



Editor's
TAKE

IMF: India Must Have a Balanced Growth Strategy

Amid global headwinds of protectionism and slowing trade, India remains a rare bright spot – but the IMF warns that it must have a multi-pronged strategy

Indian economy has shown a lot of resilience in the recent times. While the major economies were struggling to keep afloat, Indian economy was marching ahead with impressive growth rate. Even during the Covid, Indian economy was progressing at a decent rate. However, the recent upheaval in the world trade environment have impacted the Indian economy adversely, especially the reciprocal tariffs enforced by Trump administration. This is indeed going to slowdown the economy as a lot of jobs are at stake as are the future of various industries dependent upon the US orders. The International Monetary Fund's latest observation that India must "fire on all cylinders" serves both as a compliment and a caution. India remains the world's fastest-growing major economy in a slowing global environment but it must act to sustain this trajectory. Maintaining the momentum demands reform, integration, and innovation working together in harmony. IMF Asia-Pacific Director Krishna Srinivasan's remarks underscore a critical truth: India's growth story cannot rely on a single engine. The country's economic fundamentals are indeed robust – growth projected at around 6 per cent, inflation moderating, and the fiscal deficit under control. Yet, these strengths will not automatically translate into long-term prosperity unless India deepens its reform agenda and embraces a more outward-looking economic model. The IMF's advice is clear – India must strengthen domestic demand while simultaneously integrating more deeply with global trade networks. In recent years, India's focus on self-reliance through the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* initiative has bolstered local manufacturing and reduced import dependence. Srinivasan has rightly cautioned that India should not see domestic growth and global integration as two different things. The challenge is not to choose between the two, but to synchronise them.

Trade liberalisation, flexible labour laws, and regulatory simplification are the other "cylinders" that must be fired up. Despite significant reforms like the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and production-linked incentive schemes, India still faces bottlenecks that constrain private enterprise. Complex regulations, high tariffs, and labour rigidities continue to impede the scalability of industries. To attract global supply chains, India must make its trade regime more predictable and its business environment more agile.

A more liberal trade posture could enable Indian industries to participate more fully in global value chains – particularly in electronics, green technology, and digital services, where demand is expanding. This would not only boost exports but also drive innovation, investment, and job creation. Domestic investment and innovation form another vital front. Strengthening financial markets, improving access to credit for small enterprises, and incentivising research and development will be crucial for sustaining productivity-driven growth. If India has to achieve the vision of *Viksit Bharat* by 2047, it must balance ambition with adaptability.

The return of history in the AF-Pak Conflict

Pakistan finds itself fighting another war – this time with Afghanistan – along a border drawn more than a century ago by imperial hands. The ongoing conflict is less a clash of armies than a collision of identities, histories, and unresolved wounds



NILANTHA
ILANGAMUWA

That was Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif, who seized the moment at last week's Sharm el-Sheikh peace summit, earning the visible approval of President Trump – a move that clearly rattled India. A segment of Indian media erupted with criticism, portraying Sharif as reckless, yet the Prime Minister appears to have calculated the risks with surgical precision. Trump's repeated public praise for Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir, whom the former President has called his "favourite field marshal," signals a subtle but deliberate recalibration of Pakistan's strategic alignment with the United States.

While this diplomatic drama dominates headlines, Pakistan finds itself engaged in its second war of the year – this time with Afghanistan – a conflict whose roots lie not only in recent flash-points along the Durand Line but extend deep into centuries of imperial manipulation, ethnic division, and transgenerational grievance. Dozens have been killed on both sides, and as of this writing, Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban administration have agreed to a 48-hour temporary ceasefire.

The Durand Line, drawn by British India in 1893, is far more than a mere border; it is a historical wound, an artificial fissure imposed upon the Pashtun tribes and communities whose cohesion predated the concept of nation-states in the region. The British approach to empire was not merely extractive; it was deliberately destabilising. By bisecting ethnic groups, elevating certain factions, and leaving behind rivalries as a permanent feature of governance, they effectively weaponised the social fabric. Their departure was not benign. By creating a patchwork of enmities, distrust, and ungoverned spaces, they left a region structurally predisposed to recurring conflict.

For Afghanistan, the Durand Line is neither accepted nor forgotten. Kabul regards it as a colonial imposition and a wound in national consciousness, a legacy that resonates through contemporary resistance. Afghan memory is forged in defiance of invaders – Mughals, Persians, British, Soviets, Americans – and now extends to any perceived Pakistani overreach. Pakistan, meanwhile, insists on the line's inviolability, framing it as essential for national security and internal legitimacy.

The Taliban's resurgence adds a further layer of complexity. The recent visit of their foreign minister to India demonstrates the intricate triangular dynamics of regional geopolitics.

For New Delhi, the engagement signals potential influence over Afghanistan, yet it is deeply sensitive given Pakistan's entrenched interests. Islamabad, ever attentive to such subtleties, can



leverage these moments to project influence over Indo-US relations, particularly amid escalating trade tensions and tariff disputes between Washington and New Delhi. In such a climate, every diplomatic gesture carries strategic weight; every handshake, every official visit, becomes a calculated move in a game where historical grievance and modern geopolitics intersect.

The prevailing Afghan narrative is unmistakable: no external power or foreign endorsement can eclipse the Taliban's claim to historical legacy and authority over the nation. The human cost of the Durand Line conflict is immense. Civilians on both sides endure repeated displacement, disrupted livelihoods, and constant insecurity. Pashtun communities, split by a border imposed in 1893, are trapped in a persistent conflict of loyalties. In Afghanistan, populations support national forces with moral, material, and logistical contributions, reinforcing resistance; in Pakistan, tribal communities confront the state's military assertion, caught between allegiance to kin and obligation to the nation. The border thus transcends geography, becoming a battlefield where identity, memory, and sovereignty converge. What is at stake is more than territory: it is legitimacy, culture, and historical justice, echoing through generations.

Geopolitical ramifications are extensive. A protracted Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict threatens regional stability. Iran, India, and Central Asian states face the spectre of refugee flows, smuggling networks, and cross-border militancy. Global powers – particularly the United States, China, and Russia – engage from self-interest, their interventions magnifying the local conflict while shaping outcomes to suit strategic objectives.

China, heavily invested in the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, fears disruption of vital economic corridors. Russia, wary of militant spillover onto its southern frontier, advocates dialogue yet balances it against the temptation of influence. The United States, maintaining historic ties and

seeking regional leverage, evaluates Pakistan's military and political alignments through the lens of transactional advantage.

The conflict exposes the contradictions of modern statehood in the region. Afghanistan's insistence on defending sovereignty collides with Pakistan's perception of strategic necessity. For Islamabad, frontier control is both a security imperative and a domestic political instrument. For Kabul, any concession is a compromise of historical memory, a potential betrayal of centuries of defiance against external powers. This dynamic ensures that every military engagement or border patrol carries symbolic weight far beyond tactical considerations. Today's conflict is interwoven with complex global stakes and historical sensitivities that cannot be bypassed.

Religion has further complicated governance in Afghanistan, embedding extremist ideologies into the very structure of the state. The result is a government that simultaneously oppresses minorities and restricts women's rights while defending national sovereignty. These contradictions are not incidental; they are the product of centuries of foreign interference and internal power consolidation. Modern Afghan governance, shaped by decades of invasion, occupation, and betrayal, exemplifies a paradoxical resilience: willing to cooperate when strategically necessary, yet uncompromising in the defence of dignity, territorial integrity, and cultural identity.

British imperial planners not only carved borders but institutionalised chaos, creating rivalries, proxy conflicts, and social fractures that persist to this day. Pakistan and Afghanistan inherit the consequences, navigating statehood amid contested boundaries, divided communities, and historical trauma. Every ceasefire, every diplomatic negotiation, every military engagement along this line is a re-enactment of colonial designs – a theatre where historical memory dictates contemporary strategy. The conflict is simultaneously territorial, existential, and ideological.

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The conversations we still don't have about women



ASHA IYER
KUMAR

2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

We live in a world where women journalists are first excluded from an event covering a significant diplomatic dialogue, and then, when there is a ripple of indignation against the perversion, a "correction" is made – one that jars more than it gels with the modern women's narrative we have been copiously fed with. We live in a world where a man, a surgeon in Bangalore, murders his new wife, herself a doctor, for a reason that shows utter disregard for life and human decency. The police surmise that he was upset about the woman's multiple health issues, which were allegedly kept under wraps by her parents before the marriage.

His anger resulted in an act that not only ended a life but also tore open the raw, unspoken tensions that surround the life of a woman in our society. We live in a world where discussions and debates about women's parity with their male counterparts have grown loud; yet their autonomy over their bodies and their choices over their destinies remain open to appraisal, critique, and, at times, deadly punishment.

The indignities may differ – from exclusion at a press conference to the ultimate violation of the right to life – but the underlying pattern is the same. Women have yet to secure their authority, their voice, and vindication from a society that is ready to talk but reluctant to fully abide by what it says. I am not sure if it is my imagination or certitude, but there are several things that still linger in the shadows of a woman's world. How often have we heard open, unrestrained conversations about what women truly want in their lives, beyond equality in workspaces or freedom from patriarchal dynamics and stereotyping? No, it is not all about heading boardrooms and making their opinion count alone. It is also about how they are treated in the bedrooms – how their wounds and whispers are received. It is also about what they want from their relationships – as a partner, a mother, a daughter. It is about their freedom to express their desires, their long-

ings, their right to preserve emotional dignity, their need for sacred intimacy rather than coerced surrender. I say "sacred intimacy" because women are still too rarely asked about their preferences, too rarely offered choices, too rarely given the freedom to say "no" or to insist. It is still largely a man's world, folks – especially in matters of the heart, mind, and body. Why are these inconsistencies so intrinsic to our societal fabric that even honest discussions about a woman's happiness – emotional, psychological, and physical – remain deferred or dismissed? Why does shame still cling to women's instincts and needs? Why is domestic violence tolerated, and why is marital rape still unacknowledged, condemning women to servitude under their husbands' whims? Millions of women hold back unspilled tears – many in corporate suits and cars – having fought only half the battle. Their inner lives remain cloistered, their wounds unhealed. Yes, progress deserves recognition, but the celebration of empowerment is premature.

Women must not be afterthoughts. Their dreams deserve space to breathe. No woman wants to be a Devi – only to be seen, not sanctified.

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist and children's writing coach

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unsung heroes of every dawn

It is heartening to learn that a day has been dedicated to honour Newspaper Vendors, celebrated on October 15. Every morning, my subscribed newspaper arrives at my doorstep at the break of dawn – without fail – throughout the year. Be it the scorching summer, the biting chill of winter, or the relentless downpour of the monsoon, one thing remains constant – the newspaper's gracious presence at the door.

Even during cyclones that uproot trees and electricity poles, blocking roads and lanes, the paper finds its way through. During the stringent lockdowns, when the world stood still, the newspaper never failed to arrive – like the sun, moon, and stars – waiting for me every dawn.

It makes one wonder when these vendors wake up to collect their bundles before we even stir from sleep. Neither film stars nor sports icons are my heroes – it is these humble newspaper vendors whose dedication is unmatched. They are the unsung heroes who bridge the gap between us and the world, opening our windows to knowledge and truth each morning. Their dedication reminds us that true heroes often work quietly, unseen. We owe them gratitude for keeping the world informed every day.

KAJAL CHATTERJEE | KOLKATA

Celebrate a climate-friendly Diwali

As Diwali approaches, our excitement grows, but so must our sense of responsibility. The Supreme Court's earlier reminders cannot be ignored – combining winter and fireworks poses serious risks to public health and the environment. It is time to think ecologically and avoid lighting crackers to the extent of causing hazards.

We can celebrate peacefully and embrace a climate-friendly Diwali. Let us illuminate the skies with joy rather than toxic fumes or glittering pollutants. Every spark of celebration should not come at the cost of air quality or human health.

Festivals should symbolise harmony with nature, not hostility toward it. Lighting diyas and candles safely, while spreading happiness through eco-conscious practices, reflects the true spirit of celebration. Communities can organise creative and safe events that bring joy without harming the environment.

This Diwali, let us reclaim the essence of festivity through responsibility and mindfulness. Together, we can make our celebrations cleaner, greener, and more meaningful – where happiness and environmental care go hand in hand. By doing so, we honour both tradition and the planet, ensuring that future generations can also enjoy the festival safely and sustainably.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

US CHAMBER CHALLENGES TRUMP'S H-1B VISA FEE

The US Chamber of Commerce has filed a federal lawsuit against the Trump administration, contesting the legality of a newly imposed annual fee of \$100,000 on H-1B visa applications. The business lobby argues that the fee, announced last month, is unlawful and would gravely harm American companies dependent on skilled foreign workers. Filed in the US District Court for the District of Columbia, the lawsuit accuses President Donald Trump of exceeding his executive authority by introducing the fee without congressional consent.

The Chamber has urged the court to block federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the State Department, from enforcing the measure. H-1B

visas allow US employers to hire highly skilled foreign professionals, particularly in the technology sector. Nearly three-quarters of these visas are granted to Indian nationals, benefiting firms such as Amazon, TCS, Microsoft, Apple, and Google.

The Chamber contends that the administration's drastic increase violates the Immigration and Nationality Act, which mandates that visa-related fees reflect processing costs.

The organisation warned that the policy could raise labour expenses, reduce skilled hiring, and harm America's competitiveness – deepening tensions between Trump's protectionism and corporate reliance on global talent.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

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

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

PM Modi's vision reignites Andhra's journey of resurgence



VINUSHA REDDY

Andhra Pradesh is a state that has endured repeated political setbacks and emotional upheavals. It is perhaps the only state in India that has lost its capital three times — first Chennai during the linguistic reorganisation of 1953, then Kurnool which briefly served as capital from 1953 to 1956, and finally Hyderabad after the bifurcation of Telangana in 2014. Each time, Andhra had to start over — rebuilding its administration, institutions, and economy from scratch. Yet, despite these trials, the people of Andhra Pradesh never gave up. Their determination, enterprise, and hard work became their greatest capital. And it is this indomitable spirit that Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi recognised, respected, and revitalised.

A Decade of Stability and Support

When the Modi-led NDA government assumed office in 2014, Andhra Pradesh was a state searching for identity and direction. The bifurcation had drained it of resources, institutions, and even emotional unity. But instead of sympathy, what Andhra received from Prime Minister Modi was something far greater — opportunity and empowerment. The Centre didn't just send grants; it laid foundations of education, industry, connectivity, and confidence. Over the last decade, the Modi government has focused on building a self-reliant Andhra Pradesh that stands not as a victim of division but as a driver of national development.

Kurnool: From Historic Capital to Modern Nucleus

Kurnool, which once served as the state's capital, today stands as a symbol of Andhra's rebirth. The district has emerged as a major growth hub under the Modi government's development vision.

The Orvakal Node, being developed as part of the Bengaluru-Chennai Industrial Corridor, is transforming into an industrial and logistics powerhouse. The establishment of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)'s Drone Testing Centre and an upcoming Drone Manufacturing Unit mark Kurnool's rise on India's technological map. Asia's largest hybrid Solar-Wind-Hydro Power Project in Kurnool reflects India's global leadership in renewable energy, while the Jayaraj Steel Factory and the mod-



UNDER PRIME MINISTER MODI'S LEADERSHIP, ANDHRA PRADESH HAS TRANSFORMED FROM UNCERTAINTY TO ASPIRATION

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 The Pioneer

ernised Kurnool Railway Station show tangible progress on the ground. The Kurnool Airport, developed under the UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik) scheme, now connects the district directly to major cities, making air travel accessible to the common citizen.

Under the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive for Adithana Mandirams (PRASADAM) Scheme, the Srisailem Temple, one of India's holiest Jyotirlingas, has been upgraded with enhanced pilgrim amenities, blending faith with modern infrastructure. When Prime Minister Modi visits Srisailem and Kurnool, the people of Rayalaseema will not just welcome a leader, they will greet the architect of a decade-long transformation.

Empowering Andhra Through Knowledge and Education

The Modi government's belief that education is the foundation of empowerment is visible across Andhra Pradesh. Institutions once concentrated in other regions have now been distributed to ensure balanced regional growth.

Across the state, 11 premier central educational and research institutes have been sanctioned and established by the Modi government, including:

- Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Tirupati
- Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Visakhapatnam
- National Institute of Technology (NIT)

- Tadepalligudem
- Indian Institute of Information Technology Design and Manufacturing (IIITDM) Kurnool
- Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Tirupati
- All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Mangalagiri
- National Academy of Customs, Indirect Taxes and Narcotics (NACIN), Hindupur
- Central Tribal University Vizanagaram, among others.

Each of these institutions represents not just infrastructure, but opportunity for lakhs of youth who no longer need to leave their home state to pursue higher education or research. The establishment of IIITDM Kurnool in Rayalaseema ensures that the region joins the national innovation network, nurturing future technologists and entrepreneurs.

Accelerating Infrastructure and Industrial Growth

Andhra Pradesh today stands at the centre of India's new industrial geography. Out of 11 Economic Corridors being developed across India, three run through Andhra Pradesh — the Hyderabad-Bengaluru, Bengaluru-Chennai, and Visakhapatnam-Chennai corridors. These are not mere highways; they are arteries of growth carrying jobs, industries, and investments.

Within these corridors, the Orvakal

Node (Kurnool), Krishnapatnam Industrial Area, and Kopparthi Node are being developed as major industrial clusters to drive employment and economic expansion. Road infrastructure in Andhra has seen historic expansion. Under PM Modi's leadership, the total length of National Highways has more than doubled from

4,193 km in 2014 to over 8,660 km by 2022. In the last year alone, projects worth ₹11,000 crores were completed, and ₹20,000 crores of work is ongoing. Over the

next four years, the Centre has planned investments exceeding ₹1.2 lakh crores, ensuring seamless connectivity across the state.

Major national investments have also transformed Andhra's economic potential:

- Polavaram Project received over ₹5,000 crores in central funding.
- Vizag Steel Plant got a ₹12,000-crore revival package.
- Amaravati was granted ₹15,000 crores for capital infrastructure.
- Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) is investing ₹8,110 crores across coastal Andhra in energy projects.
- Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) Refinery in Nellore and India's first Green Hydrogen Energy Hub in Visakhapatnam are setting the stage for a green energy revolution.

Andhra Pradesh is also being considered for semiconductor manufac-

turing units, marking a leap into India's high-tech future.

Urban Transformation and People-Centric Welfare

Under the AMRUT Scheme, projects worth ₹130 crores are underway in 52 wards of Kurnool Municipality, improving sanitation, water supply, and urban infrastructure. Across Andhra Pradesh, the scheme will see investments of ₹3,333.76 crores, driving urban renewal in multiple cities and towns.

Andhra Pradesh ranks number one in India under the PM Awas Yojana (Urban), having been sanctioned 20,28,899 houses — the highest in the country, even ahead of Uttar Pradesh. These houses represent security, dignity, and empowerment for lakhs of families.

Under the Jal Jeevan Mission, more than 39.77 lakh rural households have been provided with tap water connections, transforming public health and rural livelihoods.

From PM-KISAN to Ayushman Bharat, Ujjwala, Swachh Bharat, and Digital India, the Modi government's schemes have touched every home.

This model is not about handouts, it is about dignity. As PM Modi often says, "Our goal is not to create dependents, but to create empowered citizens."

From Pain to Progress: A People's Journey

The story of Andhra Pradesh is one of loss and resurgence. The state that once lost its capital three times is today reclaiming its pride through development. This is not just about economics, it's about restoring self-respect. Under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, Andhra Pradesh has transformed from uncertainty to aspiration. Kurnool, Rayalaseema, and the coastal belt are now writing a new story — one of faith, progress, and national pride.

When the people of Kurnool welcome Prime Minister Modi, they will be welcoming not just a leader, but a partner in their journey of resurgence — a leader who believed that Andhra's strength lies in its people.

As the nation marches toward Viksit Bharat 2047, Andhra Pradesh stands tall — confident, capable, and committed to contributing to India's rise.

Under PM Modi, Andhra's message to the nation is clear:

"We may have lost capitals, but we have found our confidence again."

Shubh Dhanteras: Celebrating wealth that begins with health



PRATAPRAO JADHAV

As we celebrate this auspicious day marking the beginning of the Diwali festival, Dhanteras is traditionally observed as a day of prosperity, renewal, and new beginnings.

According to our ancient scriptures, it commemorates the divine emergence of Goddess Lakshmi and Dhanvantari — the celestial physician — during the Samudra Manthan, the great churning of the cosmic ocean.

This sacred day symbolises not merely material abundance but the deeper truth that genuine prosperity flows from holistic well-being. In essence, Dhanteras reminds us that health itself constitutes the highest and most enduring form of wealth.

In the profound wisdom of Ayurveda, Dhanteras holds special significance beyond its festive celebrations. It coincides with the crucial seasonal transition into Hemant Ritu, the early winter season — a period our ancient seers identified as supremely conducive for rejuvenation, detoxification, and building immunity. The traditional rituals associated with this auspicious day, from lighting earthen lamps to the ceremonial purchase of gold and silver vessels, reflect both symbolic and physiological dimensions of health preservation.

The radiant flame of the diya represents the illumination of consciousness and the dispelling of ignorance, while precious metals like gold and silver have been valued in Ayurvedic therapeutics for millennia for their healing properties and their remarkable ability to harmonise the body's subtle energies.

This sacred day also encourages introspection, gratitude, and mindful self-care. Ayurveda teaches us that the harmonious balance of the three fundamental bio-energies — Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, collectively known as the tridoshas — ensures vitality, resilience, and longevity. When these elemental forces exist in equilibrium within our constitution, they give rise to Ojas, the subtle essence of strength, immunity, lustre, and spiritual radiance.

