement it." A major achievement of Gandhi was to make Britain agree on the removal of a clause in its law that offered protection to terrorists in the name of "genuine political activity".

LALA CRITICAL

INDIA'S FORMER CRICKET captain, Lala Amarnath, who suffered a massive heart at-

tack, was reported to be in a "critical condition" by doctors attending to him at the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi. Amarnath, who complained of pain in the chest, collapsed in his bedroom, according to his youngest son, Rajender. Doctors were immediately called and they advised that the veteran cricketer, who scored a Test hundred on debut, be taken to the hospital.

DHAKA ROOF COLLAPSE

AT LEAST 300 students were feared dead and over 400 others were believed to be injured after the roof of a Dhaka University dormitory collapsed following heavy rains, university officials and hospital doctors said. The roof of the Jagannath Hall, where about 1,200 male Hindu minority students live, gave in while most students were inside studying or

sleeping. The death toll could rise higher as some students were reportedly trapped in the debris.

ASSAM ELECTORAL ROLL

THE ELECTION COMMISSION has asked the Assam government to take a series of measures including the constitution of a high-power cell to expedite the disposal of over one million claims and objections filed in the state on the draft electoral rolls. The Deputy Election Commissioner, V Ramakrishnan, who visited Assam last week along with C I Rose, secretary of the Election Commission, told newsmen that the Commission had requested the state government to make available additional manpower on a whole-time basis so that claims and objections could be disposed of faster.



The CJI's restraint and the media's reckoning



SANJAY HEGDE
SR ADVOCATE, SUPREME COURT

ON a Monday morning, an act of madness breached the quiet dignity of the Supreme Court. A 71-year-old lawyer, Rakesh Kishore, hurled an object at the Chief Justice of India BR Gavai. The projectile missed, but the insult did not. I was in that courtroom. I did not see the act itself, only the sudden stir, the hush that followed, and the CJ's calm voice: "Don't get distracted. We are not distracted. These things do not affect me."

That response defined the day. There was no panic, no outburst, no order to have the man dragged away. The CJI continued to work, unruffled. Within seconds, the rhythm of proceedings resumed. It felt as if the institution, embodied in its *pater familias*, refused to be shaken.

That composure was constitutional philosophy in action. The CJI's deliberate lack of reaction became the foundation of his decision not to press charges or initiate contempt. In that context, restraint was not leniency; it was majesty. By treating the episode as beneath response, the CJI affirmed that dignity is not lost through insult, but through insecurity.

The attacker did not deserve such grace. Inside court, he mumbled that his act was "intended for Gavai alone." Outside, before cameras, his tone changed. He suddenly alleged that *Sanatana Dharma* had been insulted. The shift from personal pique to ideological posturing revealed the truth. This was not conviction but opportunism. Inside the court, he was an offender. Outside, in the theatre of social media, he styled himself a crusader.

Interviews, statements and talk-show appearances began. Some TV anchors painted him as a misunderstood rebel. The man turned into content. Click by click, his infamy metastasised into influence. This is the real danger. When outrage turns profitable, civility becomes costly. The judiciary, bound by decorum, cannot compete in that marketplace.

Till that point, the CJI's restraint drew admiration. But as the offender continued to speak, as social-media clips began to glorify him, the Bench and the Bar stirred. Justice Ujjal Bhuyan called the act "an affront to the institution." The Attorney General for India, R Venkataramani, acting on requests from the Bar, granted consent to initiate criminal-contempt proceedings against Rakesh Kishore — a rare and serious step.

Supreme Court Bar Association president Vikas Singh, along with Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, mentioned the matter before the Bench of Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joydalya Bagchi, seeking an early listing. Singh went further. He asked the Bench for a



FAITH IN LAW : A man hurling a shoe at the CJI should be a figure of disgrace, not an algorithmic star. AN

John Doe order — an injunction against social media posts glorifying the attack. The concern went beyond one man's misconduct. A wider ecosystem of provocation was emerging, where violence against judges could become an algorithm for fame.

Justice Surya Kant responded calmly. "Honble CJI has been extremely magnanimous... that shows the institution is not affected by these kinds of incidents." He wondered whether reopening the matter might give fresh oxygen to publicity seekers. Justice Bagchi agreed, asking if new proceedings would "revive and give a fillip to all these publicity-hungry elements."

Their worry was understandable. Every judicial action, however justified, risks becoming a hashtag battle. A contempt case could

easily become Episode No. 2 of the same media drama.

Justice Bagchi said, "It is because of our behaviour in court that we survive and get the confidence of the people." The Solicitor General described the Chief Justice's forbearance as "a gesture of majesty." He warned, however, that continued social media valorisation was "a matter of institutional integrity." Vikas Singh agreed, noting that Kishore had shown no regret and kept "making statements glorifying his act."

The imagery grew more striking when Singh invoked faith. "Some people say Lord Vishnu will justify it. Lord Vishnu will never justify this kind of violence. It is an insult to Lord Vishnu also." Justice Kant agreed. "Our holy scriptures never condoned violence."

The moral argument was complete. Even in the lan-

This is the real danger. When outrage turns profitable, civility becomes costly. The judiciary, bound by decorum, cannot compete in that marketplace.

A truce without peace : Gaza's Kafkaesque trial



SHELLEY WALLA
FORMER PROFESSOR, PANJAB UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH

THE war in West Asia has at last yielded a truce. Relief and gratitude accompany the hope that the guns have fallen silent and lives may begin to be rebuilt. Yet, alongside this cautious celebration, scepticism persists considering what happened on October 15. Temporary cessations of violence often mask unresolved grievances and structural injustices. The question remains whether this truce will endure.

I cannot help but think of those six friends waking to the fragile dawn of a peace that wasn't real, believing the genocide was over; that perhaps the long night had finally lifted. They walked through the eastern suburb of Gaza City, searching for what had once been their homes, only to find them reduced to rubble, their memories turned to dust. And then, as if the world itself denied them even the small

mercy of survival, a blast tore through the morning's silence and they were gone.

For me, the scene embodies the cruel absurdity of the conflict, where even the hope of peace had become a death sentence. The strike in Gaza after the declaration of ceasefire, which killed six Palestinians, was followed by retaliation. Hamas gunmen killed nine Israelis in the street. The symmetry of violence, blow for blow, body for body, defines a region where justice is deferred and humanity lies in ruins.

My elegy is not for the dead, but for the living, the ones condemned to remember. Mothers cradle photographs of sons who will not return; fathers dig with bare hands for glimpses of familiar garments. To grow up amid ruins is to inherit grief and the discipline of endurance. And yet, amid the dust, courage persists, as seen in a teacher gathering children under a broken awning; a doctor refusing to abandon his post despite power loss. These acts do not change the world but confront its collapse.

Meanwhile, the world watches in weary repetition. Statements of outrage, appeals for restraint and polished diplomatic phrases continue their familiar acts of manipulation. Still, despair cannot be total. Gaza's people find ways to affirm life: they write poetry



in the shadows, send messages through interrupted networks and turn mourning into testimony. Each surviving story, each image of a mother's embrace, indicts the silence that engulfs the world. Their very visibility becomes an act of rebellion.

In the centennial year of Kafka's *The Trial*, the vision of existence under absurd and disciplinary authority is uncannily farsighted. Gaza exists in an uninterrupted state of judgment without justice, a labyrinth where every road leads back to suffering and a long wait. The notion of peace becomes surreal, a word worn away by repetition. And yet, the stubborn will to narrate and bear witness to the unending pain continues. The conflict descends into an abyss of suffering, accentuated by a moral

The West Asia conflict exposes the limitations of conventional approaches to peace. Repeated ceasefires and humanitarian aid have failed to address the root causes of the issue.

reckoning that the global community seems reluctant to confront. Each explosion and retaliatory strike perpetuates a cycle of violence that defies logic. In this context, Kafka's notion of the "logic of the absurd" seems disconcertingly relevant. The conflict takes on a life of its own, driven by a bureaucratic machinery that prioritises power and control over human life and dignity.

Even as the war pauses, the trial continues. What Kafka imagined in *The Trial*, a machinery of accusation outliving the crime, now finds its faithful stage in the uneasy peace that follows, outlasting the transgression it purports to resolve. Bombs have fallen silent, but the bureaucracy of control moves faster. Drone echoes replace the shuffle of papers, the vigilant manage-

ment of despair. The drumbeats of war fade, but their resonance lingers at tumpikes. The trial Kafka envisioned, where guilt is assumed and justice eternally postponed, has for decades been inflicted upon Palestine. Even now, as the world hails the ceasefire, Gaza is not acquitted but doomed to a different sentence. Peace here becomes not an end but an unbending hiatus, a technical reset of occupation. As in *The Trial*, fear endures here, disguised as protocol, enforced through bureaucracy measures rather than missiles.

It unmistakably follows that the West Asia conflict exposes the limitations of conventional approaches to peace. Repeated ceasefires and humanitarian aid have failed to address the root causes of the issue. The language of peace processes continues to mask the reality on the ground, where bureaucratic measures are mistaken for progress. The apparatus of control, including permits, ration cards and border restrictions, remains in place, albeit under the guise of stability — in reality, an act of domination.

This approach prioritises short-term calm over long-term justice and sovereignty, leaving the underlying issues unresolved. True peace requires a commitment to unravelling the conditions that perpetuate the conflict. Thump

and his allies may claim credit for the quiet of the guns, yet the ceasefire has not destroyed the trials; it has archived them, allowing authority to settle into the daily routine.

The tragedy of situations like Palestine is exacerbated by the international community's tacit complicity. Terms like "security", "self-defence" and "peace process" have lost their meaning, becoming mere justifications for policies that prioritise control over human rights. This phenomenon echoes the themes of Franz Kafka's works, where bureaucratic red tape serves to oppress and disempower individuals.

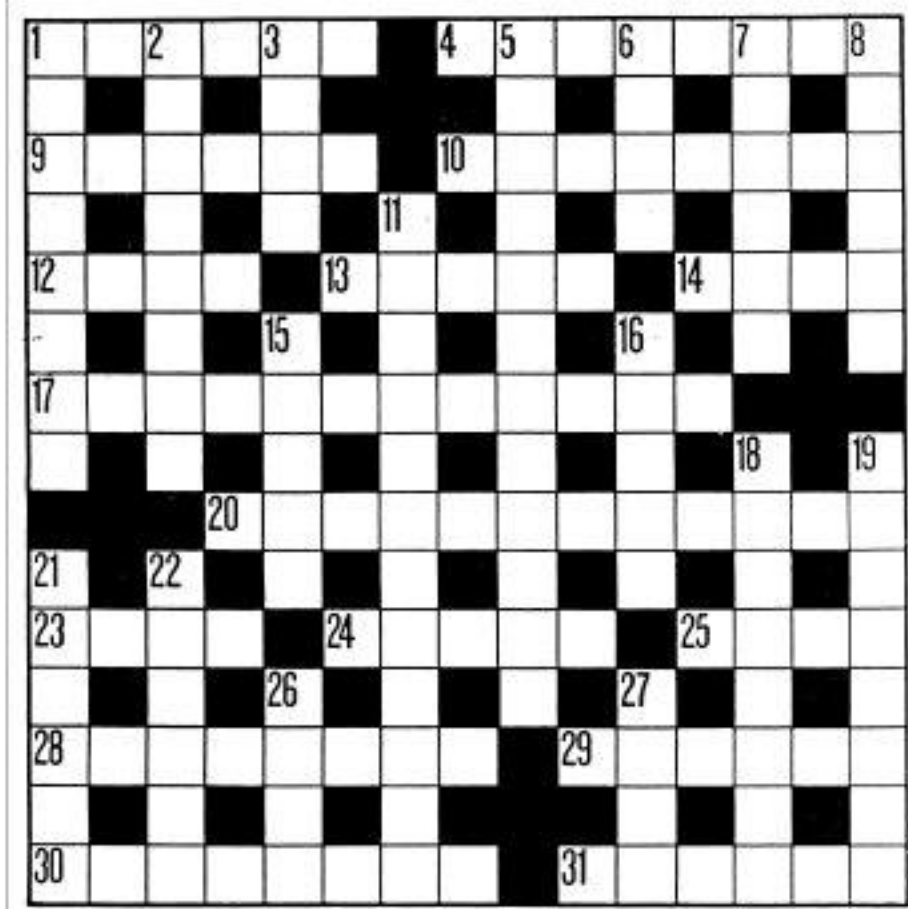
Meanwhile, Gaza will endure. Poets will write again, mothers mend, children trace names on walls that may fall once more. And still, I return in thought to those six friends. They are the human pulse of a city reduced to ashes. Their ordinary desire to see the world return to normal ended in a single, cruel instant. Their story lingers as a testament to the fragility of life under occupation, to the absurdity of a world that calls a truce 'peace' while the machinery of suffering marches on. Remembering them challenges us to see beyond rhetoric and confront the true cost of violence in Gaza and beyond.

Ultimately, this episode is about the faith of a billion citizens who still believe that, whatever the chaos outside, justice inside the SC proceeds with reason and restraint. Every attack on a judge is an attack on that faith. Every indulgent click, share, or laugh that follows such an attack erodes it a little more. Institutions must build structural safeguards and social consensus that violence against judges is unacceptable.

The lesson of that Monday morning is twofold. First, the Chief Justice taught us the power of calm. Second, the aftermath reminds us that calm must not mean complacency. Let the offender face due process. Let the Bar remain vigilant. Let the media find its conscience again.

And for all our sakes, let us hope that the sooner the hype around this incident ends, the better it is.

QUICK CROSSWORD



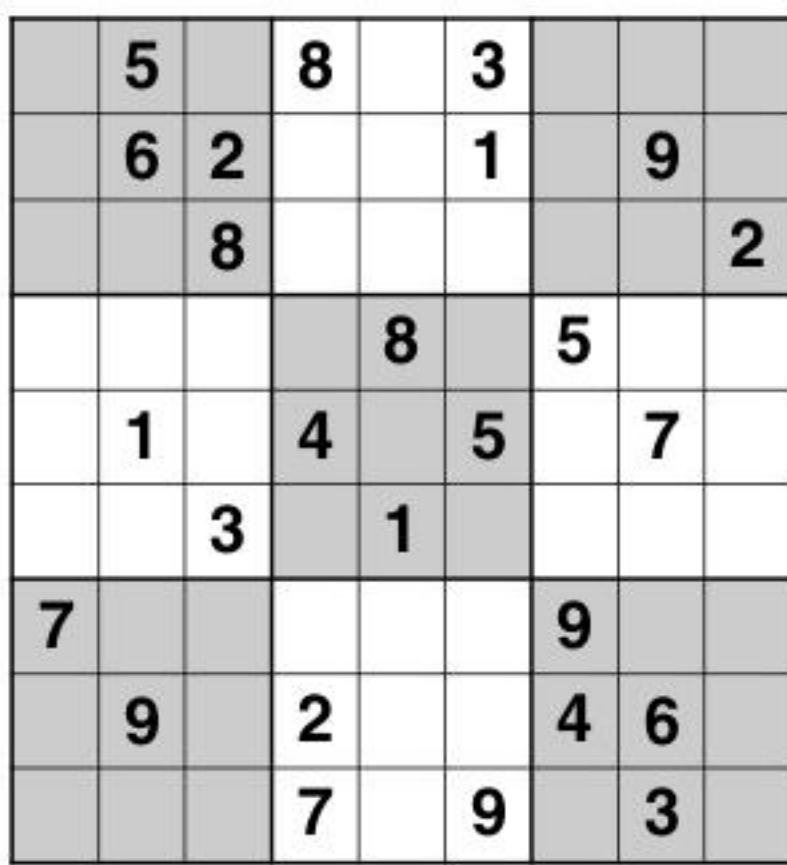
- ACROSS**
- 1 Formal discussion (6)
 - 4 At high speed (4,4)
 - 9 Lento (6)
 - 10 Following modern trends (2-2-4)
 - 12 Gardening implement (4)
 - 13 Intended to cause laughter (5)
 - 14 Reasonable (4)
 - 17 Irrevocably (6,6)
 - 20 Cordially (4,4,4)
 - 23 A support (4)
 - 24 Awry (5)
 - 25 Pellets of frozen rain (4)
 - 28 Unofficial (8)
 - 29 Lump of raw gold (6)
 - 30 Waterproof overshoes (8)
 - 31 To plan (6)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Alias, 4 Red tape, 8 Mat, 9 Face value, 10 Entrant, 11 Aphid, 13 Seeing, 15 Jetsam, 18 Waste, 19 Attempt, 21 Affidavit, 23 Nod, 24 Handful, 25 Layer.

Down: 1 Aimless, 2 In tatters, 3 Sofia, 4 Recite, 5 Deviate, 6 Awl, 7 Emend, 12 Hush money, 14 No end of, 16 Matador, 17 Marvel, 18 Wrath, 20 Total, 22 Fan.

SU DO KU



V. HARD

FORECAST

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	1750 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	06:28 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	19
New Delhi	33	18
Amritsar	30	19
Bathinda	34	17
Jalandhar	31	19
Ludhiana	31	20
Bhiwani	31	17
Hisar	33	16
Sirsa	33	18
Dharamsala	28	12
Manali	24	09
Shimla	25	12
Srinagar	26	09
Jammu	29	18
Kargil	19	02
Leh	17	-01
Dehradun	31	17
Mussoorie	22	13

TEMPERATURE IN °C

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

NAVIGATE WITH CARE

Trump's claims on India's oil imports from Russia underline Delhi's challenge: It must reiterate red lines, while moving ahead

ON WEDNESDAY, US President Donald Trump once again raised the contentious issue of India's energy imports from Russia. While his unhappiness at India's oil purchases is well known, what came as a surprise was the claim that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had "assured" him that India would stop buying oil from Russia. "That's a big step," he said. While India's Ministry of External Affairs has said it is not aware of any conversation between the two leaders Wednesday, Trump's comments following his first statement — "There will be no oil, he's not buying his oil from Russia... you know, you can't do it immediately, it's a little bit of a process, but the process is going to be over with soon" — acknowledge that any diversification away from a big supplier is a "process". This also opens up crucial space in which Delhi can negotiate. It will need to be tactful, however, as it pushes ahead, while taking care not to come under pressure from the Opposition either to counter Trump's claims, or to give in to the temptation to grandstand for the domestic audience.

India has not bowed under pressure from the White House, even as a tariff rate of 50 per cent has been imposed on its exports to the US market. Oil imports from Russia have been holding steady. As per data from Kpler, in September, oil imports were around 1.6 million barrels per day, down 5 per cent from August, but as of October 10, imports averaged around 1.81 million barrels. However, the pain from the levy of the tariff and the penalty is being felt. As per data released a few days ago, India's exports to the US fell by 12 per cent in September. While India should not compromise on its strategic autonomy, and must safeguard its energy security, it should also factor in changes to the cost-benefit matrix of relying to such an extent on one supplier. It could look at increasing energy procurement from the US. This would only deepen the relationship. Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal is reported to have said that "there is headroom of around \$12-15 billion, which we can purchase without worrying about the configuration of refineries".

There are other points of convergence as well between the two countries. Only a few days ago, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said that America expects support from "Europe, India and other Asian democracies" as it pushes back against China's controls on exports of critical minerals. This indicates an alignment in priorities, increasing the space for manoeuvre. As India seeks to conclude its trade deal with the US, it must skillfully navigate the various points of contention that have arisen. This is a crucial period in India-US relations. It must tread carefully.

MAPPING WELLNESS

Global Burden of Disease Report underlines need for a multi-pronged effort to deal with growing lifestyle diseases in India

IN 2017, THE National Health Policy emphasised the need to focus on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like heart ailments, diabetes and respiratory afflictions. The policy was a response to an epidemiological transition that had commenced around the second decade of this century. The report of the latest Global Burden of Disease study, released earlier this week, shows that the shift has become more pronounced in the eight years since the policy came into operation. It makes a strong case for a healthcare strategy that recognises the adverse effects of environmental pollution, unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles. Another key takeaway of the report is that though Indians are living longer, chronic diseases diminish the quality of life of senior citizens.

The Global Burden of Disease study should be read along with other recent studies on NCDs in India. WHO data, for instance, shows that these diseases are responsible for close to 65 per cent of deaths in India and about a fourth of those who succumb to NCDs are below the age of 70 — this figure is roughly 12 per cent for the US and 17 per cent for China. In other words, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and lung ailments are cutting the lives of a large section of Indians short, hurting their families, society, and the economy. The problem is also that some of these diseases are not well understood. The Global Burden of Disease study draws attention to one such ailment, COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) — it constitutes more than 75 per cent of the country's burden of respiratory diseases. COPD is incurable, but not untreatable, and early diagnosis can make a big difference. In a large number of patients, however, the disease evades diagnosis because doctors do not follow protocols and most often target the symptoms — cough, cold and fever. In recent years, the government has bolstered community health centres (CHCs) and primary health centres (PHCs) in rural areas. The Global Burden of Disease study underscores the next-level challenge for the National Health Policy — to strengthen the diagnostic acumen of doctors at CHCs and PHCs.

The country needs an approach that combines medical research with understanding from nutritional and ecological sciences. Ensuring that people make healthy choices will require building awareness — on food habits, physical activities, the environment — from a young age through schools, families, and communities. Building synergies between projects targeted at the environment, the National Clean Air Programme, for instance, and those aimed at improving people's health and well-being is an imperative that cannot be postponed.

NOT INTERESTED

A new paper suggests aliens and humans may have more in common than was previously imagined

SILENCE IS MADE up of paradoxes, it holds both questions and answers, mysteries and the keys to unlock them. It is the moment before the reveal, a prelude; it is also nothing — a black hole in which climax falls flat. The Fermi paradox is a great example of this — it encapsulates the contradiction between the probability of the existence of advanced extraterrestrial civilisations and the lack of evidence to support the idea. In this Great Silence, as the paradox is colloquially referred to, humans can imagine themselves all alone or they can dream of an extraterrestrial kinship. A new paper titled 'A Less Terrifying Universe? Mundanity as an Explanation for the Fermi Paradox', awaiting peer review, places its bets on option two.

In it, scientists explain the lack of detectable extraterrestrial civilisations (ETCs) through the theory of "radical mundanity". Robin Corbet, senior research scientist at the University of Maryland, argues that perhaps aliens have not found Earth because they are not as far ahead technologically, or different behaviourally, from humans, as scientists imagine. "The idea is that they're more advanced, but not much more advanced. It's like having an iPhone 42 rather than an iPhone 17," says Corbet. According to him, such extraterrestrial life does not have the tools to reach human beings — perhaps they are not even interested.

Corbet asks people to consider the possibility that instead of being light-years ahead in their technological capacity, aliens are simply fed up — of space exploration, of human beings, of things just being too boring. Among many fantastical theories about alien life, "radical mundanity" offers a soothing middle ground. One that bets on similarities, not differences. This fills the Great Silence with a refreshing new possibility: Aliens may be far away, but in their commitment to the mundane, they are closer to humans than ever before.



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

GLOBAL TRADE IS entering its most turbulent phase since the creation of the WTO. The US, the EU and China — once the engines of globalisation — are now its biggest disruptors. The US and EU use access to their massive markets as a pressure tool. China, meanwhile is using its dominance over production, supply chains, and critical minerals to keep other economies dependent.

The US and China are locked in a fierce contest of economic power. Washington is tightening controls on exports of advanced technology — especially semiconductors and chipmaking tools — to slow China's rise. Beijing has struck back by curbing exports of rare earths and critical minerals vital for defence, electronics, and clean energy. This tit-for-tat has turned trade and technology into weapons, pushing the world toward a prolonged supply chain standoff that may soon evolve into a full-blown economic cold war.

In this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, India must chart a clear strategy to protect its economic interests and seize new opportunities.

The US, once the champion of free trade, is now undermining the system it created. The "Liberation Day" tariffs announced by President Donald Trump on April 2 — added on top of earlier duties — broke WTO rules and turned tariffs into a weapon for political bargaining. Because tariffs target specific countries, companies are rerouting shipments through low-tariff markets instead of buying from the most efficient suppliers. India's exports to the US in September are 37 per cent less than in May, a direct consequence of tariffs.

Crude oil is another major issue. The US is pressuring allies to shift from Russian to US supplies — the EU alone has pledged \$250 billion a year to buy American energy, with Japan and the UK making separate commitments. The US has penalised India for purchasing cheaper Russian crude. However, the US is still a net oil importer, running a \$60 billion deficit in 2024, and much of its light shale crude cannot be refined abroad without costly upgrades. By forcing global buyers toward limited US supplies, Washington risks creating artificial shortages, inflating prices,

US, EU and China are rewriting trade rules.
India needs its own playbook

As the US weaponises tariffs and energy policy, the EU hides protectionism behind green regulations, and China turns its industrial dominance into geopolitical leverage, India's approach must rest on three pillars: Strengthening domestic manufacturing, safeguarding strategic autonomy and securing supply chains. Free trade agreements alone won't solve the problem — over 80 per cent of world trade already happens outside them. New Delhi should diversify energy and trade partners, resist one-sided deals, and protect critical sectors. Equally, India must lower production costs, build scale in key industries, and assert its rules regarding digital and environmental standards.

and destabilising energy markets. India, now under pressure to scale back Russian imports, must tread carefully.

While Washington uses tariffs to achieve its geo-economic goals, Europe hides behind environmental rules. The EU's measures — such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) — are import tax collection tools rather than genuine climate solutions.

Under CBAM, the EU will start charging importers for the embedded carbon in steel, aluminium, cement, and other goods from January 2026, generating billions in new income for Brussels without any direct environmental benefit. Even before full implementation, and during the CBAM's current "reporting-only" phase, India's steel and aluminium exports to Europe fell 24 per cent in FY 2025 over the previous year. The fall will be steep once the tax kicks in in January.

Similarly, the Deforestation Regulation restricts imports of coffee, leather, palm oil, and wood products unless exporters prove that goods weren't sourced from land deforested after 2020. Pain will increase as the EU plans to extend CBAM and EUDR to all industrial and agricultural imports within the next decade. New Delhi must insist on clear safeguards as it negotiates its FTA with the EU.

China deserves credit for building the world's most powerful manufacturing base. It now dominates electronics, machinery, solar panels, lithium-ion batteries, electric vehicles, chemicals, and consumer goods. However, its subsidised products through aggressive exports have flooded global markets, shutting factories in other countries and distorting trade.

The auto sector shows the scale of China's dominance: It can produce 50 million vehicles a year — enough to meet 55 per cent of global demand — compared with just 10 million in the US. This scale threatens to close auto plants around the world. The pattern is familiar: Solar cells, APIs, electronic components, and EVs have all seen similar disruptions. Hundreds of solar firms in the US and EU have already shut down, and India faces the same pressure across sectors.

China's grip also extends to raw materials.

It refines about 70 per cent of the world's rare earths, essential for defence, electronics, and clean energy. On October 9, Beijing weaponised this control by requiring export approvals for these materials, prompting Washington to retaliate with 100 per cent tariffs on Chinese goods the next day.

As China tightens its grip on materials and manufacturing — and starts using them for political leverage — global tensions are rising, creating a cycle of trade conflict that could hurt China as much as everyone else.

As the US weaponises tariffs and energy policy, the EU hides protectionism behind green regulations, and China turns its industrial dominance into geopolitical leverage, India's approach must rest on three pillars: Strengthening domestic manufacturing, safeguarding strategic autonomy and securing supply chains.

Free trade agreements alone won't solve the problem — over 80 per cent of world trade already happens outside them. New Delhi should diversify energy and trade partners, resist one-sided deals, and protect critical sectors. Equally, India must lower production costs, build scale in key industries, and assert its rules regarding digital and environmental standards.

Just as Suzuki's entry transformed India's auto sector in the 1980s, and Apple is doing for smartphones now, the country needs similar anchor investments in electronics, defence, and green technology to build global supply chains. In a world defined by power-based trade, India's strength will come not from alignment but from self-reliance backed by manufacturing competitiveness.

Indian producers face costs up to 25 per cent higher than Chinese firms due to expensive power, costly credit, and import duties on raw materials. Opening the market further to industrial giants like China without fixing these issues would only widen India's \$100 billion trade deficit with Beijing.

Only a strong domestic base will secure India's place in today's VUCA world.

The writer is founder, Global Trade Research Initiative



ABDULLAH M ABU SHAWESH

ALL POLITICAL COMMENTATORS, diplomats, and observers of the Middle East must remember a simple truth: The two years of war on Gaza cannot, and must not, be erased from analysis or history. The world before the war is not the same as the world after it.