This Ojas represents the true foundation of lasting prosperity, extending far beyond mere material affluence or temporal success.

Ayurveda's conception of wealth is thus profoundly holistic and multidimensional. It invites us to make conscious investments in our



physical, mental, and spiritual well-being through simple yet transformative practices. These include nourishing our bodies with wholesome seasonal foods, cultivating mindfulness through meditation and pranayama, ensuring adequate and restorative sleep, maintaining harmonious relationships, and fostering a spirit of gratitude and contentment. These are not merely ceremonial rituals but time-honoured health prescriptions that

fortify our resilience, enhance our immunity, and bring lasting stability and peace to our lives. The seasonal transition around Dhanteras makes it an opportune moment to embrace Ayurvedic practices such as Abhyanga (oil massage), consuming ghee and warming spices, practising yoga, and adopting seasonal dietary adjustments that strengthen digestion and vitality. These preventive measures, rooted in thousands of years of empirical wisdom, help us build robust health and prevent diseases before they manifest.

In our contemporary world, where lifestyle disorders are reaching epidemic proportions and stress-related ailments affect millions, the ancient wisdom of Ayurveda offers practical, accessible, and effective solutions. The Ministry of Ayush has been working tirelessly to integrate these traditional health sciences into mainstream healthcare, making wellness accessible to every Indian household while also sharing this invaluable knowledge with the world. This Dhanteras, I earnestly appeal to all citizens to embrace Ayurvedic principles in their

daily lives: prioritise balanced and seasonal nutrition, establish regular self-care routines, practise mindful and conscious living, adopt preventive health measures, and maintain harmony between body, mind, and spirit. Let us honour this sacred festival not merely by seeking material prosperity through the acquisition of gold and silver, but by making a commitment to invest in our most precious and irreplaceable asset — our health and well-being.

By adopting these simple yet profoundly effective, time-tested practices rooted in our civilisational wisdom, we can ensure that the radiant light of holistic well-being illuminates our homes, strengthens our families, and uplifts our communities. In doing so, we honour not only the festival's traditional significance but also fulfil our responsibility to future generations.

May this Dhanteras bring not merely material wealth, but enduring vitality, constitutional balance, mental peace, and authentic joy into every home across our nation. Let us celebrate a festival that truly nurtures the body, energises the mind, and uplifts the spirit — creating an invaluable legacy of wellness and wholeness that will resonate through generations to come.

Shubh Dhanteras!

The writer is Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Ayush and Minister of State for Health & Family Welfare

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VIKAS YADAV

The idea of One Nation, One Election - holding simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and local bodies — has been one of the most discussed electoral reforms in recent years. The proposal, which aims to reduce election costs, administrative burden, and political disruptions caused by frequent polls, has taken concrete shape through the recommendations of the Ram Nath Kovind Committee, set up by the Government of India in September 2023.

The committee, headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, was tasked with examining the feasibility of conducting simultaneous elections and recommending the necessary constitutional and legal changes. After extensive consultations with experts, political leaders, and election authorities, the committee submitted its detailed report to President Droupadi Murmu in March 2024. The report, running over 18,000 pages, outlined a step-by-step roadmap for implementing the system across the country.

The committee proposed that simultaneous elections should first be held for the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies, followed later by municipal and panchayat elections within a 100-day period. It recommended a set of constitutional amendments — including introducing Article 82A to synchronise the terms of Parliament and State Legislatures, and Article 324A to extend the framework to local bodies. It also suggested amending Articles 83 and 172 to permit flexible adjustment of legislative terms.

A single electoral roll and voter ID for all elections were proposed to avoid duplication and simplify logistics. The committee further advised that if any legislature were to dissolve early, the newly elected house should serve only for the remainder of the original term, keeping the national election cycle intact.

Following the submission of the report, the Union Cabinet approved its recommendations in September 2024. Two key bills — the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024 — were then introduced in Parliament in December 2024. Both bills were referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) of 39 members drawn from both Houses for detailed examination.

The JPC continues to deliberate on the proposed legislation. It has sought views from



former Chief Justices, legal experts, economists, and constitutional scholars. Several experts have supported the idea in principle but cautioned that care must be taken to preserve the federal structure and prevent excessive centralisation of power. In particular, some legal experts warned against giving the Election Commission unrestricted powers to alter election schedules.

As of October 2025, no draft or final JPC report has been made public. The committee's deadline for submitting its findings has been extended until the first day of the last week of the Winter Session 2025. The bills therefore remain under parliamentary scrutiny, and the constitutional amendments required for implementation have not yet been enacted.

According to JPC Chairperson P. P. Chaudhary, the earliest practical timeline for synchronised national and state elections would be around 2034. This projection allows time for all necessary legal amendments, state ratifications, and administrative preparations by the Election Commission.

While the proposal promises greater stability and efficiency, it also faces significant challenges. Achieving political consensus among multiple parties, safeguarding the federal character of governance, and ensuring logistical readiness for such a large-scale exercise will all be critical.

The One Nation, One Election initiative has thus moved from an abstract idea to a serious legislative and administrative proposal. If the process continues smoothly and gains nationwide support, India could see its first fully synchronised elections within the next decade — a reform that may fundamentally reshape how the world's largest democracy votes.

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times

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{ OUR TAKE }

Last chapter in Maoist story

The large number of surrenders indicate that the violent political movement is in disarray

The Centre has set March 31, 2026, as the deadline to eliminate the Maoist movement. But the armed political insurgency that dates back to the late 1960s and presently, centred mainly in the forested areas of central India, may fizzle out even before that. Since CPI (Maoist) general secretary Nambala Keshav Rao, alias Basavaraju, was killed in a police action in Chhattisgarh in May, the political group has been in disarray. Many more have been killed in encounters with security forces, and a large number of cadres have surrendered. Close to 300 persons have laid down arms in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra in the past three days. The movement itself is divided, with a section advocating surrender.

The collapse of the Maoist movement, described in 2009 by the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as the country's biggest internal security threat, is yet another example of a militaristic ideological force biting the dust. The Maoists, also called Naxalites, broke away from the CPM in 1967 and have been waging war against the Indian State since. It had survived the setbacks in West Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Bihar between the 1970 and 1990s, to regroup as a potent force in central India in the 2000s. The leadership, under pressure from police in Andhra Pradesh, had moved deep into the jungles and built the party as a guerrilla force with cadres from the economically impoverished tribal communities. That phase is over, as the numbers reveal: Union home minister Amit Shah said Thursday that since January 2024, 2,100 Naxalites have surrendered, 1,785 have been arrested, and 477 have been eliminated.

There are multiple reasons for the Maoists losing ground. One, the Indian State has extended its reach into areas that were once inaccessible because of poor physical infrastructure and ungoverned in the absence of public institutions. The underdevelopment, an outcome of the absent or weak State, had allowed rent-seeking by caste and other social elites, creating a large catchment for the Maoists to recruit from. Two, operations by the security forces have blunted the military edge that the Maoists had over local police, which also allowed them domain dominance. Three, pressure from security forces and the killing of senior leaders seems to have broken the will to continue the fight for an unrealisable Utopia. Four, a crisis of ideology, the result also of global politics, has left the movement politically impoverished and reduced it to a band of violent outlaws. The Maoists had no answers to a democratic order, imperfect in many ways, but willing to address social and economic grievances through the instruments of the State and backed by legitimate firepower. The collapse of the Maoist movement is a chronicle foretold.

The success of the anti-Maoist campaign is also evidence of the robustness of India's constitutional democracy and the flexibility of its instruments such as affirmative action and welfare programmes. The inequities in the distribution of resources notwithstanding, successive governments have been successful in building a State that is reasonably responsive, representative, and inclusive. Much more can be, and needs to be, done, no doubt. The trust citizens harbour in electoral democracy is self-evident in the high polling recorded despite threats from the Maoists. Ideological blindness prevented the Maoists from recognising the liberatory potential in electoral democracy, and they are paying the price for it.

{ THIRD EYE }

Barkha Dutt



India must engage with the Taliban, but do it cautiously

India can be a possible moderating influence in Afghanistan rather than wield little influence in the region by remaining disengaged. But New Delhi needs to look at relations beyond the Pakistan prism

The photograph of the Taliban foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi sitting under an old portrait of the Bamiyan Buddhas at the Afghanistan Embassy in Delhi — an iconic heritage site his group destroyed in 2001 on the orders of Mullah Omar — captured all the contradictions and cultural challenges that India's dramatic reset with the Taliban will entail.

From lyricist Javed Akhtar to parliamentarian Mahua Moitra, several Indians have questioned or criticised this engagement. At an intuitive level, the angst is understandable. Since 2021, the Taliban have banned girls from secondary schools and women from universities. Women are completely excluded from formal political life. And in some provinces, women are forbidden to be treated by male doctors — UN Women warns that maternal mortality could increase by 50%.

The Taliban delegation made its own case worse by seeming to bring some of these Neanderthal policies to Indian soil when no women

journalists were invited to the first press conference Muttaqi held. While all kinds of theories were offered to initially explain this, including that no one could dictate what the Taliban did within the compound of its own embassy; the fierce backlash forced the Taliban to hold a second press conference at the embassy and invite female reporters as well.

This in itself is instructive. It is better for India to be a possible moderating influence than be of no influence as a result of the cold freeze in relations.

That said, it is important to understand India's tryst with the Taliban in strategic terms, not ideological ones. The unravelling of trust in the relations with the US should be illustrative of the limitations or even redundancy of shared values diplomacy in today's turbulent times.

Foreign policy must, by definition, be guided solely by India's national interests. Add to this a series of cataclysmic geo-political factors — India's military conflict with Pakistan, China's long-term patronage of Pakistan now combined with US president Donald Trump's distinct tilt towards Islamabad, and trouble in the neighbourhood, in Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar.

The flare-up of a border war between Pakistan and Afghanistan — with Pakistan bombing targets inside Kabul just as Muttaqi touched down in Delhi — reveals how irked the powers that be in Islamabad are. In Muttaqi's visit to India, the message from the Taliban to Pakistan is that they cannot, and will not be, treated like a puppet regime.

India's decision to reset relations is a message not just to Pakistan about extending stra-



We (India) will need to reopen our doors on visas, medical infrastructure, and education, as well as provide assistance in rebuilding Afghanistan.

AFP

tegic depth in Afghanistan, but also a message to the Trump administration that has been aggressively eyeing control of the Bagram base in Afghanistan. Muttaqi's visit to the Deoband seminary in Uttar Pradesh was especially significant in challenging Pakistan's assumptions about Muslims and nationhood.

That said, the Taliban is not a monolith. And India should not forget that when Kabul first fell to the Taliban, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief was among the first public figures to be spotted on the ground. Entities like the Haqqani network operating out of Afghanistan, but with well-established links to ISI must not be glossed over as well. Those of us of a certain vintage remember the hijacking of IC814, diverted to Kandahar by Pakistan-backed hijackers in exchange for the release of terrorists, including Masood Azhar.

Today's Taliban may pose no direct security threat to India in the way Pakistan does — a

point made repeatedly by veteran diplomats. And it's a point well taken.

But if this is genuinely about re-establishing India's connection with Afghanistan, we will need to look at relations beyond the Pakistan prism. We will need to reopen our doors on visas, medical infrastructure, and education, as well as provide assistance in rebuilding Afghanistan. We will need to channel historical connections and affections.

Or else, this dramatic reset will be about tactics — short-lived and inflammable.

This very interesting moment in India's geo-political history will need to find the balance between cold-blooded assessment of national interest and not going overboard in treating the Taliban as some sort of heroes coming home.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

How great institutions power great nations

Behind many of India's most remarkable achievements lies a common force: High-quality institutions that empower generations to build paths that once seemed impossible. From designing AI-powered mosquito-tracking systems that prevent disease outbreaks to breakthroughs in space exploration to artists from rural India performing on world-class stages, these milestones are not incidental. They are visible outcomes of decades of collective effort, deep, purpose-driven investment in the centres of excellence we have incubated and nurtured, and unwavering belief in human potential.

Born of visionary intent to confront India's defining challenges, and to reinforce its cultural mores and civilisational values, institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, and the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA), stand out as multi-generational legacies of impact. Across the decades, philanthropic leadership in India has not only supported existing centres of excellence but also actively incubated new institutions that address the emerging needs of our society.

Examples such as the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Tata Memorial Centre and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, illustrate how long-term philanthropy, rooted in partnership and mentorship, has helped seed early-stage organisations that have grown into nationally and globally recognised pillars of progress. This commitment to institutional incubation, from ideation, sustained mentorship, investment, and collaborative networks, has enabled pathbreaking solutions and empowered new generations of talent across health care, education, technology, and social

sciences, contributing to India's transformation.

The true imprint of such institutions does not reside only in history books or research papers. It lives in the stories of those who carry these learnings into the world — scientists, artists, and changemakers whose ideas, nurtured first in classrooms or laboratories, ripple outward, touching lives, shifting systems, and quietly rewriting what's possible. We see it in rockets that carry hope and in breakthroughs in energy, health, and climate action.

Our past shows us what this looks like. Nobel Prize laureate CV Raman's leadership at IISc, Jayant Narlikar's stewardship of the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy & Astrophysics (IUCAA), Pune, and Homi Bhabha and JRD Tata's vision for TIFR — all left us stronger than before. They turned fledgling institutions into engines of discovery, built ecosystems that nurtured innovation, and laid the foundations for India's scientific self-reliance. We stand on the shoulders of such visionaries — inspired not just to protect their enduring impact, but to extend it.

As the nature of our challenges evolves, so must our institutions. India's aspirations multiply, and more Indians rise to meet them. The problems we face today cannot be solved in silos, be it the climate crisis, the AI evolution, or antimicrobial resistance. Consider this: By 2050, India could lose almost 3% of its annual GDP due to climate-induced productivity losses. At the same time, India's share of the global workforce is set to grow dramatically, creating both opportunities and responsibilities. These intersecting realities demand institutions that go beyond producing knowledge. They must break disciplinary boundaries and



Siddharth Sharma



Institutions are not just systems or structures: they are catalysts for dreams and launchpads for human potential.

HT ARCHIVE

bring together technology, communities, and policy under one roof.

The role our institutions play in solving global problems has never been more crucial. The climate crisis is redrawing coastlines and straining health systems. In 2024 alone, 5.4 million people in India were internally displaced due to disasters like floods and storms, the highest in more than a decade. In such times, these must be more than places of learning. They must become platforms where diverse voices come together to co-create solutions at scale.

Institutions act as connectors and enablers: meeting people where they are and opening doors to a more equitable future. As Nobel laureates Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson remind us in *Why Nations Fail*, inclusive,

adaptive, and resilient institutions, and not growth alone, make progress lasting and fair.

The true strength of institutions will be measured when knowledge translates into action. During the recent pandemic, Indian institutions were central to enabling the delivery of Covid-19 vaccine doses nationwide. Over two billion doses were administered, in turn protecting millions of people and strengthening public health systems. Similarly, in the clean energy sector, collaborations between scientists, universities and industry helped reduce the cost of solar power by more than 80% over the past decade, powering rural communities and driving livelihoods.

Institutions are not just systems or structures: they are catalysts for dreams and launchpads for human potential. They are the reasons that a young girl in Jharkhand dreams of curing cancer, or a first-generation student from Uttarakhand can lead clean energy research, or a musician from Rajasthan is able to share their art with the world on the stages of NCPA. In nurturing such aspirations, these centres build the very foundations of a more inclusive India — empowering citizens to contribute to the nation's transformation.

However, despite being living, breathing ecosystems and the country's inheritance to our children, they remain persistently under-resourced. Funding gaps restrict innovation, limit infrastructure, and constrain the next generation of innovators. This is where the Tata Trusts has shown that philanthropy can make a difference. Today, it continues to drive progress where it is needed most — whether enabling new research, funding early-stage innovation, or building collaborative platforms.

The future of our institutions will not be written by policymakers or philanthropists alone, but by how each of us chooses to support and reimagine them. Nations are not built overnight, but generation by generation, through institutions that evolve, endure, and empower.

Siddharth Sharma is CEO, Tata Trusts. The views expressed are personal. This is part of a series for Nobel Prize Dialogue India 2025 that will be held in Bengaluru and Mumbai on November 3 and 5, in partnership with Tata Trusts.

Lessons in etiquette for Indian politicians

Kerala's longest-serving chief minister (CM), EK Nayanar, had once said that rape in the US was as frequent as drinking a cup of tea. The statement created uproar, but it was no surprise that many Malayalis echoed his sentiment. For America was "uncultured", their women wore short clothes, stepped out at night, and hence, could not complain about being sexually assaulted. The idea of culture here stemmed from what we, as a society, understood — that ours is the only one that can define the word, and everyone outside is bereft of it.

But what exactly is this culture we are so eager to defend and define? Why is it almost always used to police women?

Days after a 23-year-old MBBS student was gang-raped in Durgapur, West Bengal

CM Mamata Banerjee said the survivor should not have been out at night — a familiar refrain that often follows incidents of sexual violence. To give Banerjee the benefit of the doubt, perhaps her stance presented itself from a moment of concern, which defaulted to blaming the student for being out at night. Women are no strangers to this kind of "concern", but how do we perceive it when a tall leader, who built her political legacy on being a ferocious woman, voices them? The track records of many Indian politicians, among them former CMs Mulayam Singh Yadav and Om Prakash Chautala, have been no better. Yadav infamously dismissed rape by saying "boys will be boys", while Chautala sug-

gested lowering the legal age of marriage as a way to curb sexual violence.

Politicians are often compelled to speak about violence against women. They don't mean to but have to. Their political stature also rests on how they perceive the "second gender". At some point, the wheel needs to break, and they need to learn how to speak to young voters — a demographic that makes up 22.78% of India's electorate, according to the Election Commission of India's Atlas, based on data from the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. This age group, defined as those between 18 and 29 years, accounts for 223.19 million electors. This is not to assume that all young voters are progressive, but one can demand that politicians ought to be while talking to them.

An editorial in this newspaper ('Politicians must take lessons in sensitivity', October 15) rightly pointed out that politicians reflect the social moods and customs that govern us. Few truths about politics ring truer. Our leaders seem to believe that women can be handed some money and a gas connection, and they



Anuradha Vellat

can be expected to stay contented. Conversations about crimes against women, or promises regarding their safety when they do step out at night, hardly feature in political campaigns.

The culture of patriarchy sees no gender. It tells men and women that equality is a myth and that we abide by it. We are offered lessons in patriarchy without bias. The culture we are so passionate about defining wants girls to be obedient, young women to be back home early, and mothers to raise their sons to value wives who are homemakers.

Patriarchal cultural norms make even a modest night stroll feel costly. Walking alone at night can be particularly peaceful. When the traffic eases, the breeze cools, and one can calmly feel the ground beneath the feet. For most women in India, this is a luxury, so we limit ourselves to cramped balconies and boxed hallways. So, we aspire for strolls at ungodly hours with the same passion for pay parity. Surely, our leaders, representatives of the people, can lend us a hand?

The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

SAVING THE ELEPHANT

The decline in India's elephant numbers — contested by some based on methodological differences between two separate counts — is certainly a concern for the country, against a backdrop of visible conservation successes with the tiger and the rhinoceros. This makes ecologist Raman Sukumar's *Elephant Days and Nights: Ten Years with the Asian Elephant* an essential read.

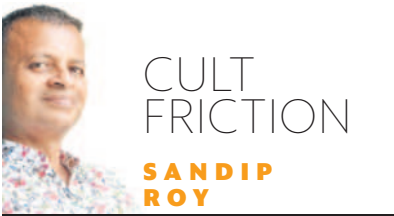
The book covers many aspects of elephant conservation, from terrain, diet, seasonal foraging behaviour, reproduction to social and physical development of calves and how elephant herds get built over time, function and sustain. Sukumar makes it clear that elephant survival and thriving would demand from humans a revision of forest-related priorities. The book also makes very interesting suggestions on conservation, including use of sounds of specific frequencies and pheromones to prevent elephants from straying into human habitations. For the lay reader, a serious but easy to understand guide to elephant conservation.



Elephant Days and Nights
Raman Sukumar
Year: 1996

In the dark about light pollution

Beset as we are with many kinds of pollution, we barely pay attention to light pollution and ignore the risks it poses



CULT FRICTION
SANDIP ROY

When my father died over two decades ago, my mother told my little niece that her Dad-ubhai or grandfather had become a star. They stood on our balcony in Kolkata, looking up at the night sky and trying to find the “Dadubhai star”.

In childish euphemism, death was becoming a star.

I remember looking up at the sky the night my mother died this year. There was no need for childish euphemisms anymore. And it was just as well. The bright lights of the big city had long swallowed up the darkness. The night sky seemed emptied of stars. Only a handful were visible. Perhaps they were not even stars, just satellites.

Beset as we are with many kinds of pollution, we hardly pay any attention to light pollution. It does not smell. It does not choke our lungs or our water bodies. It does not deafen us. It hides in plain sight. Even I didn’t think too much of it until recently.

At the end of August I went on a night tour of illuminated buildings in Kolkata. The Kolkata Illumination Project by a citizens group called Kolkata Restorers has been lighting up old heritage buildings for almost two years—massive colonial buildings that house insurance companies and banks, an old market, synagogues and churches, a Radha Jiu temple and more. By day the buildings look imposing enough but the low wattage warm yellow LED lights make them come alive at night. They looked mysterious and beautiful.

A few weeks later, in the run-up to Durga Puja, I saw giant billboards,

which later proved to be LED screens, that popped up in a park near my house. I felt I was surrounded by a battery of television screens flashing advertisements for leggings, *kurtis* and cooking oil, the shocking pinks, reds, yellows and neons screaming for attention. They looked garish and hideous.