Israel and its allies are already working tirelessly to close this dark chapter, to reduce history to one date, October 7, and to frame it as the only starting point, even linking it to the Holocaust. Their media machinery has worked relentlessly to portray that day as if the universe itself began there, so that everything that followed could be justified as "self-defence". But Gaza changed the world. It polarised nations, divided societies, and exposed the deep hypocrisy that underlies the so-called liberal international order. For the first time in history, a genocide was broadcast live, supported by Western powers, while the rest of the world stood helpless, unable even to deliver food or medicines, or to stop starvation and agony. The UNSC remained silent. The General Assembly issued resolutions that meant nothing on the ground, and the International Criminal Court was punished for daring to act. The mask of moral superiority has fallen.

This silence has emboldened extremists everywhere. The fugitive from justice, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has become a model for those who see impunity as a licence to kill. If he is granted red-carpet immunity, others follow his path, local versions of the same brutality.

We are all trapped by the war on Gaza, vic-

WITHOUT TRUTH, NO PEACE

To remember Gaza is to remember who we are, and who we must never become

For the first time in history, a genocide was broadcast live, supported by Western powers, while the rest of the world stood helpless, unable even to deliver food, anaesthetics, or painkillers, or to stop starvation and agony. The UNSC remained silent. The General Assembly issued resolutions that again meant nothing on the ground, and the International Criminal Court was punished for daring to act. The mask of moral superiority has fallen.

tims of its consequences, no matter how far from the enclave we live. Our shared future depends on how the international community responds to this war and its aftermath. As the cannons cool and the dust settles, we must dare to ask the four essential questions: Why, Who, What, and Where.

Why did October 7 happen? A rational reading connects it not to a single day, but to 106 years of Palestinian suffering, beginning with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, when Britain promised a land it did not own to a people who had no claim over it. Our tragedy deepened in 1948, when 78 per cent of historical Palestine was taken, and continued in 1967, when the remaining 22 per cent was occupied.

Even after the PLO accepted a painful compromise to build a state on that 22 per cent, the so-called peace process brought only more settlements, more settlers, and more despair. Today, Palestinians are still denied their very existence. The US ambassador to Israel openly claims that "there is no such thing as the Palestinian people". To ask why is not to justify violence but to understand its roots, because without truth, there can be no peace.

Yes, Hamas launched the October 7 attack. But how could a small, lightly armed group breach the world's most fortified fence, equipped with automated machine guns and real-time surveillance? How did the most advanced intelligence system on Earth fail for over six hours, allowing fighters to move freely and livestream videos from Israeli territory? Why was communication in Gaza not cut, as

any army under attack would do immediately? These are not conspiracies; they are legitimate, unanswered questions.

What truly happened that day, and after? From the false claims of "40 beheaded babies" to unverified horror stories, the media became a weapon of manipulation. After two years of bombardment, the full scale of destruction in Gaza remains unknown. An independent UN-mandated investigation is needed to document what happened, what weapons were used, and who should be held accountable.

Where are we heading? If we answer the previous questions honestly, without Western interference, we can begin a new chapter of history based on justice and equality. The parameters exist: UN resolutions, international law, and the global consensus on a two-state solution. The apocalypse-minded zealots and messianic extremists who drive Israeli politics today do not seek peace but domination and erasure. True peace will only come when the world says, with one voice, "enough", and applies the same rules of justice to all.

The war on Gaza has already redefined our world. It has tested every moral compass and exposed the emptiness of the West's human-rights rhetoric. If we fail to learn from it, we risk a future where truth no longer matters and impunity becomes the new law.

To remember Gaza is to remember who we are, and who we must never become.

The writer is ambassador of the State of Palestine to India



OCTOBER 17, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

AGAINST APARTHEID

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi led a majority of Commonwealth nations at their summit in Nassau in demanding "comprehensive and mandatory sanctions" against the racist South African regime, thus isolating Britain on the opening day. Gandhi, in an emotion-layered speech, said, "Let not the Commonwealth be charged with cowardice... The time has come when the Commonwealth in one voice should demand the application of these sanctions."

US SUPERCOMPUTER

THE US HAS decided not to sell an advanced computer to India for fear of its possible use in

nuclear research, an American newspaper reported quoting a US defence official. India required the computer for weather research purposes, *The New York Times* said. Over the past few months, the US has approved sales of \$80 million worth of sophisticated equipment with military applications to India, a Pentagon official was quoted as saying.

CYCLONE IN EAST

A SEVERE CYCLONIC storm devastated coastal Orissa and West Bengal, leaving three dead, thousands homeless and a trawler missing. All the three deaths took place in Cuttack district in Orissa in house collapses. An estimated 50,000 persons have been rendered homeless

in West Bengal, Chief Secretary S V Krishnan told newsmen in Calcutta. A trawler with 10 aboard, which went out fishing in Orissa's coastal Balasore, is missing.

INDIA-CANADA TREATY

THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT is framing an extradition treaty to be signed with India in order to contain local Sikh extremism. A spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs told UNI in an interview that the government was trying to overcome the problems due to the absence of such a treaty. The government is firm that Sikh troublemakers should not be allowed to misuse Canadian liberalism and decency, he said.

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



CR Sasikumar

The government plans to open up oversight of protected monuments to private players. Will this deepen India’s conservation efforts or dilute them?

Empower ASI to do its job

Our decision-makers are shedding their knowledge of history and their imagination. Problem also lies in defining ‘monument’



NARAYANI GUPTA

IN A BRAVE new world which I will not see, they will invent a train that will take you back in time, and you will trudge with Joseph David Beglar through Mehrauli in 1871, go back to the 1840s and wander through Tughlaqabad with Syed Ahmad Khan, and meet up with Dargah Quli Khan in the 1760s. Each of them wrote about buildings in Delhi. At each point of time, the explorer found that some of the places they read about had gone the way of all brick and stone. It was not a static landscape. This was true of all of South Asia. In 1861, the imperial British government launched a project to supplement the Geographical Survey of India with one specifically on the architectural vestiges of India’s past. That was wise anticipation. The enumeration, strengthened in 1904 by the power to “protect” them, was what kept most of them standing while Indian cities became more heavily populated.

That was in 1861. After Lord Curzon empowered the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), it commanded respect and did fine work. But in recent decades, it has slipped in the list of priorities, jolted by the emphasis on culture and tourism. And now comes the final, ironic blow — it is said to have outlived its relevance, like telegrams, post-boxes and so much else.

What went wrong? It will be obvious that the casual manner of announcing this suggests that there are non-casual reasons behind it. It does not take much to figure out that the ASI is another victim of real-estate considerations, covered up with promises of spectacle.

This announcement follows another policy statement from last year: A bill presented to Parliament that proposed to “rationalise” the number of ASI-protected monuments. The problem lies with the word “monument”. We live in a time when public or historic art must be larger than life — of Broddingnagian proportions — when Sardar Patel must be stretched to an improbable height like a Giacometti statue, or Subhas Chandra Bose be made to fit a canopy which had accommodated a life-size statue of George V, or Shivaji’s greatness conveyed through a 35-foot statue. Alas, our decision-makers shed their knowledge of history — and their imagination — as they grow older. It is their loss. Small, or even larger, protected areas can be imaginatively made part of urban public spaces. But those who make decisions see ruins as blocking profitable real estate. It was the belief that different forms and spaces in our cities could be harmonised that had led the brilliant architect Patwant

Singh to persuade the government to set up an urban art commission for Delhi in 1974. The Delhi Urban Art Commission (DUAC) had immense possibilities, but it did not take on the challenge. As for the general assumption that the commission was to do with “urban arts”, the consequences are there for all to see.

When it comes to the ASI, the following are needed.

Give the ASI employees a sense of pride in what they do. I have seen junior employees who enjoy their work but have no illusions. When I sent one of them a notice about a conference in Europe, he laughed and said, “I will have to inform my boss, and he will say, ‘I will go. You are too junior.’” If junior employees could share a sense of purpose, if they could be told why their work is important, they would hold their heads high.

The ASI and conservation architects must work in harmony. Builders of earlier times worked as a guild, each member proud of his expertise. This can still be seen in Kerala, Rajasthan and Odisha. The terms “*vaastu*” and “vernacular” are banded about in conferences and forgotten the next day. They should be part of the conservation archaeologist/architect’s mental toolkit.

Introduce the conservation architect, the latest player in the field. In the early

The ASI needs to come out of its anonymity and have in-site discussions.

Heritage walks have taken off in the last 30 years. The ASI should be part of this outreach activity.

They should make their resources available to all instead of allowing them to decay in stuffy rooms.

19th century, engineers were happy to be archaeologists, and architects were employed by the PWD. The new genre of heritage conservation architect followed from UNESCO’s 1964 Charter of Venice and the designation of World Heritage Sites. In 1982, Nalini Thakur was the first Indian architect to qualify as a conservation architect from Rome. She is a rare example of someone whose strong integrity has stood her in good stead through a minefield of scepticism. The project she did for the DDA in 1988 — the Mehrauli Archaeological Park — should be named for her. Today, there are over 500 conservation architects in India, though not all engaged in the work they specialised in. There is a grey area of old buildings that are not “protected”, which employ them, as do the many institutions offering courses in “heritage management”, an offshoot of tourism, that have only minimally to do with heritage.

The ASI needs to come out of its anonymity and have in-site discussions. Heritage walks have taken off in a big way in the last 30 years. The ASI should be part of this outreach activity. They should make their resources — books and maps and photographs — available to all instead of allowing them to decay in stuffy rooms.

If the government’s plans come through, some conservation architects will be employed by individuals bidding for the monuments of their choice; the small structures will be demolished. And someone will write a lament for Chhoti Gumti, which lights up the road to Hauz Khas village after dusk.

The writer is a Delhi-based historian



TASNEEM ZAKARIA MEHTA

THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT’S decision to invite corporate sponsorship for the conservation and restoration of heritage sites across the country through public-private partnerships is a welcome initiative. I have overseen the restoration of several important sites in Mumbai through PPP initiatives, including the Elephanta Caves and the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum. The extraordinary Gharapuri caves, as they are locally known, were in a sad condition in the late 1990s, with families cooking inside the caves and young boys playing cricket in the large hall. The fences were corroded and broken, an open drain full of garbage ran along the edge of the site and the custodian’s cottage lay in ruins. There was no signage or information text to guide visitors. In 1997, Sir Bernard Feilden, senior advisor to UNESCO, had threatened to delist the site and gave a leading newspaper a front-page interview criticising the lackadaisical approach to our her-

One of the challenges we face is a dearth of skilled man power, and of leadership. This is where corporate India can attract the best talent to provide expertise in heritage and ecological management as well as skilling and uplifting the communities that live and work at and around the sites.

I had been newly appointed as convener of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) Mumbai, and Pupil Jayakar, then chairman of INTACH, asked me to investigate and prepare a plan. The project spanned five years and included the detailed documentation of the site, preparing a comprehensive site management plan, ensuring the upliftment of the local communities, preparing a potential development plan and much more. There were serious local vested interests who made every effort to block our work. But we persevered.

INTACH didn’t have funds at the time, so we did a very successful fundraiser and UNESCO was so pleased with the initiative that it too contributed. We restored the custodian cottage and converted it into a site museum and cleaned up the entire surrounding area. We not only worked on the conservation of the site but also prepared an environmental and tourism master plan. The site master plan prepared in conjunction with the ASI included detailed maps and recommendations and was the first prepared in India for a heritage site. I believe the Elephanta template, where we approached the site holistically, not looking at heritage in isolation — that is, just the monument — but working with all the elements that contribute to ensuring the stability of the site, and benefiting the community, is very important. Ajay Shankar, then DG ASI, acknowledged that the ASI did not have the 360 degree expertise required to prepare such a plan. So we brought in experts from several fields and from across the globe, including the UK and Australia.

Twenty-five years ago, the project was viewed as out-of-the-box and there was no MOU. The project was executed by INTACH Mumbai Chapter under my stewardship in good faith. We achieved a lot but without an agreement to manage the site, things fell apart. Today the site museum at Elephanta lies locked up and the stairs leading to the site on which the locals hawk trinkets to tourists are a disaster waiting to happen. We had put together an access plan that included a tourist *haat* and places to rest and enjoy the beautiful ambience, but local politics ensured this was never implemented. However, if there is political will, much can change. We are in a different world today in which social media and soft power impact other economic indices. Tourism presents India with an unprecedented opportunity to script a narrative that can capture the imagination of the world. It can also provide much needed jobs and give a tremendous boost to the economy.

Partnerships are the way forward to preserve our incredible cultural assets, but much thought needs to be given to their structure so that outcomes are achieved. Another PPP project I have helmed has sustained despite many odds because an agreement was in place. We have had a long 21-year PPP at the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum which today is acknowledged as one of the best public museums in the country. In 2005, the Museum

Restoration Project won the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award of Excellence for Conservation. Much credit goes to the Mumbai Municipal Corporation, which owns the Museum, and the Jammnalal Bajaj Foundation for their support.

However, much more can be achieved with patience and determination and Mumbai can show the way forward for the country, not only for heritage sites but equally importantly for museums. The larger objective must be to be as good as the best in the world. To achieve this, we

need to study and understand success stories from across the world. We need to restructure the management of these heritage assets and allow experts to manage them. It is essential that experts and government officials work together in mutual trust and respect to achieve goals.

One of the biggest challenges we face in this endeavour is a dearth of skilled man power, and of leadership. This is where corporate India can attract the best talent to provide expertise in heritage and ecological management as well as skilling and uplifting the communities that live and work at and around the sites. It can also marshal the latest technologies to enhance visitor experience and make operations more efficient. Inviting corporate India to participate in this important initiative should not be just about funds and restoration but also about promotion and community welfare. Let’s make our magnificent heritage sites live forever and inspire our imaginations.

The writer is managing trustee and director, Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum and former vice chairman and Mumbai Convener of INTACH

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Achieving the just peace that the two-state solution could guarantee requires the commitment and consistency of all parties. That remains a very distant prospect.”

— LE MONDE, FRANCE

Harnessing talent, shoring up system

Short-term consulting appointments offer government an effective way to address challenges of innovation, new technologies



SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG

THE GOVERNMENT OF India has signalled its resolve to reform the appointment system for individual consultants, which major departments such as Economic Affairs, as well as Niti Aayog, use extensively.

Concerned departments select consultants (including young professionals and interns) by determining their own systems. These positions are not part of what has been termed the lateral entry system, and the appointments are not made through the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) or Staff Selection Commission (SSC). Usually, the consultants are appointed for a period of up to two years, and their terms can be extended up to a total period of five years, though some have managed to stay longer. The government probably wants to streamline the system of selection, extension and maximum period.

The practice of appointing individual consultants raises many questions. Why does the government need individual consultants in place of regular staff? Is the contractualisation of government jobs a healthy practice? Can the government put in place a streamlined system for individual consultants?

The Government of India is primarily charged with the provision of public goods and services such as defence, internal security, currency management etc. As these are of a permanent nature, the government understandably opted for a system of organised civil services in which officers serve throughout their careers. These services have delivered excellent performances in their respective domains.

Over the years, however, the government ventured into many non-core economic and commercial services and businesses. Many public sector enterprises (PSEs) were established in industries exclusively reserved for the public sector, including infrastructure, basic metals, power generation, machine manufacturing and the like. The government also took over a considerable number of financial businesses — banks, insurance companies and so on. Running these PSEs would have required people with different skillsets, and different remuneration packages for them. Instead, however, their pay scales were aligned with those of government servants and their careers protected in the same way using the figleaf of these enterprises being instrumentalities of the state.

This structural choice had serious consequences for the productivity and efficiency of PSEs, forcing the government to finally open up all reserved sectors to the private sector, although their personnel policies remained constrained by the limitations of being instrumentalities of the state. The government has been struggling to find solutions. A system of performance bonuses was institutionalised. Recently, the government decided to open up some positions in public-sector banks to private-sector talent, although it remains unclear whether their

salaries and benefits will be closer to those of the private sector.

The government also had to expand its policymaking as developments such as the establishment of global manufacturing value chains and services shifting to electronic modes changed the rules of trade, technology and the financial system. This required not only specialised knowledge but also more technocratic and nimble-footed policymaking. The existing system was not suited to coping with these emerging requirements, such as dealing with start-ups, e-commerce, digital infrastructure and so on.

The Department of Economic Affairs (DEA), which I headed for two years, is one example. It is charged with framing policy and legislation in these emerging fields. In the past decade, it has facilitated the enactment of many new laws such as the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, International Financial Services Centres Authority Act and Fugitive Economic Offenders Act. Some cutting-edge laws did not see the light of day, such as the Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance Bill and Banning of Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill.

The DEA has generally managed to get the best talent from the organised services and has evolved a forward-looking working ecosystem, using its interactions with leading international organisations like the World Bank to keep abreast of new developments. Still, it did not have all the talent, skills and expertise to develop the required policy frameworks and legislation. Quite a few options were tried.

The department harnessed talent from the private sector, think tanks and consultancies in two major ways. First, it hired individuals with specialised domain knowledge and experience as consultants and young professionals. Second, it entered into agreements with a slew of organisations, including the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research and Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. These organisations hired experts and provided advisory services, enabling DEA to manage its skill deficit.

When challenges relating to innovation and new technology in the economic and financial fields emerge, they become extraordinarily important and require quick solutions. The government needs talent and expertise only temporarily to manage these challenges. Once policy is developed and programmes formulated, they are embedded in the larger permanent system.

A system of short-term consulting appointments at market-related compensation is best for managing these challenges. There is some trouble, however, as many of these consultants and professionals want to stay on longer than needed and be absorbed permanently into government service. That generates considerable tension in the system, and also undermines the value of the system of individual consultants.

Therefore, this requires a systemic fix. It would be advisable for the government to reform the system and fix a firm limit of two or three years for individual consultants, with an extension up to a maximum period of five years only in exceptional cases. Such a streamlined system would satisfy both public and individual interests.

The writer is former Finance and Economic Affairs Secretary

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLLUTION SOLUTION

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Don’t blame the firecracker’ (IE, October 16). A stringent ban on firecrackers cannot be a comprehensive solution for reducing or controlling pollution, especially in the presence of other major damaging sources. A more balanced approach is needed to protect both the environment and cultural traditions. First, developing a transparent system to verify green crackers and prevent their misuse. Second, promoting eco-friendly options for celebrations like community laser light shows, traditional diyas, or drone displays. Third, conducting public awareness campaigns to promote a cultural shift toward more sustainable celebrations. Lastly, drafting comprehensive policies to achieve long-term air quality improvement.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Don’t blame the firecracker’ (IE, October 16). The Delhi government’s attempt to reintroduce so-called “green” firecrackers is a retrograde step. Even if these crackers emit 30 per cent less pollutants, they still add to an already hazardous air quality index that worsens dramatically every winter. Moreover,

enforcement is virtually impossible. Instead of diluting the ban, the government should strengthen its awareness campaigns and engage communities in celebrating Diwali in cleaner, creative ways — through diyas, lights, and community events that do not harm health or the environment. Protecting public health must take precedence over misplaced notions of festivity or tradition.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

CASTE DENIAL

This refers to the report, ‘MP govt: Caste system founded on principles of social harmony’ (IE, October 16). The MP government’s affidavit before the Supreme Court has cited a study claiming social status was not predetermined by birth and caste never existed in undivided India. This is in concordance with an article in the RSS-affiliated weekly Panchjanya last year that justified caste. However, it contradicts RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat’s assertion that *varna* and *jaati* must be completely discarded. The study’s claim that this discriminatory system was introduced by foreigners was contradicted by Bhagwat when he lamented that caste discrimination had existed for 2,000 years.

LR Murmu, New Delhi



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Engagement without recognition: India & new Afghanistan



BASHIR ALI ABBAS & BANTIRANI PATRO

AMIR KHAN Muttaqi, the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, left New Delhi Thursday after an unprecedented eight-day stay which has yielded, among other things, the re-establishment of the Embassy in Kabul.

Since June 2022, roughly a year after the Taliban returned to power, the Embassy has been functioning as a “technical mission”, principally to coordinate the distribution of aid. While reopening the Embassy is significant, India continues to refrain from formally recognising the Taliban government.

A practical compromise

The actions of recognising a government and establishing an embassy in that state are

distinct political acts. Officially recognising the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate would entail India’s acceptance of its *de jure* nature. This would, in turn, mean that India deems the Taliban’s violent displacement of an elected government in 2021 to be a legitimate form of governmental transition.

That said, India can still use traditional diplomatic tools to engage with the *de facto* entity ruling Afghanistan. In the years prior to India’s decision to re-open its Kabul Embassy, New Delhi has been able to passively allow the steady change of the *de facto* character of the Afghan Embassy in Delhi even while it flies the older flag of the *de jure* Republic. On October 12, Muttaqi himself confirmed that “even those (diplomats) from the former government now work with us”.

Cumulatively, along with India’s own steady increase in diplomatic interactions with the Taliban across the last two years, this has meant the assertive use of an ‘engagement-without-recognition’ model.

India has used this model for other states (like Taiwan) or governments (like the Myanmar junta) which it does not recognise. The former is represented by the Taiwan

Economic and Cultural Centre in New Delhi, and the latter controls the Myanmar Embassy through staff appointed by the *de facto* military leadership ruling Myanmar from 2021.

Global trends have made it easier to adopt this model: former Al Qaeda terrorist Ahmed al-Sharaa being fêted by the US as Syria’s legitimate leader, arguably also created a geopolitical window for India to further engagement with the Taliban, even as Muttaqi himself remains a UN-designated terrorist.

Note that India’s model for engagement is not reliant on future recognition of the Taliban government.

International context

Kabul has long been vying for political recognition, especially by the United Nations (UN). But for this, Kabul must satisfy the UN on three fronts: an inclusive government, dismantling terror groups operating in Afghanistan, and respect for human rights and liberties, especially of women and girls. It has failed on all three counts; last November, Taliban’s request for recognition was rejected by the UN for the fourth year in a row.

Functionally, the UN’s non-recognition also leaves other states’ abilities to host Taliban senior representatives subject to UN permissions. Muttaqi’s visit to New Delhi was only possible due to the UNSC 1988 Sanctions Committee approving an exemption to his international travel ban on September 30.

But even in the face of such restrictions, the on-ground realities in Afghanistan continue to favour the Taliban. Put simply, there are next to no existential challenges facing the government in Kabul, and the West’s reluctance to get embroiled in Afghanistan means that the Taliban’s hold is likely to remain unchallenged in near future.

The question of granting recognition or engagement has thus become one of geopolitical expediency. Russia became the first state to formally recognise the Taliban in July 2025; other states have followed suit with their own engagement-without-recognition models. By 2023, China had become the first to dispatch an Ambassador to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover and accredit a Taliban-appointed envoy. The UAE was next to accept the credentials of a Taliban-ap-

pointed ambassador.

In Central Asia, Uzbekistan was the first to accept a Taliban ambassador, while other Central Asian states host Taliban diplomats at varying levels. Despite its severe downturn in ties with the Taliban, Islamabad too has upgraded its diplomatic relationship with Kabul.

View from New Delhi

India’s approach has three specific drivers.

■ First is the Taliban’s own proactiveness in seeking foreign engagement. Over the last four years, the Taliban has actively lobbied for Indian re-engagement with Kabul, taking special care to guarantee that Afghanistan will not become a haven for anti-India groups. Muttaqi, for instance, spoke to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in May 2025 to condemn the Pahalgam terror attack.

■ Second is the ongoing breakdown in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties. The Taliban, as further evidence of a diversified, engagement based, foreign policy, has been disinclined to categorically support Pakistan’s demands from Kabul: it has shown continuity with past Afghan governments in not recognising the Pakistan-Afghanistan bor-

der and has not abandoned the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This has led to clashes between Taliban and Pakistani forces, with an especially marked escalation during Muttaqi’s ongoing visit to India.

■ Third is India’s opportunity to leverage the Taliban’s economic needs. India has long had a robust humanitarian and development portfolio in Afghanistan. Given the Trump administration’s termination of all foreign assistance to Afghanistan earlier this year, Taliban has had to look to the likes of India for more help.

Muttaqi’s remarks in New Delhi focused on showing Afghanistan to be a positive investment environment. He notably invited Indian firms to invest in Afghanistan’s mining sector, and reiterated Afghanistan’s interest in connectivity projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and increased transit through the Chabahar port in Iran.

Bashir Ali Abbas is a Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research. Bantirani Patro is a Research Associate at the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

EXPLAINED LAW

DECODING SUPREME COURT ORDER ALLOWING GREEN CRACKERS IN NCR



Despite the SC’s order, enforcement will be a challenge. Gurmeet Singh

VINEET BHALLA
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 16

THE SUPREME Court (SC) on Wednesday relaxed the absolute ban on the sale and use of firecrackers in Delhi-NCR, allowing government-approved “green crackers” on a “test case basis”.

The order, passed by a Bench of Chief Justice of India BR Gavai and Justice K Vinod Chandran, attempts to strike a balance between the livelihood concerns of the firecracker industry, festive traditions and the public health crisis caused by air pollution.

SC’s directions

The SC has laid down a strict regulatory framework for this temporary relaxation: only approved green crackers can be sold and used; sale will be permitted only from October 18 to October 20; crackers can only be sold from designated locations; they can be used on Diwali or the day before, at 6-7 am in the morning, and 8-10 pm in the evening; crackers containing barium salts or other banned chemicals are prohibited; the sale of firecrackers through e-commerce websites is banned; and the manufacture and sale of ‘laris’ is not allowed.

Police and pollution control board officials will form patrolling teams to monitor designated sale sites, verify authenticity and take random samples for testing. Violators — both manufacturers and sellers — will face penalties, including the cancellation of their licences.

Behind relaxation

The court’s reasoning stems from a desire to find a “balanced approach”. The court noted that despite the ban, conventional and highly polluting firecrackers were being smuggled into the NCR and

used rampantly. It reasoned that allowing a less-polluting alternative in a regulated manner could be more effective than a complete ban that is difficult to enforce.

The development of green crackers, which the court was informed could reduce particulate emissions by 30-80%, presented a viable middle path. Moreover, unlike the previous AAP government, both the Centre and the Delhi government argued in favour of relaxation.

The court also considered the economic hardship faced by the firecracker industry and its workers: the order aims to balance the “right to carry on a profession” with the fundamental “right to life”.

‘Green crackers’

‘Green crackers’ are not pollution-free: they are formulations developed by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) that have a reduced environmental impact.

Such crackers do not contain harmful chemicals like barium nitrate, arsenic, lithium and mercury. They are designed to release water vapour or dust suppressants that trap a portion of the particulate matter generated. They are claimed to reduce PM2.5 emissions by at least 30%, and also have a lower noise intensity, capped at 120 decibels. Authentic green crackers can be identified by a green logo and a QR code on the packaging.

The SC clarified that this year’s “relaxation is only on a test case basis”. It directed the pollution control board to conduct intensive air quality monitoring from October 14 to October 25, and submit a report. The future of firecracker regulations in the NCR will likely depend on the outcome of this experiment.

GEORGE MATHEW
MUMBAI, OCTOBER 16

INDIA’S CORPORATE world is abuzz with the news of Adani Properties Private Ltd’s offer to buy 88 properties from the debt-laden Sahara Group. The proposed multi-thousand-crore deal, now before the Supreme Court, includes marquee holdings such as the Sahara Star Hotel in Mumbai, the Aamby Valley township near Lonavala, real estate in Lucknow, and several land parcels across India.

For Adani Properties, the proposed acquisition aligns with its strategy of securing prime real estate and hospitality assets, deepening its footprint in key cities. For Sahara, it could be the last major effort to resolve a decade-long financial crisis that has eroded its credibility and strained its operations.

While the transaction offers hope for thousands of investors and lenders awaiting refunds, identifying genuine claimants and ensuring transparent fund distribution remain formidable challenges.

Lack of clarity

While court records indicate that the Sahara Group has already deposited close to Rs 25,000 crore with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) over the years as part of its obligation to refund investors, there remains considerable ambiguity over how those funds have been utilised or will be utilised. The proposed sale of Sahara’s assets adds another layer of uncertainty. It is still unclear whether the proceeds from the proposed transaction will be channelled to investors through SEBI’s refund mechanism or diverted towards other liabilities and expenses.

Legal experts point out that the Supreme Court will have to lay down clear guidelines to ensure transparency and accountability in the disbursement process. “The regulator is yet to identify and repay the full amount of Rs 25,000 crore lying in its account. So what will happen to the proceeds from the sale of assets now? Who are the investors? Why are they not approaching SEBI for refund?” an analyst with an investment firm said, alluding to the unanswered questions.

A Supreme Court order dated March 29, 2023 says, “of the total amount of Rs



SEBI in 2013 questioned Subrata Roy and three top Sahara executives in Mumbai, in a case involving refunding Rs 24,000 crore to three crore investors. Pradip Das

24,979.67 crore lying in the “Sahara-SEBI Refund Account”, Rs. 5,000 crore be transferred to the Central Registrar of Cooperative Societies, which, in turn, will disburse the same against the legitimate dues of the depositors of the Sahara Group of Cooperative Societies.”