The World Atlas of Night Sky Brightness, generated on the basis of thousands of satellite photos, shows the planet lit up like a Christmas tree. Admittedly it looks pretty. Come Diwali, we all get WhatsApp forwards with images showing the map of India lit up for Diwali purportedly seen from a satellite. They are AI-generated but will be nevertheless forwarded from group to group with Happy Diwali messages. The image, even if fake, glows with 1,000-watt pride.

The electric light bulb is indeed one of our greatest inventions. Having grown up with chronic power cuts, I have no nostalgia for the “pleasures” of trying to read by the light of hissing Petromax lamps and candles. But there is such a thing as too much light at a time when our body clock tells us it should be dark.

Just as air pollution and water pollution are linked to a slew of diseases, light pollution can wreak havoc inside us. A report in *IndiaSpend* cites numerous studies showing the connections between over-exposure to artificial light and health issues. Light pollution can cause stress and sleep disruption, reducing the production of melatonin, the hormone produced at night.

A 2021 study in *Sleep and Vigilance* journal looked at the importance of melatonin in the development and growth of cancers and immune activity. An Israeli study found higher breast cancer rates in areas with high night-time light. A Spanish study showed greater prostate cancer risks in people exposed to higher artificial light levels at night. Higher outdoor night-time light has been found to be a bigger risk factor for Alzheimer’s than alcohol



There's too much light at a time when our body clock tells us it should be dark. ISTOCKPHOTO

abuse or obesity, according to the journal *Frontiers of Neuroscience*.

But when the *Journal of Urban Management* surveyed Indians aged 16-65 in 2022, it found 57% had not even heard of the term “light pollution”. Others thought it was something to do with UV and other harmful rays in sunlight. Many thought it was “pollution which is not very harmful.”

The health connections, direct or indirect, are little talked about. Instead urban development wants more lights, brighter lights, floodlights to build a city that never sleeps. In the name of public safety, the street outside my home now suddenly has glaring white light all night long. The same city authorities that com-

plain about the visual pollution of billboards, green-lights their transformation into blinding LCD screens. Brighter the better is the lighting mantra.

The most revolutionary thing about the Kolkata Illumination Project is its muted yellow lighting. Mudar Patherya, the moving force behind Kolkata Restorers, tells me many people, impressed by the lit up buildings, wanted to do the same but they wanted bright DMX or Digital Multiplex Lighting with changing colours. And he would have to talk them down from it, telling them it would not look good on the building. While no light is good for night birds and other nocturnal creatures, he also consulted with experts to

ensure the disruption was minimal.

Suyash Narsaria, lighting designer and founder of Optiluxx Electrical, which lit up many of the buildings Kolkata Restorers worked on, says it was a learning curve for him too. The Eastern Railway building spread out over a block needed about 450 lights and he says it took a lot of time to figure out the optimal light intensity. They reduced the wattage to make it more efficient, layered the lights so they picked out the details they wanted to highlight in the building. The result is the buildings are illuminated but never dazzling. And that makes a huge difference.

It’s a hard lesson to remember in a world where the mantra for success has

become bigger and brighter. Things of quieter beauty get short shrift. We want to be remembered for building the biggest statue, the tallest building, the largest dam. A few years ago a Kolkata Durga Puja *pandal* that copied the Burj Khalifa ran into trouble with air traffic control because of its height and lights. And nothing seems to say tax rupees at work better than a city blazing with light all night long. Bright lights, big city is proof of India Shining emerging out of V. S. Naipaul’s *Area of Darkness*.

Yet darkness too is an old friend. This month I spent a few days in a nature reserve in Thailand. One night we were on a floating raft house in a huge lake in southern Thailand surrounded by limestone karsts. The cabins were modest and powered by solar energy. One could not even charge a phone inside the room. It didn’t matter because once we reached we realised there was zero connectivity anyway. The sunset was a stupendous blaze of orange and gold but as darkness fell, I wondered what we would do all night without phones and internet, just staring into the inky darkness. But as I sat on the deck overlooking the expanse of the lake, I realised I was finally in a place where, as Ray Bradbury wrote in *I Sing the Body Electric*, the lights could not diminish the universe. If I looked up, the sky was studded with stars.

I immediately wanted to identify the constellations and realised to my chagrin that my stargazer apps would not work without connectivity. So we sat there with beers, listening to the waves and looking at the sky above us, making up stories about twinkling stars I could not name or map, stars manifold and bright, looking down on us.

Suddenly, it seemed like those stories we made up of parents becoming stars were not so foolish and childish after all.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.
Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

Can we ever give ourselves the gift of time?

We’ve got apps, gadgets, hacks and services to get work done faster and better. Yet we remain busier than ever

Pooja Singh
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The Instagram algorithm had decided that I was looking for a lifestyle of optimisation. Reels on the advantages of starting your workday at 3am or 1pm, depending on the content creators’ views, were clamouring for my attention.

Some ads suggested tools to maximise sleeping hours so I could fight procrastination and “Get Sh*t Done” before deadline. In between were memes of how I January 2025 felt like it was just this Monday, and why only January and Monday come so early. Of all the content thrown at me this past week, a productivity guru’s reel to help with “rawdoggging” caught my attention. Earlier slang for unprotected sexual intercourse, “rawdoggging” is now Internet-speak for doing nothing for a few hours to hone focus, increase creativity and improve one’s quality of life.

We’re all chasing time, trying to squeeze the most out of every second, turning to all sorts of hacks and tips, looking for ways to find “free time”. Yet, free quality time seems perpetually out of reach.

For context, the time spent by Indians on “self-care activities”, which includes sleeping and personal hygiene, has declined steadily since 2019, while time spent on socialising and employment has gone up, according to the 2024 Time Use Survey data published by the Union statistics ministry. A rural-urban comparison shows that urban Indians spend more time on employment compared to their rural counterparts, who have more time



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM ISTOCKPHOTO

for self-care, though rural Indians spend more time on unpaid work (such as domestic chores, which usually fall to women) and “producing goods for their own use”.

“We are living in a world where hustle culture is on steroids,” says Amit Nandkeolyar, an associate professor of organisational behaviour at Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad.

Our relationship with “free time”—to be spent leisurely doing activities that bring us joy or with loved ones without worrying about work or chores—remains ambiguous.

“We are being made to feel that time is scarce and we need to ensure that every second offers some kind of commodity-like return. That’s why you have services today that say ‘give a gift of time’, which is interesting because time is in your hands and you can do with it whatever you want. The problem is that we are made to believe that leisure time is time wasted,” explains Nandkeolyar.

ANOTHER COMMODITY

One reason our relationship with time has become so transactional is to do with the way it has been commodified. E-commerce platforms promise to deliver everything—from groceries to smartphones

and Diwali gift hampers—to your doorstep in 10 minutes or less. On a quick commerce app, you can get a mish-mash of items, including a *suastik* design clay set, two avocados, snowflake-shaped string light, and a one-gram 24k gold coin—all in eight minutes.

These are the kind of services designed for the people we’ve become, always trying to “hack” time and always glued to screens—Indians spent five hours daily last year on mobile screens, nearly 70% of it devoted to social media and gaming, going by a report by consultancy firm EY, published earlier this year. This figure excludes the hours they already spend online on their laptops for work. In many ways, people have become more available to others but less available to themselves.

“Many people thought they would continue to live the slow life in the post-covid world,” says Rahul Advani, cultural anthropologist and insights and strategy manager at Mumbai-based strategy consultancy Plum Insights. “Instead, we went into overdrive, maximising every moment. The definition of time has changed—earlier, we used to experience time because we didn’t have control over it. Now, time has become all about filling it up. The increasing desire to be ‘bored’ is actually a response to the fact that time,



The definition of time has changed—earlier, people used to ‘experience’ time, and now, time has become all about filling it up.

something so fluid, has become structured or constricted.” He’s referring to the trend of people stepping away from constant stimulation, especially social media, and allowing themselves to be bored or do nothing for a certain number of hours to promote creative thinking.

This paradox of doing more and doing it faster and smarter in order to “have free time” has led to other services for the ever-busy. Smart rings, organisers and other devices promise to help make time for you. Even leisure is about doing things quickly: consider custom music playlists that apps serve based on your mood and tastes. You don’t have to scroll through different genres to discover something you like. It’s all served on a platter within minutes, helping you save time and energy.

Concierge services across the country offer “lifestyle managers” for hire, who help the wealthy with chores that range from the mundane (buy gift for *beta*’s birthday; unpack suitcases) to the unusual (deliver masalas to hotel room in Uppsala with instructions for the chef). Some of

Multi-tasking has its benefits but the blurring of work and leisure has made people forget that not every hour needs to be milked for all its worth

these tasks—planning gifts or special celebrations—would once have been personalised and a way to express one’s feelings.

One Gurugram-based lifestyle management company has a campaign to suggest that time is the biggest gift, and promises to finish your tasks to free up time for loved ones during the festive season. Packages run from ₹2,000-40,000—all to give you the gift of time. By delivering groceries in minutes, picking gifts for family members or clearing your calendar, these apps and services are helping you save time and use it for moments that really matter. Saving time costs money today.

But, can anyone or anything really buy time? “You can save time,” Nandkeolyar says. “Now whether you spend that saved free time scrolling Instagram while playing with your kid, or check mails when you wake up in the middle of the night, it depends on you. Time management is not a big task if you follow some strict rules. Attention management is, because even during free time we are trying to multitask, taking away the joy from leisure.”

Multi-tasking has its benefits but this blurring of work and leisure has made people forget that not every hour needs to be milked for all its worth.

NEVER ENOUGH

The introduction and evolution of productivity tools indicates that there’s no clear answer to one of the biggest mysteries: Why is time never enough, despite the tech and services available to help us complete our tasks faster?

Nandkeolyar offers an explanation: “Time is porous with no sharp edges.

What people forget is that time depends on how society views it; it’s a cultural construct. Why do we return home from the office in the evening? Why is Chhath Puja performed at a certain time in the day? It’s all our construct.”

Time’s use is up to us, but it is measured. “The industrial era introduced ‘clock time’ to help decide how much work one can perform in a certain number of hours. That’s from the economics perspective. The sociological view is what we do with the time we have,” Nandkeolyar continues.

But there is no doubt that “time-saving” aids may have ended up speeding up our expectations of how much time a task should take, and making us impatient. Consider the speed with which we complain if something isn’t delivered on time or our impatience if an app takes too long to load. “Our patience levels have gone down considerably. The only time I see people now wait (for anything) is when they queue up outside a match place that has gone viral or when a new iPhone or some limited-edition sneakers reach the store,” says Advani.

Offering his take on why more people complain of less time in a culture obsessed with personal productivity, Advani says, “Because we are able to do so many things in one day, we end up trying to do more things than we can handle.”

If there’s one answer to carving out free time with no strings attached, it is intention. The groceries will get delivered, the lifestyle manager will decorate the house for Diwali. But it’s up to you to decide how many times you check your notifications on your phone, watch or ring.



Claim, counterclaim
India must speak out on world issues
with moral clarity, not ambiguity

President Donald Trump appears to have set the cat among the pigeons yet again so far as recent Indian foreign policy actions are concerned, this time with regard to an alleged assurance by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that India would halt its oil imports from Russia. Speaking at the White House, Mr. Trump said that Mr. Modi had assured him on Wednesday that India “will not be buying oil from Russia... Now we’ve got to get China to do the same thing”. This utterance follows in the wake of a summer of heightened temperatures in the bilateral space, after multiple claims by Mr. Trump that he played a role in bringing Operation Sindoor to an abrupt halt, with a full and immediate ceasefire agreed only after “a long night of talks mediated by the United States”. India was quick to challenge the White House’s narrative, with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson saying that he was unaware of a conversation between the leaders on the previous day, even if discussions were “ongoing” about deepening India’s energy cooperation with the U.S. Nevertheless, he did not unequivocally confirm or deny Mr. Trump’s assertion that India would be halting its purchases of Russian oil. A similar ‘soft denial’ approach seemed to be the chosen tack in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor.

The quandary faced by Indian foreign policy strategists is that India is in a sensitive phase of bilateral engagement with the U.S., specifically regarding its hopes for bilateral trade deal in the nearer term and shared regional goals in the context of the rise of China, over the longer arc of the evolving balance of power in Asia. Additionally, Mr. Trump’s sheer chimerical nature, which is either the trait of an impulsive but popular leader on American soil, or the standard “art of the deal” playbook trait of a President seeking to bring global counterparts to the negotiating table, appears to be routinely frustrating South Block mandarins seeking predictability in their engagements with U.S. interlocutors. India may have found an appropriate response in avoiding knee-jerk public reactions to the sometimes outlandish claims of Mr. Trump. However, the bigger challenge for New Delhi is to clarify its global posture on issues such as the purchase of Russian oil in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine. It would do well to remember that it is not so much the strident voices of the North Atlantic that matter as much as India’s hopes to be a true global power one day, and speak with the moral clarity that accompanies such a title.

Blatant aggression
Trump administration’s intervention in
Venezuela is built on false pretexts

In a brazen admission, U.S. President Donald Trump has confirmed authorising covert CIA operations in Venezuela targeting the government of Nicolás Maduro. This escalation follows weeks of deadly strikes on boats in Caribbean waters, threatening to destabilise the region by violating fundamental principles of international law. The prospective actions fall under a grim historical pattern of actions by the CIA – the 1954 coup in Guatemala, the Bay of Pigs disaster in Cuba, the orchestration of the 1973 coup in Chile that resulted in President Salvador Allende’s death and the Contra wars in Nicaragua in the 1980s. Such interventions have led to catastrophic consequences such as decades of instability, democratic backsliding and authoritarian rule, leaving scars across Latin America. Mr. Maduro’s disputed election victory in 2024 has compounded his regime’s economic mismanagement which, combined with sanctions, has devastated Venezuela’s economy. In recent years, millions of Venezuelans have been forced to flee because of the crisis, with many undertaking perilous journeys through Colombia, the dreaded Darién Gap and Mexico to reach the U.S. The refugee influx has provided the Trump administration with ammunition to weaponise the immigration issue and to issue claims about Venezuelan drug trafficking to up the ante against the Chavistas, as the followers of former President Hugo Chávez are called. Mr Trump has repeatedly, without proof, characterised Mr. Maduro as a “narcoterrorist”, alleging that the country operates as a drug corridor, with criminal trafficking organisations under his control. This has been contradicted by the U.S. intelligence agencies, much to Mr. Trump’s disapproval, leading to consequences such as the firing of a National Intelligence Council director who refused to alter his assessment of the drug issue and the Maduro regime.

It is not difficult to ascertain the true motive of the Trump administration – to control Venezuela’s massive petroleum reserves and substantial natural gas deposits. The fact that Caracas has maintained strong trading relations with Russia and China, and close ties with the U.S.’s bête noire, Cuba, also presents a geopolitical challenge to American hegemony in the region – this has also explained the hostility by preceding American administrations but none was as brazen as Mr Trump is. This is not to absolve the Maduro regime. Its authoritarian trajectory and manipulation of electoral processes deserve international censure. But acknowledging these failures does not justify illegal U.S. intervention. The international community must resist the Trump administration’s recourse to illegal and Cold War-era regime change policies and instead pursue diplomatic solutions that respect Venezuelan sovereignty while supporting its genuine democratic forces. Venezuela must determine its future without external intrusion.

The year 2025 marks the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties between China and India. Since April 1, 1950, exchanges between the two great countries have come a long way, in which heads of state (government) diplomacy plays a key role in enhancing mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual complementarity. Highlighting more recent achievements are the interactions and friendship between the two leaders – China’s President Xi Jinping and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi. From 2014 to 2024, Mr. Xi and Mr. Modi have met 18 times. When the year 2014 was declared as the Year of China-India Friendly Exchanges, Mr. Xi paid a state visit to India in September and made a trip to Ahmedabad, the home town of Mr. Modi. China and India issued a Joint Statement on Building an Even Closer Partnership for Development. In May 2015, Mr. Modi made his first visit to China, and Mr. Xi received him in Xi’an, Mr. Xi’s home town.

From 2016 to 2019, the two leaders met multiple times each year on the occasions of the BRICS summit, the G-20 summit, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. Affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the next few years saw the two leaders exchange greetings and messages through letters and in telephone conversations. With the resumption of face-to-face meetings, Mr. Xi held talks with Mr. Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August 2023. And in October 2024, the two leaders held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS summit in Kazan, reaching important understandings on improving and growing China-India relations.

A milestone for the United Nations

This year also marks the 80th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, following the victory of the world anti-fascist war. Eighty years ago, upon deep reflection on the bitter lessons of the First and Second World Wars, the international community established the UN, commencing a brand new practice in global governance. In the past 80 years, the UN-based visions and practice of global governance have made historic contributions to maintaining world peace and development. However, the first few decades of the 21st century saw the world increasingly confronted with volatility, turbulence, uncertainty and unpredictability.

Faced with harmful “isms” such as unilateralism, protectionism, isolationism, separatism, terrorism, extremism and hegemonism, humanity needs to dwell on a major subject of our times, i.e., in order not to slip into a rule of jungle law, the kind of global governance system that needs to be built and how to reform and improve our global governance. Therefore, at such an important juncture, the 25th SCO Summit in Tianjin and the 19th in-person Xi-Modi meeting during the summit have been highly anticipated and



Qin Jie

is the Consul General of the People’s Republic of China, in Mumbai

China-India cooperation can increase the strength of multilateralism in international affairs

expected by not only the more than 2.8 billion people in China and India but also the rest of the world, to shed some light on subjects such as bilateral relations, global governance and the future of humanity.

Partners, not rivals

Indeed, as pointed out by Sudheendra Kulkarni, political adviser and scholar, the 2025 Tianjin SCO Summit could be one of the most successful in the organisation’s history. This could be because of the changing world order (with the West rapidly losing its dominance in global affairs in the irreversible trend of multipolarity and multilateralism), and, more significantly, due to the growing importance of Asia and Eurasia. Mr. Xi and Mr. Modi are two leaders who have shown vision and wisdom in their friendly interactions.

Mr. Xi has emphasised that China and India shoulder the crucial responsibility of improving the well-being of the two peoples, promoting solidarity and rejuvenation of developing countries, and advancing the progress of human society. China and India should be good neighbours and partners who help each other succeed. He made four points of suggestion – China and India should strengthen strategic communication and deepen mutual trust; expand exchanges and cooperation to achieve mutual benefit and win-win; accommodate each other’s concerns and get along in peace and harmony, and strengthen multilateral coordination to safeguard our shared interests. Mr. Modi echoed Mr. Xi in this by saying that the India-China relationship is back on a positive trajectory, that peace and stability in the border regions have been maintained, and that direct flights were to resume.

Such progress benefits not only the peoples of India and China but also the whole world. India and China are partners, not rivals. Their consensus far outweighs their disagreement. India-China cooperation will make the 21st century a genuine Asian century, and the two sides joining hands will increase the strength of multilateralism in international affairs.

The highlight of the Tianjin SCO summit was the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) raised by Mr. Xi, based on five basic principles. First, stay committed to sovereign equality. All countries, regardless of size, strength or wealth, shall have their sovereignty and dignity respected, their domestic affairs free from external interference, the right to independently choose their social system and development path, and the right to participate in, make decisions in and benefit from the global governance process as equals. Greater democracy should be promoted in international relations to make the global governance system better reflect the interests and the aspirations of the majority of countries, especially the developing countries.

Second, stay committed to international rule of law. The purposes and principles of the UN

Charter are universally recognised basic norms of international relations and must be upheld unwaveringly. International law and rules must be applied, equally and uniformly, without any double standards or imposition. Major countries must make the lead in advocating and defending international rule of law.

Third, stay committed to multilateralism. Global affairs should be decided by all, the governance system built by all, and the fruits of governance shared by all. The UN is the core platform for practising multilateralism and advancing global governance, whose role must be enhanced, not weakened.

Fourth, stay committed to the people-centered approach. The people of all nations are the fundamental actors in global governance, and their well being its ultimate benefit. It must seek improvement through reforms in order to inspire a greater sense of fulfilment through accelerated common development, a greater sense of safety through more effective response to humanity’s common challenges, and a greater sense of well being through advancing the common interests of different countries and communities.

Fifth, stay committed to real results. Effective global governance is essentially one that resolves real problems. It must address both the root causes and symptoms to find sustainable solutions. Developed countries should earnestly take on their responsibilities and provide more resources and public goods, while developing countries should pull together for strength and do their best for the world.

The task ahead

The GGI is another major initiative and public good offered by China. With the aim of addressing the deficit of global governance, the GGI stems from the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and responds to the shared aspiration of most countries. To reform and improve global governance does not mean overturning the existing international order or to create another framework outside the current international system. Rather, the goal is to make the existing international system and institutions better in taking action, working effectively, adapting to changes, responding promptly and effectively to various global challenges, and serving the interests of all countries.

As key members of the SCO and BRICS, China and India should step up to shoulder their responsibility in improving global governance, upholding multilateralism, strengthening communication and coordination on major international and regional issues, and in defending international fairness and justice. They should follow the strategic guidance of their two leaders, bearing in mind the importance of the larger picture and long-term view, taking on the responsibility of improving the well-being of their peoples, and in promoting the solidarity and the rejuvenation of developing countries.

The next steps for Afghanistan after the New Delhi visit

The visit of Afghanistan’s Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and its attendant excitement in mainstream and social media are now over. But this is only the beginning. What must follow is a step-by-step engagement, with the single objective of stabilising a devastated country, and, in the process, ensuring that New Delhi projects its credentials as a humanitarian force to reckon with. In these days of rampant war and war mongering, that counts. In addition, there are issues of strong security interests, that in fact, need not be a zero sum game with Pakistan. In fact, it might just deliver a certain stability to Pakistan as well, provided that it is ready to accept it.

Terror and the realities on the ground

The joint statement between the two sides, which angered Islamabad, only reiterated the Taliban’s immediate condemnation of the Pahalgam attack (April 2025), and, similarly, reiterated promises by Kabul to never allow its territory to be used against India. That promise has been made often to the international community. This has been acknowledged by the United Nations Security Council Sanctions Monitoring Committee Report which commends the Taliban’s actions against the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), even while it questions Kabul’s actual capability in countering it – given the reclusive Mullah Haibatullah’s penchant for running a parallel regime from Kandahar.

The report also notes that while the leader of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, received funds from the Taliban, Kabul was hesitant to act against it, out of fears of allying itself with the IS-K.

In short, Pakistan’s demands that it act against the TTP are not naive but deliberate propaganda. Rawalpindi knows its Afghanistan. While the Taliban are no saints, they are also not the crafty



Tara Kartha

is a former Director, National Security Council Secretariat

India must ensure a step-by-step engagement with Afghanistan, also ensuring that it projects its credentials as a humanitarian force to reckon with

terrorist sponsors Rawalpindi would have everyone believe. However, getting rid of that narrative requires actions on the ground, which is where India could come in. One line of activity is to ensure that the Taliban’s mostly successful drug eradication programme is knit into crop substitution programmes and that there is an end-to-end process which ensures farmers security and exports. This is urgent as reliable reports indicate an uptick in cultivation, even as meth labs sprout across the country. Given the huge drug seizures along India’s borders, a comprehensive training programme by the Narcotics Control Bureau would be highly desirable. The brute force being used now to counter narcotics actions is hardly helpful to the Taliban.

For Kabul to ‘normalise’, it needs the absolute basics of any city. A recent report notes that Kabul may be the first city in the world to completely run dry by 2030. Years of war have taken their toll on projects. India’s reiteration of an earlier offer to build the Shahtoot dam on the Kabul river will cause alarm in Pakistan, given a reported drop of 16% in flows. The Kabul river is a part of the Indus river system, and logically should be made part of a new treaty so that all differences are ironed out. In other words, there should be a deal that benefits all, which Islamabad will find difficult to refuse. A water-starved country is hardly the most desirable neighbour.

Education for all

The issue of women’s education is paramount. The few Taliban leaders who did support it such as Abdul Baqi Haqqani who were in favour of women’s education were quickly replaced by hardliners such as Mawlawi Habibullah Agha.

Changing this cruel practice is vital in not just reframing the Taliban but also India’s outreach. As of now, India has announced 1,000

e-scholarships for students through the Indian Council of Cultural Relations which is nowhere enough. The online option needs to be extended to all major colleges, giving them a special dispensation in terms of foreign exchange regulations.

This may also be focused on areas where India is planning to make investments. For instance, in the joint statement, mining is a key area of interest. Therefore, skills need to be developed in the country, so that a minimal Indian presence is necessary, and which creates employment in the country.

The goal of a stable country

Finally, though it is standard practice now to talk of a ‘whole of government’ approach, this rarely happens in practice. While the National Security Council Secretariat is meant to do this, it needs to be strengthened so that all arms of the government, including finance, water and power, are all working towards a specific objective – to ensure that Afghanistan stays friendly and stable.

This objective needs to remain constant across governments so that the fundamental principle of ‘selection and maintenance of aim’ is achieved with the objective of ensuring that India’s relevance remains permanent and is not part of shifting policies. But there is a key problem. The Pakistan army has no stake at all in ensuring the stabilisation of Afghanistan given its continuing desire to dominate the Taliban. Ordinary Pakistanis do, and most of them are Pashtuns with business and family ties across the border.

Potential revenues from Afghanistan trade and transit is estimated at \$10 billion. None of this will matter as long as Pakistan remains a security state. If a country that is repeatedly labelled as the cradle of terrorism needs to be changed, the so-called international community has to work on systemic change in Pakistan. Democracy is not just a nice aspiration. It works, almost every time.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Celebrations and crackers

The bursting of crackers, especially during festivals such as Deepavali, only doubles the resultant harmful effects in terms of air pollution and mounting garbage. I happened to witness a fireworks celebration in Switzerland during their national day. Scheduled for late in the

evening, on the banks of the Rhine, it was well organised. Organising such shows especially during festivals such as Deepavali could help slowly delink individuals from their craze to burst firecrackers. Dr. V. Purushothaman, Chennai

The recent order, permitting

the use of firecrackers, appears to be more like a face-saving move by the judiciary, aware that a complete ban would have been widely defied. It must be remembered that Deepavali was celebrated with diyas and lights – not with deafening crackers that pollute the air. Bursting crackers is cruelty disguised

as festivity, tormenting animals, the elderly and the sick. People must rise above newer ‘interpretations’ of traditions and embrace a green Deepavali. R.S. Narula, Patiala, Punjab

Pause and think

Google’s \$15 billion investment in an India AI

hub has stirred national pride – and rightly so. Yet, we must ask whether we are truly preparing minds to match machines, or merely training technicians for tomorrow’s code. Our education system still produces degree holders, not critical thinkers capable of ethical judgment. AI without moral intelligence

risks deepening inequality and widening social divides. Innovation without introspection may create a smarter India, but not necessarily a wiser one. Hasnain Rabbani, Mumbai

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

GROUND ZERO



Police personnel at the residence of Haryana IPS officer Y. Puran Kumar, who allegedly died by suicide, in Chandigarh. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

The murky deaths in the Haryana police

On October 7, an IPS officer from Haryana, Y. Puran Kumar, was found dead in Chandigarh. In a note supposedly written by him, Puran alleged caste-based discrimination by fellow officers. His death came a day after his personal security officer, Sushil Kumar, was booked in an extortion case. Days later, an Assistant Sub Inspector, Sandeep Lather, involved in Sushil's arrest was also found dead. **Vikas Vasudeva** and **Ashok Kumar** report on the case

Trigger warning: The following article has references to suicide. Please avoid reading if you feel distressed by the subject.

Eight days had passed since Y. Puran Kumar, an officer of the Indian Police Service (IPS) from Haryana had allegedly died by suicide. But in house 132 in Sector 24 in Chandigarh, his wife, Amneet P. Kumar, an Indian Administrative Service officer (IAS), said she had not yet accepted the loss of her husband. Amneet sat in stoic silence, greeting political leaders, colleagues, and even strangers who had come to show solidarity.

Amneet, who serves as Commissioner and Secretary in the Haryana government, had refused to allow the postmortem of her husband until two of the key accused in the case – Haryana Director General of Police (DGP) Shatrueet Kapur and Rohtak Superintendent of Police (SP) Narendra Bijarniya – were arrested. Their names featured among the dozens of names of officials in the note that Kumar allegedly wrote before he died.

On the ninth day after Puran's death, which occurred on October 7, Amneet gave her consent to the postmortem. She said in a statement to the press that the Chandigarh Police had assured her that they would “conduct a fair, transparent and impartial investigation” and that the Haryana government had committed to “taking appropriate action against any erring officials in due course of law.” Puran's two daughters performed the last rites. The officer's service uniform and cap rested briefly on his remains. A police contingent presented a guard of honour.

Despite the government's promises, Amit Rattan, Puran's brother-in-law and an MLA of the Aam Aadmi Party from the Punjab Bathinda (Rural) constituency, believes that the probe is being done “just for the sake of it.”

“The person who died was not just any ordinary person; he was a police officer who was working for the people of the country,” he said. “The message that has gone to our community, especially the youth, is that it doesn't matter how capable or intelligent you may be if you belong to a Scheduled Caste (SC) community; even if you are a senior officer in the administration, you could be suppressed. They will be scared.”

Puran was a strong man, Rattan added. “He spent 25 years in service as a decorated and respected officer. So, what breaks a man like him?”

A death and its aftermath

According to the police, Puran, 52, a 2001-batch officer serving as Inspector General of Police (IGP) in Sunaria, in Rohtak district of Haryana, was found dead at his private house in Chandigarh. When the tragedy occurred, Amneet was in Japan, as part of a delegation led by Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini.

The next day, Amneet, who had rushed home, wrote to the Chandigarh Police demanding that a First Information Report (FIR) be registered and that Kapur and Bijarniya be named in it.

In her complaint, she wrote that while official narratives suggested death by suicide, she had



Puran spent 25 years in service as a decorated and respected officer. So, what breaks a man like him?

AMIT RATTAN
Puran's brother-in-law and MLA

seen how senior officials had repeatedly humiliated, harassed, and persecuted her husband.

“The eight-page suicide note, a document of a broken spirit, lays bare these truths and the names of numerous officers whose relentless actions pushed him to the edge,” she wrote. “This is not a case of suicide but a direct result of the persecution of my husband, an officer from the Scheduled Caste community, by powerful and high-ranking officers, who used their positions to mentally torture him...” She stated that her husband had tried to reach out to Kapur and Bijarniya and claimed that Kapur had “hushed up the conversation” and Bijarniya “intentionally did not answer” his call.

Amneet also said that before Puran's death, a false FIR had been registered against a staff member of her husband, Sushil, “under a well-planned conspiracy”, to implicate him.

The next day, the police registered an FIR. However, Amneet said there were “irregularities” in the FIR and that only “diluted” sections of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, had been added. Consequently, the police added more stringent sections of the Act to the FIR. On October 10, the Chandigarh Police formed a Special Investigation Team to probe the case.

In the note allegedly written by Puran, accessed by *The Hindu*, there are not only names of officers, but also accounts of the alleged harassment. The note also stated that the representations and complaints Puran allegedly made against these officers were ignored.

The note read, “Continued blatant caste-based discrimination, targeted mental harassment, public humiliation, and atrocities by senior officers in Haryana since August 2020 [have now become] unbearable... All that I expected and requested vide various representations and complaints was equity of treatment as an IPS officer of the Haryana cadre with regard to certain issues. Instead of addressing the same, all my representations and complaints were ignored and are being used vindictively... against me...”



Relatives and locals mourn Sandeep Lather's death in Rohtak. Lather also allegedly died by suicide. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

As political parties and social groups mounted pressure on the government to deliver justice, the Haryana government removed Bijarniya from his posting on October 11. They did not give him a new posting. Three days later, they sent Kapur on leave. They gave Om Parkash Singh, a 1992-batch IPS officer, additional charge as DGP.

After the incident, a committee called ‘Justice for Y. Puran Kumar’ was formed by outfits including the Kabir Mahasabha and the Ambedkar Sanyukt Sangharsh Morcha, which work for the empowerment of marginalised sections of society. The committee held a mahapanchayat (meeting) in Chandigarh to build pressure on the government to act against the accused.

O.P. Chopra, a member of this committee, who serves as president of the Ambedkar Sanyukt Sangharsh Morcha, said that Puran's death highlights the injustices perpetuated against SCs. “His death is indicative of systemic failures and of societal discrimination against certain communities,” he said.

Allegations and counter-allegations

The drama that unfolded in Chandigarh following Puran's death has its roots in Rohtak, 60 kilometres north-west of Delhi. Puran, who served as IGP, Rohtak Range, for about six months, was transferred as IGP, Police Training Centre, Sunaria, about a week before the incident.

Puran allegedly killed himself a day after a FIR was registered in Rohtak against his personal security officer, Sushil, on charges of extortion. The FIR, lodged by Praveen Bansal, a liquor contractor, said that Sushil, claiming to be a close confidant of the IGP, had demanded ₹2.5 lakh as monthly support in return for police protection.

The FIR, registered by Bansal at Rohtak's Urban Estate police station, said, “He (Sushil) called me to meet with the IGP in June. He spoke to me in a threatening tone, saying if I wanted to operate a liquor business in Rohtak, I would have to make a monthly payment to the IGP. Y. Puran Kumar, or else he would file charges against me, along with other criminals and contractors, for liquor smuggling.”

The FIR added that the policeman had mounted pressure on the complainant to make the payment and had asked him to meet the IGP again and seal the deal. Bansal also submitted a pen drive containing the voice record and CCTV footage of his alleged meeting with Sushil on July 9. The same day, the police arrested Sushil.

Rohtak, which was the epicentre of violence and arson during the Jat reservation agitation in 2016, was briefly at the brink of a possible caste face-off after Puran's death. Khaps and SC organisations held protests in the city, showing their support for the rival parties in the case. On October 12, after Bijarniya, a Jat, was transferred, representatives of various khaps, gram panchayats, students, and trade organisations gathered at Rohtak's Mansarovar Park, demanding that the officer not be made a scapegoat and that an impartial probe be conducted into the matter.

This happened a day after a group of protesters, comprising the Dalit Adhikar Manch, the Janwadi Mahila Samiti, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), and the All-India Khet Mazdoor Union, took out a march in the city demanding a judicial inquiry into the circumstances that led to the death of Puran, which, they said, was an “institutional murder” and not a “suicide.”

Another police death

Two days later, Assistant Sub-Inspector Sandeep Lather, who was part of the team that had arrested Sushil in the extortion case, killed himself at his maternal uncle's village, Ladoth.

In a note and a six-minute video, Lather expressed his frustration over what he said was an attempt to give a caste colour to the suicide of a “corrupt” officer, Puran.

“A businessman raised his voice against crime, but he is being pressured. No one wants to bring out his truth into the open. Politics is being



This episode has exposed the corruption within the bureaucracy and its unholy nexus with criminals and politicians. It has shaken the faith of the common man in the system.

SATBIR SINGH
Vice-president, CITU Haryana

played; the cremation is not being conducted. A big truth is being prevented from being out in the public domain. But I will not let this happen. The truth must come out. He had done wrong. He will bear the fruits of his wrongdoings,” he said.

In the four-page note, Lather, a resident of Jind's Julana, alleged that Puran had been corrupt during his posting as IGP, Rohtak. Some IAS officers in Haryana were also corrupt, but a few honest officers had managed to curb it to an extent under the Bharatiya Janata Party regime, he claimed. He added in the video that the country would “wake up” when he “sacrifices himself on the path to truth”. He also described Bijarniya and Kapur as “honest”.

Rohtak SP Surinder Singh Bhoria described Lather as a “hard-working” and “honest” policeman, adding that he was like a “family member”.

Political concerns

On October 15, an FIR was registered in the case pertaining to Lather's death after Chief Minister Saini visited his family and assured them of justice. A source claimed that four people, including Amneet, Rattan, and Sushil, who is in jail in the extortion case, were named in the FIR and that the charge against them was abetment of suicide. Lather's wife, Santosh, is the complainant and said she does not have a copy of the FIR. The Rohtak Police spokesperson refused to comment on the contents of the FIR.

Meanwhile, the Chairman of the SC Department of the All-India Congress Committee, Rajendra Pal, posted a video on his social media account, raising questions over Lather's death. He said that it smacked of a deep-rooted conspiracy since there seemed to be no valid reason for the policeman to have taken such an extreme step.

“Lather accused Puran Kumar of indulging in corruption. He himself was involved in the investigation of the corruption case, and he could have exposed the IPS officer by bringing out the truth with facts. The IPS officer was already dead and posed no threat to him. In his video, Sandeep did not make any allegations against the IPS officer's wife and brother-in-law issuing any threats to him. So why did he [die by] suicide,” he asked.

On October 17, demonstrations were held on the issue. The national vice president of the Kisan Sabha, Inderjit Singh, said that the deaths of Puran and Lather were just the “tip of the iceberg”. He alleged that a network of organised crime is operating under the patronage of BJP leaders and bureaucrats, facilitating the accumulation of vast illicit wealth.

The vice-president of the CITU in Haryana, Satbir Singh, accused the BJP government of resorting to caste polarisation tactics to cover up its activities. He demanded a high-level probe into the alleged nexus of police officers, political leaders, and criminals in the State, as well as a probe into the wealth of the top bureaucrats and leaders named in the note allegedly written by Puran.

“This episode has exposed the massive corruption within the bureaucracy and its unholy nexus with criminals and politicians. It has shaken the faith of the common man in the system. Only a high-level probe can restore that faith,” Singh said.

Those in distress or having suicidal tendencies can seek help and counselling by calling Sanjivini, Society for Mental Health. Telephone: 011-40769002 (Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-7.30 p.m.)

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Push for power

Draft Electricity Bill makes yet another reform effort

The Draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, is aimed at cleaning up the finances of state-owned power distribution companies (discoms) — an effort which has been made umpteen times over the last three decades. Discoms’ finances (cumulative losses at ₹6.9 lakh crore) have been impacted by structural and political forces. The draft Bill comes in the wake of a recent Supreme Court order which says that power tariffs should reflect cost of supply.



A much-discussed feature of the Bill is to allow more than one distribution licensee to supply power in an area with their respective networks, with others too having access to them. The move to encourage more than one electricity provider in a region could work well in an affluent market such as in Mumbai and Delhi. Allowing each new distributor to set up its own network would work to the benefit of entities that have ‘end-to-end’ capabilities — from generation to distribution. However, there could be overcapacity and possibly unmonitored rise in transmission losses in the event of multiple networks. While more competition is welcome, network duplication can be avoided. There is the crucial question of whether poor consumers will benefit from competition and better services. A ‘universal service obligation’ model as in telecom can be considered.

The proposed Bill moots more powers to the State regulatory bodies to revise tariffs. While the apex court has observed that costs and actual tariffs must be aligned, the reality on the ground is complex, if not messy. State governments offer free or close to free power to farmers and consumers, paying little heed to the tariffs recommended by the regulator. While this hurts discoms, they have ironically also been hit by the reduction in cross-subsidy over the years by industry of the rural sectors. All put, the subsidy outgo has ballooned over the years as a result of misaligned pricing. Meanwhile, discoms’ procurement costs (which account for 70 per cent of total costs) are high as a result of legacy long-term purchase contracts at high rates and generational inefficiencies in the coal. There are transmission and operational costs to contend with.

On the revenue side, there is a rising trend of high end commercial users shifting to captive open access in renewables. This is the preferred option to buying from third parties and paying a surcharge for using the discoms’ network. If discoms lose large commercial consumers, which account for half its sales, they would have to rework their procurement and dispatch schedules. The proposed law relieves discoms of USO with respect to consumers of over 1 MW, which may allow them to plan better. Yet, discoms should charge for universal network services. Decentralised solar can pare their costs. Net-net, the outlook on reforming discom finances remains bleak, as electricity is subject to many pulls and pressures. Hopefully, an ‘electricity council’ along the lines of the GST Council would smoothen federal coordination in a subject that is on the Concurrent List.

OTHER VOICES.

The Moscow Times

Russia is repeating the mistakes of 2022
While the war in Ukraine remains virtually at a standstill, Russia has crossed a new line in Europe. Since the meeting in Anchorage between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Donald Trump, Russia has not only ramped up its attacks on Ukrainian cities, but has also, for the first time, attacked NATO countries in Europe — albeit without casualties. Judging by his words and actions, Putin drew three conclusions from that summit. First, Trump is not prepared to hand victory to him and end the war solely at Ukraine’s expense. Second, Trump is willing to develop relations with Russia even without an end to the war, although he will not fully restore them until the fighting ends. Third, Trump does not rate Ukraine very highly and will only intervene to save it as a last resort, and not at any cost. All of this gives Putin ample room for creativity. (MOSCOW, OCTOBER 15)

South China Morning Post

The price of renewed US-China trade tensions
On paper at least, the latest escalation of tensions between the United States and China can be compared with the outbreak of President Trump’s tariff war in April. Then US tariffs on Chinese goods reached 145 per cent before being scaled back. Now Trump is threatening a 100 per cent tariff on China on top of existing levies in another round of tit-for-tat measures, triggered by fresh US tech restrictions. But this time it is a pressure tactic aimed at China rather than the shock and awe of Trump’s global use of a blunt trade weapon. Many believe either it will not happen or will not last. However, it comes at a price that could weigh heavily on relations between the world’s two biggest economies — a loss of trust. Since April, the two sides have engaged in talks on a trade deal under a consultation mechanism. (HONG KONG, OCTOBER 15)



RAJASEKHAR VK

Corporate restructuring in India has historically been a tribunal-centric process. Sections 230-232 of the Companies Act, 2013 require National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) approval for mergers, demergers and compromises. While this framework is intended to bring judicial scrutiny and credibility to such transactions, it has also resulted in delays, high transaction costs, and unpredictable timeline for completion. In 2005, the JJ Irani Committee recommended contractual mergers without court intervention, which was incorporated in the Companies Act, 2013 as section 233, envisaging a fast-track route for certain companies. However, the Companies (Compromises, Arrangements and Amalgamations) Rules, 2016 confined its scope to small companies, start-ups and mergers between a holding company and its wholly-owned subsidiary.

THE 2025 AMENDMENT
On September 4, 2025, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs issued Notification G.S.R. 603(E), amending the CAA Rules to expand the scope of section 233. The fast-track route is now available to a wider class of unlisted companies and, for the first time, expressly covers demergers. Procedural requirements such as notices and filings have been simplified, with approvals routed through the regional director. Safeguards remain: only unlisted companies with borrowings up to ₹200 crore and no default are eligible, certified by an auditor in Form CAA.10A; a solvency declaration in Form CAA.10 and a registered valuer’s report are mandatory; and sectoral regulators and stock exchanges must be notified where applicable. The continued requirement of 90 per cent shareholder and creditor approval ensures that stakeholder rights are protected. These changes signal a policy shift towards handling routine restructuring through an administrative route rather than judicial. While these changes are welcome, they remain piecemeal. The underlying logic of section 233 — that uncontested restructurings need not clog judicial forums — applies equally to all M&As, not merely to small companies or a limited class of transactions.