According to a Ministry of Cooperation note issued on July 29 this year, as of July 23, Rs 5,139.23 crore had been disbursed to 27,33,520 depositors out of the 1,35,34,410 depositors of the Sahara Group of Cooperative Societies and an amount of Rs 523.72 crore was available for disbursement. The SC has granted extension for disbursement of refund up to December 31, 2025.

The Sahara story

Starting with a meagre capital of Rs 2000, the Sahara group of Subrata Roy travelled a long way. Roy — who passed away in November 2023 — built his empire by collecting deposits from millions of poor and rural Indians with limited or no access to formal banking services.

Roy once owned an airline, a Formula 1 team, an IPL cricket team, plush hotels in London and New York, financial companies, mutual funds, a life insurance company, the Aamby Valley project, and a huge land bank.

The group’s troubles started after SEBI took action against Roy for illegal fund mobilisation. The case involved collection of over Rs 24,000 crore from three crore individuals through two companies — Sahara Housing Investment Corporation Ltd (SHICL) and Sahara India Real Estate Corporation Ltd (SIRECL) — on the Optionally Fully Convertible Debentures issued by them.

SEBI ordered Sahara to refund the money to investors and banned the two companies and Roy from raising funds from the public in 2010.

Roy was sent to jail on March 4, 2014, for contempt for not paying a sum of Rs 10,000 crore. The court ordered that he would not be released until he brought in Rs 5,000 crore in cash and Rs 5,000 crore by way of bank guarantees.

Why tiny Cape Verde is riding high in football while resource-rich India lags

MIHIR VASAVDA
MUMBAI, OCTOBER 16

CAPE VERDE, an archipelago of 10 islands in the Atlantic Ocean, became the second-smallest nation (after Iceland in 2018) to qualify for the FIFA World Cup on Monday. Less than 24 hours later, India lost to world number 158 Singapore, thus failing to qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup.

The outcomes are revealing. On one hand is Cape Verde, 815 times smaller than India in terms of area, and with a population of about five lakhs, which has risen to the cream of the world game. Meanwhile, India’s inability to feature even in an expanded 24-team Asian Cup, despite a far bigger population, better grounds and a league with players paid in crores, points to a hopeless situation.

Population angle

There might not be a direct correlation

between population and success in football. The tiny African nation tapped into its diaspora population, with players residing in Europe forming more than half the squad. In India, almost half the professional footballers who have managed to get playing time in the top division league come from just three states, with a combined population of less than 60 lakh.

A recent study by UEFA ‘A’ license coach and former head of All India Football Federation’s (AIFF) Youth Development program Richard Hood revealed that

Manipur, Mizoram and Goa have produced players who have clocked 41.4% of all professional playing minutes in the last 11 Indian Super League and I-League (erst-while top division) seasons. Playing minutes indicate a player’s involvement in a match, their talent levels, and their impact on the team’s performance.

Of around 800 districts, “just 35 of them, home to only 7.4% of our population, have

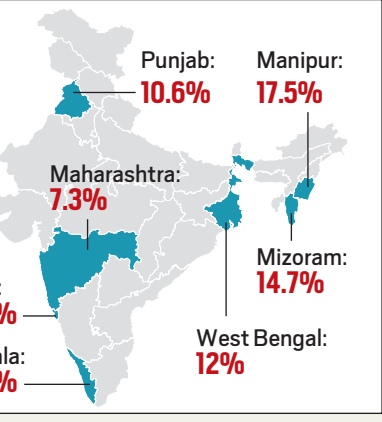
INDIA’S FOOTBALL HOTBEDS

80% of pro football minutes over the last 11 seasons of Indian football’s top division came from **7 states** who together boast only **13.7%** of the country’s population.

Source: Richard Hood, ‘Our Talent Clusters: Indian football’s hotbeds and how to develop them’, 2025

produced more than 80% of all professional playing minutes”. Seventeen of those districts are in Manipur, Mizoram and Goa.

One of the main reasons cited for the Indian national team’s poor performances has been the lack of playing time, players get in the league. But even at a club level,



Hood’s analysis showed that players from a handful of states are seen as good enough by the team management to get consistent playing time.

A separate study conducted by Hood, who has also coached at a club level, highlighted that almost 65% of the elite-level

Indian footballers come from only five states whose total population is approximately 12.43 crore (as per 2011 Census data).

Both reports highlight three things: Indians may be among the world’s biggest consumers of football, not enough of them play the sport at a high level; that talent is still nurtured in isolated pockets and widespread strategy to develop a bigger pool of players is non-existent; and that the world’s most popular sport has made virtually no inroads into the densely populated Hindi heartland.

Few clusters

Although home to only 0.23% of India’s population, five districts in Manipur — Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, and Churachandpur — produced players who played for 17.5% of the total playing minutes in the I-League and ISL from 2014-15 to 2024-25.

The players from Mizoram had a 14.7% share of the playing minutes, with most coming from Aizawl, Lunglei, Champa,

Kolasib and Serchhip. West Bengal accounted for 12% of the minutes, followed by Punjab (10.6%), Goa (9.2%), Kerala (8.2%) and Maharashtra, where Mumbai and Thane comprised 7.3% of the total minutes.

Talent clusters exist in several sports, most notably in hockey (where Punjab dominates) and wrestling (Haryana). However, the research noted that in football, the “clusters are deeply concentrated” and suggested they might not be productive when compared to international levels.

For example, an analysis of the percentage of professional minutes secured by domestic players in the last season showed that across all positions — centre forwards, attacking midfielders, wide forwards, central midfield and centre backs — Indian players spent less time on the field compared to their counterparts in Japan, South Korea and Uzbekistan, which are the 2026 World Cup-bound teams from Asia. Even in the clusters, the opportunities to play are fewer compared to mature football nations.

EDITORIAL

Time for Maoists to turn mainstream

The recent surrender of senior Maoist leader Mallojula Venugopal, also known as Sonu, along with 60 comrades and the handover of their weapons to the police in Maharashtra, marks another significant milestone in the Indian Revolutionary Movement. Since its inception, the movement has been shaped by intellectuals guided by Marxist-Leninist-Maoist (MLM) ideology, who launched various parties under different banners. Among the most prominent were the CPI (ML) People's War, influential in undivided Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, and West Bengal, and the MCCI (Maoist Communist Centre of India), which found its base in Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of northern India. Despite operating under different names, these ultra-left parties shared a common core: the principle of Protracted Armed Struggle to achieve a New Democratic Revolution (NDR). In 2004, the MCCI and the People's War group merged to form the CPI (Maoist), which greatly intensified the revolutionary movement — so much so that former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described it as the gravest internal security threat India faced. The Maoists devoted considerable effort to refining their military strategies and successfully orchestrated major attacks on police and paramilitary forces across various States. The party firmly adhered to MLM principles, built on three foundational pillars: a strong army, an ideologically driven party, and a united front. Secrecy was the guiding tenet for both the army and party organisations. However, over time, party strategists appeared to focus more on the military aspect — structures and actions — at the expense of strengthening the network and forging mass organisations. Consequently, the Indian revolution became heavily centred on military operations, often neglecting the essential task of building and sustaining the party base. As India underwent significant economic, social, and political transformations, the once-ambitious vision of creating a united front began to seem almost utopian. Against this backdrop, state security forces started to gain ground, employing the same "3S" principle (Surprise, Speed, and Secrecy), originally used by the guerrillas. Over two decades, these tactics enabled security forces to slowly dominate jungle warfare, launching operations that neutralised scores of Maoist rebels in successive encounters. With public support waning and relentless military pressure mounting, a debate emerged among Maoist strategists over whether the strategy of Protracted Armed Struggle remained suitable, or if conditions now called for its suspension. Some leaders, spearheaded by Mallojula Venugopal, advocated for a temporary halt to armed activities, while others remained staunchly opposed. Ultimately, as the debate persisted, Venugopal and his supporters chose to lay down arms and join the mainstream. It's worth noting that this is not unprecedented; in 1977, after the Emergency, the then CPI-ML also temporarily suspended armed struggle to reconnect with the people and understand their concerns — a move which later led to the formation of the CPI-ML (People's War).

Two-state solution on Palestine

Minister of State for External Affairs and Environment, Forest and Climate Change Kirti Vardhan Singh reaffirmed India's long-standing commitment to the Palestinian cause and the pursuit of peace in the Middle East during the Meeting of the NAM Ministerial Committee on Palestine, held on the sidelines of the 19th Mid-Term Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

At the outset, he conveyed India's appreciation to the Chair for convening the meeting and recalled that the NAM Ministerial Committee on Palestine was first established under India's Presidency during the NAM Summit in New Delhi in 1983. Reiterating India's consistent position on the developments since October 7, 2023, and the conflict that followed, Singh stated, "We condemned terrorism and have held that the destruction, despair and suffering of civilians must end; Gaza must have access to food, fuel and other necessities without hindrance; Hostages must be released; and ceasefire must be in place immediately." He



underlined that India's position on Palestine has always been rooted in historical support for the Palestinian people's rights. "As one of the first countries to recognize the State of Palestine, we reaffirm the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, national independence, and sovereignty," he noted. Emphasising that a negotiated settlement remains the only path to sustainable peace, Singh added, "Our ultimate objective remains a negotiated two-State

solution, which is the only path to achieve lasting peace and overall prosperity.

The essential parameters are clear -- a sovereign, independent, viable State of Palestine, living side by side in peace and security with Israel, within secure and recognized borders. Dialogue and diplomacy remain the best means to realize this. "Highlighting that India's principles are reflected through its actions, he outlined the country's ongoing development cooperation and humanitarian

assistance to the Palestinian people. "We have sought to improve the daily lives of the Palestinian brothers and sisters. We have been extending development cooperation and humanitarian assistance to them. Our projects range from health to education; from institution-building to women's empowerment and more," he said. He also shared details of India's recent contributions. "Since October 2023 alone, India has provided relief assistance of nearly 135

metric tons of medicines and supplies. These direct efforts are bolstered through our financial support for UNRWA to implement projects, particularly in education and health. We contribute USD 5 million annually to the core budget of UNRWA and projects worth USD 40 million are in the pipeline," he stated. Reflecting on the broader regional situation, Singh observed that the developments since October 7, 2023, have had far-reaching consequences across the

Middle East. He stressed that "innocent civilians have the right to lead normal lives. They cannot continue to remain deprived; they must not die due to conflict." He noted that global and regional initiatives, including those under the UN framework, have gradually begun to show progress. "We gather at a time when hopes have been rekindled. I was in Sharm el-Sheikh for the Peace Summit as the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of India. India welcomes the agreement on the first phase of President Trump's peace plan and commends the initiative and efforts of the US and President Trump," Singh said. Acknowledging the diplomatic role played by regional stakeholders, he added, "In addition, we also express our appreciation to the leadership of two NAM members, Egypt and Qatar, which played an instrumental role in realizing the agreement. We hope that the first phase will serve as the initial step towards achieving these ends." He called for all parties to uphold their commitments to ensure that peace and calm prevail.

UK, US launch coordinated crackdown on global scam network operating in Southeast Asia



The British High Commission in India on Wednesday said that the United Kingdom has announced joint action with the United States to make Southeast Asia safer from scams. According to the statement, masterminds behind industrial-scale scam centres in Southeast Asia have been targeted by sanctions in coordination with the US. The move aims to expose and disrupt the network's operations, effectively locking them out of the UK's financial system. The British

High Commission said the UK is helping to tackle an economic scourge that cost East and Southeast Asia around USD 37 billion in 2023. It further noted that the UK has sanctioned a multi-billion-pound global network involved in operating scam centres that torture their trafficked workers. The joint operation comes after a major announcement by the US Treasury Department on Tuesday, marking what it called its most extensive enforcement action in Southeast Asia. The US targeted

146 people connected to the Cambodia-based Prince Group, which has been labelled a transnational criminal organisation. As part of the same coordinated effort, the United Kingdom introduced sanctions against six individuals and entities linked to the group, freezing 19 properties in London worth over 100 million pounds (USD 134 million). "Today's action represents one of the most significant strikes ever against the global scourge of human trafficking and cyber-enabled financial fraud," said US Attorney General Pam Bondi. In a related development, US federal prosecutors unveiled an indictment against Chinese-Cambodian tycoon Chen Zhi, also known as Vincent, who chairs the Prince Group. The 37-year-old faces charges of wire fraud and money laundering conspiracy and could be sentenced to up to 40 years in prison if found guilty. The US Department of Justice also revealed that it had initiated its largest-ever forfeiture case against the group, seizing Bitcoin valued at more than USD 14 billion based on current market prices.

Indian export to US drop by 37.5% in four months due to tariffs

Indian exports to the United States have plunged sharply by 37.5 per cent following Washington's decision to impose 50 per cent tariffs on most Indian goods, according to a report by the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI). The report showed that shipments to the U.S. fell 37.5 per cent over four months, from USD 8.8 billion in May 2025 to USD 5.5 billion in September 2025, marking the sharpest and most sustained decline of the year. GTRI stated "Washington's 50 per cent Tariffs lead to a 37.5 per cent drop in Indian Exports to the USA in 4 months" September was the first full month in which Indian goods faced the 50 per cent tariff. As per the data, exports to the U.S. dropped 20.3 per cent in September alone, falling to USD 5.5 billion from USD 6.87 billion in August. This was the steepest monthly fall recorded in 2025 and also the fourth consecutive decline. The downturn began in May 2025, which was the last month of growth before the tariffs took effect.



Exports had then risen 4.8 per cent to USD 8.8 billion. However, from June onwards, shipments consistently fell by 5.7 per cent in June to USD 8.3 billion, 3.6 per cent in July to USD 8.0 billion, and 13.8 per cent in August to USD 6.9 billion, before sliding even further in September. GTRI also noted that between May and September, India's exports to the U.S. lost over USD 3.3 billion in monthly value, highlighting the severe impact of Washington's tariff decision on bilateral trade. The United States has now emerged as India's most severely affected export market since the escalation of tariffs. Sectors such as

textiles, gems and jewellery, engineering goods, and chemicals have been hit the hardest, the report noted. The decline in shipments from these industries has contributed significantly to the overall drop, raising concerns over the medium-term impact on India's manufacturing and export competitiveness in its largest market. The GTRI report highlighted that the steep fall in Indian exports to the United States over the past four months directly reflects the impact of the 50 per cent tariff regime and signals the need for a policy review to safeguard India's trade interests.

POEMS

Romer's Gap

A gap in the evolutionary fossil record; relevant fossils from this time have not yet been discovered.

—supratidal—

draw back—

fear of grief.

disdain toward

desired thing.

—tsunami:

fly agaric.

herbalist porn fantasy.

vivisection.

simultaneous orgasm atop lab table.

anthropomorphize trees to avoid

homeroptic thoughts of family members.

homeropticize anthropomorphic trees.

suppress memory.

unsuppress memory.

suppress memory.

watch deep-sea snailfish implode

upon forced surfacing—

withdraw permission.

By Tian-Ai

GST cuts and festive cheer drive surge in housing demand

India's housing market is witnessing renewed optimism ahead of the festive season, fuelled by recent Goods and Services Tax (GST) reductions on key construction materials. The rationalisation of GST rates on cement, marble, granite, and bricks is estimated to lower construction costs, giving a significant boost to developers, especially those focusing on mid-income and affordable housing projects.

The period from Navratri to Diwali traditionally sees heightened home-buying sentiment across the country. Industry experts suggest that the combination of reduced GST rates and festive enthusiasm is set to accelerate housing demand. With lower input costs potential buyers are expecting lower prices and showing greater confidence in making purchase decisions during this period. Developers too are aligning their project launches,



offers, and marketing campaigns with major festivals to tap this sentiment. Many are rolling out

flexible payment schemes, early-bird discounts, and other incentives to attract

homebuyers. The festive window is being viewed as a golden opportunity to convert

inquiries into actual sales, especially in the non-metro markets.

Cities such as Lucknow, Indore, Raipur, Coimbatore, and Bhubaneswar are emerging as frontrunners in this recovery phase. In these markets, construction material costs constitute a higher portion of total project expenditure, meaning the GST cuts have a direct and positive impact on pricing and delivery margins. "GST cuts on key construction materials have come at the perfect time, just ahead of the festive season, and this will significantly support affordability-driven markets," said Prakash Agrawal, Director, Rama Group. "In Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities like Raipur and across Chhattisgarh, the reduction directly improves both pricing and delivery timelines. We are already seeing stronger inquiries from emerging cities as buyers look for value, trust, and timely possession." According to Adish Oswal, Chairman, Oswal Group,

"The recent reduction in GST on cement has provided a much-needed boost to the real estate sector ahead of the festive season. It enables developers to offer more competitive pricing across residential and commercial projects." He added that in markets like Punjab, particularly Mohali and Ludhiana, improved infrastructure and festive enthusiasm are driving demand, making these regions key growth centres. Umang Jindal, CEO, Homeland Group, said, "A home is one of the most emotional purchases a family makes, and the festive season adds to this sentiment. Over the years, we've seen buyers amplifying their decisions between Navratri and Diwali, as the timing is seen as auspicious for new beginnings. As developers, we expect that the benefits are likely to be felt not just in metros but also in Tier-II and Tier-III cities.

Listing gains

MNC listing in India has a strong message

LG Electronics India had a blockbuster listing this week, with over 50 per cent gains compared to the issue price, after witnessing a significant investor interest during the issue period. With the issue, LG Electronics has joined a host of multinational corporations (MNCs) listed in India. Hyundai Motor India was listed last year with an issue size of over ₹27,000 crore. These large and popular listings underscore the kind of change India has witnessed over the past several decades. In the 1970s, for example, the government was forcing Indian arms of MNCs to dilute capital. As a result, names like Coca-Cola and IBM exited the market. For several years, there was also a trend among international companies to take their Indian subsidiaries private due to the apparent burden of listing requirements. But now large companies are voluntarily listing in India, a development that must be welcomed. Although these are largely issues of offer for sale, with no fresh capital being raised for the India business, they still send a powerful signal.

The successful listing of large issues indicates the depth of the Indian equity market. It is also worth noting that the depth is being created by the increasing pool of domestic savings routed partly through mutual funds. Domestic institutional investors, for instance, have pumped in about ₹6 trillion into the equity market so far in 2025. The flow of retail money, particularly through systematic investment plans, is not only reducing India's dependence on foreign institutional investors in the secondary market but also supporting activity in the primary market. Firms raised over ₹85,000 crore thus far in the primary market in 2025 on top of over ₹1.5 trillion in 2024.

The visible vibrancy in the capital market will not only improve the ease of raising capital in the public market, but it will also encourage activity in the private space because large investors, such as private equity funds, will be able to exit through the public market at an appropriate time. A vibrant and deepening market will also attract more foreign investors over the long run because of the increased availability of quality companies.

MNCs are encouraged to list in India partly because of the kind of valuation they are getting. The data shows that the market value of some Indian subsidiaries is higher than that of their parent companies, and they command much higher earnings multiples in India. LG Electronics, for instance, has a market value of over \$12 billion, compared to about \$9.4 billion in its home market. From the MNCs' point of view, listing not only helps unlock value, it also improves visibility and brand valuation, which will help the core business over time. This will benefit investors, who will have an opportunity to buy quality businesses growing in India. The successful listing of LG and Hyundai might encourage other MNCs, such as Samsung and Pepsi, to list their businesses in India. The availability of funds for quality businesses may also nudge some new-age large e-commerce businesses to list. At a macroeconomic level, capital-market activity clearly indicates that the availability of risk capital is not an issue for private investment. Policymakers thus need to address other impediments that are holding a durable revival in private investment, which is a must to sustain higher growth over the medium term.

Building capacity

Data centres in India will improve AI capabilities

Alphabet's decision to build a mega artificial intelligence (AI) data hub in Visakhapatnam could be transformational for India's fast-growing data-centre industry. The commitment by Google's parent to make a \$15 billion investment in the project over five years comes at a time of high tensions between India and the United States (US) due to the tariffs imposed by the latter. The project would be the largest data hub outside the US for Google, which has data centres in 12 countries. The investment ignores geopolitical tensions and potential legal complications, implying that the Alphabet management reckons the potential rewards outweigh the risks. Despite the legal issues, Alphabet sees India as a key market. It is a large market for Android phones and also has the world's largest YouTube audience. The planned hub could create 188,000 jobs. The Adani group and Bharti Airtel will partner Google to build the infrastructure, including laying a new international subsea gateway. The project will combine Cloud and AI infrastructure powered by renewable energy systems and connected through a fibre-optic network. It is part of the Andhra Pradesh government's plan to develop 6 Gw of data centre capacity by 2029.

These centres are physical facilities housing the computing and networking equipment required to collect, process, store, and distribute data. Apart from real estate, enormous power is required to run the systems and keep things cool. This is why data-centre capacities are measured in gigawatts (a unit of power) rather than gigabytes. Moreover, that power must be reliable and available 24x7 without voltage fluctuations, which makes this a tricky engineering challenge. The state government has offered subsidised land and power to attract investors. It is one of the prime movers among states aiming to cash in on the policy changes that have driven growth in the data-centre industry. Digital infrastructure is crucial for creating the physical capacity to build a \$1 trillion digital economy, as targeted by 2027-28.

India has other advantages too. Data is cheap, and India is the world's largest data consumer, with a large, growing, digital population. But along with physical capacity and the ecosystem, the legislative and regulatory policy changes are crucial if global players are to be persuaded to locate data centres here. Multinationals must believe that their data is safe and secure in servers located within India. India's policy pushes for data localisation and security through initiatives like the Digital Personal Data Protection Act and the accompanying rules. The commitment of Google and those earlier by the likes of Microsoft and Amazon validate the policy. Data-centre capacities are coming up in Mumbai, Chennai, Pune, Hyderabad, the National Capital Region, Bengaluru, and Kolkata, as many states are trying to attract investment. India's data-centre capacity crossed 1 Gw in 2024, up 200 per cent since 2019. Apart from employment, the location of this mega project in India should help to accelerate India's own AI mission. AI requires enormous computing power, which is pushing the demand for specialised centres where thousands of chips can be clustered together in custom-designed servers. The learning from Vizag and other such centres should help India develop the capacity it needs to create and exploit advancements in computational capabilities.

The Ministry of Everything

India's pharma regulatory failures point to a deeper structural flaw



The recent tragedy of the contaminated cough syrups, leading to heartbreaking and avoidable deaths of children both here and abroad is not an isolated incident. It is merely the latest, most horrific symptom in a continuing and distressingly predictable series of regulatory failures that plague India's health sector. When one drills down, the pathology is not just in the failed product or the rogue manufacturer; it's lodged deep in the very design of the regulatory machinery intended to protect the public.

The systemic rot is visible across the landscape. The cough syrup disaster, which indicts the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) and its state-level counterparts, finds an echo in other critical areas. We have seen similar, recurrent lapses in the regulation of food articles, where the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) often seems overwhelmed. We have also seen this in the oversight of hospital and medical establishments, where quality-of-care issues remain largely unchecked.

These are not independent, random occurrences. They are all pointers to a larger, more fundamental issue. When we look at pharma, food, or clinical establishments, it is natural and logical for us to focus on the regulatory agency. But the sad truth is that the regulators in these three domains, and indeed most regulatory agencies of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), suffer from basic design flaws.

What do we mean by this? To begin with, a lot of the health regulators are administrative units within the ministry and not standalone, arm's-length agencies, unlike the Securities and Exchange Board of India or the Reserve Bank of India. Most of them are not empowered to write regulations without the approval of the ministry, cannot recruit expert personnel, do not have access to financial resources and depend on budgetary handouts from the ministry. In other words, they do not have the domain and resource autonomy essential for effective regulation.

Hence, we need to look deeper at the parent min-

istry, with a sprawling and often conflicted mandate, and a structure ill-equipped for the vital, specialised task of regulation.

Why is regulation so important in the context of health? All areas of health, namely medical care, hospitals, medicines, and para-medical assistance, among others, are textbook examples of information asymmetry. The consumer has no way of knowing whether she is getting what is required, or its quality or efficacy. Hence, the ministry dealing with health needs to have the capacity to think deeply about, understand, and design appropriate regulatory structures.

MoHFW is a behemoth, tasked with a dizzying array of responsibilities. A quick look shows that the ministry's domain encompasses a very large number of statutory and non-statutory bodies. While an exact, universally agreed-upon single number of regulators in MoHFW is elusive due to the lack of an agreed-upon taxonomy of bodies, we are looking at scores of institutions.

For instance, it houses major regulatory agencies like the CDSCO, the National Medical Commission, the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions, the Pharmacy Council of India, the Dental Council of India, and the FSSAI, *et al.*

In addition to these, the MoHFW oversees a vast number of "autonomous agencies" — a paradoxical term in the Indian context — which include premier research and education institutes like the All India Institutes of Medical Sciences, the Indian Council of Medical Research institutions, and the National Institute of Health and Family Welfare.

Further complicating matters, the ministry is the nodal agency for implementing a multitude of enormous, large-scale public health schemes — from the National Health Mission and Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY) to major disease control programmes.

Herein lie the seeds of structural paralysis. The ministry simultaneously executes three distinct, often conflicting, roles:

- Regulation and standard-setting.
- Service delivery and direct running of institutions.

**AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM**

K P KRISHNAM

Project choice key for Urban Challenge Fund

India's new ₹1 trillion Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) was announced in the Budget in February and is set to be operationalised. It marks a fundamental shift in the Centre's role in urban financing — from an allocative model to a "challenge fund" format. The UCF offers 25 per cent of project costs on the condition that cities raise at least 50 per cent through public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the form of bonds, debt, or private equity. Therefore, cities will need a new playbook for project selection.

The contribution of PPP to urban projects has historically been low. Between 1990 and 2022, India's infrastructure sector mobilised substantial private capital, with 1,265 projects attracting over \$295 billion (over ₹24 trillion) of investment — but the bulk was concentrated in transport and energy. PPP at city-level utilities and "creative city redevelopment" projects has remained abysmally low.

The UCF's three pillars — "cities as growth hubs", "creative redevelopment", and "water and sanitation systems" — signal bold intent. But intent without rigorous project selection criteria risks diluting the impact. The fund must back projects with clear revenue streams, demonstrable service improvements, and scalability.

On the "cities as growth hubs" front, India's first urban ropeway project being developed in Varanasi, the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (Atal Setu), and the Mumbai Coastal Road Project reflect how transport-anchored infrastructure is supporting growth. Projects such as the adoption of Lal Qila by Dalmia Bharat, the restoration of Sunder Nursery in New Delhi by the Aga Khan Foundation, the Dharavi redevelopment in Mumbai as a PPP, and Ahmedabad's Sabarmati Riverfront illustrate what "creative redevelopment" can achieve.

Closely linked to real estate redevelopment is mobility, and the UCF's transport projects should complement rather than duplicate existing corridors. Instead of funding metro extensions, the UCF should sponsor last-mile electric feeder buses, pedestrian zones, and transit-oriented development (TOD) around metro stations. TOD projects combining metro stations with commercial spaces, hotels, and

apartments can earn through parking fees and rents while reducing congestion. Integrated e-mobility hubs combining electric vehicle (EV) charging with solar microgrids, bike sharing, and small-scale transit fleets create multiple income streams while supporting India's EV transition. Basic road widening or standalone flyovers should be excluded.

Water and sanitation must be reimaged as service-oriented systems that recover costs and create value by installing smart technologies. Basic supply lines and treatment plants mandated under Amrut or the Jal Jeevan Mission can be funded through existing schemes, but water supply projects equipped with Internet of Things-enabled leak detection — emulating Pune's 24x7 water project — and decentralised wastewater recycling projects create revenue streams from industrial wastewater. Kanpur's sewage treatment plant programme, delivered by Kanpur River Management Private Limited — a special purpose vehicle of Shapoorji Pallonji and SSG Infratech — demonstrates that a single concessionaire can be mandated to develop, rehabilitate, and operate a city's STP network under a hybrid-annuity "One City, One Operator" contract, creating single-point accountability.

Asia's largest bio-CNG plant, a PPP between the Indore Municipal Corporation and the private company Ever Enviro Resource Management demonstrates how a city can generate carbon credits. Such circular-economy utilities with innovative models ensure each rupee primes multiple revenue channels.

UCF projects should be structured to catalyse municipal bonds and deploy value-capture mechanisms. Recent successes indicate the potential — Pune raised ₹200 crore in municipal bonds at 7.6 per cent yield for water system upgrades, while Pimpri-Chinchwad issued ₹200 crore in green bonds — yet only 15 of the 100 designated Smart Cities have tapped capital markets, reflecting technical-capacity gaps needing urgent attention. The Fund should focus on capturing land value via Transferable Development Rights, betterment levies and TOD leases, and renting out space above bus depots, fire stations and post offices to generate steady, secured revenue.

**INFRATALK**

VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

- Scheme implementation and financing.