For businesses, the amendment promises shorter timelines, lower costs, and greater certainty in execution. For investors, it adds predictability to the M&A landscape. For regulators, it places greater responsibility on regional

Free NCLT from basic M&A clearances



PROGRESSIVE OPTION. This will ease the burden on the NCLT, freeing judicial time for complex, contested disputes and insolvency cases

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

directors, who must now balance speed with scrutiny. For the NCLT, it holds the prospect of a lighter docket, freeing judicial time for complex, contested disputes and insolvency cases. The statistics are telling. As of March 31, 2025, the NCLT had 1,088 merger and amalgamation matters pending, in addition to 6,885 other company law cases. This pendency reflects a sustained inflow of cases, underscoring the need to free the Tribunal’s limited time for matters of greater judicial importance.

A BROADER REFORM IMPERATIVE
In the UK, schemes of arrangement under Part 26 of the Companies Act, 2006 involve two hearings — one to convene meetings and another to sanction the scheme. The court’s function is supervisory rather than substantive. Once statutory majorities are achieved and the scheme is fair and procedurally compliant, sanction follows as a matter of course. The court does not re-examine commercial judgment or the merits of the restructuring. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Miheer H Mafatlal v Mafatlal (1997)* embodies this very principle. The Court held that once the statutory majority has approved a scheme with full disclosure, valuation has been carried out by recognised experts, and there is no fraud or illegality, judicial interference is limited. Courts are not to act as appellate bodies over business wisdom. The ratio thus delineates a narrow judicial function, confined to questions of fairness, transparency and legality, and excludes any review of commercial merits.

In practice before the NCLT, however, the process has evolved differently.

When the regional director (RD) raises objections and the companies submit replies, the matter should ordinarily proceed to adjudication by the NCLT. Instead, the RD is directed to file a supplementary affidavit, and the scheme is sanctioned only if all explanations are accepted by the RD. If sanction for the scheme depends solely on the RD’s complete no-objection, the exercise ceases to be one of judicial scrutiny or judgment and becomes an administrative endorsement. Therefore, the time has come to transfer the entire mergers and amalgamations portfolio from the NCLT to the RDs, except where objections are raised by shareholders, creditors, regulators or any stakeholder. Only contested schemes warrant judicial determination by NCLT. This bifurcation will restore the NCLT’s role as a tribunal for disputes, while allowing routine corporate reorganisations to proceed efficiently through the administrative route. Since uncontested cases involve procedural scrutiny alone, RDs may in fact be better placed than the NCLT to process them efficiently. The fast-track mechanism carries risks that must be recognised if the

By transferring all uncontested mergers and amalgamations to regional directors, and reserving the NCLT route only for contests or objections, India can achieve efficiency and fairness

reform is to succeed. **Minority shareholder protection:** Section 233 allows objections, but compressed timelines demand vigilance to ensure their interests are safeguarded effectively. **Creditor safeguards:** The notice-and-objection process under Form CAA-9 remain robust and transparent, and creditors are not prejudiced by silence or delay. **Administrative capacity:** Regional Directors’ capacity must be strengthened. This is largely a question of staffing and resources. **Regulatory arbitrage:** Companies may attempt to structure transactions artificially to qualify for the fast-track route. Clear eligibility norms and vigilant oversight by the MCA are essential to prevent misuse. The 2025 amendment to section 233 is both timely and ambitious. It acknowledges the unsustainable burden on the NCLT and redirects simpler restructuring matters to an administrative channel. If implemented with care, it could make India a more M&A-friendly jurisdiction, institutionalising a framework where court approval is reserved for contentious or public interest cases. The real reform lies ahead. By transferring all uncontested mergers and amalgamations to the RDs, and reserving the NCLT route only for contests or objections, India can achieve efficiency and fairness. Unless the design changes, pendency will remain the rule. The amendment should therefore be seen as the beginning of this journey, not its end.

The writer is a lawyer and former Judicial Member of the National Company Law Tribunal

Economic decolonisation reshaping entrepreneurship

The decolonised mindset is creating a modern economy that leverages India’s cultural, intellectual, and linguistic strengths

Sreevas Sahasranamam

In the backdrop of UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer visiting India — his first since taking office — the spotlight is once again on the India-UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA). But beyond the specifics of a trade deal, this moment offers something deeper: a compelling chapter in India’s economic decolonization journey. This is not merely a shift in trade terms, rather, it represents a nation asserting its agency and voice at a global stage from a position of newfound strength, a stark contrast to the resource drain and controlled markets of the East India Company era. This reclaimed economic sovereignty and decolonised mindset are not just confined to diplomatic boardrooms, they are actively reshaping India’s entrepreneurship landscape, fostering innovations deeply rooted in the local context, knowledge, and culture. Part of this decolonisation effort involves a conscious effort to reclaim and value India’s cultural heritage, previously often undervalued from a colonial lens. While debates about historical reparations continue, the emerging mindset seeks an acknowledgement of the colonial wealth extraction and the return of cultural artifacts. Recent years have seen positive steps to this end, such as Glasgow Museums’ returning seven



MARKET ACCESS. For traditional craftsmanship

artifacts in 2022 and the National Gallery of Australia returning 14 artworks in 2021. This cultural renaissance is not just symbolic, it is driving new entrepreneurship efforts. Startups like WhoVR and Leeland Studios are leveraging technology to create virtual immersive spaces and games around ancient artifacts and heritage sites, tapping into the growing market for cultural rediscovery.

INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS
Similarly, there is a growing recognition and integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into mainstream education, which were systematically suppressed during colonial rule, creating a lingering sense of inferiority around indigenous knowledge traditions like Ayurveda and Vedic mathematics. The National Education Policy 2020’s focus on integrating IKS into modern

education and the revival of Nalanda University (an ancient centre of learning) signals a concerted effort to reclaim this cognitive heritage. This shift is unlocking new avenues for entrepreneurship. Startups like Brhat and Vedic Pond are developing educational content and workshops at the intersection of IKS, modern technology, and future thinking, creating a market for knowledge previously relegated to the periphery. The decolonised perspective also challenges the historical biases against India’s diverse local and indigenous cultures, often judged as ‘primitive’ by colonial standards. This led to the neglect of indigenous ecological knowledge, sustainable farming practices, and traditional resource management. The success of community initiatives like Shivganga Jhabua’s work on water conservation drawing on local symbolism, and the pan-India success of movies like *Kantara* celebrating indigenous practices, is creating space for local narratives. This is driving entrepreneurship in areas like the revival of traditional crops, with startups like Meloop Foods innovating in millet-based products. Similarly, government-supported efforts like One Station One Product are creating market access for traditional craftsmanship, fostering cultural entrepreneurship. Perhaps most significantly for addressing the digital divide, the decolonised mindset is elevating the

importance of India’s regional languages. The colonial education system, famously articulated in Thomas Macaulay’s *Minute on Indian Education* in 1835, was to create a class of “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” marginalising Indian languages. Today, greater appreciation of regional languages, such as the emphasis on mother-tongue-based education in the National Education Policy, in unlocking newer markets. Startups are differentiating based on language, with Karya creating AI datasets in regional Indian languages, and Sarvam AI developing large language models specifically for India’s linguistic diversity, opening digital access and markets to another billion users. While the India-UK FTA does signal a marked shift in the economic ties between the two countries, the deeper story in India is one of economic decolonisation. This is not about turning inwards, but creating a modern global economy that leverages India’s unique cultural, intellectual, and linguistic strengths. This decolonised mindset is creating a vibrant entrepreneurship ecosystem, forging a national narrative rooted in economic confidence and local culture, far removed from the shadows of the colonial past and poised for growth.

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Russian oil imports
Apropos, ‘Trump claims Modi assured India will stop buying Russian oil’ (October 17). While Donald Trump’s claim took many by surprise, India’s External Affairs Ministry has firmly denied any such conversation. Despite the pressure, including a 50 per cent tariff on certain Indian exports to the US, India’s oil imports from Russia remain steady. As negotiations for a trade deal continue, India faces the delicate task of addressing contentious issues while safeguarding its strategic interests. This period is critical for India-US relations, requiring careful

diplomacy, pragmatic decision-making, and a balance between economic imperatives and national policy priorities. **N Sadhasiva Reddy** Bengaluru
GST as growth enabler
This refers to ‘Empowering MSMEs — the promise and challenges of GST 2.0’ (October 17). GST 2.0 replaces a complex multi-slab system with a simplified structure aimed at easing compliance for MSMEs empowering them with faster three day registration, seven day provisional refunds and quarterly filing options for operational strain.

Also, reduced GST rates on many essential goods will make MSME products more affordable and competitive in both global and domestic markets. If the reforms are implemented promptly, GST 2.0 could mark the beginning of a new chapter where taxation supports rather than hinders MSMEs growth. **P Victor Selvaraj** Palayamkottai, TN
Data centre boom
Apropos ‘Data dynamics’ (October 17), India’s data centre boom marks a defining stage in its digital journey, but sustaining this momentum calls for clarity and coordination. A

unified policy with single-window clearances and predictable regulations can attract long-term investors and streamline approvals. Strengthening power supply and connectivity in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities will help spread growth beyond the usual suspects. States must pull in the same direction to avoid policy overlaps and uncertainty. Fiscal incentives should reward efficiency, sustainability, and data security rather than unchecked expansion. Collaboration with private players can boost skills and innovation. **A Myilsami** Coimbatore, TN
PSB consolidation
This refers to ‘Bank consolidation’ (October 17). Post-nationalisation, consolidation of public sector banks (PSBs) should have been given top priority. But for various reasons, it got delayed and only now the government is coming out with a rational reorganisation plan. Earlier initiatives were half-hearted. The main rationale beyond having world class large-sized PSBs is reducing competition among same category of banks and integrating systems for uniform customer-friendly systems and services. **MG Warrior** Mumbai

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2025

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

THE GREATEST DANGER OF AI IS THAT PEOPLE
CONCLUDE TOO EARLY THAT THEY UNDERSTAND IT.
— ELIEZER YUDKOWSKY

The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

STATE OF DELAY

In J&K, one year after election, statehood is needed to bridge the glaring gaps in representation and accountability

ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS since the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, senior members of the central government and ruling party have spoken of the steps forward taken in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. Broadly, the claims of a turnaround rest on three pillars — development projects and economic growth, improved security and integration. Yet, an anomaly has persisted. The only state to be bifurcated into Union Territories was administered by an appointee of the Centre. Last year, the people of J&K turned out in large numbers to vote in the assembly elections, and yet the elected government continues to be hemmed in. The Omar Abdullah government has conspicuously avoided confrontation with the Centre, by and large setting aside its political differences with the BJP to work within the constraints. But now, a year after the elections, it is time that the promise of returning full statehood to J&K — made in Parliament and before the Supreme Court — is fulfilled.

As Chief Minister Abdullah pointed out in an interview with this newspaper, “a Union Territory with an Assembly is by far the most inefficient model of governance”. It is a principle of democracy that a mandate must be accompanied by the power to implement it. The Abdullah ministry has attempted to keep some of its poll pledges. It recently announced the return of the Darbar Move — the government moves from Srinagar in summer to Jammu in winter — a 150-year-old tradition scrapped by the Lieutenant Governor in 2021. The Move, since its inception, was a signal to various parts of the erstwhile state — Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh — that the government is willing to go to the people and that it seeks to represent all interests. Beyond such gestures, however, the Abdullah government has been cramped by, and in effect, dependent on, the L-G’s approval and whim. While the state government’s cordial relationship with the Centre has had some benefits — like receiving Rs 5,000 crore over the budgetary allocation — it has come at a political cost. Both from within the ruling alliance in J&K and the Opposition, the government faces criticism for not demanding the return of special status and for allegedly failing to stand up to the L-G. In this fraught context, even political gestures such as the CM’s visit to a cemetery on Martyr’s Day have become political flashpoints.

The Centre’s evident reluctance to restore statehood has little justification. Delimitation has been completed, as has a peaceful, free and fair election. Invoking national security in general, and the Pahalgam terror attack in particular, to delay statehood does a grave disservice to the people of J&K. In the aftermath of the horrific killing of tourists by Pakistan-backed terrorists, CM Abdullah, the state assembly and the people of the Valley stood with the rest of the country, in shared grief. The powers-that-be at the Centre must recognise that representative and accountable government is not a privilege, conditionally conferred. It is at the core of the constitutional and federal architecture. The recent protests in Ladakh offer a sobering lesson on the perils of prolonging a democratic deficit. In J&K, the representation gap must be bridged without delay.

AI IN PLAY

Google’s \$15 billion investment for hub in Andhra Pradesh is a big boost to India’s plans in this sector

THE LAST FEW years have seen a dramatic surge in AI investments, driven by global tech majors such as Microsoft, Alphabet, Meta, Nvidia and OpenAI. As developing AI models and then making them available for use at a global level requires huge capital, the scale of the investments being made has reached impressive proportions. In 2024, global corporate investment in AI touched \$252.3 billion as per the AI index report from Stanford University. As per McKinsey, the data centres needed to handle AI processing are expected to require \$5.2 trillion in capex by 2030, the bulk of which is likely to be directed towards technology developers to produce chips and computing hardware. While some have expressed concerns over this AI boom — the IMF has, for instance, warned that “the risk is also that lofty profit expectations will ultimately be unmet” — others are more optimistic with tech majors stepping up their investments.

Earlier this week, Google announced that it will invest \$15 billion over the next five years (2026-2030) to set up an AI data centre in Andhra Pradesh. Situated in Visakhapatnam, it will be Google’s largest outside the US, and will include a “purpose-built data centre campus capable of gigawatt-scale compute capacity”. Earlier this year, during its second quarter earnings season, the company had raised its capex forecast for the year to \$85 billion to meet the growing demand as adoption rates for both firms and companies surge. This is a big boost to India’s plans to be a major player in this space. India’s data centre industry had crossed the 1 GW mark in 2024 as per a report by JLL. Estimated to account for 52 per cent of the country’s capacity, Mumbai leads the market, followed by Chennai and Delhi.

The world over governments are announcing ambitious plans and pledging huge resources in the AI space. The Indian government has also taken several steps to help build the larger ecosystem in the country. Ten semiconductor manufacturing projects, including high-volume fabs and OSATs (outsourced semiconductor assembly and test), have been approved. Alongside, 23 chip-design projects have been sanctioned by the government and 12 startups have been chosen to build indigenous large language models and small language models. Thus, across the spectrum, from the physical infrastructure (data centres) and the semiconductor projects (chips) to developing large language models, India is making progress. These efforts need to be supplemented by a similar focus on boosting research and development and skilling the labour force.

FAME AND THE SHERPA

Death of last survivor of 1953 Everest expedition is moment to pay tribute, reflect on perks and perils of recognition

WAS IT EDMUND Hillary and Tenzing Norgay who conquered Mount Everest in 1953, or Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary? Although the two men weren’t particularly fussed about the question of who reached the summit first — they were a team — speculation abounded until Tenzing put it to rest in his autobiography two years later: “Hillary stepped on top first.” It was, perhaps, a prelude to the inequity in recognition: Two men climbed to the top of the world; one was knighted, the other was referred to as a “helper” or “porter”. Time would, arguably, redress the balance, with TIME magazine ranking both among the 100 most influential people of the 20th century in 1999.

The years brought recognition to Kanchha Sherpa, too — the last surviving member of that famous expedition, he died aged 92 on October 16. He was one of three Sherpas who reached the final camp with Hillary and Tenzing. Upon hearing on the radio that the duo had reached the summit, “We danced, hugged, and kissed. It was a moment of pure joy,” Kanchha would later recall. He continued with his own mountaineering career until 1973.

The decades after 1953 also saw the home of the Sherpas become a magnet for tourism. Often sought out by the media in his later years, Kanchha could see both sides of the coin: He recognised how tourism benefited the local economy, but worried about its impact on the environment. “If we stop the tourists to save the mountains, we don’t have anything to do,” he told ClimateWire in 2011. Melting ice, he believed, was the result of more and more people trampling on sacred ground, angering the gods. Kanchha’s death is a moment to pay tribute to the spirit of adventure and human fortitude, but perhaps also a time to reflect on how fame and recognition affect people, communities and the physical environment.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

WHEN I WAS appointed to the National Knowledge Commission in 2005, a colleague recommended that I read 2025 Nobel Laureate Joel Mokyr’s book, *The Gifts of Athena*, to gain a broad understanding of how knowledge economies are produced. Mokyr is known as the non-economist’s economist — not just because he uses economic theory in elegant and accessible prose rather than impenetrable math, but also because he resists a deeper economic reductionism that might be summed up as: “It’s the incentives, stupid.” Nothing has corrupted our thinking about development more than the language of incentives (which, of course, matter) colonising our ways of thinking about the social world.

For Mokyr, knowledge is not simply a tap that can be turned on by getting the incentives right — as if increasing demand or payments will automatically generate a response. Knowledge is not just another input where greater demand produces higher supply. In another book, *The Lever of Riches*, he put it dramatically: Necessity is not the mother of invention; one must also account for the capacity to respond to necessity. Knowledge economies are more difficult creations — more mysterious and more wondrous.

Another striking feature of Mokyr’s work is his Weberian sensibility about historical causation. Social reality is causal but not law-like. Although his books have overarching arguments, they are attentive to complexity and to the conjunctures that make an argument work. In this sense, his work is much richer, and his histories more rewarding, than those of other historically-minded economists who have won the Nobel Prize, such as Douglas North or Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson. Their emphasis on institutions is salutary, but their account of institutional causality is ultimately too abstract and rests on a more simplistic and tendentious reading of history. Mokyr offers a genuinely historical and sociological critique of economics’ dominant modes of thinking. He uses parsimony when appropriate, not as an end in itself. His history, like all serious history, will be controversial in parts, but never simple-minded. In *The Lever of Riches*, he is attentive to the conditions under which his explanations may not hold. One of the remarkable things about his histories is how much they make you think.

Mokyr’s account is Weberian in another way: It makes space for the explanatory power

The gift of Athena

Work of Nobel Laureate Joel Mokyr shines a light on path India must take to become a knowledge power

of ideas. But it is also a conjunctural account that links two forms of knowledge: Propositional knowledge, which concerns regularities in nature, and prescriptive knowledge, which is about techniques — how to make things work. The friend who recommended *The Gifts of Athena* thought its central argument especially relevant to the Indian context. Many societies have been good at discovery. But for Mokyr, the Industrial Revolution cannot be explained by factors like the comparative price of energy or heroic individual inventions. It was sustained by the interaction between propositional and prescriptive knowledge — between discovery and invention. The subtext for India was clear: Science and engineering need to be integrated into a productive feedback loop. This has been a structural weakness of the Indian knowledge system. The 20th century, Mokyr suggested, saw the deepest institutionalisation of the relationship between these two knowledge forms. But it remains controversial what actually enables such institutionalisation.

Mokyr’s histories are somewhat sceptical of the state. Not only is the state bad at picking winners, it often prevents even known winners from realising their potential — as in China’s past. Historically, and sometimes against the grain of his own narrative, Mokyr tends to downplay the role of the state in creating the preconditions for sustained innovation. Yet contemporary China now offers a living refutation of his thesis on the state, even as it vindicates his account of the feedback loops between different forms of knowledge.

The fascination of Mokyr’s work lies in its claim about a shift in elite cultures. The explosion of interest in scientific knowledge among European elites in the early modern period was astounding. It is important to remember that this scientific temperament does not exist primarily at the individual level — many great scientists believed all sorts of weird things — but is embedded in the epistemic cultures of institutions. Mokyr does not reduce science to sociology, as sociologists of science often do; science has its own autonomy as a mode of human experience and as a causal force. What he conveys is how an elite culture forms around science: Institutions, networks of diffusion, and most remarkably, social conditions that spot talent and allow it to flourish. His account of the political dynamics of this shift in A

Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy is interesting, if a little tendentious. It rests on the claim that a paradoxical combination produced Europe’s intellectual dynamism: Political fragmentation combined with a trans-European republic of letters. States competed for talent, but within a culture that allowed ideas to circulate freely across borders.

But why was European fragmentation different from that elsewhere? Consider post-imperial fragmentation in other regions, including India. New intellectual histories of India make one wonder if something else is at work. One of the remarkable features of Indian intellectual history is how successfully it created a trans-political and open republic of letters. Not only were religious and literary texts widely disseminated, but a small town like Navadipa could become the epicentre of Navya-Nyaya logic in the 17th century — surpassing even Benares. Nyaya manuscripts became pan-Indian currency, despite political fragmentation. So India, too, had political pluralism and extensive elite circulation. Comparative literacy rates in 17th to 19th-century England and India are contested, at least if Dharampal is to be believed. The sad truth is that Indian economic, intellectual, and cultural history still has too many large gaps for the Indian case to be fully diagnosed. The few references to India his work are comparatively flat, largely owing to the paucity of sources.

Mokyr forces us to confront a profound truth: Knowledge does not grow on its own. It is cultivated by cultures and institutions and legitimised by ideas. If India is serious about becoming a knowledge power, it must confront the structural disconnects in its own knowledge systems — the weak bridges between science and engineering, discovery and application, the factory and lab. It must learn to reward and match talent. The real challenge is not just investment or incentives, which we are throwing around freely. We will get easily dazzled by an odd win, ISRO or a new AI centre. The real challenge is building a sustained culture of innovation. Athena, or in the Indian context Saraswati, are not just goddesses to be worshipped: They have to become palpable social forces.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



SUMANA ROY

WHEN A TREE DIES

Sometimes grief does not recognise boundaries between species

too, must have its own genres.

One doesn’t know how to console someone who’s lost a plant. To import the words one uses for the loss of a human would feel like parody, perhaps even sarcasm. There are no rituals — no abstention or withdrawal, no time cycles of purification. There is no officially sanctioned leave, no paperwork. This affection and attachment for a different species is meant to exist on the margins, like trees are in architectural design, pushed near boundary walls as if in an instructive analogy about where our emotions for other species are meant to be.