This leads to a severe lack of focus. The essential organisational principles of efficiency, specialisation, and accountability are sacrificed at the altar of administrative convenience.

A regulatory function, by its very nature, demands intellectual and financial autonomy. Regulation requires empowered arm's-length agencies that can deliver tough decisions, often against powerful vested interests, without the shadow of political or operational interference from the parent ministry. This autonomy must be backed by rigorous, predefined accountability mechanisms and transparency. Regulators are primarily thinkers, standard-setters, and enforcers — a cerebral function requiring domain expertise, legal clarity, and financial self-sufficiency. The parent ministry of the regulator has to have this regulatory DNA.

On the other hand, running institutions and schemes requires an entirely different administrative skill set: A much more hands-on, operational approach focused on logistics, procurement, personnel management, and meeting quantitative targets. An administrator tasked with ensuring ₹10,000 crore is spent efficiently on the NHM in a quarter can't possibly give her full cognitive capacity to the esoteric legal fingerprint required for effective drug inspection and prosecution.

The current structure, where the same administrative ecosystem oversees both the regulator and the regulated (or where the operational wing overshadows the enforcement wing), creates an institutional conflict of interest. It dilutes the regulator's voice and limits its resources, staffing, and independence, turning it into a subordinate office rather than a powerful, independent sentinel of public health.

The recurring tragedies — from tainted drugs to substandard hospital care — are not merely a call for more inspectors or better vigilance at the field level, though those are urgently needed. They are a clarion call for a fundamental re-engineering of the parent ministry's design.

We must move beyond focusing solely on agency failures and address the parent ministry's structural issues. The government must seriously consider a clear organisational demarcation of MoHFW, somewhat similar to the Jaswant Singh inspired "Ministry of Finance for the 21st century". Until we accept that the ministry cannot be the umpire, the player, and the stadium owner all at once, India's public health will remain perennially vulnerable to the next cough syrup scandal.

The time for structural reform is long past due. The cost of continued administrative inertia is measured in lives.

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

Mother complex



CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

The noise surrounding Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy's new book *Mother Mary Comes To Me* — the title comes from the hit song "Let It Be" by The Beatles — is quietening down. What a relief! One can now turn the pages and meet the words on their own terms instead of being swept away by the marketing blitzkrieg that positioned the book as a publishing event rather than a literary document. Turning an iconoclast into

an icon is the ultimate disservice but that's the template that seems to work in an industry that struggles to sell.

Ms Roy is fortunate to have a problem that most Indian authors cannot even dream of. "As I travelled in the Narmada Valley, meeting people whose lives, lands and histories had been or were going to be submerged, desperately poor people facing complete erasure, I felt a little guilty and embarrassed that my book (*The God of Small Things*) was selling in millions around the world and my bank account was burgeoning," she confesses. However, she was unwilling to become "a saintly benefactress", so she started a trust to share her "crazy royalties" with people "who don't know how to or don't want to make smooth proposals that massage the NGO machine". Winners of big literary prizes rarely talk with such openness about their wealth.

Ms Roy's radical and radiant life is the subject of the book but the messaging around it has flattened a complex narrative into a sob story of a daughter wronged by her mother. It has a lot more to offer. "I truly believed she would outlive me. When she didn't, I was wrecked, heart-smashed. I am puzzled and more than a little ashamed by the intensity of my response," writes Arundhati allowing the reader to witness her mixed feelings about her mother—Mary (founder of a school called Pallikoodam, and known for challenging the Travancore Christian Succession Act of 1916) — who once told her how miserable she was when she was pregnant with Arundhati. Her first baby was only nine months old when the second child was on the way.

It must take a lot out of a child to feel compassion for a mother who says, "I wish I had dumped you in an orphanage." Mary told her daughter that she "tried to induce an abortion" by eating lots of green papaya and using a wire coat hanger. Ms Roy writes, "I sensed that she was warning me

about drifting into a life of marriage and children without thinking it through carefully. I felt terrible for her." This is love in action, a refusal to engage in mother worship, yet a profound recognition of how challenging life is for an Indian woman with an alcoholic husband.

Ms Roy does not refrain from acknowledging the gifts that her mother "bestowed" — the education that she got, the class that she belonged to, and the fact that she spoke English. Even when Ms Roy chose to leave her mother behind in Kottayam and move to Delhi, these gifts "protected" the author and gave her "options that millions of others did not have". She is able to express gratitude, without feeling the need to condone all of her mother's cruelty. This approach is what's most endearing about this book, which does not believe in heroes and villains.

**Mother Mary Comes To Me**
by Arundhati Roy
Published by Penguin
386 pages ₹899

up. She writes, "Watching Baker's buildings grow out of the earth almost like trees and plants fascinated me. I learned that design could evoke the same kind of joy in me as music, dance and literature." No wonder that Ms Roy decided to study architecture, and her love of it continues

Ms Roy's relationship with filmmaker and environmentalist Pradip Kishen forms a major part of the book, and will put an end to unnecessary speculations about her private life. More interesting are the brief accounts of her meetings with architect Laurie Baker and art critic John Berger. She describes the former as "a conscientious objector in the Second World War, who, deeply influenced by a chance encounter with Gandhi, moved to India in 1945". As a child, she met him when he began to design the campus of the school that her mother set

to this date. When Mary died, Arundhati felt that cremating her or immersing her ashes in the Meenachil river was not enough. She wanted to make her "a grove instead of a grave".

The section where Berger, author of the seminal *Ways of Seeing*, appears is far from sombre. Ms Roy writes about the time he helped her buy lingerie for her mother in Italy. She recalls, in a memorable passage that offers respite from the heaviness of the rest of the book, "Each time we entered a shop, I hung back to experience the sheer delight of watching the extremely handsome eighty-something man say in his British-accented Italian, 'Excuse me, could you show us what you have in size 44DD?..I occasionally allowed myself these weird, secret games.'"

This is a book that deserves to be read, for its invitation to find joy in the midst of pain.

The reviewer is a journalist, educator and literary critic. Instagram/X: @chintanwriting



CONTRAPUNTO

The cure for crime is not the electric chair,
but the high chair

- J EDGAR HOOVER

Death By...?

SC is right. India should have a debate on what can
replace hanging when it comes to capital punishment

Supreme Court’s lament about govt not willing to modernise the delivery of death sentence – it was hearing a petition to replace death by hanging with lethal injection – needs some parsing, and continuous discussions beyond cases in court. Death penalty has three debates that run concurrently. First, whether capital punishment should be abolished. Second, a restrained and diligent application of the penalty. SC and CJIs have time and again appealed to HCs to be ultra-careful when sentencing convicts to death. The sentencing itself is harrowing for most convicts, however hardened the criminal. On death row, it is long years of appeals till death is delivered or sentence commuted. The third debate is on the ‘best’ – or ‘humane’ – way to service the sentence.

Neither the debates nor the arguments are new. A British govt commission report in 1950s exploring modes of execution said of its goal: any method untried that would inflict death as painless and certain as hanging but with “greater decency” and without the “degrading and barbarous association with which hanging is tainted”. The argument against this debate is that there’s no ‘humane’ way; the very decision is troubling. That discussing ‘best methods’ is in fact, an attempt to protect shared values – the natural right to life and ‘dignity of death’. The reality though is, so long as the death penalty is on the statute, it must be asked: is hanging the most certain, quickest, and least painful method with minimum bruising? Should there be options? If so, what?

No method is ‘best’. The world recoiled when Alabama last year used nitrogen gas asphyxia in a global first as a new mode, claiming death would be instant. Instead, the convict struggled for life for several minutes – nitrogen was on for 15 minutes. US prisons are exploring new ways because drugs for lethal injections (sodium thiopental) are difficult to source – countries are ceasing manufacture and banning export of drugs for capital punishment. US states have re-introduced electrocution and the gas chamber (hydrogen cyanide). Finding trained personnel is a challenge. Non-medical people carrying out a medical mode of execution have also seen botched executions. India on its part has a shortage of hangmen although executions are rare – there can be no worse torture than a botched hanging. To that end, SC’s point on GOI’s lack of response is on point. It is not alone about policy. It’s a complicated medico-jurisprudential issue. However squeamish it makes one, the question of option is not to be sidestepped.

XXXGPT

OpenAI gets ready to get explicitly competitive.
This was inevitable, as are questions that follow

Treat adult users like adults, is an unexceptional principle, indeed a fine one. But what’s captured interest in Sam Altman’s post about ChatGPT committing more fully to this principle, is that it will be allowing erotica for verified adults. Users are already talking to chatbots about sex and romance. These conversations will clearly race XXXwards as the company relaxes the restrictions it has in place right now. This is very worrying for all those who, with good reasons, believe that pornography is already a public health crisis, seriously undermining the human capacity for healthy relationships. But hasn’t every technological leap of history in a way been a big leap for pornography? Expecting AI to transcend that tendency was always a pipe dream.



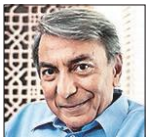
today’s tech leap, it’s tough to say where it will take us all. Maybe OpenAI will take lessons from platforms like OnlyFans, which does a decent job of ensuring minors don’t sign up. The great poser is how increasingly realistic AI-produced porn will reshape this human addiction.

Anyway, OpenAI’s cuddle of erotica is eminently good business. What is laughable is Sam claiming this is not about “usage-maxxing”. Dude. Nobody’s buying that. Or that the restrictions that had been put in place for ChatGPT are only being loosened now because the company has “been able to mitigate the serious mental health issues and have new tools”. It’s clear from reportage from across the world that age-gating is still unreliable and mental health dangers are only intensifying. But so is market competition. OpenAI will not let the sexually explicit chatbot companions unveiled by Musk’s AI company and others hurt its growth curve – without some dirty dancing.

Order of Committee

Electing a panel of appointees is indispensable
for the smooth functioning of our society

Jug Suraiya



A Gurgaon housing society where I happen to live, is abuzz with preparations for holding elections for a new Managing Committee to run the services of the community, as the current Managing Committee demits office having completed a statutory five-year term.

The word Committee has an aura of gravitas, an emanation of authority and elicits the use of capital letters as much as Trump’s tweets do. ‘By order of Committee’ appended to a list of do’s and don’ts has an injunctive resonance of magisterial finality, brooking no pettifoggling arguments. The Committee’s first task is to appoint its Office Bearers, deemed so because they bear the Burden of Responsibility. The Office Bearers appoint subcommittees (lower case to distinguish them from the main Committee) to perform designated functions.

The main role of the committee with a capital C is to hold regular conclaves called Meetings in which discussions take place on the Agenda, or order of business.

The formulating of the Agenda involves a dialectic of pros and cons, duly recorded by a designated Committee member who notes down Minutes which, considering the protracted duration of such proceedings, might appropriately be called Hours.

The holding of a Meeting often requires the holding of a prior Meeting to determine when the actual Meeting will be held. It might be required to hold another meeting (lower case to differentiate it from the meeting to fix the date and time to have the Meeting) to decide when the actual Meeting takes place.

If when the Meeting does take place and there is no consensus on the Agenda, or list of priorities, with the Ayes being vetoed by the Nays, the Meeting is adjourned sine die.

Man might work from sun to sun but a Committee’s work is never done. But despite their critics Committees are a vital necessity because left to our own devices, individuals like me, too indolent and/or incompetent to run anything, would let everything fall apart. That’s why Committees are Important. As is that Committee of all Committees called Parliament.



jugularvein

Neeraj Kaushal



Professor of
Social Policy

Avenues that once brought Indians to richer countries are shrinking as nations like the United States turn increasingly hostile to immigration. Is this a passing storm or the glimpse of a new era?

The answer depends on two countervailing forces. The changing demography in rich countries portends rising need for foreign youth to fill universities and provide skilled workforce. The political success of anti-immigrant parties on the other end, portends increased severity of restrictions on immigration.

Universities in rich countries are facing an unprecedented challenge of shrinking enrolment resulting from smaller and smaller cohorts of youngsters graduating from high school and joining colleges. Across US, over 80 universities have closed down since 2020, 20 in 2024 alone, on account of falling enrolment and the resulting financial instability. The Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia has a financial stress test model that predicts as many as 80 colleges and universities will close permanently in the 2025-2026 school year, when many universities have also faced declines in enrolment of foreign students. International student enrolment in 2025 has fallen by nearly 20%. Indian students have faced the largest brunt with the number of the incoming cohort declining by close to 45%.

American universities have little leverage with the Trump administration. Indeed, the MAGA crowd is gleefully cheering Trump’s crushing of America’s education system, which they consider elitist and wasteful. Irony is that universities closing down are not the elitist private universities that generally have deep pockets, but many local small ones.

Yet, do not expect any relief on that ground in the issuance of student visas from Trump administration. What happens after the remaining years of Trump’s presidency would depend on who the next White House occupant is, a Republican or a Democrat, and how Trump’s war on America’s education sector and immigration plays out with the general public.



Image: AI

In his 2024 campaign, Trump repeated the slogan of corporate leaders like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs – that all graduating foreign students be automatically offered a Green Card. As president, he has relentlessly pursued policies that have increased uncertainty for foreign students and graduates. With the latest move of raising visa fee to \$100,000 for new H-1B hires, Trump has made sure foreign students graduating from American universities do not get a job in US.

Corporations hiring skilled workers directly from foreign countries using H-1B visas will probably hire more workers on L-1 visas as intra-company transfers, first hiring them in a foreign country and subsequently bringing them to US. Unlike H-1B visas that have an

through a liberal visa system for foreign students and workers. The new battle cry is: US does not need the world’s brightest. At a recent address to UN, Trump declared to Europe that those European countries taking immigrants, “are going to hell!”.

Where does this leave Indian youth aspiring to emigrate to US for education and work? The short term looks bleak. Critics have incorrectly described immigration of Indians to western countries for education and work as brain drain. It is more correctly brain nourishment and circulation.

A substantial number of students and workers have returned to India and contributed enormously to the Indian economy. In western universities and corporate cultures, Indian talent has flourished and become best in the world. Had they stayed in India, they would have excelled but not have become the world’s best.

Indian elite and the middle class have in a way disassociated their personal lives from India’s education system. Instead of demanding and working towards building many high-quality universities, they opted to send their children abroad. Others invested in sending children on the *dunki* route to emigration. Trump has successfully closed the latter, and is restricting avenues for the former.

So, India must build its own OxforDs, Harvards and MITs. The time is ripe. Facing pressure at home, American universities are looking to open new campuses abroad. India should use this opportunity for building multiple online and physical universities involving domestic and global resources to educate Indian youth in India.

The gap is enormous both in terms of quality and quantity. As an example, America with less than a fourth of India’s population and an even lower proportion of youth entering college has over 3,900 universities, three times India’s.

While India has opened the education sector to foreign universities and about a dozen or so have come in, which is of course better than nothing, it is nowhere near what we need. Trump or no Trump, a quality and strong education system is a necessary foundation for building a developed nation.

The writer teaches at Columbia University, US

This Diwali...Here’s What To Know About Eating

Obesity is not principally a result of India’s traditional staples of rice and roti, despite
conclusions of a recent study. The key reason is consumption of ultra-processed foods

Arun Gupta



ICMR-INDIAB Survey-21 has triggered a national debate by linking India’s growing obesity to carbohydrate-heavy diets and by implication, to rice and roti as a source of refined carbs. The study’s findings have made headlines highlighting how these two staples ruin our health.

But like any poor diet, the debate is incomplete without including a crucial factor that could completely change how the obesity crisis is understood and tackled. The study did not measure the intake of ultra-processed food (UPF) products as the limitation notes, “...we were unable to capture intakes of processed foods and trans-fat content of commercial products due to lack of a trans-fat database and labeling regulations”.

That gap matters. As researchers and scientists would agree. Because obesity in India hasn’t grown in isolation. It has risen in parallel with the rapid expansion of UPFs silently changing our dietary patterns to be extremely unhealthy.

So, what changed? The food environment. India’s modern food system created an environment that makes diet unhealthy to the core. Food shelves are taken over by UPFs such as pre-packaged namkeens, noodles, biscuits, beverages, chips and breakfast cereals.

An Aug 2023 ICRIER/WHO report found that the UPF sector grew at over 13% CAGR in retail sales value between 2011 and 2021. The same report analysed Euro-monitor data to show retail sales of UPFs had jumped from \$0.9bn in 2006 to nearly \$38bn in 2019.

Between 2005 (NFHS-3) and 2019 (NFHS-5), obesity prevalence in India has nearly doubled. From 15% to 24% among women and 12% to 23% among men. The pattern is confirmed by the Household Consumption and Expenditure Survey 2023-24. It shows that rural households spent about 10% (about ₹406) and urban households about 11% (about ₹776) of their average monthly per capita consumption expenditure (₹4,247 in rural areas and ₹7,078 in urban areas) on processed food, refreshments, and beverages.

UPFs are now recognised globally as a key determinant of obesity and related metabolic harm. Three landmark RCTs have confirmed that UPFs harm health in ways calories alone cannot explain.

A *Cell Metabolism* study (2019) found that people on a UPF diet consumed 500 extra calories a day and gained 900g in two weeks despite identical nutrient content. Switching to minimally processed meals reversed the effect.

A *Nature Medicine* study (2025) showed those on minimally processed diets lost twice as much weight and body



fat and improved hormonal balance. Third, study in *Cell Metabolism* (2025) found UPFs disrupted metabolic and reproductive hormones and introduced toxic chemicals from packaging into participants’ bloodstreams.

Hundreds of cohort studies globally have established association of high vs low UPF intake to obesity, diabetes and 32 medical illnesses. The takeaway: UPFs aren’t just empty calories. They are biologically disruptive.

ICMR-NIN dietary guidelines for Indians suggest that NCDs are driven largely by consumption of ultra-processed and high-fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) food and beverage products. Economic Survey 2024-25 has

highlighted this issue demanding regulations to control marketing of UPFs.

UPFs are engineered formulations, usually high in carbs and refined sugar, unhealthy fats, salt, loaded with colours, flavours, emulsifiers and other additives. Designed for taste addiction, they promote overeating and displace real whole-food diets. This makes them fundamentally different from traditional foods or staple diets even as both contain carbohydrates. With the share of whole foods declining, a silent shift from kitchens to factories is happening.

Minimally processed bowl of rice with dal and vegetables digests slowly, provides fibre and micronutrients and keeps hunger in check. Ultra-processed pack of noodles or a sugary drink, with the same calories, spikes insulin and triggers hunger soon after.

UPF consumption is exploding across all age and income groups and is driven by unchecked aggressive marketing, celebrity endorsements and “health halo” claims.

Global consensus is shifting from counting calories and macronutrients to addressing industrial food processing. ICMR study calls for reducing carbs as a public health strategy to reduce obesity/diabetes. The choice lies between UPFs and Staples.

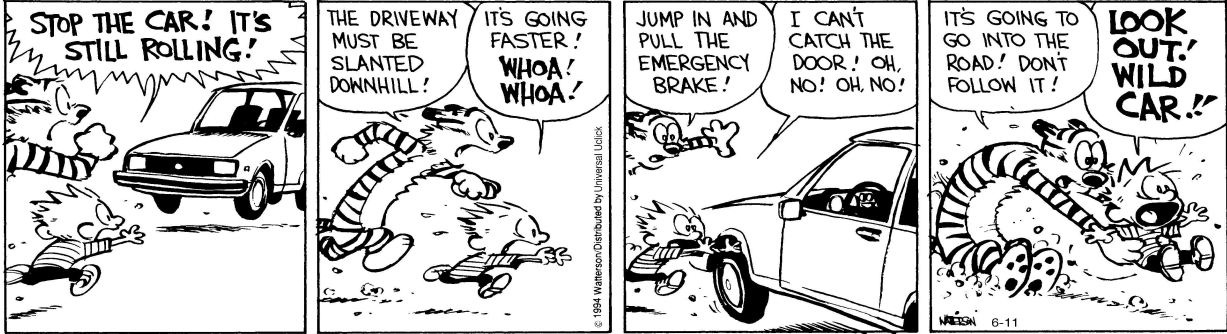
The study seems to have missed the main driver of obesity. Future national surveys must include intake of UPFs as tools are now available to assess consumption of UPFs. This will help policymakers distinguish real foods from industrial formulations and design policy interventions accordingly.

Telling people to eat less rice or roti risks creating guilt and confusion, especially when many cannot afford costlier substitutes like nuts, eggs, or dairy. Such a message may also shift them to buy cheaper UPFs.

The right message is cut down on UPFs, not traditional staples. Indians have eaten rice and roti for centuries without an obesity crisis. India’s next big nutrition reform must begin and target to reduce household consumption of unhealthy diets containing UPFs.

The writer is a pediatrician & Convener, Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPI)

Calvin & Hobbes



Jaya Row

We live in an age of endless options, possibilities, and achievements. Yet why do so many of us feel lost? Because we don’t know ourselves. We’re unsure of what we truly want. So, we get tossed around by others’ opinions. Those who know themselves remain centred. Rahul Dravid once joined a CA course as a backup in case cricket failed – but he quit after the first class and chose his true path. Ustad Zakir Hussain never wavered about his purpose. Einstein had no doubts about his vocation. Look within. Discover your passion. From childhood, the signs are there. Some recognise them early, others take time. But everyone can find their calling.

We are all wired for greatness. Not everyone can be a Steve Jobs or a Lata Mangeshkar. But everyone carries the same divine spark. Connect with the

Spirit and you’ll rise above every obstacle to achieve excellence. Eric Liddell, the athlete, had neither a coach nor fancy shoes. His belief was simple – God made me to run, and I will run for God. He was unstoppable. He went on to win the Olympic gold.

So, what do you matters more than how talented you are. If you use your gift only to make money, you’ll remain ordinary. Dedicate your talent to a higher purpose – your company, your community, your country. And excellence flows. The higher the goal, the greater your success. And the highest? When you realise your ability isn’t yours – it’s a divine blessing. You offer it back in gratitude to that Power. That’s when magic happens. You reach perfection.

We may have countless followers online and many friends around us, yet

we often feel lonely. Because the connection from the heart is missing. When was the last time you truly reached out to someone, felt their sorrow, or rejoiced in their achievements? Loneliness arises from self-absorption. When you’re preoccupied with yourself – your looks, comfort, image – you feel isolated even in a crowd.

Artificial Intelligence may transform the world, but it can never replace the human quest for love. When you reach out to someone, listen with empathy, and genuinely care, you give something far more precious than wealth – the assurance that they matter. You light a spark of belonging, reminding another soul: You are not alone in this world.

As we expand our circle of love, it blossoms into devotion. We begin to sense a benevolent Power that guides our lives – one that blesses us in countless



THE SPEAKING TREE

Expanding The Circle Of Love

Sacredspace



Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious. And however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at.

Stephen Hawking

ATOPIC DERMATITIS: HOW GUT HEALTH COULD BE THE MISSING PIECE IN MANAGING ECZEMA

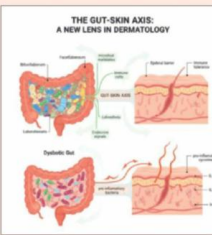
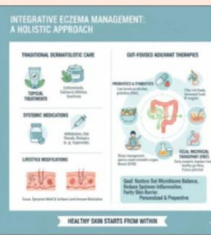
DR. SHITIJ GOEL

For years, atopic dermatitis (AD) – otherwise known as eczema – was regarded as a localized skin problem, one that for decades was considered treatable with topical creams or corticosteroids. Over time, a growing body of evidence has challenged the notion that eczema is only “skin deep”. This has been aided by growing interest and the emergence of a new area of research focused on the gut-skin axis, which has opened an entirely new landscape for how we inject ourselves into the assessment and management of chronic skin diseases. Emerging evidence and ongoing work is revealing that gut microbiome dysbiosis may trigger or play a role in the exacerbation of inflammatory skin diseases.

This is a major shift in thinking that is informing how dermatologists, immunologists, and gastroenterologists think about the treatment and prevention of eczema and the possibility of causing deeper healing within the Gastrointestinal (GI) tract. This degree of shift is also garnering interest from healthcare institutions, biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, and nutraceutical companies trying to build around microbiome therapies as adjuvant therapies for eczema and other chronic skin illnesses.

ECZEMA: A DISEASE BEYOND THE SKIN

According to epidemiological studies reported in the scientific literature, the worldwide prevalence of atopic dermatitis is nearly 20% of children and 10% of adults. It typically starts in infancy, is marked by dry, inflamed, and itchy skin, can last throughout adulthood, and interferes with quality of life and mental wellbeing. Eczema was traditionally managed symptomatically, with moisturizers, corticosteroids, antihistamines, and biologic agents for flare-ups. Most treatments addressed only the visible symptoms and



immune dysregulation on the surface of the skin. There's a growing literature suggesting that eczema is driven by gut dysbiosis. Gut dysbiosis is a microbiome imbalance in the gut. The gut microbiome – trillions of bacteria, fungi, and viruses – appears to regulate immune homeostasis and inflammatory response.

THE GUT-SKIN AXIS: A NEW LENS IN DERMATOLOGY

The gut-skin axis refers to the bidirectional network ability for communications between the gastrointestinal tract and the skin. It is a culmination of the pathway formed through the immune system, endocrine signalling, and microbial metabolites. A healthy gut microbiome supports the proper functioning of the immune system to differentiate harmful and harmless. When the gut microbiome is thrown off, for many reasons, including antibiotics, a bad diet, chronic stress, and/or environmental factors – the body enters a state of low-grade systemic inflammation.

In patients with atopic dermatitis, research suggests the following will be observed:

- Decreased microbial diversity in the gut, and specifically less abundance of helpful species like *Bifidobacterium* and *Faecal bacterium* parasite.
- Overgrowth of pro-inflammatory bacteria that can stimulate your immune system to overreact.
- Decreased production of

short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), especially butyrate, which is an important component of a properly functioning gut and skin barrier.

This information indicates that an imbalanced gut microbiome could not simply exacerbate eczema but also trigger the inflammatory cascade for eczema to develop in the first place.

THE IMMUNE CONNECTION: FROM GUT TO SKIN

The gastrointestinal tract houses approximately 70% of the body's immune cells. A healthy gut microbiota is responsible for educating these immune cells to help express tolerance to dermatologically non-innocuous antigens such as food proteins, pollen, etc., while activating an appropriate response to true pathogenic antigens.

The immune education process is broken in patients with eczema. Instead of tolerance, type 2 immunity develops, and the immune system becomes hyper-responsive by producing pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-4, IL-13 and IL-31 – the primary mediators of the atopic march.

The inflammation does not remain localized in the gastrointestinal tract; it travels in the body and expresses as itching, redness and irritation on the skin. It is important to note that due to the loss of SCFA-producing beneficial bacteria, the skin loses its immune system and exposure tolerance when the gut is unhealthy, all of which contributes barrier dysfunction and exposure to

environmental irritants.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE GUT-ECZEMA LINK

Recent studies in the clinical and genetic literature have bolstered the causal link between gut dysbiosis and atopic dermatitis. Here are three key points:

1. Infants who subsequently developed eczema had a microbiome profile that consisted of low levels of *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* species months before the development of skin symptoms.
 2. Meta-analyses have suggested that early exposure to antibiotics and formula feeding, both of which disrupt gut flora, increase the likelihood of developing eczema.
 3. Intervention trials accounting for specific probiotic strains have shown improvements in eczema severity scores, particularly in pediatric patients.
- This suggests a causative role rather than simply a correlation of gut health in creating eczema, framing skin inflammation as a systemic dysfunction – skin inflammation is a symptom of internal imbalance.

EARLY-LIFE GUT HEALTH: THE FOUNDATION FOR RESILIENCE

The development of a diverse gut microbiome starts at birth.

Babies born by vaginal delivery and breastfed generally have a more diverse microbiota that is important

to immune development. In contrast, babies born by C-section, formula-fed, or exposed to antibiotics as infants often have a reduced gut microbiota diversity and a higher risk of later development of atopic diseases.

This highlights the need for maternal and infant gut health programs as an early intervention in the prevention of allergic and inflammatory diseases.

Integrative and Gut-Focused Therapeutics

As we learn more about the gut-skin axis, physicians are considering the use of adjunctive gut-targeted therapies to conventional dermatologic care. These treatments do not replace topical or systemic treatments – but work to support and restore the body's internal ecosystem.

1. Probiotics and Symbiotic

Probiotics are live beneficial microorganisms, which can support the body's microbial balance. Selected strains, in particular *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG, *Bifidobacterium* longum, and *Lactobacillus casei*, have been shown to have protective and anti-inflammatory qualities, with clinical trials supporting their use.

Symbiotic, which combine prebiotics (non-digestible short-chain fibres to feed good bacteria), promote the immune system in the gut and skin. However, it is important to note that both probiotics and symbiotic efficacy are strains specific, as you will need a licensed professional

to help you personalize your prescription based on your microbiome.