More than a millennium ago, Deola Bai’s name might have been a peripheral character in the Jataka Tales. But here she was — her age and her action — part of the news cycle. What had this 85-year-old woman done? Nothing criminal. But she had been captured on camera crying inconsolably. The peepal sapling that she had planted about 20 years ago and cared for “like her own child” — as someone in Sara Gondi, her village in Chhattisgarh’s Khairagarh district said — had been cut “for profit”.

I haven’t been able to understand why a sight like that should generate such extremities of responses, between being moved and being bemused. I would imagine that most of us have felt like this at various points in our lives. Whether it was the calamitous felling of thousands of trees for the Siliguri SAARC highway in my hometown or something more

personal, like returning home to find a plant that will never respond to air, water and light again, I have found myself breaking down into tears. Inevitably, there’s been someone in the vicinity who’s spouted proof of being a human being: “It’s only a tree...”

Deola Bai “hugging” the tree stump and crying is bound to remind us of the Chipko movement and, by extension, of what has been characterised as an ecofeminist move. But there’s someone else I have found myself going back to — Jagadish Chandra Bose and his tendency to write about plants with feeling, an unexpected thing for a scientist. In an essay about an injured plant, he writes: “The slight reduction in sunlight was not noticeable from inside the room, but the tree sensed it and expressed its melancholy with a small response”. Notice the word “melancholy” he uses for the tree. Is it because we’ve been conditioned to believe that plants don’t have emotions that it becomes hard for many to understand how we can have feelings for them?

“It is by causing injury that we can measure the living index,” Bose writes about plants in his experiments. If we were to import this to the injuries caused by the death of plants on our psyche, I suppose Deola Bai’s “living index” would be higher than what it would be for many of us.

Roy, a poet and writer, is associate professor at Ashoka University. Views are personal



OCTOBER 18, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

ZIA IS PRESIDENT

GEN ZIAUL HAQ of Pakistan was confirmed as Pakistan’s President for five years. The assembly agreed to validate his tenure of the last eight years on the unwritten promise that he will lift martial law by December 31 next year. Speaking after the vote, Haq said, “Nobody has won. Nobody has lost, only Pakistan and national interest has triumphed.”

ANDHRA PRESS BILL

THE TELUGU DESAM government has finalised a draft bill to amend the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Criminal Procedure Code

(CrPc), 1973, Central Act 2 of 1974 in their application to the state of Andhra Pradesh on the ostensible plea of curbing defamatory and scurrilous writings in newspapers and periodicals. The new bill provides for a sentence with imprisonment of up to seven years and fine and is a replica of the infamous Bihar press bill, which was withdrawn after protests.

PM’S PROPOSAL

THE COMMONWEALTH SUMMIT accepted a proposal by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to set up a committee to suggest ways to ensure a better world order. Gandhi made the sugges-

tion during a discussion on the international situation. An ad hoc committee was formed to study the protocol.

SFI SWEEPS POLLS

THE STUDENTS FEDERATION of India (SFI), student wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), has won all the four posts of office bearers of the JNU Students Union (JNUSU) elections. TK Arun of SFI was declared elected president. He polled 601 votes against 346 polled by his nearest rival S N Malakar of the All India Students Federation (AISF), student wing of the Communist Party of India.

Vadodara

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2025

11

THE IDEAS PAGE

Before closing the US trade deal

India must guard against last-minute negotiating stratagems, protect its freedom to manoeuvre, promote national interest and autonomy



ABHIJIT DAS

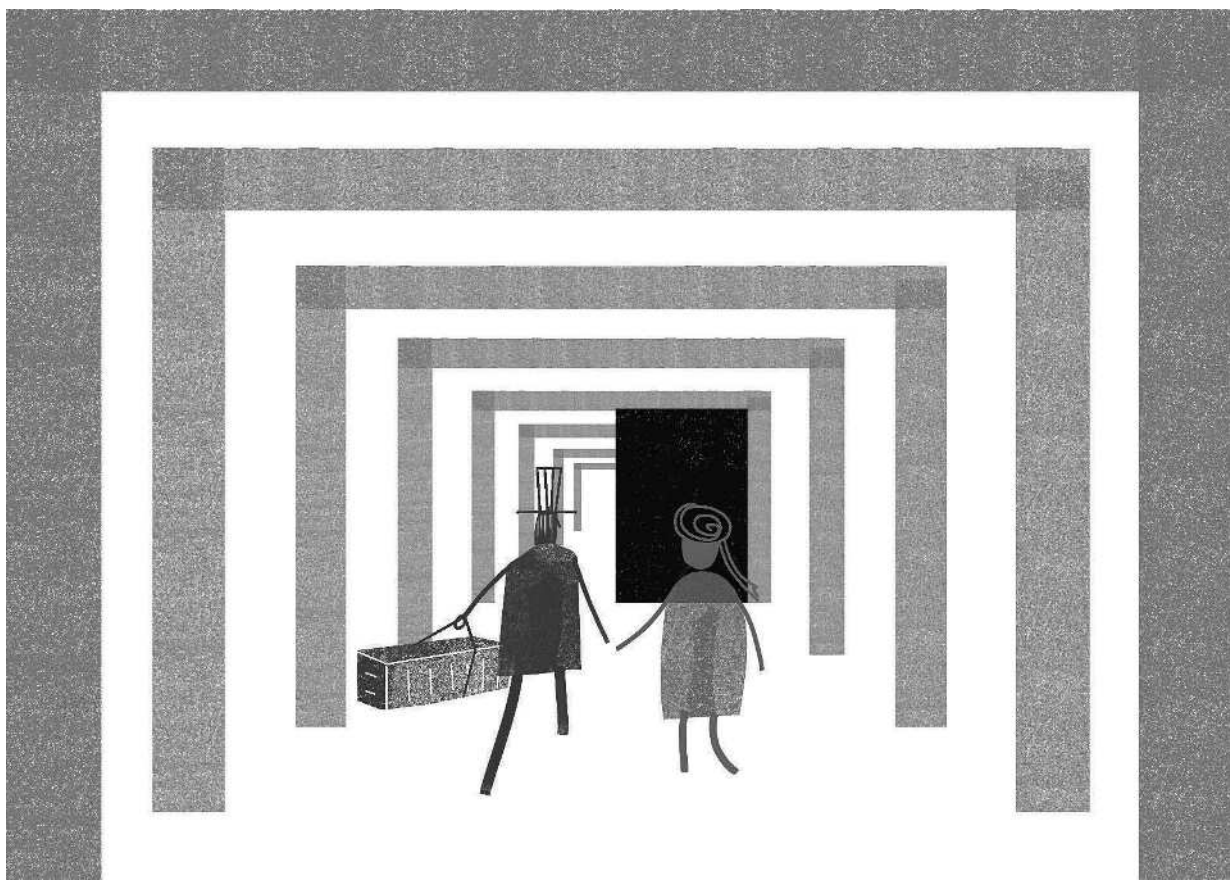
THE PROSPECTS FOR an India-US trade deal appear to have brightened in recent days. Going by media reports, the negotiations may well be approaching the finish line. If the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump at the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur does take place during October 26-28, it would provide an opportunity to finalise the trade deal. In order to guard against last-minute negotiating stratagems of the US and protect the national interest, what should the Indian government do in the endgame?

First, both sides must agree to a written document before its contents are announced. Going by media reports, Trump, at the last minute, unilaterally changed what was agreed upon in some of the bilateral trade deals between US officials and those of the partner countries, to the disadvantage of the latter. India must ensure that it does not become another victim of a one-sided deal announcement by Trump.

Second, India must look out for the US making new demands in the final stages of the negotiation and insisting on them as a condition for closing the deal. This has been a part of the US toolkit for decades at the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/World Trade Organisation (WTO). Even at the risk of delaying the finalisation of the deal, Indian officials must not agree to last-minute demands without due examination and consultation with concerned ministries and other stakeholders. These should be postponed for the second part of the deal at a later stage.

Third, Trump weaponising tariffs provides an important lesson to the rest of the world: Being dependent on a few markets for exports is a recipe for becoming hostage to those countries' economic and political interests. India needs to ensure that the bilateral trade deal does not further deepen its dependence on the US market. In addition, it would be in India's long-term interest to not become complicit in the US game to isolate China by compelling countries to decouple from global value chains involving China. India needs to guard against any provision in its bilateral deal with the US that ostensibly promotes resilient supply chains but actually targets China. Further, the government must carefully study whether the bilateral deal curtails India's autonomy to decide which countries to trade with.

Fourth, in the frenzy of bargaining in the final stages of negotiations, the less powerful parties are known to abandon many of their long-held red lines. India needs to exercise extreme caution on this score. PM Modi's emphatic assertion that the interests of farmers and fishermen would be protected has certainly been reassuring. However, India's negotiators cannot afford to ignore red lines



CR Sasikumar

on issues related to the digital economy now and intellectual property in the second phase of negotiations. As the digital sector can impart significant buoyancy to India's economy, these issues merit a detailed discussion.

The following issues can be said to constitute the core of US interests in the digital economy: First, prevent India from imposing taxes on digital players headquartered in the US; Second, prevent India from leveraging its data advantage and creating domestic digital champions, including through sharing anonymised government data exclusively with Indian domestic entities; and third, prevent India from effectively regulating the digital sector.

The US can secure the above and many other objectives in the digital sector by getting India to agree to the following sentence in the trade deal: "Both countries agree to grant non-discriminatory treatment to digital services, and suppliers of these services, from the other country". India's negotiators must recognise that this would substantially compromise the prospects of the country creating a vibrant domestic digital sector. Such a provision would prohibit the government from giving a boost to domestic digital players, for example, by mandating that all its entities use the homegrown communication app Arattai, instead of other apps. It would also tie the government's hands from supporting its domestic start-ups through various policy interventions. Finally, it would effectively prevent the government from raising revenue by taxing activities in the digital sector overwhelmingly dominated by US players. Concessions on digital issues in the trade deal would render India's *atmanirbhar* and *swadeshi* objectives hollow and devoid

Trump weaponising tariffs provides an important lesson to the rest of the world: Being dependent on a few markets for exports is a recipe for becoming hostage to those countries' economic and political interests. India needs to ensure that the bilateral trade deal does not further deepen its dependence on the US market. Further, the government must carefully study whether the bilateral deal curtails India's autonomy to decide which countries to trade with.

of substance.

Before closing the trade deal, the government must make an objective assessment of how it would modify India's rights and obligations vis-à-vis the US as they existed on the day when PM Modi and President Trump announced the launch of negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement (February 13). If the recent US trade deals with Japan, EU and Vietnam are any indication, India may have to remove its most-favoured-nation tariffs on most industrial goods and some agricultural products, as well as provide concessions in other areas, while the US may only lower the 50 per cent tariff on Indian exports to about 15-20 per cent.

Given the asymmetry in political and economic clout between the US and India, the odds are stacked against the latter in the ongoing bilateral negotiations. Further, with India adopting a non-confrontational approach, its negotiators have been left with few chips in their pockets to bargain for reduction or elimination of the US tariffs. In light of these constraints, it would be a major achievement if India's negotiators manage to secure a mutually beneficial bilateral trade agreement with the US. If the assessment is that the outcome is skewed against India's interests, the government must not hesitate to walk away from the negotiating table. In this context, it is relevant to recall Chanakya's wisdom — when benefits accruing to kings under a treaty are to be distributed unfairly, war is preferable.

Das is a former trade negotiator and the author of the recently published book Strategies in GATT and WTO Negotiations. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The US has a long and inglorious history of intervention in Latin America. But Mr Trump will be wary of angering Maga supporters with military action and of looking like a paper tiger if Mr Maduro endures again."

— THE GUARDIAN

Red carpet, red flag

Signals sent by Taliban Minister Muttaqi's visit to Deoband have disappointed many in the country



FAIZAN MUSTAEF

TO LAY CLAIM to the title of "*vishwaguru*", India must assume ethical leadership of the world. As a founder-member of the United Nations and original signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it must demonstrate an unequivocal commitment to human rights and gender justice. Our opposition to terrorism, too, is an article of faith. The current geopolitical scenario may have necessitated a warm welcome for the Taliban's visiting foreign minister, Amir Muttaqi. Yet, is it not a fact that Muttaqi has been declared a terrorist by the UN? Diplomacy sometimes demands such compromises. But whatever the compulsions, we should have put our foot down regarding the state-arranged visit by Muttaqi to the seminary of Deoband. It has given the Taliban much-needed legitimacy and Muslim liberals are at a loss to understand the government's decision to organise the visit.

It is true that the Deoband ulema issued a fatwa of jihad against the British and opposed the flawed and communal idea of Partition, besides issuing fatwas against all kinds of terrorism and cow slaughter. Yet, the seminary established in 1866 by Muhammad Qasim Nanawtawi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi represents, at its core, orthodox and conservative Sunni Islam.

Deoband signifies the dated ideas of one Sunni school, and its graduates dominate the Muslim Personal Law Board. It is opposed not only to the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) but also to modern progressive reforms in Muslim Personal Law. Most of its ideas on freedom of religion, blasphemy, triple divorce, hijab, etc, are not compatible with constitutional morality and norms. It continues to hold the Sharia as the highest norm of the legal system.

Under Article 26 of the Constitution, every religious denomination or any section thereof is entitled to establish and manage religious institutions of its choice. The Deoband seminary is entitled to teach any theology and have an opinion as per its theological school. But should the state be seen as facilitating such institutions?

The signals sent by Muttaqi's visit have disappointed many in the country. Freedom of religion under our Constitution includes freedom from religion as well. It also guarantees freedom within religion. But the Taliban does not guarantee this freedom to Afghan women. The worst kinds of women's rights violations are reported from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The Taliban is one of the most regressive and authoritarian regimes today. By the 1990s, 40 per cent of doctors in Afghanistan were women. Women also constituted 70 per cent of school teachers, 60 per cent of university professors and almost half of university students. Today, women's literacy in Afghanistan is at a meagre 14 per cent.

The Taliban's Jim Crow-like decrees have not come as a surprise. Its promises during the Doha deal of respecting human rights in general and women's rights in particular have proved to be empty words.

Women, who occupied one-fourth of parliamentary seats and 6.5 per cent of ministerial positions in 2021, have been completely excluded from the Taliban government. They can no longer go out and work in most sectors. They are forced to cover their faces and must be accompanied by a male guardian. Afghan women are denied access to amusement and public parks, and are banned from universities and colleges. Women are now forced to join madrasas.

Not only does the Taliban have no respect for the international human rights covenants, its ideology is also in violation of Islamic theology. The Arabic word for knowledge is *ilm*. This root word has been used in the Quran 854 times — 397 times as a noun, 425 times as a verb, and the remaining times as an adjective. The first words of divine revelation in the Quran asked the Prophet (PBUH) to read: "Read in the name of your Lord who has created (all that exists)" (Quran 96:1-5). Islam was a knowledge revolution. The Prophet himself had reportedly said that "seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim male and female". (Al-Tirmidhi). There is not a single verse in the Quran or Hadiths that prohibits women from acquiring knowledge.

The Taliban seems to be ignorant of the history of Islamic civilisation. The Prophet's wife Ayesha was a great scholar who was consulted by people on theological matters. She is the most prominent narrator of the Hadith. In fact, it is impossible to talk of Islam without referring to her. Nafisa, a close relative of Ali, the fourth caliph, used to be consulted by the people and even scholars.

The Taliban leadership may not know that one of the earliest modern universities, the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, was founded in 859 by Fatima al-Fihriya. In the 13th century, Raziya Sultan ruled over Delhi and built several schools. In Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto has been the Prime Minister, and Bangladesh has been ruled by Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajid for a large part of its history. Even in Afghanistan in 1880, Malalai demonstrated her courage and bravery in the battle of Maiwand. Habibi Sarabi was appointed as Governor of Bamyan in 2005, and Azra Jafari became the first female mayor in Afghanistan in 2009.

If at all the foreign minister had to be taken to some Muslim institution, the Aligarh Muslim University, the greatest citadel of Muslim education, where a woman is the vice-chancellor, should have been chosen.

The Deoband administration, in an official statement, was cleverer than the organisers of the first press conference in Delhi. It stated categorically that "its policy of welcoming guests of India is allied with the foreign policy of the country and this visit was not their endorsement of Taliban's policies but mere continuation of historical, cultural and scholarly ties between Deoband and Afghanistan".

The writer is vice-chancellor of Chanakya National Law University, Patna. Views are personal



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

Can't rely only on government

To become a leader in deep tech, India needs private sector to step up

In recent years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasised enhancing India's preparedness in areas like artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing and green tech. The PM devoted considerable time to these issues in his Independence Day address this year. He insisted that every sector — MSMEs, education, healthcare, transport, agriculture — needs modernisation and innovation. He argued that self-reliance in technology, including deep tech, is essential for national security and strategic autonomy. He cautioned that excessive dependence on foreign technology weakens the nation.

"India must reduce dependence on foreign weapons, energy and critical technologies," he said, pointedly asking, "if we have the capability, why should India's money flow outside?". Underscoring that the future of the world is connected with semiconductors, modern technology and AI, he called on the youth to "dream big". He raised pertinent issues like — "Will we make our own EV batteries?"; "We need our own patented medicines"; and "We must become *atmanirbhar* in energy". He called on industry stakeholders and the private sector to come forward in this effort.

The Modi government has set up several missions around the deep-tech frontier — India Semiconductor Mission, National Quantum Mission, India AI Mission, Deep-tech Fund of Funds, and Anusandhan National Research Foundation. The government's effort is to achieve strategic autonomy and self-reliance in these areas and also to position India as one

of the leading deep-tech powers by 2035.

This is ambitious for any country. However, for India, it is a necessity. The new world is going to be controlled by countries with deep-tech power. The 20th century was all about capital and trade, whereas the 21st century is going to be about capital and technology. If India is to realise its dream of emerging as a global leader in the next couple of decades, besides the size of its economy, the strength and resilience of its frontier tech innovation and R&D systems will play a crucial role.

The big question is whether all this can be possible only through the government efforts or if several other stakeholders need to pitch in to augment the pace of our progress. Until now, the major burden of promoting India's deep-tech revolution has been shouldered by the government. India spends roughly 0.65 per cent of its GDP on R&D in science and technology. It is well below the spending of technologically advanced countries like China (2.4 per cent), the US (3.4 per cent), South Korea (4.9 per cent), and Japan (3.3 per cent). These figures may be deceptive as each country's GDP is different. In real terms, India spends roughly \$15 billion on R&D, while China spends more than \$600 billion and the US more than \$1 trillion.

This humongous gap in R&D spending is a major challenge for India in realising its ambition. But the challenge stems not from the government's inability to spend more but from the private sector's reluctance to chip in. In most technologically advanced countries, the share

of private sector spending on R&D has been upwards of 70 per cent. It is around just 30 per cent in India. While the entire private sector spending on R&D in India remains below \$5 billion, American chip majors like NVIDIA and IBM alone spend \$13 billion and \$8 billion, respectively. Several of those companies allocate upwards of 10 per cent of their revenues to R&D, while in India, such allocations remain negligible.

Given this resource crunch, the pace of India's deep-tech R&D and innovation is slow. In areas like AI and quantum computing, the government's push is yielding good results, but it can only help the country catch up with advanced countries. What India needs to aim for is not just to follow the curve but to move ahead of it. Despite its linguistic diversity, vast literature and large amounts of data in regional languages and dialects, India has not been able to develop its own AI-based Large Language Model. Some minor efforts did succeed, but they remain inferior in scale and efficiency. While advanced countries produced commercially accessible quantum machines with more than 100 qubits and IBM announced the release of its Kookaburra quantum processor with 1,386 qubit capacity in a multi-chip configuration in 2025, India's IITs are still at an experimental stage with 25-qubit quantum computers.

The Modi government has seen major successes in the renewable energy sector. In the last 10 years, it grew significantly to reach 50 per cent of the country's total power ca-

capacity. However, the import dependence of this sector is a cause for concern. Until last year, our import dependency for solar modules stood at 80 per cent and inverters at 60 per cent. In critical minerals like lithium, cobalt and nickel, essential for the renewable energy industry, our import dependence is near 100 per cent. In the EV sector, Indian companies like Tata and Mahindra made significant advances. The PM proudly announced that the country has the potential to export those vehicles to over 100 countries. But the sector depends heavily on imports — almost 100 per cent in battery cells and 70 per cent in several other components. This dependency is largely on China. In an age of growing nationalisms impacting supply-chain resilience, this is worrying.

It is this scenario that prompted PM Modi to infuse massive government funding into indigenous R&D. His relentless campaign to encourage innovation and startups is also yielding tangible results. However, what is needed is a whole-of-nation approach. India's corporates, state governments, academic institutions and research organisations must come together to catch up with the energy, speed, vision, and, most importantly, the urgency of the PM.

If we fail, we will not become leaders but remain "also-rans" in a world fast transitioning to the Industry 5.0 era.

The writer, president, Indian Foundation, is with the BJP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FOR A HEALTHY INDIA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Mapping wellness' (IE, October 17). The government's decision in GST 2.0 to reduce taxes on confectionery items, pizza bread, and refined carb products will only worsen obesity and related ailments. Air pollution, a major cause of COPD, reflects the government's failure to curb environmental degradation. Moreover, Indians are epigenetically more prone to diabetes due to lower muscle mass. Instead of subsidising wheat and paddy, incentives should favour protein-rich rabi crops like lentils that promote better nutrition. Adding protein would also address stunting.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Mapping wellness' (IE, October 17). In 2019, the World Health Assembly approved a resolution urging governments to implement pricing policies on the affordability and accessibility of medical products. India lacks population-level financial risk protection mechanisms, which leads to huge out-of-pocket expenditure, and Drug Price Control Orders attempt to keep medicine prices in check. Though beneficial in containing pharmaceutical expenditure and ensuring affordable healthcare, they often have a limited impact on switching from non-price-controlled to price-regulated medicines.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

TRUMP'S OIL CLAIM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Navigate with care' (IE, October 17). The Ministry of External Affairs's statement that India is "broad-basing" and "diversifying" its energy sources reduces the credibility of US President Donald Trump's claim that India "agreed to stop buying Russian oil". No matter what the Modi government says for domestic consumption, the drop in import of Russian oil by as much as 45 per cent over the last five months gives reason to infer that it is kowtowing to US pressure. The MEA must tell Trump to respect India's sovereignty.