2. Prebiotics and Fiber-Rich Diet

Diet consisting of plant-based fibre (such as found in garlic, onions, bananas, oats) promotes gut bacteria producing SCFAs that induce a metabolic pathway that leads to anti-inflammatory pathways which contribute to fortifying the epidermal barrier and potential reducing flare-ups in eczema.

3. Lifestyle and Nutritional Modifications

Reducing the number of processed foods, refined sugars, and artificial ingredients can lead to a decrease in systemic inflammation. By adding naturally fermented foods such as yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, and kimchi, you also introduce beneficial microbes to the system. Stress management, quality sleep, and cautious antibiotic use are other factors that assist in maintaining microbial equilibrium.

4. Faecal Microbial Transplant (FMT)

Still in the research stages, faecal microbial transplant (FMT) will transfer healthy gut bacteria from a donor organism into a patient. While the vital role of the microbiome continues to be studied, some very early animal and laboratory research demonstrated that FMT can help to improve cytokine signalling (those critical in creating the immune response) and decrease the thickness of eczema-like inflammation.

Trials on humans are ongoing and while attention to safety is still underway, the hope is to lower unnecessary exposure to, or use of, topical or oral medications.

PHYSICIAN'S ROLE AND WHAT THE HEALTH-RELATED INDUSTRIES WILL HAVE TO CONSIDER ABOUT THIS

The recognition of the gut-skin connection through nutrition practice is changing the delivery of care in both clinical practice and in commerce. Multidisciplinary practice with dermatologists, paediatricians, gastroenterologists, nutritionists, etc. is becoming the new norm for some institutions.

For hospitals and institutions, this will allow for the design of integrative eczema clinics with microbiome health at the forefront of intervention. For pharmaceutical and nutraceutical brands, this means adjustment to market for newer formulations looking to target the microbiome as a benefit of future formulation – including probiotic, prebiotic and dietary formulations that will be based upon some improvement in clinical outcomes.

Despite the industry shift toward integrative solutions, common education remains essential. Potential public engagement that educates patients, families and the community on the gut health-related literature and overall connection the gut can have, can provide patients with options to make more informed decisions about their care and well-being, leading to choices independent of popular notions from unverified “Gut Labs.”

CAUTION AND SCIENTIFIC RIGOR

While the potential of microbiome therapy is exciting, experts caution against oversimplified or commercialized interpretations. Not all probiotics or diets claiming to “cure eczema” are supported by clinical evidence.

Elimination diets or excessive supplement use, without medical supervision, can worsen nutritional balance and immunity. The focus must remain on scientifically supported, clinician-guided, and personalized approaches

that integrate microbiome modulation within the standard of care.

THE FUTURE OF ECZEMA MANAGEMENT: PERSONALIZED AND PREVENTIVE

The future of atopic dermatitis treatment is likely to be personalized, and data driven.

With the advent of gut microbiome testing, clinicians may soon tailor probiotic regimens or dietary plans to individual microbial profiles. Researchers are already working on next-generation probiotics that can specifically target immune pathways implicated in eczema.

For healthcare organizations, investing in microbiome research and patient education can position them at the forefront of preventive dermatology. The next era of eczema care will likely combine topical science with gut intelligence – integrating external treatment with internal equilibrium.

CONCLUSION

While atopic dermatitis manifests on the skin, it originates deeper within us – in the gut. Implementing a full-spectrum gut health approach in addition to established dermatologic treatment can pave the way for better outcomes and quality of life (QoL) for patients with atopic dermatitis.

As the science develops around the gut-skin axis, one thing is clear:

Healthy skin starts from within.

By embracing this concept internally, we can shift a future in eczema care, including collaboration between clinicians, academic investigators, and health care entrepreneurs for an integrative, evidenced-based model of care, bridging dermatology and gut health, to provide patients with more personalized, effective, and lasting relief.

PATIENT SAFETY IN INDIA: HOW HEALTH-TECH PLATFORMS ENSURE SAFER, ERROR-FREE PATIENT CARE

DR. AJAY SINGH CHAUHAN

India's healthcare landscape is undergoing a major transformation, driven by health-tech innovations that aim to make care safer, more accurate, and more inclusive. With preventable harm still a major concern – especially in pediatric and neonatal care where up to 97% of adverse events can be avoided – digital tools are emerging as powerful allies in ensuring patient safety.

A Decade of Progress in Patient Safety

Over the past decade, India has strengthened its focus on patient safety through initiatives like the National Patient Safety Implementation Framework (2018), which standardized practices for infection control, clinical safety, and error reporting. Accreditation systems such as NABH and programs under the National Health Mission have further improved healthcare quality. Digitally, the creation of more than 67 crore Ayushman Bharat Health Accounts (ABHA) and over 42 crore linked health records has made it easier to access secure and accurate medical data – paving the way for continuity of care and transparency.



Health-Tech Leading the Way

Technological innovation is reshaping care delivery. Artificial Intelligence predicts hospital admissions, IoT-enabled devices continuously monitor vital signs, and telemedicine brings specialist consultations to remote corners of India. With nearly 70% of the population residing in rural areas, these digital tools are bridging critical access gaps. Platforms like e-Sanjeevani, TeleMANAS, and the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission are connecting patients with doctors and ensuring timely interventions, especially for those in underserved regions.

Data as the New Pillar of Safety

The integration of health data analytics is proving instrumental in preventing medical errors. By analyzing large data sets, hospitals can now predict risks, flag drug interactions, and ensure that treatment protocols are followed correctly. Real-time dashboards allow healthcare providers to track infection rates, monitor patient vitals,

and ensure compliance with safety standards. As India's healthcare analytics sector grows at over 25% annually, the system is evolving from intuition-based to data-driven decision-making – making care not only smarter but also safer.

Bridging the Rural-Urban Healthcare Divide

Despite these advances, rural India still faces unequal access to healthcare. While most of the population lives in villages, only about 36.5% of hospital beds are in rural areas, and doctor-to-patient ratios remain extremely low. Government efforts like upgrading Health and Wellness Centres and expanding telemedicine have improved access, but sustained investment in infrastructure and manpower remains essential to achieve balance.

Towards a Patient-Centric Future

The next phase of India's digital health journey emphasizes patient-centered care. Platforms now offer personalized engagement through medication reminders, lifestyle tracking, and follow-up management. Patients can access their health records, monitor treatment costs, and even connect with mental health or social support services – all through digital

Understanding the surge of arthritis in millennials and gen Z

DR. AKHILESH RATHI

Arthritis, often perceived as a condition that accompanies old age, is now making its presence felt among the younger generation. Increasingly, people in their 20s and 30s are experiencing joint pain, stiffness, and inflammation – symptoms once associated only with seniors.

“Arthritis simply means inflammation of the joints,” explains Dr. Akhilesh Rathi, Director of Orthopedic Replacement, Sports Injury and Orthopedics at Sri Action Balaji Hospital and Founder of Rathi Orthopaedic and Spine Clinic, Dwarka New Delhi. “It can affect one or multiple joints and has over a hundred types. The most common are osteoarthritis – due to wear and tear of cartilage – and rheumatoid arthritis, which is an autoimmune disorder where the body attacks its own joints. Early onset joint issues are on the rise due to lifestyle habits and neglect of musculoskeletal health.”

Young and Arthritic: What's Fueling the Trend

The modern lifestyle has a major role to play. Sedentary habits, poor posture, obesity, excessive screen time, and lack of regular exercise have made the younger

population vulnerable.

“Prolonged sitting, inadequate stretching, and lack of muscle strengthening lead to early degeneration of joints, especially the knees and spine,” says Dr. Rathi. “Unhealthy eating patterns, high sugar intake, and processed foods trigger inflammation that worsens joint health.”

Sports injuries, improper gym workouts, and repetitive strain activities are other common triggers. Moreover, chronic stress and sleep deprivation can disturb the immune system, accelerating joint inflammation.

Spot the Early Warning Signs

Early detection is critical. Joint stiffness (especially in the morning), swelling, redness, and difficulty in movement are telltale signs.



“Young people often ignore early symptoms, assuming it's just muscle soreness or fatigue,” warns Dr. Rathi. “But persistent pain or swelling lasting more than a few weeks should not be neglected. Early diagnosis can prevent permanent joint damage.”

Prevention: Protect Your Joints Before It's Too Late

While not all forms of arthritis can be completely prevented, lifestyle changes can greatly lower the risk. Dr. Akhilesh Rathi advises maintaining a healthy weight, staying physically active, and eating a balanced, anti-inflammatory diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and omega-3 fatty acids. “Opt for low-impact exercises like swimming, cycling, or yoga, which strengthen mus-

cles without stressing joints,” Dr. Rathi suggests. “Take breaks from prolonged sitting, practice good posture, and ensure your Vitamin D levels are adequate. Prevention truly begins with awareness.”

Treatment: Modern Medicine Restores Mobility

Today's treatment for arthritis is highly customized. Mild cases respond well to physiotherapy, medication, and lifestyle changes. For autoimmune forms, disease-modifying drugs are used to slow down progression.

“When arthritis severely limits its movement and quality of life, surgical options like joint replacement offer excellent outcomes,” explains Dr. Rathi. “With advanced minimally-invasive techniques and durable implants, recovery is faster and patients regain mobility sooner.”

A Healthy Future Is in Our Hands

Arthritis is no longer confined to the elderly. The rising cases among younger adults serve as a reminder that joint health must be nurtured early. “Our joints are designed to last a lifetime. With timely care, regular exercise, and a healthy lifestyle, we can ensure that arthritis doesn't dictate how we move, live, or enjoy life” – concluded Dr. Akhilesh Rathi.



SofteningCPI masks long-term concerns

India's retail inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and wholesale inflation, as seen in the Wholesale Price Index (WPI), have fallen to record levels, beyond projections of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and other agencies. Retail inflation slipped to 1.54% in September, the lowest since June 2017, while wholesale inflation declined to 0.13% on a year-on-year basis, and down from 0.52% in August. For the second time in this fiscal year, the retail inflation rate was below the RBI's target zone of 2-4%. This fall has been traced to a decline in food prices, including those of vegetables and pulses, despite an increase in the prices of vegetable oil. The consumer food price index fell by over 2%, also accounting for the lower rural inflation in relation to urban inflation.

It should be noted that while retail inflation hit record lows, there was no similar fall in core inflation, which is inflation without taking into consideration the prices of goods such as food items, fuel, and others with volatile prices. Core inflation represents a longer trend – it rose from 4.2% in August to 4.6% in September and has stayed above 4% for eight consecutive months. The spurt in core inflation has been partly on account of the recent increase in gold prices. But the rise is considerable even if gold is excluded from the mix. This should be a matter of concern because it may be indicative of an active long-term trend of inflation. The rise, indeed, should be a factor to be considered for the longer term, but the softening of retail inflation also presents opportunities for the RBI and other policymakers to make useful interventions in the economy. Retail inflation could find still lower levels when the GST cuts come into full force. The September inflation rate has only partially captured the price cuts resulting from the GST restructuring.

Since retail inflation has stayed below the RBI's medium-term target of 4% for seven straight months, the apex bank is likely to make another cut in interest rates in its December meeting. The RBI said in its last meeting that inflation was likely to moderate further in the current fiscal year because of the GST rate cuts and a favourable outlook on food prices. While the high festival demand in the current month does not give a comprehensive picture of the scenario, it is almost certain that the RBI will prioritise growth over inflation in the coming months.

Core inflation has consistently stayed above 4% and may be indicative of an active long-term trend

After the fallout, a fresh start with Canada

The visit by Canada's Foreign Minister Anita Anand to New Delhi earlier this week extends efforts to reset relations between the two countries that hit a low in 2023 over the killing of Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar. The Canadian government, headed by Justin Trudeau, had alleged that the killing of Nijjar, a Canadian national, was orchestrated by India's secret services. India denied the charge, but the issue led to a series of actions, including a suspension of trade negotiations, disruption of visa services, and expulsion of diplomats. The rift had caused anxiety among the sizeable, influential Indian diaspora in Canada, which also maintains close links with India. It had an economic fallout as well. India and Canada are large economies, and both have been hit by US President Donald Trump's tariff war. A re-establishment of bilateral relations, therefore, also makes economic sense.

The change of leadership in Canada provided crucial impetus. Prime Minister Mark Carney has consciously tried to restore relations as part of his emphasis on engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Carney, an economist, has from the beginning indicated that he wanted to rebuild relations with India. India has also positively responded to these signals. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Canada as a special invitee to the G-7 summit outreach in June. The Trudeau government's policy towards India was influenced by domestic politics, as the regime depended on the support of the extremist fringe among the Sikh diaspora, and of the National Democratic Party led by Jagmeet Singh, who is no friend of India. Politics in Canada has seen a shift after the April 2025 election, giving Carney more leeway to repair relations with India.

In her first official visit to India, the Canadian Foreign Minister met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar. The visit saw both countries agreeing on a host of collaborative measures. Ministerial-level discussions on bilateral trade and investments are to begin soon, and a high-level dialogue on energy co-operation is to be re-established. The focus of the deliberations was on initiatives that were put on hold since 2023. The visit is expected to re-establish cooperation in trade, technology, education, and security. Discussions around a free trade agreement are proposed to be restarted. A visit by Carney to India in February next year is in the works. The messaging of the foreign minister's visit is one of reconciliation, a reconnection before both parties set out to chart the course for future bilateral engagement.

Canadian minister's India visit signals renewed ties in energy, trade, and strategic engagement

Peace by force undermines Palestinian autonomy

Trump's Gaza plan ignores core questions on occupation and resistance, risks another truce breakdown

MALAY MISHRA

With two years of war having passed into the bloodied history of modern times, celebrations were seen on both sides of the northern frontier as the 'historic' Gaza peace plan was foisted on Palestine by an American-led international order. The celebrations appear premature, considering how the previous agreements failed, including the one in January, which was violated by Israel after two months. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will try to subvert the agreement (finalised for the first phase only) to hold on to power, with the Israeli Supreme Court waiting in the wings to oust him from office. Donald Trump, while signing the first phase plan, stated that he couldn't guarantee that Israel would not attack Hamas again if they tried to regroup. Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz has given orders to the IDF to hunt down Hamas militants if Hamas refuses to implement the agreement.

The first phase of the plan is done, and 20 living hostages were released from Hamas's captivity while Israel delivered on its agreement to free nearly 2,000 Palestinian militants and civilians. A grand ceremony jointly hosted by Egypt and the United States on October 13 at the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh brought a galaxy of world leaders from the Western world as well as the region to applaud the statesmanship of the US President.

It is important to note that neither the UN, which is mandated to administer Gaza, nor the Palestinian Authority, which is supposedly governing the West Bank, was consulted on the peace plan. For instance, Navi Pillay, the former Chair of the UN Commission for Human Rights, the body which found Israel responsible for committing genocide (subsequently taken by South Africa to the International Court of Justice), claimed that Palestine was not a party to the plan.

The second phase of the plan, dealing with the disarmament of Hamas and future governance of Gaza, is in limbo as Hamas has not agreed to the subsequent phases of the plan. This suits the Far-Right Likud party headed by Netanyahu well, as it will probably attribute all ensuing problems to the intransigence of Hamas. It is not surprising to understand the position Hamas has taken in the face of obstacles and having lost men and arms, besides its image within the Arab bloc. With 67,000 plus innocent lives lost, women and children murdered, maimed, raped, and starved to death, and with hospitals, schools, and community centres bombed, food and medical supplies weaponised, and



homes destroyed, what could have been their options?

As Franz Fanon, the celebrated author of the decolonisation primer *The Wretched of the Earth*, says, "Decolonisation is truly the creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the thing which has been colonised becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself". Hamas has thought fit not to surrender the right of the Palestinian people to speak for themselves, for their self-determination and sovereignty. The legitimacy of Hamas derives from its mandate to govern Gaza since its victory in the 2006 elections, no matter whether or not the Western powers, who now clamour to recognise the State of Palestine, see it as a terrorist group.

India's position defies tradition
While India had given its all-out support to the peace plan (Prime Minister

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Little things, big difference

The universe helps us find joy when we are ready to make an effort

RAMESHINDER SINGH SANDHU

Like most Indian homes, the so-called drawing room at our home in Amritsar always stood ignored. Even when guests came, we made them sit in the lobby or in one of the bedrooms. We overlooked it despite it having floor-to-ceiling windows facing our small but serene garden. But this early June, as I made two single-seat sofas face the garden with a small marble-top table in the centre, I was completely oblivious that this little change would turn into my favourite spot.

I felt the connection, as if the river was gently flowing in me, in the very first minutes as I lounged – clapping my eyes on the garden. It is blessed with an array of plants, many also in the pots which remain shaded by an old tree

known for its big yellow flowers. For it, the season of fall is always on, as it sheds leaves after every few days, and the grass always welcomes them. They may lie scattered, yet they continue to exude beauty of their own. The wall of it is embellished with original Nakashahi bricks.

I am not its only admirer; there are several birds, including exotic ones. I have also spotted a family of squirrels which lives on the tree but is often running on the wall. When it rains, the sound of it makes me contemplate life, and the fragrance of the wet soil wafts freely inside. Imagine the joy of the garden when the spring comes, as it will explode with fragrant flowers.

The day I first sat, I thought, 'I will come here for tea or coffee,' but I soon realised that whenever I am home, I am always here, where I also began enjoying my meals, listening to the music or podcasts, afternoon naps, reading books and even writing. The piece you are reading now was also written here, the session of which remained punc-

Modi congratulated both Netanyahu and Trump several times), Gaza or Hamas has been conspicuously absent in Delhi's political thinking. India, it may be noted, was one of the first non-Arab countries to recognise the PLO in 1974 and Palestine as a State in 1998, in line with its principled position on decolonisation.

Writing in the *Harijan* in November 1938, Gandhi had said, "My sympathy for Jews does not blind me to the requirements of justice. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs". India had opposed the UN Resolution 181, which laid the ground for the UN Partition Plan of 1947. Contrast it with the present-day pattern of India's voting in support of the "two-nation theory" on the floor of the UN, along with 153 member nations, when it has been an uncomfortable proposition for New Delhi, even after several resolutions calling out Israel's genocidal actions and proposing an immediate ceasefire in Gaza were vetoed. While 'Palestine' may have become taboo in public discourse, this position amounts to denying history and the long tradition of India's support for the Palestinian cause.

Trump's peace plan, a cleverly manipulated instrument of surrender for Hamas, leaves little room for any kind of Palestinian autonomy now or in the future, nor any scope for its participation in post-conflict reconstruction. The plan has been critiqued for its vagueness and top-down imposition by the global rules-based order clique in cahoots with global capitalism. Soon after the peace summit and withdrawal of the IDF from the proximate periphery of Gaza, militants released from Israeli prisons publicly slaughtered so-called infidels.

With food aid having been halted, chaos is ruling the Gaza landscape again. Peace is extremely fragile – the deftly crafted scheme under the Trump imprimatur, so readily endorsed by Arab nations driven by their own plans, may have come to naught with Palestinian resistance showing no sign of dying out.

Peace imposed by force can never withstand the increasing challenge of just demands for a homeland. The global order needs to recognise this.

(The writer is a retired diplomat and political analyst; Syndicate: The Billion Press)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Abandon the ill-conceived project

The proposed 16.7-km tunnel road between the Central Silk Board and Hebbal in Bengaluru appears to be ill-conceived. The committee headed by BMRCL executive director S Hegaraddi has rightly pointed out several inconsistencies and 'bare minimum' geological data in the DPR. It is clear that the firm responsible for preparing the DPR is either inexperienced or has done shoddy work, which could lead to cost escalation, waterlogging, and structural issues during construction. Further, the project's proximity to Lalbagh, with its rich history,

raises concerns. Given the history of major projects in India, it is doubtful whether 90% of the work site can be handed over without delays. The project seems to cater only to car owners who can afford the hefty toll of Rs 300, making it inaccessible to the general public. Instead of this ill-conceived project, the focus should be on introducing a well-planned public bus transport system that benefits the masses. It would be wise to abandon this project.

H R Bapu Satyanarayana, Mysuru

public policy understanding, and field experience determine leadership, not celebrity status or social media influence. Before contesting elections, Thakur should engage in party work at the ground level, understand citizens' issues, and prove her commitment to governance. Only then would her candidacy reflect the democratic spirit.

Vishal Mayur, Tumakuru

Get rid of potholes

The persistent debates about Bengaluru's potholed roads never seem to end. Despite repeated repairs costing hundreds of crores of public funds, these potholes appear and reappear. Unless those responsible are

held accountable and concrete measures are taken, no improvements can be expected. Neighbouring states often cite this issue to lure industries away from Bengaluru, claiming better infrastructure. However, this should not be at the cost of Bengaluru's progress. As the technology hub of India, Bengaluru's importance in industry and allied establishments cannot be overstated. It is time for the authorities to take responsibility and find lasting solutions to this recurring problem.

V Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT

No worker in BJP gets angry... People who chant Bharat Mata ki Jai are not angry...



Nityanand Rai,
Union Minister

I live in a constant state of hyperbole.
Eden Sher

TO BE PRECISE

Modi promised to stop buying oil from Russia, says Trump. Gol denies.



IN PERSPECTIVE

Quantum state and collective behaviour

The Nobel Prize for Physics recognises efforts that push boundaries of quantum mechanics to macroscopic scales

GAUTAM I MENON

Quantum mechanics, first formulated in the early 1900s, has never failed a test. An early success was understanding the behaviour of a single hydrogen atom in terms of its quantum states. But can a large number of particles display any kind of quantum mechanical behaviour that isn't just a feature of its units, taken one by one?

To get large numbers of particles to collectively display quantum mechanical behaviour requires that they be cooled to very low temperatures. In the right conditions, these particles can condense into a single quantum state. For collections of electrons in metals, such a state is a superconductor, in which a current can flow endlessly.

Superconductors (also superfluids) are examples of quantum mechanics operating at scales much larger than an atom – there's no size limit to the number of electrons in that single quantum state. The property of superposition is uniquely quantum mechanical. The quantum mechanical analogue of a 'bit', a quantity which takes only the basic values 0 and 1, is the 'qubit', any intermediate combination of these two basic states.

Superposition leads to apparent paradoxes when we consider large objects. Consider Schrodinger's cat. Could one come up with real experiments in which a cat – or the same number of atoms that might go into a cat – could exist in a superposition state of alive and dead?

Another quantum mechanical feature is that of tunnelling. A quantum particle can cross a nominally insurmountable barrier, 'tunnelling' through, simply because quantum mechanics allows quantum states to leak into such forbidden regions.

Specifying a quantum mechanical state of a collective of particles involves assigning an angle to that state, most straightforwardly thought of as a point along the circumference of a circle, moving around the circle and returning to its original position after a full rotation. To understand the Nobel Prize-winning experiments, consider two superconductors separated from each other. Each has its own, independent 'quantum' angle. Now bring them together, with a tiny sliver of non-superconducting material between them. This is called a Josephson junction.

In the case of superconductors, electrons pair up to form Cooper pairs. These pairs

condense into one quantum state, where they behave as if they were one single unit. While Cooper pairs live only within superconductors, tunnelling implies that superconductivity can also leak into regions that are not superconducting. As a result, a current can flow effortlessly across the Josephson junction, even without a voltage to drive particles across the junction.

When a voltage source is introduced into the circuit, the difference in angles on both sides of the junction changes steadily with time, driven by this voltage and described by the point going around the circle. A steady voltage leads to a current that goes up and down in time at a regular rate, predicted by quantum mechanics.

Testing at scale

The experiments that won the Nobel Prize were designed by UK-born John Clarke, then a young faculty member at the University of California at Berkeley, together with Michel Devoret, a French postdoc, and American PhD student John Martinis. It relies on applying a fixed current to a Josephson junction.

They started with the system in a zero-voltage state, but with current flowing through. This 'metastable state' is not what the system prefers to be in, but a barrier must be surmounted first. Quantum tunnelling enables the crossing of this barrier.

Clarke and his collaborators went to great lengths to isolate the purely quantum mechanical parts of the experiment. They measured how long the system stays in the zero-voltage state. They shone microwaves of different frequencies on their apparatus, exploring its quantised energies, providing precise tests of quantum mechanics at a scale much larger than that of atoms.

Josephson junctions, and devices built with them, allow for many tests of quantum mechanics. In particular, they allow us to test the robustness of the quantum state.

Making quantum computers and related devices requires that we understand quantum mechanical behaviour, and its robustness at a scale much larger than that of a single atom or molecule. The experiments of Clarke, Devoret and Martinis show precisely how quantum mechanics continues to work even at these scales. Because of them, we know that quantum mechanical states of multiple atoms large enough to constitute even a cat can exist. Everything we know about quantum mechanics applies here, too.

All this confirms the primacy of quantum mechanics as the defining theory of the physical world.

(The writer is Dean, Research, and Professor of Physics and Biology, Ashoka University)

When the numbers don’t add up: Karnataka’s flawed survey

SURABHI HODIGERE

Karnataka’s Social and Educational Survey was conceived as an exercise in social justice. It is now revealing itself as a case study in administrative hubris. Across the state, thousands of enumerators have been trudging through villages and towns with malfunctioning devices and minimal preparation. Schools have been closed to free up teachers. In several districts, teachers have reported exhaustion, stress, and even tragedy: a 58-year-old teacher died of a heart attack reportedly while on duty. These failures reflect a deeper collapse of planning and purpose within the state. At their core lies the absence of institutional clarity about what this survey is, who is authorised to conduct it, and what purpose it serves.

The Karnataka government has tasked the Backward Classes Commission with conducting an all-caste survey – a move that, several legal experts argue, exceeds its mandate under law. Section 9(1)(i) and

(ii) of the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1995, empowers the Commission to study the social and educational conditions of the Backward Classes and to conduct surveys only for that purpose. It does not authorise the enumeration of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or the General Category. This position has also been raised in recent petitions before the Karnataka High Court, which noted that the Commission’s powers do not extend to an all-caste survey.

The irony is that the survey claims to serve the very groups it risks undermining. A government committed to social justice would strengthen institutions, not stretch their limits. The previous BJP government, through the Madhuswamy Committee, dealt with the question of internal reservations through a structured process. The present one appears to be acting without a firm legal anchor or institutional discipline. What may seem procedural in bureaucratic terms carries profound implications for justice and representation.

If the legal foundation of the survey is uncertain, its political origins are even more telling. It strains belief that Karnataka cannot locate the report of its own 2015 survey. The Kantharaj Commission’s massive survey, covering over 1.3 crore households and costing more than Rs 160 crore, was never tabled. The original report is no longer traceable. The Hegde Commission in 2023 submitted a reconstructed version using partial data. The Congress government has treated this institutional amnesia as routine – announcing new surveys while quietly burying the old.

The decision to order a fresh survey appears to have originated not within the state cabinet or policy machinery but from the Congress high command. The announcement was made in Delhi by party general secretary Randeep Surjewala, in the presence of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar. This sequence of events raises questions about where authority truly lies. Having failed to conduct a national caste census

while in power at the Centre, the Congress now seeks to reclaim the social justice narrative through a state-level exercise that lacks administrative and legal clarity.

Even within the government, confusion has been apparent. Ministers have issued contradictory statements, officials have complained of shifting instructions, and the process of verification lacks clarity. The survey design itself compounds the problem. Respondents are asked to write in their caste without reference to an approved list or coding framework, producing inconsistent or non-existent identities. Reports from the field mention entries such as “Brahmin Christian” or “Lingayat Christian”, which have no recognition in law or welfare policy. Unless there is a clear process to verify and classify such data, the exercise risks producing numbers that are neither reliable nor useful. By confusing recognition with representation, the government risks turning social justice into an instrument of political convenience. Karnataka’s reservation system is built on

statutory lists that define eligibility with precision.

Implementation of this survey has been equally disorderly. The government initially announced that enumeration would end by October 7, but the deadline has since been extended to October 18, with further delays expected in some districts. In Belagavi, teachers have protested the deployment of pregnant women, persons with disabilities, and those nearing retirement. Yet the government insists that the exercise is on schedule and that “minor technical issues” are being resolved.

Although the Karnataka HC has clarified that participation in the survey is voluntary and that enumerators cannot pressure anyone to respond, field reports suggest that performance targets are influencing enumerator behaviour. The questionnaire itself appears poorly designed, with intrusive and inconsistently worded questions varying across districts, raising doubts about comparability and data integrity. D K Shivakumar has also public-

ly advised enumerators to “avoid asking personal questions”, further indicating administrative confusion.

A survey launched without clear constitutional backing, executed without administrative capacity or clarity, and pursued without internal coherence cannot command public trust. What began as a promise of social justice now risks being seen as a politically driven exercise.

If caste enumeration is to serve equity, it must be done with credibility, legality and transparency. That calls for a national caste census, conducted transparently under the authority of the Union government, rather than fragmented state-level efforts driven by electoral or partisan considerations. The Karnataka exercise offers a cautionary tale: when data collection becomes a substitute for governance, even a cause as vital as social justice can be reduced to political theatre.

(The writer is a spokesperson for the BJP in Karnataka and a public policy professional)

Once consumed mainly in small, formal tea ceremonies, matcha is now mixed into fruity lattes and preyed on by counterfeiters. Can it survive its own popularity?

PETE WELLS

Over four centuries, Japan built a tradition of drinking matcha that was based on four principles: *wa, kei, sei and jaku*, or harmony, respect, purity and tranquility. It took just a few years for a worldwide matcha craze to upend those values and replace them with disharmony, disrespect, impurity and fraud.

Highly respected Japanese firms are at war with scores of vendors who resell their matcha far above the normal retail price on Amazon, Facebook Marketplace and other sites.

Others are hawking the tea trade’s equivalent of \$45 Chanel bags, counterfeit packages filled with third-rate product or with ordinary tea ground to a dull yellow dust.

Tea companies that have built their reputations over centuries are in despair. Marukyu Koyamaen, founded by Kyujiro Koyama in 1704, has been taking action against counterfeiters for eight years, fighting them in court and making its packages more difficult to copy.

Some of the fakes are filled with “low-quality powdered green tea,” Motoya Koyama, the company’s president and a direct descendant of the founder, said in an email interview. “It would be definitely a great harm to us if those customers who purchased these counterfeit products think that they are produced by Marukyu Koyamaen.”



Matcha drinks at Matchaful cafes, which are whisked by hand in New York. THE NEW YORK TIMES

The matcha market cracks under pressure

Other practices, while not as deceptive, are wildly untraditional. Green lattes and smoothies are prepared with shortcuts (batched concentrate nicknamed *batcha*) and flavourings (banana bread!) that send ripples of horror down the spines of matcha purists. Baristas inhale so much airborne green powder that they joke about coming down with matcha lung.

“It’s like the Wild West because there are so many unknowns and so many new contenders in the game,” said Sebastian Beckwith, an importer whose company, In Pursuit of Tea, has offered matcha for more than 20 years.

Matcha, in its most traditional and prized form, is tea that is shielded from the sun for several weeks before it is picked, steamed and ground to a powder between granite millstones. The process is painstaking. The number of people in Japan for whom it is an everyday drink has never been large. About 80% of the tea grown in the country is sencha, a whole-leaf green variety. Matcha’s share is about 6%. It is very much a niche product.

In the past five years, it has become more popular abroad than it is at home, rocketing to stardom on TikTok and displacing coffee on cafe menus. Japan now exports more than half the matcha it grows. According to the market research firm NiiQ, retail sales of matcha in the United States grew by 86% over the past three years.

Wholesalers are fielding requests from coffee shops in Warsaw, Poland, and in Kazakhstan. Retailers sell out of new shipments in minutes. With demand streaking ahead of the limited supply, all kinds of shady practices have crept into the gulf.

Matcha labelling is almost completely unregulated, making it easier for less scrupulous operators to pass off second- and third-tier products as premium stuff. Previously unknown classifications, like imperial grade and barista grade, are popping up. Even “ceremonial grade,” which is widely

used outside Japan, is an invention of American marketers with no formal definition.

The word matcha itself is open to interpretation these days. Although matcha is historically associated with Japan, powdered tea sold under that name is now made in Australia, Kenya and other countries. Starbucks buys its matcha from China and South Korea as well as Japan.

There is brown matcha, black matcha and white matcha, in addition to old-fashioned matcha in the vibrant green colour of a tree frog. Some of these products were on display at the North American Tea Conference in Charleston, South Carolina, last month.

“There were a lot of different coloured matchas, and this is an issue for a lot of companies that make matcha,” said Rona Tison, tea ambassador for a Japanese firm, Ito En, who attended the event. “There are no regulatory guidelines.”

You’d never know there was a shortage on the streets of Los Angeles, Washington and London. Starbucks, which reported a 40% year-over-year increase in matcha sales for the first quarter of 2025, introduced a new line of protein drinks in September that includes three flavours of matcha. This summer, Blank Street Coffee rolled out a visual rebrand so drenched in foamy green that Fast Company called it “full-on matcha core.” In the process, Blank Street, an international chain, dropped Coffee from its name, and for good reason. Matcha drinks now outnumber coffee drinks on the menu and make up about half the company’s business, according to The Wall Street Journal.

In downtown Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn, it’s hard to round a corner without tripping over an A-frame sidewalk board advertising tiramisu matcha lattes, vanilla matcha fogs or spinach-fortified Mega Matcha smoothies.

This month in Brooklyn, Kettl, a Japanese tea dealer, plans to open a store devoted to matcha appreciation, with canisters for sale in front and guided tastings behind sliding doors in the back. The shop, Kettl Matcha Sen Mon Ten, is meant to offer a bit of counterprogramming, showing a side of matcha that isn’t deeply explored on TikTok.

“It’s an artisan product like wine, and I wanted to have a space focused on that,” said Zach Mangan, Kettl’s founder.

To understand why farmers cannot simply keep all the overnight converts happy by tripling production, it’s useful to remember that the most coveted matcha is milled from the first harvest of spring, when the leaves are sweetest.

“There’s really a supply shortage of first flush,” said Hannah Habes, founder of Matchaful, a New York-based retailer and wholesaler. According to Habes, first-flush matcha grown by a single farmer is the foundation of most of the lattes and other drinks sold at the seven Matchaful cafés. Buying directly from the producer or from well-established retailers is the best way to get what you’re paying for, tea experts say.

There is never as much of this first-flush tea as there is matcha from the second and third harvests, which tends to be more bitter and astringent. It’s typically labelled “culinary grade.”

Culinary-grade matcha is suited for chocolates, brownies and sweet, milky drinks. Tea connoisseurs feel strongly that the finer grades are wasted in lattes and smoothies.

“Using that in a latte is like using red Burgundy to make sangria,” Mangan said.

Adulterating high-grade products with fruit, honey and other sweeteners is more than a waste of good matcha, Koyama said. It also contributes to shortages that have made it difficult to stage tea ceremonies, or *chado*, a cornerstone of traditional Japanese culture.

A more accurate translation of *chado* is “the way of tea,” and understanding the rituals of preparing and serving it is a lifelong pursuit, said Ann Abe, chief of administration at Urasenke Los Angeles, a nonprofit cultural group devoted to the tea ceremony.

“Being third generation Japanese American, to learn about the culture is fascinating, and I’m still learning,” Abe said. She studied *chado* under influential teacher Sosei Matsumoto, who stressed the importance of never wasting any of the powdered tea. Abe has mixed feelings about matcha’s modern ubiquity outside Japan.

“It’s nice to see an interest,” she said. “However, I don’t think most people understand or realize what’s behind a bowl of tea.”

For Tison, who grew up in Japan and whose great-grandmother was a tea ceremony instructor, the sudden global thirst for this esoteric drink is still hard to fathom. “I would never have foreseen it,” she said. “Whoever would have thought?”

The New York Times

ABHAY G CHEBBI

India’s higher education system stands at a transformative crossroads where national aspirations meet global expectations. With over 1,100 universities and 40 million students, the challenge today is not access but excellence—achieving self-reliance, innovation, and employability at a global standard.

The India Skills Report 2025 offers a mixed picture: Kerala records an employability rate of 90.94%, but many states lag behind, exposing deep disparities in academic quality and skill preparedness. Bridging these divides is essential if India is to emerge as a true knowledge superpower.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is India’s most ambitious education reform yet, urging universities to blend Indian ethos with global competitiveness. Complementing it, the National Research Foundation (NRF) seeks to build a vibrant research ecosystem and make India an international hub for innovation and intellectual property.

Yet, challenges persist. According to the Economic Survey 2023-2024, India’s R&D spending is just 0.64% of its gross domestic product – far below China’s 2.4% and the United States’ 3.5%. Only 36% of India’s research funding comes from the private sector, compared with around 75% in the US and China. This imbalance highlights the need for stronger academia-industry-government links.

While leading private universities can nurture innovators up to Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs) – and even product manufacturing – India’s scale demands a broader framework. Each state should establish an Innovation Council comprising academia, industry, and government to evaluate student ideas, set benchmarks, and link innovators to venture capital and manufacturing networks. Such councils would speed India’s transition from lab to market, ensuring creativity finds real-world expression through mentorship, funding, and go-to-market strategies.

Self-reliance in education is not isolation; it is confidence – the ability to produce globally competent graduates while staying rooted in local contexts. Digital technology will be central to this shift. Initiatives like SWAYAM, NPTEL, and UGC-approved online degrees have already democratised learning. As India advances towards the 6G revolution, online and blended learning must

reach every learner. Regulations should encourage quality while ensuring affordability. Backed by public schemes and institutional partnerships, this digital infrastructure can make higher education truly inclusive – ensuring that no learner is left behind.

Self-reliance must go hand-in-hand with inclusivity. Universities should be required to offer merit-cum-need-based scholarships to support promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Employability remains the Achilles heel of Indian higher education. Outdated curricula and weak industry linkages leave many graduates ill-equipped for modern workplaces. A National Talent Pipeline Consortium – bringing together academia, government, and industry – could develop standardised, future-ready curricula.

Leading companies could help define baseline competencies in AI, data analytics, sustainable manufacturing, and emerging technologies. Universities could then customise 20–30% of the curriculum to suit local needs. The Entrepreneurship Mindset Course (EMC) launched by the Punjab government is an excellent example. Targeting five lakh students by 2028-2029, it integrates entrepreneurial thinking with practical business skills.

Beyond coursework, universities should foster AI-integrated, interdisciplinary learning, where social sciences intersect with technology and ethics. This will produce graduates who are not only technically skilled but also empathetic and globally aware.

The next leap must come from embedding apprenticeship-based and cooperative education (co-op) models within degree structures. The government, through NIRF and accreditation frameworks, could reward universities that institutionalise co-op programmes where students alternate between academic study and industry engagement. This model, long practised in Canada and Germany, allows students to gain hands-on experience while earning credits.

India’s rise as a global knowledge power will depend not merely on the number of universities it has, but on how effectively they nurture innovation, employability, and inclusion. The vision ahead is clear: an education system that is self-sufficient but globally connected, digitally empowered yet deeply human, and research-driven yet socially rooted.

(The writer is Pro-Chancellor, Alliance University)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: OCTOBER 1975

Kissinger found Nixon unpleasant

Washington, October 16
Secretary of State Henry Kissinger revealed at a banquet in Ottawa on Tuesday night that former President Richard Nixon was an “old, artificial and unpleasant man”, the Washington Post reported today. Dr. Kissinger’s comments at the banquet in his honour by the Canadian Foreign Minister, Mr. Allan Maceachen, were picked up by a microphone which had been installed to transmit his after-dinner speech to journalists not invited to the banquet.

25 YEARS AGO: OCTOBER 2000

Veerappan sets free one more hostage

Bangalore, Oct 16
The Rajkumar kidnap crisis took another strange twist today with forest bandit Veerappan releasing one hostage, Mr S A Govindaraju, son-in-law of Kannada film star Dr Rajkumar, upsetting government calculations that the actor himself would be freed either tonight or tomorrow. Official sources here told Deccan Herald that Govindaraju, who had reached Erode tonight, was on his way to Bangalore and would be arriving in the city tomorrow morning.

‘What is spirituality, Amma?’ my 15-year-old son asked me recently. This was probably the most complex question someone had ever asked me. According to me, there is no single definition that can sum up the meaning of spirituality. For some, spirituality can be synonymous with religiousity, while for others it could be independent of religion. Its interpretation depends upon the individual’s beliefs, context or personal experiences. Since I didn’t want to diminish my son’s interest in this topic, I tried to decipher spirituality by narrating a true story.

I recently read somewhere that ‘through the power of prayer, faith,

love and gratitude, things have a way of working out.’ My school friend Rajeshwari’s life reflects this quote perfectly. We revived our friendship after a gap of almost three decades. Since our first meeting as adults, she struck me as someone who is extremely humble and pious. Festivals brought out an inner child in her as she excitedly prepared for them weeks in advance. Any festival, be it big or small, she celebrates it with much devotion, earnestly praying for the well-being of not just her family members but for anyone who is unhappy. ‘The number of people on your prayer list is getting

lengthier by the day,’ I teased her once. She smiled and said, “Praying gives me joy because I am assimilating all the positive thoughts with a hope that it will change someone else’s life.”

It’s not that her life is sans difficulties, but she chooses to seek little joys from mundane things instead of cursing her fate or wallowing in self-pity. Be it cooking, visiting a temple or lending a helping hand to the needy, she exemplifies that practising gratitude and mindfulness can enhance overall well-being.

The power of prayer is central to her existence. It is not merely a communion with the divine, but she firmly be-

lieves that prayer helps her in focusing the mind and finding a sense of peace and comfort that helps her navigate through life’s difficulties.

In many ways, she personifies Vivekananda’s answer to the question, ‘What do you gain by prayer?’ He had famously said, ‘I gained nothing. In fact, I lost anger, irritation, insecurity and jealousy’.

After getting a brief glimpse into Rajeshwari’s life, my son’s understanding of spirituality is – ‘Someone who is good-natured, kind and compassionate and believes in bringing comfort and healing to others.’ His interpretation of spirituality made me wish for more people like Rajeshwari in this world.



AHMEDABAD CWG CAN BE MUCH MORE THAN JUST THE 2030 GAMES

AHMEDEBAD is set to host the Commonwealth Games two decades after New Delhi hosted them in 2010. Commonwealth Sport's executive board has forwarded the candidature of Gujarat's largest city as the host for the 2030 games. However, one must be guarded in celebration for now. Just to jog the memory, CWG 2010 in New Delhi was embroiled in avoidable controversies ranging from delays in constructing venues, gaps in civic planning and allegations of massive corruption. This is just one part of the troubles. Hosting Commonwealth Games has become a liability—the last two editions have shown that there are not too many takers to host the quadrennial event. Durban, which was supposed to host the 2022 edition, withdrew because of rising costs, and Birmingham was forced to step in. The 2026 games were supposed to be held in Victoria but the Australian government withdrew after estimates overshoot the original budget. Even for the 2030 edition, there were only two interested nations—India and Nigeria.

Ahmedabad is an apt choice considering the city's push to create world-class infrastructure. The Naranpur Sports Complex, a sprawling structure built for about ₹825 crore, is set to be the main venue. The yet-to-be-finished Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Enclave, which houses the Narendra Modi stadium, will be another venue. India must learn from Delhi and not overshoot the budget. Birmingham 2022 was minimalistic, as will be Glasgow 2026. Even the Paris Olympics last year had strict austerity measures in place to offset the spiralling budget. India's ultimate aim is to host the Olympics in 2036 and the CWG should be organised to show that India can host big-ticket events. Ahmedabad is also in the running for the Olympics, but the International Olympic Committee will decide the hosts by 2030. And Olympic bids are far more complicated than CWG.

India must grab this opportunity to sow seeds of a broader sports culture. The government and all other stakeholders must ensure that India's Olympics tally doubles by 2032 from the seven at Paris 2024. It is possible, going by CWG 2010. India bagged six medals at the 2012 London Olympics, up from three at Beijing four years earlier. With robust planning and investment, India can again create a rewarding culture. CWG 2030 should be the platform for the country's next sporting leap.

STOP BLAMING VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

EACH time a woman is brutalised, those in power rush to manage outrage, not justice. The pattern is painfully familiar—denial, deflection, and, worst of all, blame. Last week, when a young medical student from Odisha studying in Durgapur was allegedly gang-raped, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's first instinct was not compassion, but suspicion. "What was she doing outside after midnight?" she asked. The assault reportedly happened between 8 and 9 pm—words that make her question crueller still. Her party accused the BJP of politicising the crime, but Banerjee herself reached for whataboutery: "In Odisha, girls were raped on beaches. What action has been taken?" The remark was not meant to defend the victim, only to deflect her own failure.

Just a year ago, the rape and murder of another medical student at R G Kar Medical College and Hospital had brought protesters out on Kolkata's streets. Then too, Banerjee responded with denial and blame-shifting. A year later, nothing has changed—not the outrage, not the indifference. Yes, the police have moved faster this time—arrests made, custody secured, and forensic tests widened. But speed means little when empathy is absent. The wound does not close when leaders reopen it with suspicion.

West Bengal was once a beacon of learning, reform, and modernity. It still draws students from across India—young men and women chasing dreams their families can barely afford. What do they hear now from its chief minister? A warning not to step out at night. As if freedom itself were a risk. Women do not need curfews. They need safety. They need leaders who stand with them—not above them, not against them. As chief minister for 14 years, Mamata Banerjee has the authority to protect, to heal, and to lead by example. What she owes the young woman in Durgapur—and every woman who walks afraid—is not excuses or comparisons, but courage. The last thing any survivor deserves is blame.

QUICK TAKE

MTV IS DYING, LONG LIVE MTV

A cultural icon of the 1990s will have its last airing on the last day of 2025. Paramount has announced it will shut down MTV's music channels in several countries including the UK, Australia, Poland, France, Germany and Brazil as part of cost-cutting efforts. What will be left are a few reality TV channels in the stable—a poor reflection of the world's first 24-hour music channel that revolutionised cable TV in India too. At its prime, MTV was a swashbucklingly creative cultural phenomenon that earlier generations could hold up to the following ones to show they did not invent the wheel when it came to paring innovation with creativity in audiovisuals. The icon's demise should raise a chorus call for an archive and museum of TV shows. Any takers?

IT's quite fascinating that in a world where new words and phrases are often coined to cleverly repackage old phenomena, a phraseology popular in the 1960s is being brought back to describe a certain migration out of Donald Trump's America. One has to be cautious when one calls it 'migration', because one is not sure if it's really so. That is, if it's a sustained trend of conscious escape or opportunity hunting.

When Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo announced last week they were moving to the University of Zurich in Switzerland from MIT in the US, it was casually labelled as 'brain drain', although the economist couple had themselves not characterised the professional move as such.

An American news site reported that "one of the biggest risks of the White House's war on academia and its slashing on scientific research funding has been brain drain—the situation where top scholars, spooked by the worsening climate, find working in other nations more attractive instead." It said Banerjee and Duflo were 'decamping' to Zurich.

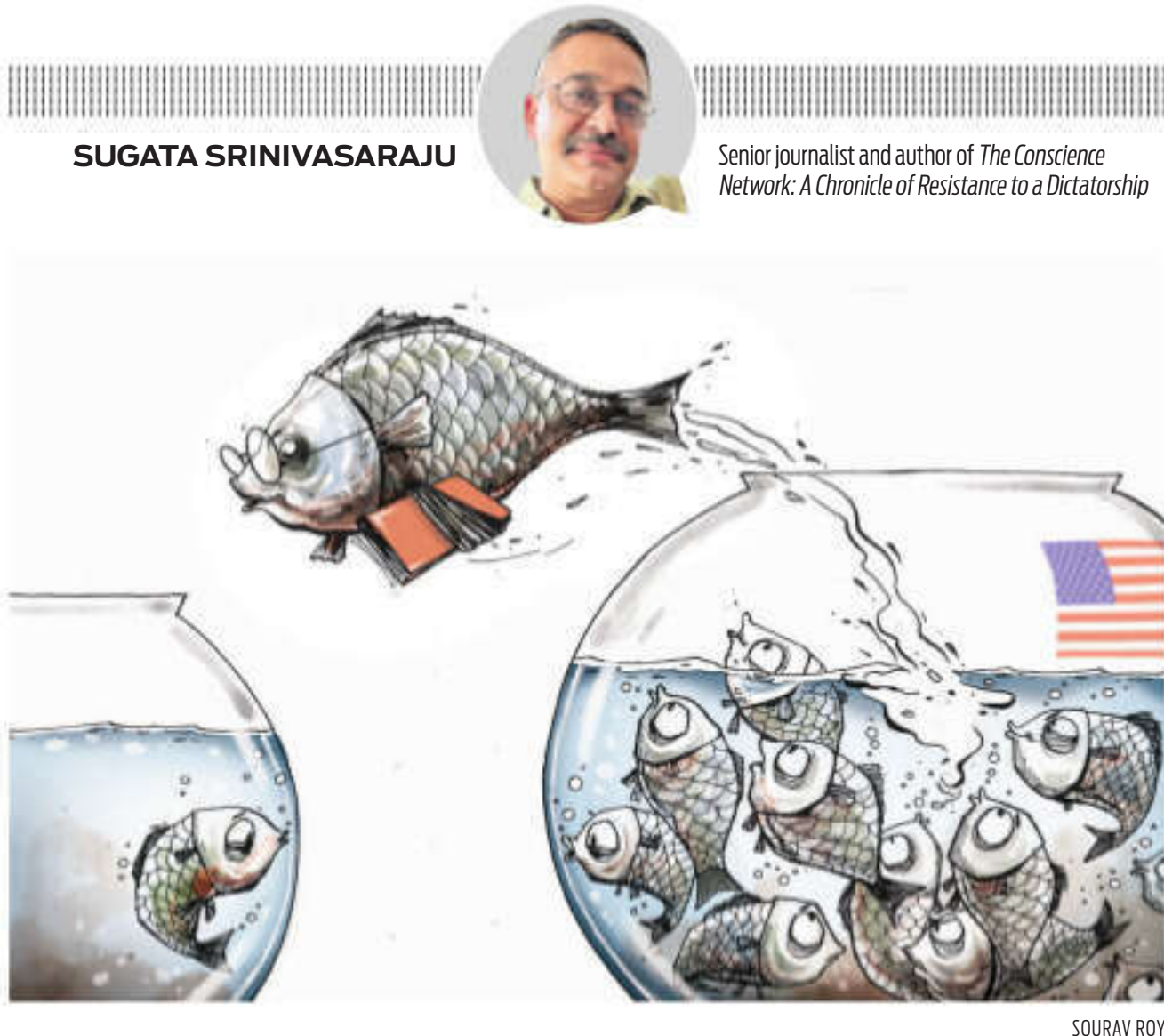
The site also quoted a source to claim the pair's departure was connected with the White House's attacks on academic freedom. It speculated: "The timing certainly is suggestive." MIT is among the top centres of learning in the US that the Trump administration has been pressuring to make institutional changes in exchange for preferential government funding. Unlike many other institutions, MIT had spurned what is euphemistically called the 'Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education' days before Banerjee and Duflo made their decision public.

Duflo had told the news site they did not wish to comment on their move especially when MIT was dealing with reaction to its refusal of the 'compact'. However, Duflo had co-signed an op-ed in *Le Monde* as early as March 2025 that had pretty much made her stance clear. The article had warned that academic and scientific freedoms were under unprecedented attack in the US and 'ideological censorship' was spreading.

Although the Trump administration had initially circulated the compact with nine top American universities including MIT, this week there has been news floating around that it is being extended to all academic institutions across the US. Now, one will have to wait to see if this move is going to lead to an actual wave of 'brain drain'.

Two top academics' shift from the US has brought back the brain drain discourse. Is it likely given the realities elsewhere and the possibility of US reversal in a few years?

OPPORTUNITY HUNTING AS BRAIN DRAIN



The brain drain narrative in the US is in place, with a number of examples of disillusioned top academics being cited regularly by the media, but the reality of action remains to be tested. Even if brain drain happens, it may happen over a period of time, not in an instant surge. That is simply because other nations and other universities across the globe need to expand infrastructure, build resources, and, more importantly, create trust. It's easier said than done.

If one assumes that the destination of those leaving the US is Europe, Asia or Australia, there is no guarantee that ideological regimes there may not bring similar pressures and obstacles. In fact, that nature of illiberalism is on the rise in Europe and other continents, too. Trump has allies and imitators everywhere.

In Banerjee and Duflo's destination, Switzerland, the government and politics is currently dominated by the Swiss People's Party, which is unabashedly far-right and Eurosceptic. Its anti-immigrant rhetoric is loud and it commands 28 percent of the lower chamber of parliament.

China, where cutting-edge scientific and skilled work happens, is often presented as an alternative to the US. Many say China may eventually end up accommodating the best brains from across the world, like the US did during and after World War 2.

But there are political and cultural barriers for this to happen. China is run by a communist regime. Freedoms come

AMERICA'S POLITICS, NORWAY'S MEDAL

THE refusal of the Norwegian Nobel Committee to entertain Donald Trump for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, despite his querulous, absurdist demands, has swung the spotlight on the prize itself. The revelatory fragility of its longstanding rules, the monoethnic—indeed, mononational—constitution of the selection committee, and the dubitable nature of the awardees.

The reasons for Trump's defeasance are several: his inexistence humanitarian record; that the nominations closed on January 31, months before seven countries decided to plug his bid; and that he had not been nominated by 'leading lights' in categories the Norwegian Nobel Committee lists.

How then did Barack Obama crack the prize in 2009? How did the nominator/s know before he became president how he would fare on matters of peace and humanitarianism, the basic tenet of the prize? Obama went on to become a militaristic expansionist, even stunning attendees at the award ceremony by calmly declaring that war was often "morally justified".

Nominations for the following year's peace prize begin online in mid-October. Before the 2009 nominations, Obama was a junior senator with zero "international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples" credits. The credits applied to his nomination were probably unspecific—which must also have been true of Trump's nominators.

After it receives the nominees' list in mid-February, the Norwegian Nobel Committee prepares a shortlist by end-March. By April-end, the advisors selected, according to the Nobel Peace Prize website "on the basis of their professional experience and academic expertise", send in their initial character and suitability analyses. The committee then asks for "further reports on various candidates". This back-and-forth continues until August. A majority vote is taken in the beginning of October.

Obama had ordered his first Predator drone strike—the hallmark of his two presidencies—on January 23, 2009, a week before the last nomination date. On February 17, when the longlist of nominees was received, Obama ordered 17,000 more troops into Afghanistan. On March 27, he unveiled a new escalatory strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. On what basis, then, did he get the golden gong?

The peace prize's nomination-discus-

sion-voting timeline is deeply questionable. As has been its choice of awardees since Henry Kissinger in 1973, which was a brazen disregard for the awfulness of this grey eminence of American realpolitik. In the 21st century, the peace prize has tended to go to political figures opposed to heads-of-state the US is geopolitically uncomfortable with.

This year it went to Maria Corina Machado, a conservative, US-aligned political figure stridently opposed to Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro, an autocrat who is staunchly against American neoimperialism in Latin America and the Middle East-North Africa region.

relations—the collapse of the 2015 nuclear agreement's revival, Iran's suppression of domestic protests, its drone supply to Russia. In September 2023, the US unfroze \$6 billion of Iranian money held in South Korea, which it transferred to Qatar with the caveat that they were to be used for US-defined "humanitarian purposes". Iran never saw the money.

Ales Bialiatski, a pro-democracy human rights activist sent to the brutal Penal Colony No 9 in Belarus, was the 2022 awardee along with the Russian human rights organisation Memorial and the Ukrainian human rights organisation Center for Civil Liberties. Belarus-US relations had tanked after the Alexander Lukashenko regime, in May 2021, forced a Ryanair flight to land to arrest popular dissident blogger Raman Dzmitryevich Pratasevich. The Biden administration protested volubly. Lukashenko bit back. Bialiatski got the peace prize in 2022. In 2023, he was sentenced to 10 years—a victim of Lukashenko's autocracy, the Lukashenko-Biden feud, and Biden's Russophobic overreach.

The 2021 prize went to two journalists, Filipina American Maria Ressa and Russian Dmitry Muratov. Both came into the limelight as opposition figures—Ressa against that thorn in the US's flesh, Rodrigo Duterte, who had announced "separation from the United States" in 2016, and in early 2020 unilaterally abrogated the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement, a linchpin of Philippines-US regional security.

And Muratov became known for bucking Vladimir Putin's diktat against publishing uncleared information—or "knowingly false information"—on the Russo-Ukrainian war. In 2020, he had supported the protests in Belarus following Lukashenko's fixed electoral victory. As a member of the Russian opposition party Yabloko, he had already been in Putin's sights for a while.

While few of these laureates are undeserving, an American hand hovers above them all. The Nobel Peace Prize has never been nonpartisan—but now it is unabashedly political.



Barack Obama was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize just days after being sworn in. He ordered drone strikes and troop placements while his nomination was being vetted. In recent years, the prize has gone to opposition figures in countries not doing the US's bidding

With multidecadal connections to US Republicans, she has long been a votary of American—and, oddly, Israeli—bellicosity in Venezuela. Not surprisingly, observers have wryly concluded that the 2025 prize might not have gone to Trump, but it went to a Trumpista who dedicated the trophy to him, which is why Trump isn't exactly ticked off at having been overlooked (although he forgot her name while publicly thanking her for her devotion).

Narges Mohammadi, the 2023 awardee, is an Iranian human rights activist whose work has centred on fighting the oppression of women, and remains in jail at present. Year 2022 was bad for Iran-US

filtered through many sieves of ideology. To add to this, there is the impediment of language (against the default of English), culture and civilisation. Also, recall the country's perception during the Covid pandemic.