G David Milton, Maruthancode

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Navigate with care' (IE, October 17). The issue of India's oil imports from Russia, highlighted by US President Trump's recent remarks, reflects the complexity of India's energy and diplomatic balance. While global pressures persist, India must continue prioritising its energy security and strategic autonomy. Any shift in oil procurement should be gradual and pragmatic, not reactionary. Diversifying sources is wise, but decisions must stem from long-term interests rather than external influence. With trade tensions rising and alliances shifting, India must tread carefully, ensuring stability in energy supply while reinforcing independent foreign policy.

Charu Sharma, Hoshiarpur



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Amid price surge, should you buy new or exchange old gold?

SIDDHARTH UPASANI
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17

SACHIN TENDULKAR is now batting for India's macroeconomic stability. In an advertisement for Tanishq, he explains why Indians should exchange their old gold for new jewels.

"India imports almost all its gold. But if you exchange your old gold (for new jewelry), there will be no need to import gold. This will make our country stronger," Tendulkar says.

He is right. Higher gold imports widen India's merchandise trade deficit, which means India has to pay more in foreign currencies than what it receives for its exports. A widening of this deficit weakens the Indian rupee, which makes foreign goods and services even more expensive. And gold is a big factor when it comes to these trade dynamics.

Indians love gold

India is second only to China in its thirst for gold. According to the World Gold Council

(WGC), Chinese consumers bought 857 tonnes (tn) of gold in 2024, and Indians 803 tn. Over the last 15 years, the two countries have consistently accounted for over half of the global consumer demand for the yellow metal.

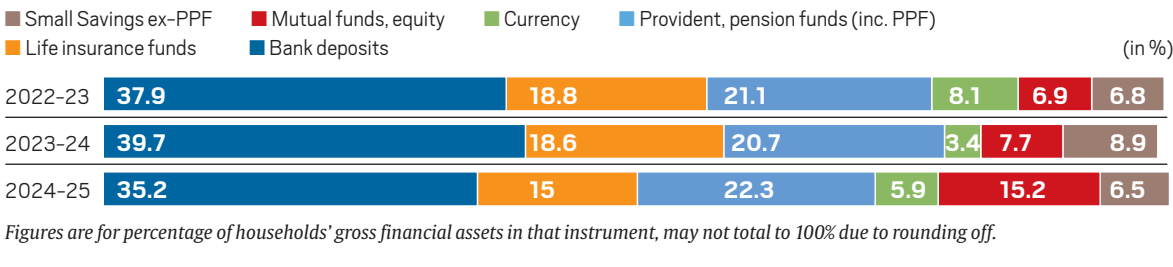
But this is just the annual demand for gold. According to Morgan Stanley economists Upasna Chachra and Bani Gambhir, Indian households owned 34,600 tn of gold as at the end of June this year. With prices at an all-time high, this gold is worth roughly \$3.8 trillion: or 89% of India's GDP.

"...the stock of holdings of gold provides a positive wealth effect to the household balance sheet, which is also benefiting from cyclical factors of lower interest payments with monetary policy easing, and the positive impact on disposable income through direct and indirect tax cuts," Chachra and Gambhir wrote last week.

Savings breakdown

Just over a decade ago, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Raghuram Rajan warned Indians of the perils of their love af-

CHANGING PATTERN OF HOUSEHOLDS' FINANCIAL SAVINGS



fair with gold. At the time, households were aggressively buying gold to stop their savings being eroded by rapidly rising prices.

WGC data show that Indians' consumption demand for gold is down nearly 20% from around 15 years ago. This is in part due to RBI having sharply brought down headline inflation, from almost 10% in 2012-13 to an expected 2.6% in the current fiscal.

Indians are also investing in different assets now. As per latest RBI data, the share of

households' mutual fund and equity investments doubled to 15.2% of their gross financial savings in 2024-25 on the back of an incredible shift to the stock market. According to data from the NSE, individuals put in Rs 1.66 lakh crore into Indian equities in 2024 on a net basis — more than the Rs 1.53 lakh crore they invested in the previous 10 years combined.

Data from the statistics ministry show that household savings in the form of physical assets reduced in the years leading up to the

Covid-19 pandemic to 36.9% of gross savings in 2020-21 from 45.9% in 2011-12. It then rose to 43.8% in 2022-23 — widely attributed to the purchase of homes and vehicles as people took advantage of low interest rates — before edging down again to 41.5% in 2023-24.

The trend for savings in the form of gold and silver ornaments is similar: from 1.1% of gross savings in 2011-12 to 0.7% in 2020-21, 0.8% in 2022-23, and back to 0.7% in 2023-24.

Behind Tendulkar's message

If Indians' demand for gold has reduced over the years, why did Tanishq employ Tendulkar to educate the public on why lowering gold imports is beneficial for the Indian economy? The answer: rising gold prices.

A host of factors — uncertainty caused by the US tariff war, its potential impact on economic growth and inflation, geopolitical risks, and purchases by central banks around the world — have led to the price of gold rising more rapidly than analysts expected. It crossed the Rs 1-lakh-per-10-gram mark earlier this year in April; it is now moving towards Rs 1.3 lakh, up more than 50% from last year.

This surge has hit the ability of Indians to buy gold, which is hurting jewelers, making the exchange of old gold for new jewellery an attractive business proposal.

The impact of the higher prices is showing up in India's trade data. Data released Wednesday show that gold imports were down 9% for the first half of 2025-26. But with Diwali around the corner, September saw gold imports jump to \$9.62 billion — double that from a year ago.

GDP: GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES

Why European firms lost their competitiveness

UDIT MISRA
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17

DURING A curtain raiser for the latest World Economic Outlook by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva shared remarkable data about Europe's economy. The *table* (bottom five) shows companies in the European Union that are less than 50 years old, but now have a market capitalisation of more than \$10 billion. They are dwarfed when compared to similar firms in the United States (top five). Georgieva said, "...my beloved, native Europe, some tough love: enough lofty rhetoric on how to lift competitiveness — you know what must be done. It is time for action."

How did Europe, which basically ran the world until a century ago and was the birthplace of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, get here?

The newly minted Nobel laureate in Economics, Philippe Aghion, recently commented on this issue. He said that while Europe was catching up with US standards of living as it recovered after the devastation of World War II, since the mid-1980s, the average per capita GDP (read income) of the Eurozone has declined relative to the US. "The big reason is that we failed to implement breakthrough high-tech innovations".

Aghion said that at the heart of the matter was Europe's inability to reconcile competition policy (which aims to promote fair competition in an economy by clamping down on anti-competitive entities such as monopolies) and industrial policy (which aims to promote national industries). "In Europe, in the name of competition policy, we became very anti any form of industrial policy," he said.

While he was quick to point out that he does not welcome the "protection-

US FIRMS DOMINATE

Name	Marketcap (in \$ billion)
NVIDIA	4378.3
Microsoft	3816.4
Apple	3700.3
Alphabet (Google)	3039.6
Amazon	2299
Spotify	138.1
Adyen	53.9
DSV	49.5
EQT	41.2
Amadeus IT Group	34.1

Note: Select companies that came up in the past 50 years and a market cap of more than \$10 billion. Source: Companiesmarketcap.com

ist wave" in the US as it is not good for global growth and innovation, he could see the bright side: "European countries have to realise that we should no longer let the US and China become the technological leaders and lose to them."

Georgieva's solution? A "single market czar" with real authority to drive reforms forward for the bloc. She argued for an energy union, removing border frictions in the labour market, goods and services trade, energy, and finance, and building a single European financial system. Ultimately, Europe has to "Catch up with the private sector dynamism of the US," she said.

Note the number of Indian companies that figure in the list of top 100 global companies in terms of market capitalisation. The US has 59, China 12, Europe and the rest of the world have 27 companies. India has two — Reliance at number 71 and HDFC Bank at 90.

ANJALI MARAR & AMITABH SINHA
BENGALURU, NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17

THE ATMOSPHERIC concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂), the primary driver of climate change, increased by a record amount between 2023 and 2024, according to latest data released by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Globally averaged CO₂ concentration near the Earth's surface reached 423.9 parts per million in 2024, 3.5 ppm higher than in 2023. The year-on-year increase in this period was significantly higher than the annual average during the 2011-2020 decade.

The year 2024 was also the warmest year ever recorded, with the global average temperature being 1.55 degrees Celsius higher than pre-industrial times. This was the first time that global annual temperatures had crossed the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold, a key limit which, when breached over a long-term period, can result in devastating irreversible impacts.

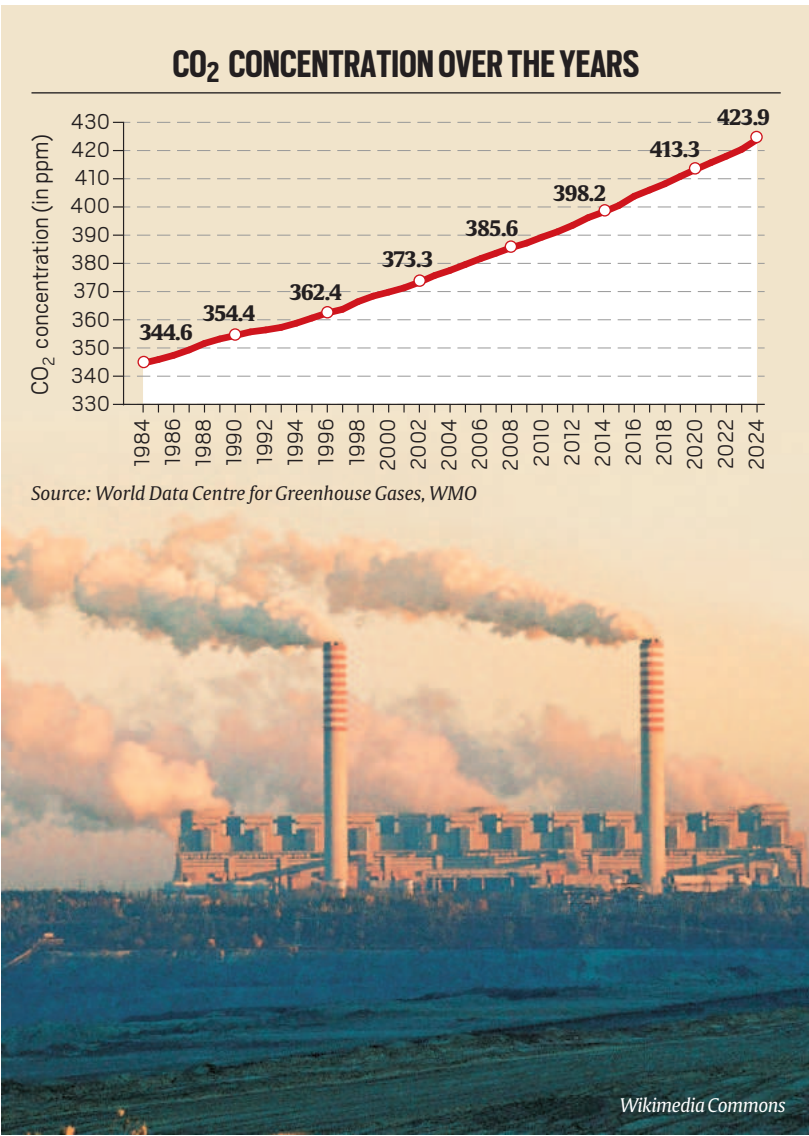
The rapidly rising CO₂ concentrations underscore the failure of the international climate framework, as represented by the Paris Agreement, to achieve a meaningful slowdown in global emissions.

Rise in CO2 concentrations

CO₂ concentrations have been rising consistently over the years. There has been no instance of a decline in the last 40 years, at least. However, the new data from the WMO show that the year-on-year increase between 2023 and 2024 was the highest since these kinds of measurements began in 1957. This has come at a time when a massive effort is being made globally to restrain CO₂ emissions.

The rate of increase in CO₂ concentrations had already tripled from an average of 0.8 ppm per year during the 1960s to 2.4 ppm per year between 2011 and 2020. But a 3.5 ppm jump in a year is unprecedented. The current CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere, 423.9 ppm, is now 152% more than the pre-industrial levels of 278.3 ppm.

CO₂ is the most widespread of the greenhouse gases (GHGs), and is produced in a variety of natural and man-made processes. The emissions from natural processes such as respiration, ocean releases, volcano eruptions, wildfires, or decomposition of organic matter are nearly all absorbed back in other natural processes like photosynthesis, ocean and land sinks, thus maintaining a balance. Nearly half of the CO₂ emissions from man-made processes, such as the burning of fossil fuels,



is also absorbed by these natural sinks. It is the other half that accumulates in the atmosphere, resulting in a warming effect.

Although CO₂ accounts for more than 90% of all accumulated GHGs in the atmosphere, its ability to trap heat is significantly less than other GHGs such as methane (CH₄) and nitrous oxide (N₂O). CH₄ is at least 25% more potent than CO₂ in its heat-trapping capability, while N₂O is about 270 times more potent.

However, CO₂ remains in the atmosphere for a far longer time, about hundreds to thousands of years. As a result, it has a cumulative

impact on global warming. CO₂ is known to have contributed about 66% of the warming that has happened since pre-industrial times, and about 79% in the last decade.

In comparison, CH₄ is relatively short-lived and remains in the atmosphere for only about 12 to 14 years. N₂O disintegrates after about 100 to 120 years.

Reasons behind the increase

The unusually high increase of 3.5 ppm between 2023 and 2024 could not be solely attributed to continued emissions of CO₂ from man-made activities, the WMO report

said. Variabilities in the natural CO₂ loop also had a role to play.

In particular, oceans and land sinks seem to have absorbed a lesser amount of CO₂ in 2024. An exceptionally high number of forest fire incidents in the year resulted in additional emissions.

One of the causes of the reduced capability of natural sinks in oceans and land to absorb CO₂ is global warming itself. At higher temperatures, oceans absorb less CO₂ due to decreased solubility. Similarly, extreme droughts, which result in forests and vegetation drying up, reduce the absorption capacity of trees and grasslands. These processes feed into each other and worsen the CO₂ imbalance, leading to more CO₂ being released into the atmosphere.

Other GHGs

The concentration of CH₄ and N₂O also increased in 2024, but the jump was lower than the annual average witnessed in the last decade. CH₄ — the second most widely emitted GHG — concentrations increased by 8 parts per billion to reach a level of 1,942 ppb in the atmosphere, while N₂O concentrations increased by 1 ppb to reach 338 ppb.

In the last decade, CH₄ concentrations increased by an average of about 10.6 ppb every year, while N₂O concentrations increased at the rate of 1.07 ppb a year.

CH₄ concentrations account for 16% of the warming caused since pre-industrial times, while N₂O concentrations contributed about 6%. The rest come from other gases and processes.

Challenges

The new data from the WMO Greenhouse Gas Bulletin underline the enormity of the challenge being faced in restraining the rapid accumulation of GHGs in the atmosphere. It is not just the man-made activities, over which humans have some control, that are accentuating the problem. Natural processes are also getting destabilised under the influence of global warming, resulting in greater accumulation of these gases.

However, even in areas where they have some control, humans have been finding it extremely difficult to rein in emissions of GHGs. Global emissions are still on the rise. Ten years of the Paris Agreement have been unable to make any appreciable dent in this rising trend. The emission reduction targets for 2030 are almost certain to be missed, while global temperatures already breached the 1.5 degree Celsius mark in 2024.

Muttaqi's Deoband visit: driven by personal connection & religious diplomacy

SHUBHAJIT ROY, ASAD REHMAN & PRAGNYESH
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17

AFGHANISTAN FOREIGN Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's visit to the Darul Uloom seminary in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh last week can be seen from the prism of "religious diplomacy". Sources said that New Delhi facilitated the visit upon receiving a "request" from the Taliban leader who left India on Thursday after an unprecedented eight-day trip.

A historic madrasa

Located around 150 km from Delhi in Deoband, a small town in the Saharanpur district, Darul Uloom was established in 1866 as an Islamic alternative to British-run universities of the time.

The seminary gave birth to the influen-

tial Deobandi movement, a Sunni revivalist movement that sought to resist Western cultural and religious influences on Islam in South Asia during colonial rule. 'Deobandism' is known for its 'orthopraxy', adherence to the rationalist Hanafi school of jurisprudence, and an emphasis on piety and morality.

Within only a few years of its establishment, the influence of the Deoband madrasa spread far and wide. For more than a century, the seminary has been an "incomparable teaching institution for the religious education of the Muslims not only in the sub-continent but also throughout the Islamic world", said one official at the madrasa.

The seminary is credited for creating political consciousness among Muslims in the subcontinent, and also taking part in the freedom struggle against the British. Today, the Darul Uloom is among the most

renowned religious and academic centres in the Islamic world, considered second to only the Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

Taliban connection

After 1947, Maulana Abdul Haq, a teacher at the Deoband seminary, established the Darul Uloom Haqqania near Peshawar in what was then the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. This seminary, modelled around the one in Deoband and preaching the same brand of Sunni Islam, would go on to become the birthplace of the Taliban.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Darul Uloom Haqqania essentially became a training ground for Afghan resistance fighters. Sami ul Haq, the son of Abdul Haq who had taken over the seminary by then, essentially took the idea of a personal struggle (*jihad*) and modified it with a fo-

cus on fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Some of these resistance fighters, including Mullah Omar, Taliban's founding leader, and Jalaluddin Haqqani, who established the group's military wing, would later form the Taliban (literally "students" in Pashto).

Born in Afghanistan's Helmand Province in 1970, Muttaqi emigrated to neighbouring Pakistan after the Soviet invasion. He too would study at the Darul Uloom Haqqania. For Muttaqi, visiting the Darul Uloom Deoband was thus of

"personal" significance, although officials at the seminary say that the school in UP has consistently distanced itself from the actions of the Taliban.

Diplomatic significance

From a diplomatic perspective, New Delhi's decision to allow Muttaqi to travel

to Deoband is significant amid its own engagement with the Taliban regime in Kabul, and the nosedive in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties. New Delhi, watching the growing wedge between its western neighbours, has sought to establish the influence of Indian institutions over Islam in South Asia.

There is a message here for the Taliban, too. While Darul Uloom Deoband has insisted on gender-segregation in education, it has historically issued fatwas supporting girls' right to learn, in contrast to the actions and ideology of the Taliban.

This is not the first time that India has employed "religious diplomacy" while engaging with leaders from Islamic countries. One notable example was former Iran President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's visit to Lucknow in April 1995.

In Lucknow, a city with a large Shiite population, Rafsanjani addressed a crowd of over 10,000 at the Bara Imambara. In his

speech, he notably endorsed Indian secularism and stated that Indian Muslims should feel safe in the country. This was particularly important as this visit came just a few years after the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, an event that had strained India's relations with many Muslim-majority nations.

At the Deoband seminary, Muttaqi was greeted by a crowd of nearly 15,000 students who turned up to catch a glimpse of the leader. He delivered a 30-minute speech to a 4,000-strong crowd of students, scholars, and clerics, and had private conversations with many dignitaries.

Shah Alam, 22, a student at a nearby madrasa, was one of the many thousand who arrived at the Darul Uloom campus to see Muttaqi. He said: "*Humare liye toh wo Deoband ko maante hai, utna hi kaafi hai* (For us, it's enough that he believes in Deoband)."

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A thought for today

The ID card was launched with fantastic claims about supposed benefits. In truth, it represented the worst of govt

DAMIAN GREEN

Be Kind, EC

Young Biharis who were in state care pose a question

How do those who grew up parentless and in care homes produce documents of their parents? As TOI reported, such young adults in Bihar have requested EC to waive this requirement. The bigger point is that such a predicament shouldn't have been there in the first place. Parentless wards are nothing new across India – orphans and abandoned youngsters brought up in state care are a vulnerable group. That this has become a hindrance for some young Biharis wanting to vote says something about how rules for SIR were crafted. No authority can or should ignore social realities.



EC's rule for parents' origin to prove eligibility as a voter arguably sits uneasily with its mission of inclusion – 'no eligible voter left behind'. Repeated instances when the challenge of meeting such a demand has been raised, EC has countered all such grievances by questioning intent. But not only is much of India document-scarce, it has a large barely literate population, and a big cohort of the unlettered. There are many vulnerable groups for whom documentation is intimidating, near inaccessible, or even alien as an idea. But thanks to EC's decades of hard work, these multiple smaller groups are proud of their right to vote – it brings them dignity, a sense of belonging. It is these vulnerable groups most hit by the need to show parental proof.

As those without parents grow under state care, the transition to adulthood involves an 'aftercare' system till age 21 or 23, as the need may arise. Per a collective of care-leavers alliances, about 50,000 young adults transit out of shelters every year. For them, getting address proofs and identity documents is a struggle. EC should forthwith exempt them from the parents' papers rule. And, going forward, review this rule.