It may take many generations for these barriers to be broken; by then, democratic America may have recovered. It may have seen another election and picked a president who may restore everything with a pen stroke. This may happen as early as three years and a few months from now. Therefore, one needs to ask if all the talk of brain drain is just hype and propaganda. Are some individual choices being made out as a trend? It's difficult to assume that America will crumble soon. For that to happen, it may take longer than what the British empire did.

Interestingly, brain drain was used in the past to describe the movement of the skilled and educationally qualified from the 'developing' to the 'developed' world. To escape what was known as a 'third-world' drabness. Like it was in India in the 1960s, where Nehruvian institutions of higher learning manufactured talent, but did not have an economy to accommodate them. Those who left were actually a minority and mostly upper-caste. They could leave also because the US immigration policy became more liberal after 1965.

Then, too, there was a hype around the idea of talent leaving the nation after using public resources, although there was no anti-national virulence against those who departed. To address the rhetoric of those times, economists like Jagdish Bhagwati even proposed a 'brain drain tax'—without actually proposing how to impose and collect it.

By the end of the 1990s, India realised that brain drain was actually never a drain—it was a long-term investment. Migrations and globalisation had created complex outcomes. In the early 2000s, as the IT industry grew, the phrase 'brain drain' was replaced by 'body shopping', signifying the changing economics of cheap skilled labour.

The phrase 'brain drain' had almost been forgotten. In recent discourse, it has been used to refer to something altogether different—negative cognitive performance as a result of the ubiquity of smartphones. There is an attempt to restore the phrase's old meaning. But an anachronism remains one even if it's smartly twisted as 'reverse brain drain' or 'brain gain'.

(Views are personal)
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MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Pollution complacency
Ref: *The air we breathe* (Oct 16). The air pollution debate has moved beyond policy failures—it now mirrors our collective complacency. Clean air isn't a seasonal entitlement but a shared civic right that demands restraint. The problem isn't ignorance but indifference—our unwillingness to forgo small comforts while the most vulnerable bear the costs.
Sanjeev Jha, New Delhi

Women's right
Ref: *Putting Womenomics 2.0 to work* (Oct 16). Women should claim visible labour participation as their right, demanding support services and financial literacy, knowledge about production, management models and continuous upskilling, ensuring safety in workplace and travel arrangements.
P Prema, Thanjavur

Smoke control
Ref: *SC allows limited use of green crackers* (Oct 16). The ruling reminded me of my own brush with smoke control. During our housewarming, a relative quipped, "You should've waited (with the false ceiling). The havan smoke will blacken it!" Panicked, I asked the priest how to avoid it. Without missing a beat, the priest replied, "Sir, I've never performed a havan without smoke." Smoke always finds its way up.
N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

Passport limits
Ref: *Decline in passport strength* (Oct 16). Judging a passport's strength only by visa-free access is too narrow. The decline in the rankings is primarily due to new political and reciprocal visa deals, not a true loss of global respect or power. A strong passport also includes security and consular support.
Athira Edayath, email

Ministerial duty
Ref: *Minister's remark on hijab* (Oct 16). People in office should uphold the values they stand for as their irresponsible statements often go viral. The government must not let any organisation or individual to play up the issue.
Krishnaprasad S, Palakkad

Ceasefire gaps
Ref: *Israel military claims Hamas handed over wrong body* (Oct 16). The revelation raises doubts about Hamas's credibility and intentions. It also exposes the group's manipulative tactics in psychological warfare. Such deceit deepens mistrust and hardens Israeli public anger.
RS Narula, Patiala

Google’s Vizag investment: Endorsement of Andhra Pradesh policies

GOOGLE’S announcement of \$15-billion investment in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, for a large-scale artificial intelligence (AI) hub is huge by any reckoning. To begin with, it is the IT major’s biggest investment outside the US so far. Unsurprisingly, its employment generation potential is humungous - more than 1 lakh jobs. The five-year project (2026-30) will scale the data centre to multiple gigawatt (GW). “It is a part of a network of data centres that we are building, and we will be making Vishakhapatnam a global connectivity hub. We are also bringing our sub-sea cable infrastructure to Vishakhapatnam and we will be connecting it to other cables,” Google said. The announcement is not just an endorsement of the policies of Andhra Pradesh but also of India. It is not just a big project employing a large number of people; it will also, as IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said, build digital infrastructure that will go a long way in meeting the goals of our India

AI Mission. He also urged Google to leverage Andaman Island as a hub for undersea cables for internet connectivity, for which the “government will provide full support.” For Visakhapatnam, the project could be transformative. Long regarded as a city with immense potential but limited private investment, Vizag may finally come into its own as a major digital and maritime gateway. Its port connectivity, relatively stable infrastructure, and proximity to Southeast Asian sea routes make it ideally suited for a data and connectivity hub. Moreover, by situating such a large facility on the Bay of Bengal, Google is helping address an often-overlooked vulnerability: India’s overdependence on western coastal infrastructure. The Visakhapatnam project will strengthen redundancy and resilience in India’s data and cable networks - vital in an era when data security, latency, and geopolitical stability are tightly intertwined.

Andhra Pradesh’s educational and technical institutions could benefit immensely through skill-development initiatives and R&D partnerships. The government would do well to coordinate with Google on structured training programmes to prepare local youth for high-value digital jobs. The initiative also dovetails neatly with India’s broader goals of digital sovereignty and AI leadership. As the world increasingly turns to AI-driven economic models, data localisation and computational capacity are becoming the new markers of national competitiveness. Google’s massive infrastructure investment will give India the backbone to support large-scale AI research, high-speed cloud services, and indigenous innovation. Yet, euphoria must be tempered with realism. The challenge now lies in execution. Major infrastructure projects in India have often been delayed by red tape, land acquisition hurdles, environmental clearances, and co-

ordination failures between Central and state authorities. If these issues are not preemptively managed, they could blunt the momentum of what is clearly a generational opportunity. Policymakers must therefore ensure that clear timelines, transparent regulatory frameworks, and efficient project management mechanisms are in place. The focus should also be on sustainable infrastructure- ensuring that power supply, water resources, and environmental safeguards keep pace with the data centre’s enormous energy and cooling demands. In essence, Google’s Visakhapatnam venture could mark the beginning of a new chapter in India’s digital history - a pivot toward the eastern seaboard and a decisive leap in global digital infrastructure. If executed with foresight and discipline, it will cement India’s position as an AI powerhouse. The promise is immense, but so also is the challenge to deliver it.

LETTERS

K’taka CM takes on RSS in state

THE Karnataka government cabinet on Thursday approved a proposal to frame new rules restricting Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) activities in public spaces and government premises a decision that follows not only state minister Priyank Kharge’s complaints about RSS presence in schools but also recent public outrage over the suspected suicide of a Kerala IT professional who alleged years of sexual abuse by RSS members in a dying statement posted on social media. The move was sparked in part by Kharge’s letter to chief minister Siddaramaiah, which demanded bans on RSS activities in government and aided institutions, citing the role of such spaces in “indoctrination”. But the controversy further intensified when 26-year-old Kerala software engineer Anandu Aji was found dead in a lodge, allegedly by suicide, after accusing RSS members of repeated sexual abuse and harassment during his childhood spent in an RSS shakha (unit). In his letter to the chief minister, Kharge cited concerns over RSS shakhas in public and educational spaces, alleging that slogans and ideology are being propagated among youth without oversight. Aji’s allegations had given fresh fuel to those concerns, especially among opposition and civil society groups demanding a full investigation. *Bhagwan Thadani, Mumbai*

Of superstitions and beliefs

I fully concur with the opinion of Dr Mohan Kanda’s essay ‘DIVISION’ between rational and the superstitious is in one’s mindset’. One’s belief is another’s disbelief. Amavasya thithi is good for Tamilians and is not for Telugus. Even in Telugu families the puja mandiram are facing on east and west sides. Omens are treated as bad and good. There is no standard method or trust on superstitions. Julius Caesar’s wife faced bad omens and tried to stop Caesar from attending a meeting arranged by Brutus. It became a reality as Caesar was assassinated. Egyptians also were bent down to superstitions. Rituals in Brahmin families differ with others. This kind of mad belief wholly depends upon one’s own sentiments. Can we deny that man is a sentimental fool? *Dr N S R Murthy, Secunderabad*

PK move laudable

Political advisor - strategist - Prashant Kishore who made headlines, till recently in the upcoming Bihar elections, even as some news channels even projected him as the likely winner, has announced that he would not contest the Bihar Assembly elections. It is a good decision on his part, as he would have ended up as a ‘voter cutter’ at best. Prashant Kishor has no particular plan for Bihar, except for demanding employment; he at least could have supported the NDA in Bihar as several developmental activities are afoot in the state by the present government which is in power. *S Lakshmi, Hyderabad*

Let death be dignified in jails

THE Centre’s stand against alternatives to hanging ignores the need for a humane execution method. Hanging, causing prolonged suffering, is outdated and cruel. Most developed nations have replaced it with painless procedures. Administering anesthesia followed by a lethal injection ensures a peaceful, dignified death without physical agony. India must move beyond this colonial relic and adopt scientific, compassionate methods that uphold human dignity till the end, aligning justice with modern humanitarian and ethical standards. *RS Narula, Patiala*

Pakistan should not be spared

This refers to news that Lt Gen Katiyar has warned Pakistan of intensified military response, in the event of another misadventure by that country, against India. The General Office Commanding-in-Chief of the Western Command has warned that Operation Sindoor 2.0 could be more destructive, if Pakistan blatantly persists in its terror activities against India. Similar warnings against Pakistan have been delivered by the chiefs of India’s defence forces. This is a good gesture by India to proactively keep Pakistan warned of what might be India’s reaction in that scenario, if another round of Operation Sindoor 2.0 is thrust upon India, due to Pakistan’s irresponsible and unpredictable behaviour against India. *K V Raghuram, Wayanad*

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BENGALURU ONLINE

KMF launches sugar-free Nandini Sweets as Diwali gift

BENGALURU: Diwali is a time of lights, crackers, and sweets, and this year the Karnataka Milk Federation (KMF) has added a healthy touch to the celebrations. Bringing joy to health-conscious consumers and diabetics alike, KMF has launched a new range of sugar-free Nandini sweets for the festive season. While traditional sweets are often loaded with sugar, the new sugar-free varieties allow everyone to enjoy the festival without guilt or health concerns. With growing awareness about healthy eating, especially among the younger generation, many people are turning away from sugar-based foods and beverages. Responding to this change, KMF has introduced sweets suitable for diabetics, those watching their weight, and anyone who wants to stay fit without giving up on festive indulgence. KMF Managing Director B. Shivraswamy said the move reflects changing consumer preferences in a health-conscious era. He added that the new Nandini sugar-free range is both healthy and delicious, designed to let customers enjoy sweets without compromising their well-being. The range includes sugar-free Nandini Khova Gulab Jamun priced at ₹220 for a 500-gram pack, sugar-free Nandini Milk Peda at ₹170 for 200 grams, and Nandini Jaggery Oats and Nuts Burfi, also ₹170 for 200 grams. Each product is made from pure Nandini milk ingredients and offers a blend of purity, taste, and affordability. During the recent Dasara festival, Nandini sweets recorded sales exceeding 750 metric tonnes, underscoring consumers’ trust in the brand’s quality and authenticity. With this new sugar-free line, KMF aims to make this Diwali not only bright but also healthy for every household.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

PROF K VIYANNA RAO

It is a matter of augury that National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has completed a decade of its existence, having been launched in September, 2015. It has commenced its work with the declaration of its first edition of Rankings in 2016. The latest edition, tenth in the series was announced on September 4. While it is appreciable that the Ranking Framework has matured into a comprehensive and data driven evaluation system, similar exercise is being done by other agencies like NAAC and NBA. In addition, the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) is compiling data for the past over a decade. It is not clear as to why so many national level bodies are involved in carrying out the similar job. May be keeping this in view, the National Education Policy, 2020 has proposed to create a single data Platform in the name of ‘One Nation One Data’. It may be hoped that these issues would be sorted out at the earliest. The primary aim of this write up is to highlight a few of the significant aspects that are connected to the Ranking. First, as per the 2025 Rankings, the number of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) covered are 14,163, which included Universities, Colleges and other stand-alone outfits. Against this, there are about 58,643 HEIs as per the data of AISHE. Therefore, the coverage of the NIRF is just about 24.2 per cent. In spite of the fact that the Ranking Framework has laid down a criterion to be eligible to participate in the Rankings, it may not cross about 30

per cent. It is thus high time to ponder over as to how the reach can be enhanced, so that every HEI is made an integral part of the process. Further, the NIRF is choosing to declare Ranks up to a specific number and leaving others in dark as to their standing in the network of institutions. For instance, NIRF declares up to 200 ranks only in case of universities and up to only 300 in case of colleges, as against the vast number of participating institutions. The new development in this regard is that it has chosen to communicate the score card to every institution now individually. But their rank is not indicated. Therefore, it is logical to expect that every participating institution has the right to now its position, even one secures the last rank. Second, it is noticeable that the ranking agency has diversified its methodology and now covering seventeen categories of institutions, which include the eight subject areas also. Keeping in view of the changing dimensions, it has also attempted to cover skill universities, open universities, innovation institutes and institutes that focus on the realisation of sustainable development goals (SDGs). The number of institutions covered under the above new categories is very small and efforts need to be made to enhance the canvass. In the category of subject domain also, the coverage is very limited. For one thing the NIRF feels happy for creating greater awareness on the part of the HEIs in the country and making them to be conscious of improving their quality of education. True that the number of HEIs from India have swelled



from just 1 in Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2015 to 15 in 2025. Similarly, the world rankings have also jumped significantly from 14 to 54 in QS and from 17 to 128 in THE during the period between 2015 and 2026. Third is about the ranking methodology followed by the agency. The ranking framework comprises of 19 parameters organised into 5 broad groups, which included: (i) Teaching, Learning and Resources (TLR), (ii) Research and Professional Practice (RP), (iii) Graduation Outcomes (GO), (iv) Outreach and Inclusivity (O&I) and (v) Perception (PR). Many of the lessons that need to be learnt cling on to these. Pertaining to the Teaching, Learning and Resources three major aspects are taken into consideration, which included the quality of faculty, their experience and the faculty-student ratio. Regarding the quality dimension of the faculty, it is highlighted that the faculty with Ph.D. are only about 58.56 per cent and their average experience with less than 8 years is significantly high at 34.17 per cent. As a matter of fact, many universities and colleges are carrying on the teaching-learning process with a substantial number of contract, ad-hoc and guest faculty, whose tenure is extended year after year, impacting the quality of higher education. Unfortunately, the faculty-student ratio is also high beyond the norms prescribed by the UGC (1:15 or revised 1:20). About 62 per cent of the HEIs have FSR above the specified limits. In terms of the research and professional practice, judged from the point of view of publications and citations, the performance of the participating institutions is very dismal. The productivity in terms of publication of research papers is just 1.76 per faculty in the overall and college categories. It is only in the context of Universities, it is anything above 7.71 per faculty. As per the norms of accrediting agencies, anything below 2 per faculty secures ‘o’ points only. The astonishing fact is that there are HEIs with ‘zero’ publications. In the overall category, 136 out of 1757 and 573 out of 1821 in case of colleges and 530 out of 909 in the domain specialisation of Management, faculty have no publications at all. During 1950s, India was a leading nation in the context of international research publica-

tion that are worth mentioning, producing about a quarter of world productivity. Though claimed to have scaled to third position from seventh in this regard, the percentage contribution is not above 7-8 per cent. In terms of citations too, the position is lack lustre. The average citations per paper are noted as 8.71, which does not qualify for any marks in the accreditation evaluation. A comparison of the same at the global level indicates that the India’s position is unenviable at only 13.44 as against 33.36 and even the H-Index, is low at 925 against 3,213 for USA. These issues need to be noted while deliberating on the NIRF and its rankings. In terms of the Graduation Outcomes also, the number of faculty showing interest to register for Ph.D. and completing the same in the prescribed period is rare. The percentage of faculty registering for pursuing research is less than 10, owing to the fact that the Higher Education Sector in India is engulfed by the recruitment of part time and contingent faculty. It is heartening to note that the enrolments are happening from outside the states also, but the students from other countries are almost negligible. It may be noted that Covid-19 had a deleterious effect on this segment. There had been a phenomenal decrease in the inflow from even African countries. It would be in the fitness of things to focus attention on the Asian and European countries. The final parameter having impact on the rankings is about the perception of the peers and employers. It is gratifying that this is taken as the most invaluable parameter for judging the performance of HEIs in India.

Establishment of Google’s Data Center

A new era of prosperity for Uttarandhra



KALISETTY APPALA NAIDU

NAIDU has earned recognition as the architect of India’s development, and his son, Nara Lokesh, is giving that vision a modern and technological shape. While Chandrababu is widely regarded as a farsighted leader, Lokesh is strengthening that vision through innovation and transparent governance. Following in his father’s footsteps, Lokesh is proving himself to be a worthy successor, bringing technology closer to the people in today’s digital world. The establishment of the Google Data Center marks a historic turning point that will redefine the course and direction of Andhra Pradesh. After studying various states and countries, Google chose Andhra Pradesh as the best location for its massive in-

vestment — a moment that has drawn global attention. The agreement with Google to set up a massive AI Hub and Data Center with an investment of ₹1.33 lakh crore (approximately USD 15 billion) is a remarkable achievement. Attracting a globally prestigious company like Google is no ordinary feat. Just as Microsoft transformed Hyderabad years ago, Google is now set to transform the face of North Coastal Andhra (Uttarandhra). This massive investment is expected to generate around 1,88,000 employment opportunities, both direct and indirect, while several ancillary companies are expected to move their operations to Visakhapatnam. With a goal of establishing six gigawatts of data centers, large-scale investments are anticipated in the region. The establishment of the largest AI data hub outside the United States will usher in a new era of prosperity for Uttarandhra. In the presence of Andhra Pradesh IT Minister Nara Lokesh, Google Cloud has announced plans to invest USD 15 billion over the next five years for the establish-

ment of this AI Data Hub — a commendable initiative. India’s first 1-gigawatt-scale Data Center coming to Visakhapatnam is a matter of pride for Andhra Pradesh. Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu is striving to make Artificial Intelligence accessible to every household in the state. Minister Lokesh deserves special appreciation for his pivotal role in bringing such a monumental investment to Andhra Pradesh. By 2030, Google will have invested ₹1.33 lakh crore (USD 15 billion) in Visakhapatnam through this project. The Visakhapatnam AI Data Hub will support Google services such as Gemini AI, Google Search, Google Workspace, YouTube, Cloud, and Gmail. From this hub, Google will deliver services not only to India but also to 12 other countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia. To enable this, Google will build a subsea cable landing station, providing high-speed connectivity via over 2 million miles of subsea cables, making Visakhapatnam a global connectivity hub. This development will

bring tremendous benefits to Visakhapatnam and Andhra Pradesh — boosting the local economy, generating direct and indirect employment, and strengthening the IT ecosystem. With an investment of ₹87,520 crore (around USD 10 billion), the project is expected to contribute an additional ₹10,518 crore annually to the state’s GDP during 2028–2032. Visakhapatnam is set to evolve into India’s largest AI-driven Data Center, a Cloud and AI services hub, and an international digital gateway. Through the Cable Landing Station (CLS), international data connectivity will improve significantly, linking Visakhapatnam to key global digital networks such as Singapore, Australia, and Thailand. The city’s infrastructure, educational institutions, and technical training facilities will advance considerably, creating new opportunities for youth skill development. With this, Visakhapatnam is poised to become a global IT and data hub, attracting further investments, enhancing revenue, and strengthening infrastructure.

Experts predict that while Mumbai is currently India’s primary data center hub, the new Visakhapatnam data center will operate with twice the capacity. Minister Lokesh’s ambition to transform Visakhapatnam into a major IT hub gets a huge boost from this project. It will be India’s first direct data center project and one of Asia’s largest infrastructure developments, playing a vital role in connecting Visakhapatnam to global internet traffic networks. With gigawatt-level computing power, this data center campus will also spur significant energy infrastructure development, creating a long-term flow of business and resources for the state. Andhra Pradesh is thus poised to emerge as a global Data Tech Hub. Bringing such a world-renowned company as Google to Andhra Pradesh is not an ordinary event — it is a milestone in technological advancement. Experts observe that with Google’s entry, an entire ecosystem of mid-size and small tech firms will emerge, creating a multiplier effect. The first and hardest

step is attracting an investment of this scale — but for Chandrababu Naidu, who once convinced Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and for Lokesh, a visionary leader in the IT sector, this is another great accomplishment. This initiative will open vast opportunities for the youth of Andhra Pradesh, providing high-quality jobs locally rather than forcing talent to move abroad. With Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu’s commitment to skill development, the state’s youth are set to benefit immensely. As experts note, this project is not just about a data center — it is about building the future. Leadership is about vision, determination, and tireless effort. Just as people once failed to grasp the importance of “HITEC City” in Hyderabad — which later transformed the destiny of Telugu people — today’s Google Data Center project in Visakhapatnam is ten times more powerful, destined to redefine Andhra Pradesh’s future. *(The writer is Member of Parliament, Vizianagaram)*

DECCAN Chronicle

17 OCTOBER 2025

Right time to wean Maoists off ideology

It could be disillusionment in part over the core ideology but mostly the fear of annihilation of their rank and file that has been motivating several top leaders of the outlawed Communist Party of India (Maoist), the most aggressive outlawed domestic insurgent outfit in India till date, to surrender before the government.

On Thursday, the 69-year-old Mallojula Venugopal Rao alias Sonu laid down arms along with 60 associates in the highly insurgent-infested Gadchiroli of Maharastra in the presence of chief minister Devendra Fadnavis taking the total of “battle-hardened left-wing extremists” court- ing arrest in the last two days to 258 as announced by the home minister.

Takkalapalli Vasudeva Rao alias Ashanna, another top militia commit- tee member, too, surrendered almost leading to collapse of the leadership that is yet to recover from the slaying of several top leaders including the general secretary Basavraj in May this year.

Reiterating his pursuit of “uprooting Naxalism” before March 31 next year, home minister Amit Shah said the surrenders “attest to the fact that Naxalism is breathing its last due to the relentless efforts of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government to end the menace”.

Indeed, these “efforts” have taken place on an unprecedented scale in the past one year. As many as 25,000 personnel of paramilitary forces have combed the almost-inaccessible Abujhmad, declared as a red corridor by the Maoists, leading to the surrender of about 2,100 Maoists and the deaths of 471 in this period. And in these confrontations, the District Reserve Guard, a local force developed with surrendered Maoists, has delivered for the state what the earlier experiment of Salwa Judum failed to. Improved road network, use of cutting edge technologies including satellite and drones to map and trace the hideouts, cutting supplies, both food and arms, but most critically, pulling off covert operations by the armed forces have all dealt a fatal blow to Maoists, whose foray into the use of mobiles also p o r o v e d counterproductive.

Earlier, the government of united Andhra Pradesh had enjoyed some success in wiping out extremists after the 2004 peace talks. Making best use of inputs gathered on the movement of the cadre during the ceasefire, the elite police force Greyhounds had been able to eliminate several leaders. Welfare initiatives, too, resulted in diminished public backing for the Naxals, who were even disowned by their supporters who, in several pock- ets of Telangana, went on to form a class of neo-rich following forced takeover and cultivation of lands belonging to landlords.

But what makes the present “Operation Kagaz” noteworthy is that it has almost annihilated the outfit lock stock and barrel while the previous offensive had been limited to driving away the leaders and cadre out of the state into Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra.

Ironically, the newly surrendered leaders had themselves vehemently opposed the proposal to stop armed struggle mooted in the early 1990s by Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, PWM founder. It is hoped that they and their followers will successfully re-integrate into society and take advantage of the benefits offered to them by the administration. It is indeed the right time for the government to offer these and at the same time renew its focus on development.

ORS clarification life-saving

After over two years long legal battle started by a paediatrician from Hyderabad against misbranding sugar drinks as ORS, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) redefined Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) to mean only those liquids that conform to the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) standard formulation — a precise balance of glucose, sodium, and electrolytes.

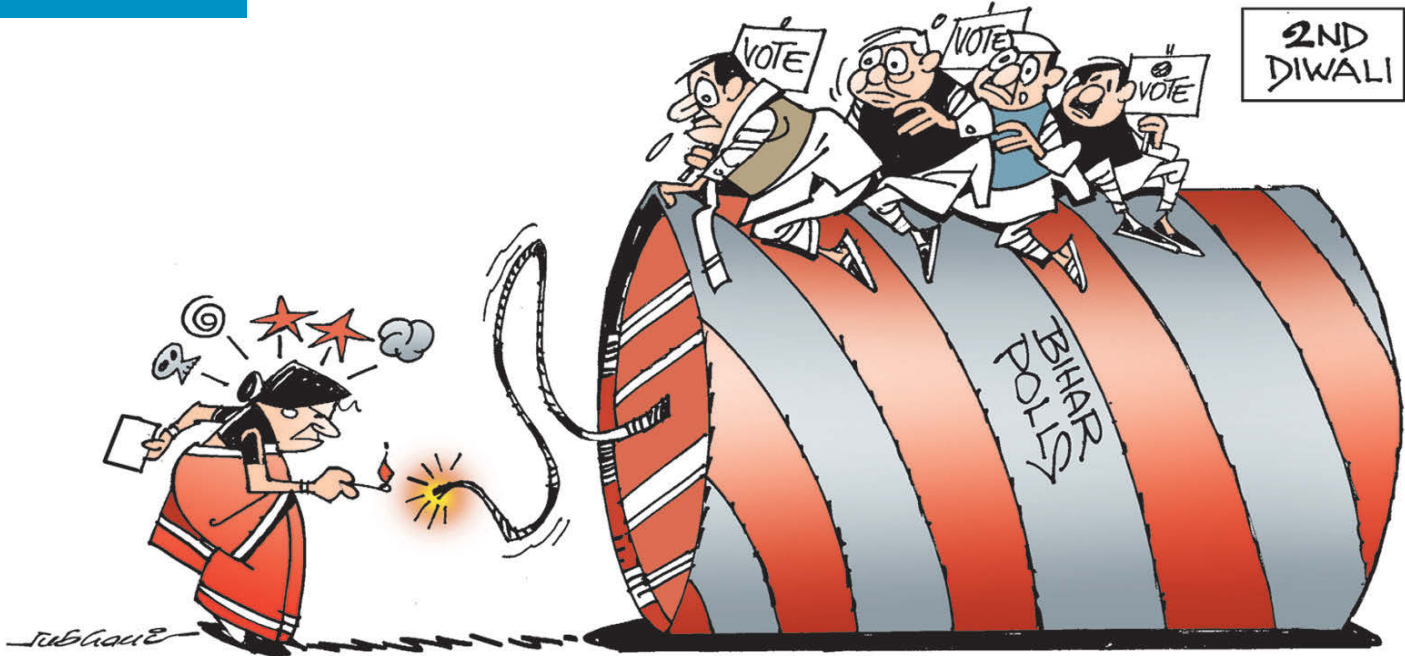
This clarification issued on October 14 corrects several years old miscon- ception that any sugary drink — ranging from fruit juices to carbonated beverages — could substitute for ORS. This is a result of Dr Sivaranjani Santosh’s perseverance against misuse of ORS brand by some companies for profiteering. She filed a public interest litigation against FSSAI in the Telangana high court in 2022 against branding sugar drinks as ORS products.

The FSSAI’s clarification, though technical in nature, has far-reaching public health implications in a country where diarrhoeal diseases contin- ue to claim thousands of lives each year. Because of the misbranding of sugar drinks, many families often bought sweetened liquids during their family member’s diarrhoeal episodes. While the sugar drinks may have provided temporary energy, they lacked the vital electrolyte ratio required to prevent dehydration. In severe cases, excessive sugar could even wors- en fluid loss. The new definition, therefore, is not just a semantic correc- tion — it is a life-saving clarification.

Thanks to the clarification, people could now buy an accurate ORS for- mulation, which is medically effective. When labels strictly adhere to sci- entific standards, consumers can make more informed choices. It will also encourage wider distribution and proper use of WHO-approved ORS sachets, which remain one of the simplest and most effective public health innovations in history.

However, there are practical challenges. Small-scale manufacturers who previously sold “ORS-like” drinks will need time and support to reformu- late their products and comply with the new norms. State governments must, therefore, help them switch to manufacturing ORS products which are compliant with WHO standards.

Subhani



As Ladakh boils, statehood for J&K India’s litmus test



Abhijit Bhattacharyya

This writer has always maintained that the Constitution of India should not be amended too frequently. A recent report on October 5: “Fact-finding report backs Ladakh statehood and flags resource exploita- tion by outsiders” reminds us of this. Before going deeper, one must re-exam- ine the geography and other parameters related to Ladakh in a broader context.

The predecessors of today’s Ladakh’s popula- tion of 300,000 were part of the independent Jammu and Kashmir kingdom from 1839 to October 26, 1947 when its ruler, Hari Singh, acceded to India. Ladakh’s territory was automatically absorbed into Independent India, as part of J&K province.

The border state of J&K, sharing frontiers with both Pakistan and Tibet, became extremely important due to the congenial hostility of both Islamabad and Beijing, especially after Communist China captured the territory of Tibet. The people of Ladakh have been com- pelled to live under the shadow of the PLA’s machine-guns lurking around Leh’s plateaus, rivulets and passes. In this scenario, is Ladakh’s demand to be “upgraded” from being a Union territo- ry to a state justified? While it is the duty of polit- ical parties to respond to this issue, owing to Ladakh’s location, the unprecedented volatility and violence in a highly sensitive part of India must be kept in mind. The nuances of geography in a vast continent-like country can’t be forgotten. Ignoring this could create more com- bat-like situations in future.

The eruption of the unrest in Ladakh is a lit- mus test for the Republic of India due to geography, first and last. With an area of 60,000 sq km, high moun-

tainous terrain, with a pop- ulation of 300,000 people, Ladakh is precariously sandwiched between Tibet and Pakistan-occupied- Kashmir. Despite their dis- tinct ethnic identity, the people of Ladakh have proved themselves as loyal, valuable citizens of the Republic of India.

Let us remember that the new boundaries of Inde- pendent India haven’t brought much happiness to a majority of South Asians from the beginning of 1947. The geography of India was cut into pieces through the middle — Punjab, Sindh and Bengal by the one-man boundary commission of Sir Cyril Radcliffe. India did not break from the bor- der like the Soviet Union in 1991. India broke from within in 1947.

After 1947, regrettably, Indians themselves broke province after province, many of which shared land borders with two hostile and unfriendly neighbours — Pakistan and China — and three politically tempera- mental, mentally senti- mental and mercurial rul- ing nations of Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Will it, therefore, be wrong to suggest that the propensity of independent India’s ruling class to ceaselessly re-create new internal boundaries and re- configure the maps of states sharing frontiers with foreign countries, for domestic political reasons, needs to be eschewed? Let everyone know that not every ethnic or linguistic group, caste, religion or off- shoots of any other vintage can have everything in a country of bewildering variety, divergence and differences.

India’s provinces were founded on a linguistic basis under the States Reorganisation Act 1956. There are 22 official lan- guages under the Eighth Schedule. But the total number of major languages is 122, along with 1,599 other spoken languages. Can all of these be declared

There is no Bengal, Goa, Gujarat or Parsi Regiment. Yet, a man from Jamnagar, Gujarat, two Bengalis, one Parsi and an artillery officer from Goa became chiefs of the Indian Army.

as “official language”? Also, can all claim their own linguistic states?

The irony of the Indian polity is that after 1947, except Madhya Pradesh (2000) and Andhra Pradesh (2014), every other part- itioned state shared an international border with hostile, politically unstable or highly volatile neigh- bours. The Bombay Reorganisation Act 1960 split up Bombay state into two states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. Punjab was carved out twice, creating Himachal Pradesh and Haryana (1966). Assam was broken up many times — Nagaland (1962), Manipur (1971), Tripura (1971), Meghalaya (1971); Mizoram (1986), Arunachal Pradesh (1986). Uttar Pradesh was cut for Uttarakhand (2000) and Bihar was redrawn to carve out Jharkhand (2000). The unprecedented creation, however, came in 2019 when the status of J&K state was demoted, with partition into two UTs of Ladakh and J&K.

Whether all this is good or bad for India is for the country’s rulers to intro- spect on, and course-cor- rect if necessary. But virtu- ally all of India’s part- itioned states with interna- tional boundaries face hos- tile or unstable neigh- bours, and internally pose increasing challenges. From now on, therefore, let’s not tweak the internal boundary of any border state/UT facing Pakistan, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar to avoid an inevitable future disaster.

India’s political class, of whatever ideological per- suasion, must not get into the cauldron of conflict and confrontation to divide their own land for short- term gains, rather than addressing key strategic issues.

Let’s again refer to

India’s 22 official lan- guages. Do all of them have linguistic states or combat regiments in their names? No. Among the Union terri- tories, Ladakh is the only one to have the Ladakh Scout Regiment. On the other hand, 11 of the 22 offi- cial languages do not have any regiment with their names. So what? How does it affect their identity or existence in India? Surely not all linguistic states can demand, as a matter of right, to have a regiment or state. Merit holds away, with or without any reg- iment or state in the Indian system, minor irritants and aberrations notwith- standing.

There is no Bengal, Goa, Gujarat or Parsi Regiment. Yet, a man from Jamnagar, Gujarat, two Bengalis, one Parsi and an artillery officer from Goa became chiefs of the Indian Army without any embossed regimental identity to their state or language. Hence, no Indian leader should ever claim to have any new regiment for their caste, class, language, religion or state. Administering a land of 1.4 billion demography needs maturity, fair play, objec- tivity and probity. Rabble- rousing people to spread hatred, revenge or make- belief enmity could pose unforeseen and unexpected challenges to India and its civilizational history.

To protect its geography and polity, India must never do two things. No border province should be cut. And four Union terri- tories — the Andaman and Nicobar, Lakshadweep and Ladakh in the high hills, as well as the nation’s capital, New Delhi, should never ever be converted into states for reasons that are well understood by the political class of all shades, colour and ideology. Finally, it must be remem- bered that whereas Ladakh got “promoted” from being part of J&K to a separate UT, Jammu and Kashmir was “demoted” from being a province of India into a UT, which was a first of its kind in the nation’s consti- tutional history. Therefore, it is the statehood of J&K which deserves to be restored today.

The writer is a Supreme Court and high court advo- cate. The views expressed here are personal.

LETTERS

POLL EXPERT DROPS OUT

One really wonders why the former political strategist and Jan Suraj Party founder Prashant Kishor has decided not to contest the Bihar assembly polls to be held next month. There is something more to it than what meets the eye. Elections are held once in five years for the Assembly or the Lok Sabha. The Opposition leaders normally work in full gear to topple the ruling dis- pensation. Especially, when elections draw closer, they will do everything to fortify the parties’ prospects and romp home. The reason, of course, is not far to seek. Politics is a sus- tained interest and struggle for power. Prashant Kishor’s actions do not fit into the defi- nition.

S. Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

TRUMP DID IT

I agree with your views on Donald Trump brokering the peace accord between the two belligerent groups Hamas and Israel. How long the accord will sustain is a million-dollar question. While Hamas faced extinction of Palestine due to starvation and disease suffered by its people, Netanyahu faced growing dissent of Israelis for prolong- ing the war that seemed to go on. There was no alternative but to agree for a truce that will give them time to regain their breath. The fact remains that Donald Trump has achieved at least a partial success in bringing the cease- fire.

B.S. Jayaraman, Coimbatore

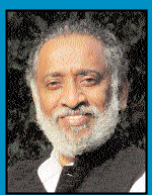
INDIA AND CWG

India is set to host the Commonwealth games 2030 at Ahmedabad. India last hosted CWG in 2010 in Delhi, an event that was overshadowed by poor plan- ning, delays in infrastructure comple- tion and allegations of corruption. The 2030 CWG will be a powerful oppor- tunity to inspire our youth, strengthen international partnerships and con- tribute to a shared future across the Commonwealth countries. With 61 medals, including 22 gold, India fin- ished fourth at the 2022 CWG in Birmingham. CWG at Ahmedabad will certainly be a day of immense joy and pride for India.

P. Victor Selvaraj, Palayamkottai

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

Dilip Cherian Dilli Ka Babu



Sebi vacancy sparks rush as babus smell market power

The power corridors are abuzz again, but not over taxes or budgets this time. Eyeballs are fixed on who’ll get to wield the next big regulatory stick. The govern- ment’s hunt for new full-time members of Sebi, the capital markets watchdog, has thrown up two clear frontrunners, according to sources: V.S. Sundaresan, a Sebi insider and former executive director, and Sandeep Pradhan, an Indian Revenue Service (IRS) officer with a taste for enforcement.

What’s interesting is the sheer number of IRS officers who’ve thrown their hats in the ring, showing just how irresistible the lure of regula- tory power is. Mr Sundaresan represents the old-school Sebi DNA — steady, experienced, and predictable. He knows the rulebook and how to wield it. In a system jittery about credibility, that’s comforting. But comfort can also breed complacency. Regulators risk turning inward, mistaking process for progress.

Mr Pradhan, on the other hand, brings the enforcement reflex of the tax service — decisive, sometimes draconian, often disruptive. That might sound refreshing to investors tired of mild wrist-slaps. But if the revenue mindset dominates, we could end up with a market that fears its regulator more than it trusts it.

The deeper question is whether Sebi is becom- ing just another babu playground. Its early ye- ars drew professionals from markets and acade- mia. Today, the generalist babu seems to be win- ning. This subtly shifts the regulator’s tempera- ment from entrepreneurial to administrative.

If the government wants Sebi to keep pace with AI-led trading, complex derivatives, and global capital flows, it needs more than hierar- chy-hardened mandarins. Whoever gets the job should be chosen not for seniority or service background, but for agility, domain knowledge and the courage to stay independent — from both babus and brokers.

A LITIGANT WITHOUT A BENCH

If irony needed a case study, it would look a lot like Sanjiv Chaturvedi’s. Sixteen judges have recused themselves from hearing the Indian Forest Service (IoFS) officer’s case. What began as a legal proceeding has evolved into a kind of judicial relay race, with the baton being passed endlessly and never received.

The latest to step aside was Justice Alok Verma of the Uttarakhand high court, who recused himself from hearing Mr Chaturvedi’s contempt petition. No reason given, just a quiet “list before another bench.” It’s hard not to won-

der what makes this case so radioactive. After all, Mr Chaturvedi isn’t just another babu. He’s one of India’s best-known whistleblowers, whose exposés, from corruption in Haryana’s forestry projects to irregularities at AIIMS, earned him admiration and enemies in equal measure. He’s paid the price in transfers, inquiries, and now, apparently, in judicial limbo.

Those who take on entrenched systems often end up isolated, and Mr Chaturvedi’s case cap- tures that perfectly. To be fair, judges have every right to recuse if they see a conflict or risk of bias. But public trust would be better served if reasons were stated, even briefly. Transparency protects both the litigant and the institution.

For all our lip service to “protecting whistle- blowers,” India’s record shows a preference for celebrating them from afar, not standing with them when it counts. Chaturvedi’s long fight is more than a personal battle—it’s a test of whether the system still has space for honesty that makes it squirm.

He deserves, at the very least, his day in court.

TOXIC SYRUPS, UNTOUCHABLE BABUS

In other countries, every human life matters, regardless of the person’s nationality. When

Portugal’s health minister resigned after the death of an Indian tourist, it wasn’t just a politi- cal gesture, but a statement of accountability. Hard to imagine that happening here. In India, dozens died recently from toxic cough syrups exported under official watch, and not a single babu’s chair even creaks, let alone a minister.

Our babus, after all, have perfected the ancient art of administrative invisibility. When things go right, they’re the “unsung heroes”. When things go wrong, they’re “still investigating”. The cough syrup deaths didn’t just kill children; they exposed a regulatory system run on paper- work and plausible deniability. And yet, not one resignation. Not one face of responsibility. The minister stays, the regulators stay, and the files stay exactly where they were, probably gather- ing dust beside a few expired drug samples.

In Portugal, a minister steps down over a sin- gle death. Here, we have a body count, and yet, nobody blinks. Maybe that’s what real immu- nity looks like — not from disease, but from consequences.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip’s belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

AHMEDABAD CWG CAN BE MUCH MORE THAN JUST THE 2030 GAMES

AHMEDEBAD is set to host the Commonwealth Games two decades after New Delhi hosted them in 2010. Commonwealth Sport's executive board has forwarded the candidature of Gujarat's largest city as the host for the 2030 games. However, one must be guarded in celebration for now. Just to jog the memory, CWG 2010 in New Delhi was embroiled in avoidable controversies ranging from delays in constructing venues, gaps in civic planning and allegations of massive corruption. This is just one part of the troubles. Hosting Commonwealth Games has become a liability—the last two editions have shown that there are not too many takers to host the quadrennial event. Durban, which was supposed to host the 2022 edition, withdrew because of rising costs, and Birmingham was forced to step in. The 2026 games were supposed to be held in Victoria but the Australian government withdrew after estimates overshoot the original budget. Even for the 2030 edition, there were only two interested nations—India and Nigeria.

Ahmedabad is an apt choice considering the city's push to create world-class infrastructure. The Naranpur Sports Complex, a sprawling structure built for about ₹825 crore, is set to be the main venue. The yet-to-be-finished Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Enclave, which houses the Narendra Modi stadium, will be another venue. India must learn from Delhi and not overshoot the budget. Birmingham 2022 was minimalistic, as will be Glasgow 2026. Even the Paris Olympics last year had strict austerity measures in place to offset the spiralling budget. India's ultimate aim is to host the Olympics in 2036 and the CWG should be organised to show that India can host big-ticket events. Ahmedabad is also in the running for the Olympics, but the International Olympic Committee will decide the hosts by 2030. And Olympic bids are far more complicated than CWG.

India must grab this opportunity to sow seeds of a broader sports culture. The government and all other stakeholders must ensure that India's Olympics tally doubles by 2032 from the seven at Paris 2024. It is possible, going by CWG 2010. India bagged six medals at the 2012 London Olympics, up from three at Beijing four years earlier. With robust planning and investment, India can again create a rewarding culture. CWG 2030 should be the platform for the country's next sporting leap.

STOP BLAMING VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

EACH time a woman is brutalised, those in power rush to manage outrage, not justice. The pattern is painfully familiar—denial, deflection, and, worst of all, blame. Last week, when a young medical student from Odisha studying in Durgapur was allegedly gang-raped, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's first instinct was not compassion, but suspicion. "What was she doing outside after midnight?" she asked. The assault reportedly happened between 8 and 9 pm—words that make her question crueller still. Her party accused the BJP of politicising the crime, but Banerjee herself reached for whataboutery: "In Odisha, girls were raped on beaches. What action has been taken?" The remark was not meant to defend the victim, only to deflect her own failure.

Just a year ago, the rape and murder of another medical student at R G Kar Medical College and Hospital had brought protesters out on Kolkata's streets. Then too, Banerjee responded with denial and blame-shifting. A year later, nothing has changed—not the outrage, not the indifference. Yes, the police have moved faster this time—arrests made, custody secured, and forensic tests widened. But speed means little when empathy is absent. The wound does not close when leaders reopen it with suspicion.

West Bengal was once a beacon of learning, reform, and modernity. It still draws students from across India—young men and women chasing dreams their families can barely afford. What do they hear now from its chief minister? A warning not to step out at night. As if freedom itself were a risk. Women do not need curfews. They need safety. They need leaders who stand with them—not above them, not against them. As chief minister for 14 years, Mamata Banerjee has the authority to protect, to heal, and to lead by example. What she owes the young woman in Durgapur—and every woman who walks afraid—is not excuses or comparisons, but courage. The last thing any survivor deserves is blame.

QUICK TAKE

MTV IS DYING, LONG LIVE MTV

A cultural icon of the 1990s will have its last airing on the last day of 2025. Paramount has announced it will shut down MTV's music channels in several countries including the UK, Australia, Poland, France, Germany and Brazil as part of cost-cutting efforts. What will be left are a few reality TV channels in the stable—a poor reflection of the world's first 24-hour music channel that revolutionised cable TV in India too. At its prime, MTV was a swashbucklingly creative cultural phenomenon that earlier generations could hold up to the following ones to show they did not invent the wheel when it came to paring innovation with creativity in audiovisuals. The icon's demise should raise a chorus call for an archive and museum of TV shows. Any takers?

IT's quite fascinating that in a world where new words and phrases are often coined to cleverly repackage old phenomena, a phraseology popular in the 1960s is being brought back to describe a certain migration out of Donald Trump's America. One has to be cautious when one calls it 'migration', because one is not sure if it's really so. That is, if it's a sustained trend of conscious escape or opportunity hunting.

When Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo announced last week they were moving to the University of Zurich in Switzerland from MIT in the US, it was casually labelled as 'brain drain', although the economist couple had themselves not characterised the professional move as such.

An American news site reported that "one of the biggest risks of the White House's war on academia and its slashing on scientific research funding has been brain drain—the situation where top scholars, spooked by the worsening climate, find working in other nations more attractive instead." It said Banerjee and Duflo were 'decamping' to Zurich.

The site also quoted a source to claim the pair's departure was connected with the White House's attacks on academic freedom. It speculated: "The timing certainly is suggestive." MIT is among the top centres of learning in the US that the Trump administration has been pressuring to make institutional changes in exchange for preferential government funding. Unlike many other institutions, MIT had spurned what is euphemistically called the 'Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education' days before Banerjee and Duflo made their decision public.

Duflo had told the news site they did not wish to comment on their move especially when MIT was dealing with reaction to its refusal of the 'compact'. However, Duflo had co-signed an op-ed in *Le Monde* as early as March 2025 that had pretty much made her stance clear. The article had warned that academic and scientific freedoms were under unprecedented attack in the US and 'ideological censorship' was spreading.

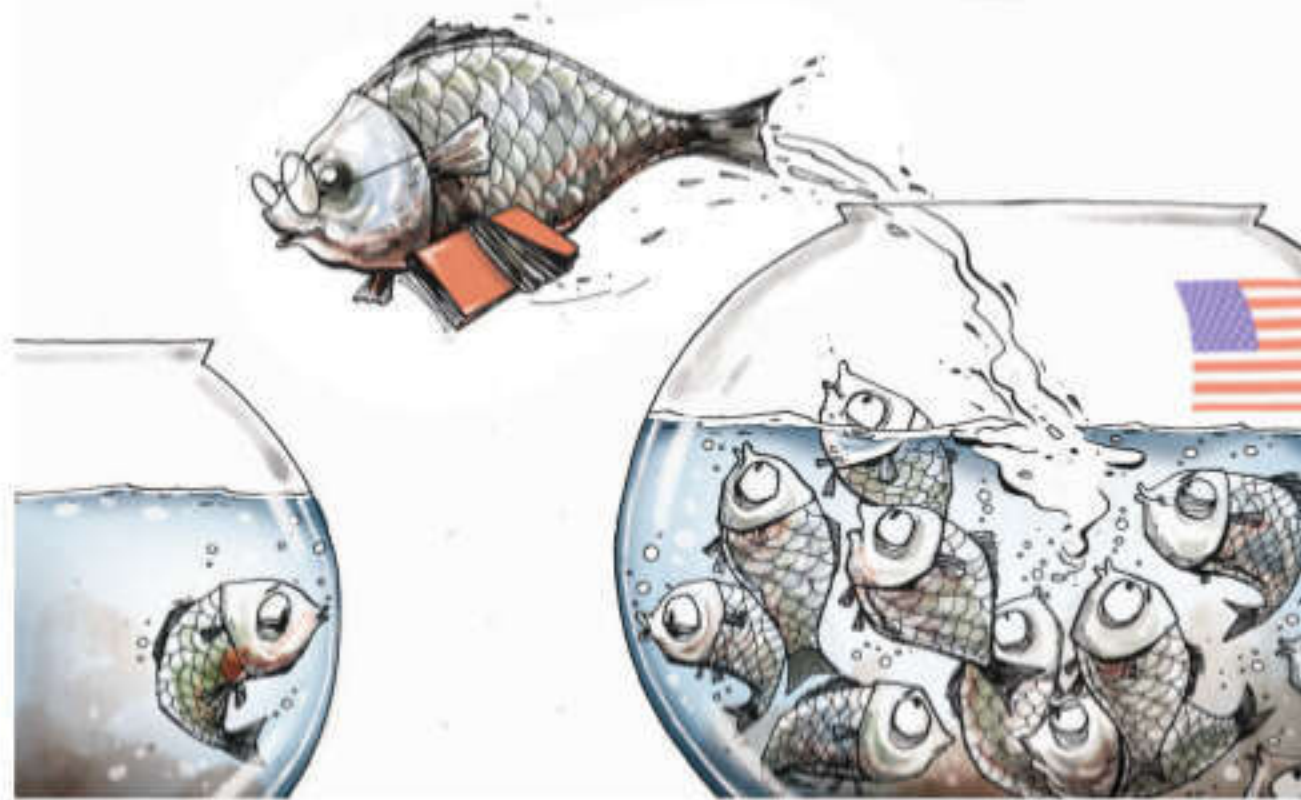
Although the Trump administration had initially circulated the compact with nine top American universities including MIT, this week there has been news floating around that it is being extended to all academic institutions across the US. Now, one will have to wait to see if this move is going to lead to an actual wave of 'brain drain'.

Two top academics' shift from the US has brought back the brain drain discourse. Is it likely given the realities elsewhere and the possibility of US reversal in a few years?

OPPORTUNITY HUNTING AS BRAIN DRAIN

SUGATA SRINIVASARAJU

Senior journalist and author of *The Conscience Network: A Chronicle of Resistance to a Dictatorship*



SOURAV ROY

The brain drain narrative in the US is in place, with a number of examples of disillusioned top academics being cited regularly by the media, but the reality of action remains to be tested. Even if brain drain happens, it may happen over a period of time, not in an instant surge. That is simply because other nations and other universities across the globe need to expand infrastructure, build resources, and, more importantly, create trust. It's easier said than done.

If one assumes that the destination of those leaving the US is Europe, Asia or Australia, there is no guarantee that ideological regimes there may not bring similar pressures and obstacles. In fact, that nature of illiberalism is on the rise in Europe and

other continents, too. Trump has allies and imitators everywhere.

In Banerjee and Duflo's destination, Switzerland, the government and politics is currently dominated by the Swiss People's Party, which is unabashedly far-right and Eurosceptic. Its anti-immigrant rhetoric is loud and it commands 28 percent of the lower chamber of parliament.

China, where cutting-edge scientific and skilled work happens, is often presented as an alternative to the US. Many say China may eventually end up accommodating the best brains from across the world, like the US did during and after World War 2.

But there are political and cultural barriers for this to happen. China is run by a communist regime. Freedoms come

AMERICA'S POLITICS, NORWAY'S MEDAL

THE refusal of the Norwegian Nobel Committee to entertain Donald Trump for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, despite his querulous, absurdist demands, has swung the spotlight on the prize itself. The revelatory fragility of its longstanding rules, the monoethnic—indeed, mononational—constitution of the selection committee, and the dubitable nature of the awardees.

The reasons for Trump's defeasance are several: his inexistence humanitarian record; that the nominations closed on January 31, months before seven countries decided to plug his bid; and that he had not been nominated by 'leading lights' in categories the Norwegian Nobel Committee lists.

How then did Barack Obama crack the prize in 2009? How did the nominator/s know before he became president how he would fare on matters of peace and humanitarianism, the basic tenet of the prize? Obama went on to become a militaristic expansionist, even stunning attendees at the award ceremony by calmly declaring that war was often "morally justified".

Nominations for the following year's peace prize begin online in mid-October. Before the 2009 nominations, Obama was a junior senator with zero "international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples" credits. The credits applied to his nomination were probably unspecific—which must also have been true of Trump's nominators.

After it receives the nominees' list in mid-February, the Norwegian Nobel Committee prepares a shortlist by end-March. By April-end, the advisors selected, according to the Nobel Peace Prize website "on the basis of their professional experience and academic expertise", send in their initial character and suitability analyses. The committee then asks for "further reports on various candidates". This back-and-forth continues until August. A majority vote is taken in the beginning of October.

Obama had ordered his first Predator drone strike—the hallmark of his two presidencies—on January 23, 2009, a week before the last nomination date. On February 17, when the longlist of nominees was received, Obama ordered 17,000 more troops into Afghanistan. On March 27, he unveiled a new escalatory strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. On what basis, then, did he get the golden gong?

The peace prize's nomination-discus-

sion-voting timeline is deeply questionable. As has been its choice of awardees since Henry Kissinger in 1973, which was a brazen disregard for the awfulness of this grey eminence of American realpolitik. In the 21st century, the peace prize has tended to go to political figures opposed to heads-of-state the US is geopolitically uncomfortable with.

This year it went to Maria Corina Machado, a conservative, US-aligned political figure stridently opposed to Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro, an autocrat who is staunchly against American neoimperialism in Latin America and the Middle East-North Africa region.



THE WHITE HOUSE

Barack Obama was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize just days after being sworn in. He ordered drone strikes and troop placements while his nomination was being vetted. In recent years, the prize has gone to opposition figures in countries not doing the US's bidding

With multidecadal connections to US Republicans, she has long been a votary of American—and, oddly, Israeli—bellicosity in Venezuela. Not surprisingly, observers have wryly concluded that the 2025 prize might not have gone to Trump, but it went to a Trumpista who dedicated the trophy to him, which is why Trump isn't exactly ticked off at having been overlooked (although he forgot her name while publicly thanking her for her devotion).

Narges Mohammadi, the 2023 awardee, is an Iranian human rights activist whose work has centred on fighting the oppression of women, and remains in jail at present. Year 2022 was bad for Iran-US

relations—the collapse of the 2015 nuclear agreement's revival, Iran's suppression of domestic protests, its drone supply to Russia. In September 2023, the US unfroze \$6 billion of Iranian money held in South Korea, which it transferred to Qatar with the caveat that they were to be used for US-defined "humanitarian purposes". Iran never saw the money.

Ales Bialiatski, a pro-democracy human rights activist sent to the brutal Penal Colony No 9 in Belarus, was the 2022 awardee along with the Russian human rights organisation Memorial and the Ukrainian human rights organisation Center for Civil Liberties. Belarus-US relations had tanked after the Alexander Lukashenko regime, in May 2021, forced a Ryanair flight to land to arrest popular dissident blogger Raman Dzmitryevich Pratasevich. The Biden administration protested volubly. Lukashenko bit back. Bialiatski got the peace prize in 2022. In 2023, he was sentenced to 10 years—a victim of Lukashenko's autocracy, the Lukashenko-Biden feud, and Biden's Russophobic overreach.

The 2021 prize went to two journalists, Filipina American Maria Ressa and Russian Dmitry Muratov. Both came into the limelight as opposition figures—Ressa against that thorn in the US's flesh, Rodrigo Duterte, who had announced "separation from the United States" in 2016, and in early 2020 unilaterally abrogated the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement, a linchpin of Philippines-US regional security.

And Muratov became known for bucking Vladimir Putin's diktat against publishing uncleared information—or "knowingly false information"—on the Russo-Ukrainian war. In 2020, he had supported the protests in Belarus following Lukashenko's fixed electoral victory. As a member of the Russian opposition party Yabloko, he had already been in Putin's sights for a while.

While few of these laureates are undeserving, an American hand hovers above them all. The Nobel Peace Prize has never been nonpartisan—but now it is unabashedly political.

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MAILBAG

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Pollution complacency

Ref: *The air we breathe* (Oct 16). The air pollution debate has moved beyond policy failures—it now mirrors our collective complacency. Clean air isn't a seasonal entitlement but a shared civic right that demands restraint. The problem isn't ignorance but indifference—our unwillingness to forgo small comforts while the most vulnerable bear the costs. **Sanjeev Jha, New Delhi**

Women's right

Ref: *Putting Womenomics 2.0 to work* (Oct 16). Women should claim visible labour participation as their right, demanding support services and financial literacy, knowledge about production, management models and continuous upskilling, ensuring safety in workplace and travel arrangements. **P Prema, Thanjavur**

Smoke control

Ref: *SC allows limited use of green crackers* (Oct 16). The ruling reminded me of my own brush with smoke control. During our housewarming, a relative quipped, "You should've waited (with the false ceiling). The havan smoke will blacken it!" Panicked, I asked the priest how to avoid it. Without missing a beat, the priest replied, "Sir, I've never performed a havan without smoke." Smoke always finds its way up. **N Nagarajan, Hyderabad**

Passport limits

Ref: *Decline in passport strength* (Oct 16). Judging a passport's strength only by visa-free access is too narrow. The decline in the rankings is primarily due to new political and reciprocal visa deals, not a true loss of global respect or power. A strong passport also includes security and consular support. **Athira Edayath, email**

Ministerial duty

Ref: *Minister's remark on hijab* (Oct 16). People in office should uphold the values they stand for as their irresponsible statements often go viral. The government must not let any organisation or individual to play up the issue. **Krishnaprasad S, Palakkad**

Ceasefire gaps

Ref: *Israel military claims Hamas handed over wrong body* (Oct 16). The revelation raises doubts about Hamas's credibility and intentions. It also exposes the group's manipulative tactics in psychological warfare. Such deceit deepens mistrust and hardens Israeli public anger. **RS Narula, Patiala**