Luxe@Discount

The rich collectively bargain 'cos pickings are rich

Sodgy textbooks tell you that collective bargaining began with the industrial revolution and workers seeking to protect themselves against exploitation. You have updated the concept as more jobs now come from outside factories, mills and mines. But it's still associated with the grim fight for minimum pay, accident insurance, transparency in algorithms... So you might be shook that JITO, an Ahmedabad-based group of Jain industrialists, businessmen and professionals, has used collective bargaining to get themselves Audis, BMWs, Mercs... They jiffed top luxury brands into giving them a ₹21cr discount.



Actually, the Richie Rich are not new to this romp at all. Different Indian mercantile communities historically grew by negotiating with the colonialists as a coordinated bloc. In the West, families like the Rothschilds and Agnellis grew into their extraordinary wealth and power through mobilising oversized leverage. Family-controlled conglomerates from Japan's Mitsubishi and Mitsui to South Korea's Samsung and LG have done the same to get favourable industrial policies and trade protections. BTW, what do you think oil barons of Opec do? The Silicon Valley bros may compete aggressively with each other but they also often act collectively, as when lobbying against proposed antitrust or privacy laws. So, if in your head, it's workers, wage earners, gig hands alone who are acting as a class, maybe have a rethink.

If we book a bunch of hotel rooms for a family function, we demand a discount. If the real moneybags buy some prime real estate in London or Mumbai, they do the same. Same difference. The Rolex, Hermès and Ferraris also line up to do the tiptop for them. Jets, yachts, vineyards, yes, they negotiate great prices for all these. Because they can. Not everyone tattles like JITO though. Most golden bargains stay behind gilded curtains.

Dr AI's Ready For You

The tech's near-ready. But there's fear of fatal errors

India has a massive shortage of doctors – only 7.2 per 10,000 people, as against 7.6 in Myanmar – a country racked by civil war. Even Pakistan has 11.6, and Cuba – under US embargo since 1960 – has 95.4. Finding a doctor in rural India is much harder as the average plummets to 3 per 10,000, the same as Afghanistan. How many decades will it take to boost India's doctor strength to, say, Brazil's 23.6?

If the answer is 10 years or more, the question arises, will we need that many doctors then? That's because AI is already showing promise as a doctor's assistant, and in 10 more years it could well be 'the doctor'. Not a neurosurgeon, but your friendly neighbourhood go-to physician. Robert Wachter, chair of University of California's Department of Medicine, discusses this possibility in detail in his book *A Giant Leap*.

Wachter says this is not the first time AI has been pitched as a substitute for human doctors. Attempts were made in the 1970s too, but the technology then was so underwhelming, and the goals so ambitious – they tried to use it for diagnosis – that failure was inevitable. Then, in the last decade, when IBM's Watson supercomputer beat humans at a game of 'Jeopardy', healthcare seemed like an achievable goal. IBM invested billions, only to dump the project after its bot "prescribed a cancer patient with bleeding be given a cancer medication that can cause severe haemorrhage".

Yet, three years after ChatGPT's launch, Wachter and many other medical experts are less sceptical. Wachter reminds you that while AI today is already impressive, "it is the worst you will ever see." Which means

things will only get better from here. Sensing an opportunity, hundreds of startups have entered the field, and some, like Hippocratic AI, started by Indian-origin Munjal Shah, already seem to have a business plan.

Because AI excels at learning from patterns, give it millions of patient files to learn from, and it will correlate symptoms to likely causes: "One study found it could pass a key medical student licensing exam," says Wachter. On another difficult test, it "performed at a level equal to the best faculty diagnosticians". So, AI can "think" like a doctor, but can it show empathy like a human? Wachter points to a 2023 study in which AI's responses were judged to

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



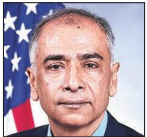
be more empathetic than those given by actual physicians. So, why hasn't AI disrupted medicine already? The motivation to do so is very strong when America is spending 20% of its GDP on healthcare, leaving relatively little for infra, and India is struggling with rising healthcare costs and doctor shortages. Wachter says it's because of problems like bias and hallucinations that AI is susceptible to. One wrong diagnosis could mean curtains for a startup. That's why, for now, AI is being used for simpler but time-consuming tasks like patient record summarisation.

The holy grail, of course, is diagnosis, but that won't happen until companies are 100% confident about their bots' capabilities. For the foreseeable future, AI will only be used to reduce doctors' bureaucratic burden – documentation, etc – so that they have more time for patients. As for replacing doctors, it won't happen anytime soon, although roles like radiologist and pathologist could start disappearing in 10 years.

What The Tellis Case Tells Us

One, his arrest is part of a growing American scrutiny of Chinese influence peddling in Washington. Two, he's served in US govt, and therefore should have been aware of document handling rules. Three, a strong FBI indictment doesn't guarantee conviction, even for espionage charges

Amit Gupta



The arrest of Ashley Tellis for allegedly passing secrets to the Chinese has been met with glee by some in India. On LinkedIn one Indian academic was petty enough to describe Tellis as a windbag who got his just rewards. The anger against Tellis stems from a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* where he is critical of Indian foreign policy. While I have often disagreed with his writings, I have respected his scholarship and opinions. So what should Indians understand about this case?

First, when Tellis came to India in the early 2000s as a special assistant to Ambassador Robert Blackwill the then BJP govt gave him

Given the sensitivity of contacts with Chinese officials, the question arises did Tellis inform his employers in the US department of war about this. It is also not clear under what circumstances 'Top Secret' documents obtained by FBI in his house were acquired by him. These are questions courts will examine. His detention is part of years-long investigation of many individuals that has seen 162 arrests

access to policymakers so he could write a book on India's nuclear weapons programme. What emerged was a volume that was favourable to India's nuclear aspirations.

After returning to Washington, Tellis was appointed the Tata Chair for Strategic Studies at the Carnegie Endowment and in recent times his interests had shifted from South Asian studies to examining the US-China relationship. Contrary to what has been written in the press, Tellis was very anti-Chinese because the prevailing winds in Washington were negative towards China. As part of his anti-China writings, he had begun to be critical of Indian foreign policy. He felt India's approach should have been aligned more closely to American

interests. Several academics disagreed with his analysis but no one accused him of ulterior motives. So what then is the case about?

Since the first Trump administration, as well as during the Biden term, there have been concerns in American governmental circles about Chinese attempts to penetrate the bureaucracy and decision-making process. This led in part to cases being filed against people of Chinese origin under the China Initiative created by the Trump administration in 2018. The



Imaging: Jatin Kumar

statistics on successful conviction were not high because of the 162 indictments made, only 45 were convicted at trial or by entering a guilty plea deal. One classic case is that of Taiwanese-American Wen Ho Lee who was charged with 59 counts of espionage and eventually pleaded guilty to the mishandling of official documents. He did not serve any jail time.

The fact is that in the American legal system a very

‘My Relationship With A Swimsuit...It’s Complicated’

There’s sexism and bad body image and many can’t swim. There’re ladies getting into pools in salwar kameez. Forget all that. What women got to do is have fun, be real and live for their own gaze

Radhika Vaz



With holiday season upon us many are taking off for the sun, the sea, the sand and the swimsuit horror of places like Goa. I personally have some holiday plans that involve a beach though until a few years ago I loathed packing for any trip that involved a swimsuit. And by the way who even named it 'suit' – it's not a suit. It's a terror inducing bit of cloth designed to discomfort me.

Maybe all this paranoia is because I am 52, female and Indian and for my demographic, body shame is practically mandatory. By that I do not mean just the feeling of inadequacy about the shape of things but also the moral burden of 'showing' myself in front of the mens. My generation could wear shorts that show leg, halter tops that show shoulder, and saris that show midriff – but nothing that would show all three at once. A swimsuit would be a step too far.

Bad body image and sexism did a number on me but I thought swimsuits were stupid for another reason: I didn't swim. Why on earth would anyone not engaged in the act of swimming need to be wearing a swimsuit? I feel the same about yoga pants for anything other than the practice of yoga, cowboy boots not used in actual cow herding, that annoying cycling shorts rage from the late 1980s that made a massive comeback thanks to the Kardashians and not thanks to cycles. If I didn't swim, why would I need a swimsuit.

And while I think my logic is flawless, I do love a pool-party so I knew I had to kill this deeply ingrained self-consciousness in me. I needed to get over myself and into a swimsuit. But how! There was so much baggage in the way. Let me explain.

I stand strong in accepting my body. It is not perfect and I do not care if other people agree wholeheartedly with me. But what I never want is for them to think that I might be entertaining the idea that my body is flawless. That by wearing a swimsuit I am transmitting that I think I am hot or sexy or built or whatever the word is that we use to describe women who are used in swimsuit advertisements to fool people like me into believing



Image: AI

'oh yes it will look exactly like that on me'. My level of over-thinking is bewildering even to me.

Of course, my peer group doesn't make it easier.

Of Life And Love
STORIES OF THE WAY WE ARE

It's like we all made some unspoken pact that swimsuits are fine for ages 0 to 30. After which we conceal our post-partum/post-youth bodies under kaftans, the lengths of which are inversely proportional to the rating we give our legs. And then, as soon as we hit 65 we are once again OK'ed for public consumption because now it is taken for granted that

we can't possibly be hot, sexy or built let alone think that of ourselves so swimsuits, even itty-bitty ones, are ironic.

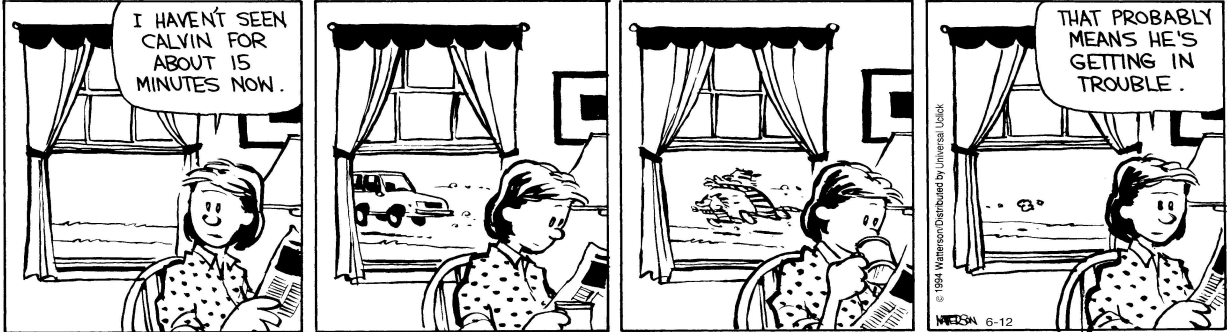
I so desperately wanted to be the woman who looks at a swimsuit and thinks 'oh I like that one' and not 'oh my god what would I look like in that one' that a few years ago I learnt to swim. I joined a children's swim class, and along with my 6-year-old friends was taught the crawl. With my newfound skill I am over my fear of swimsuits. No longer do I linger pool-side, I am now in there swimming laps. Doing the activity my outfit was designed for gives me all the spunk I was previously lacking. In fact, I recently ordered a very expensive two-piece because I deserve it. Deserving expensive clothing was another thing I thought of as stupid. But I guess we all change eventually.

Through all of my swimsuit drama I learnt something about myself. Just because I don't cover my head doesn't mean I am not wearing a ghoongat. For all my high-handed feminist chitchat I care how I am perceived. I used to scoff at the women who sometimes see on holiday getting into hotel pools in salwar kameez and yes, it is a little odd but at least they were having fun and being real. I was the fake, nervous, miserable thing in my transparent cover-up. Worrying so much about what people might be thinking about what I was thinking that I actually learnt how to swim so I could justify my body in a swimsuit.

Women are told how to talk, walk and dress from an early age. Influencers describe in detail how to cover, disguise, enhance or distract other people from our body parts that aren't tight. Yet we are expected to have high self-esteem and be confident. Talk about a paradox. So here is an idea. Let's make a new pact, I'll go first and you repeat after me: If beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, then let that beholder be me.

The writer is a standup comedian

Calvin & Hobbes



Amitava Basu

Observed in Bengali households the night before fervent blaze of Kali Puja, *Bhoot Chaturdashi* has an unmatched gravitas. Often misunderstood as merely a night of ghosts, it is in truth a sacred pause. It is a moment where the veil between the seen and the unseen becomes thin, allowing for deep introspection. This is not a celebration of fear, but a meditation on continuity. It is a reminder that spiritual journey begins not with dramatic gestures, but with quiet rituals rooted in memory, healing, and humility.

At the heart of the observance lies a pair of ancient gestures, each flowing into the other like twin streams of the same river – one luminous, and other earthy. The lighting of fourteen earthen lamps in the corners of the home is far

from superstition. It is an act of remembrance and reverence. Each flame becomes a beacon, guiding ancestors back to the hearth. In this simple act, the invisible scaffolding of our existence is honoured, acknowledging that our lives are not isolated moments, but chapters in an eternal lineage. These lamps illuminate more than physical spaces. They light up the mind's darker recesses, dispelling ignorance, fear, and inner shadow. *Kathopanishad* warns, those who dwell in ignorance, mistaking it for wisdom, wander endlessly in darkness. These flames are not merely for the departed; they burn for the living, quietly urging to walk the path of dharma, to reflect, and correct course before the final curtain descends. Each lamp is also an offering to Yam, cosmic

keeper of karm, gently reminding that righteous living is not optional but essential.

Running parallel to this luminous act is a ritual that speaks of wisdom of the earth. It is the consumption of fourteen varieties of leafy greens. On the surface, it appears to be a dietary custom shaped by the changing season, designed to strengthen the body as it faces the onset of winter. But there is deeper spiritual dimension. These greens, drawn from the soil, become instruments of purification that cleanse not just the body



THE SPEAKING TREE

but the inner vessel, making it less vulnerable to subtle afflictions carried by negative energies. This practice is not a denial of the physical in favour of the spiritual. It is a holistic embrace of both. The Gita echoes this harmony: for

Sacredspace

Monism and dualism are essentially the same...As dualists hold the Father and Son to be two, monists hold them to be really one. Dualism is in nature, in manifestation, and monism is pure spirituality in essence.

Swami Vivekananda

Bhoot Chaturdashi: Lamps, Greens, And Shakti

one whose eating, recreation, and sleep are balanced, yog becomes destroyer of sorrow.

Together, these two rituals – one of light, the other of sustenance – form a coherent spiritual tapestry. The Bengali household, on this night, does not merely seek to keep ghosts at bay. It prepares itself, with devotion and mindfulness, to receive the intense, transformative force of Mother Kali the following day.

The night becomes a threshold, a liminal space where the past and present meet, where remembrance becomes a form of prayer and self-care, a sacred obligation. This is the silent eloquence of Bhoot Chaturdashi that spiritual awakening begins at home, not in grand declarations but in the quiet lighting of lamps, mindful offering of food, and deep inner knowing that our journey is never truly solitary.

Will AI pay off the West’s debts?



KENNETH ROGOFF

There is no question that artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the global economy at unprecedented speed. But will it rescue rich countries from intensifying debt pressures, particularly as rapidly aging populations increase pressure on benefit programmes? If so, could these countries safely run even larger deficits, effectively borrowing against ultra-rich future gener-

ations? No one should bet the farm on it. To be sure, a wildly upbeat assessment of AI’s potential impact on economic growth has propelled asset markets higher over the last few years. This is especially true for euphoric equity markets, which continue to rally despite political paralysis in France, a government shutdown and an all-out assault on central-bank independence in the United States, and an exodus of high-skilled talent from the United Kingdom. Although I have long argued that AI will eventually solve the problem of advanced economies’ anaemic growth, I have also cautioned that several possible obstacles could slow down the pace of this transformation. Among the many material, legal, economic, and social factors to reckon with are electricity supply; intellectual-property rights; a lack of skilled AI workers; and the need to establish a comprehensive framework governing how chatbots com-

municate and exchange information, including some kind of price mechanism. AI companies have invested vast sums in the race to dominate the market (should governments allow it), seemingly willing to haemorrhage money in exchange for users and information. But eventually, probably in the not-too-distant future, these firms will need to develop revenue streams, most likely through advertising, like social-media companies before them. Although US President Donald Trump’s administration has signalled full speed ahead on AI, knotty questions involving how moral judgement is coded into these models — currently the remit of a small group of developers — will ultimately be taken up by the US Congress and the courts, as well as by authorities in other countries. But the most pushback will likely come from hundreds of millions of displaced white-collar workers, who are set

to become the newest political cause, just as manufacturing workers are today and as farm workers were in the 1960s and 1970s. Anyone who works with a computer is vulnerable to automation. The idea that a handful of firms can replace a large portion of the workforce without massive political upheaval is sheer fantasy. Barring some dramatic authoritarian turn, unrest is all but guaranteed. This will provide ample fodder for the Zohran Mamdani of the world (Mr Mamdani, a 33-year-old socialist, is the front-runner to become New York City’s next mayor in November), especially because AI seems to be eliminating jobs for younger workers. Then there is the inconvenient truth that many cutting-edge AI applications are in the military domain, which could trigger a massive arms race and even lead to a proliferation of wars fought with drone armies and other AI-backed weapons systems. Geopolitical fracturing and conflict are harmful to long-term growth and as likely to drain tax revenues as boost them. AI

could also empower smaller states and terrorist groups by effectively giving them access to leading physicists and biologists at the press of a button. Finally, just because Mr Trump, an unrepentant climate-change denier, is back in the White House does not mean that the threats posed by global warming have disappeared. The costs of unfettered climate change are set to rise sharply over the coming decades — unless, that is, our AI overlords manage to solve the problem (although they may conclude that the solution involves having far fewer people). The idea that, following a long and painful transition, the arrival of artificial general intelligence (AGI) will solve all the rich world’s problems is hyperbole. Even if AGI supercharges growth, it will almost certainly lead to a much higher share of capital in output, and a correspondingly lower share for labour. Indeed, the stock market is booming precisely because firms expect labour costs to shrink. Given this, the high profit expectations embedded in soaring

equity prices cannot be understood as translating one for one into overall growth. That brings us back to government debt. There is no reason to suppose that AI-driven growth will lead to an equivalent increase in government tax revenues, even though that might have been a reasonable assumption to make in the past. After all, capital is much harder to tax than labour, partly because it tends to be more concentrated and politically powerful, and partly because it can move freely across borders. Of course, higher tariff walls could prevent this capital flight, but any such strategy would ultimately be self-defeating. So yes, the AI transformation is coming, and has already contributed to a new arms race between the US and China. But it would be reckless to assume that advanced economies can rely on AI to resolve budget problems that human politicians cannot. The author is professor of economics and public policy at Harvard University © Project Syndicate, 2025



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The AI gold rush



VIEWPOINT
DEVANGSHU DATTA

This week, Google committed \$15 billion over the next five years to build a data centre in Visakhapatnam. This AI-focused hub will generate nearly 200,000 new jobs. It would have a non-trivial impact on India’s gross domestic product or GDP, which is roughly \$4 trillion. Other global multinational corporations (MNCs), such as Amazon and Microsoft, and local giants like Airtel and Reliance are also investing heavily in data centres. The aggregated data centre buildout therefore will be very significant. Similar stories are playing out elsewhere. Jason Furman, a Harvard economics professor, estimates that AI-related investments accounted for 92 per cent of the United States’ GDP growth in the first six months of 2025. The money went into data centres, including networking equipment, servers, cooling systems, dedicated fibre optic connections, and power capacity. But while the investments are very real, nobody has a clear idea of how much AI will contribute to overall growth in the long term. Indeed, national accounting methods and norms may make it hard to accurately calculate this. The guesstimates are all over the place. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) says AI will affect 40 per

cent of global jobs. It will increase global GDP by \$7 trillion (about 7 per cent) over the next 10 years, says Goldman Sachs. It could grow the global economy by between \$17.1 and \$25.6 trillion, according to McKinsey — that’s more than China’s GDP. These are the conservative projections. In September, the NITI Aayog estimated that AI could drive productivity and efficiency and contribute an extra \$500 to \$600 billion to the Indian economy by 2035, over and above trend growth rates without AI. The largest impacts would be in information technology (IT), finance and finance-related services, but there would be AI-driven growth acceleration across many industries. Also in September, a three-person report from Goldman Sachs estimated AI-related activity had contributed \$160 billion to “true GDP” in the US since the advent of ChatGPT in late 2022. The research draws on company reports and government data, and is focused on investments in AI infrastructure to the tune of \$400 billion over that period by US firms. After subtracting for imports and adjusting for inflationary spikes, Goldman Sachs reckoned AI contributed \$160 billion to US GDP from 2023 to June 2025. But much of that did not show up in official calculations since it had an “intermediate impact” and only final demand is reflected in official data. Official AI-related activity over 2023-25 was calculated to be \$45 billion, which is just 0.1 per cent annualised contribution to a \$29 trillion economy. Other reports from the US also point to enormous recent investments in AI infrastructure. Capital expenditure on AI contributed 1.1 per cent to GDP growth between January and June 2025. But the “true” contribution may

not be accurately reflected in the GDP statistics due to the intermediate nature of contributions to growth. Going beyond physical and tech-related investments, what is crucial is the positive externalities from deploying AI across economies. All those data centres are expected to drive innovations, productivity and efficiency gains in multiple sectors, and contribute to basic science research. Expectations are very high, which is why Nvidia and OpenAI command the valuations they do, and everybody is prepared to invest large sums in AI. If those expectations are belied, this could turn out to be a bubble. All those data centres might then become the digital equivalent of physical bridges to nowhere — shiny artefacts that serve little real purpose. Nobel Laureate Daron Acemoglu has an interesting and nuanced take on this in a recent paper “The Simple Macroeconomics of AI”. He estimates that only about 5 per cent of all current tasks performed in the US labour market can be profitably performed by AI over the next 10 years. While AI may perform many more tasks than this small subset, cost-benefit analysis suggests that it would be more expensive to implement and deploy AI than to continue using existing non-AI modes for most tasks. His guesstimate is that AI would thus add around 1 per cent per annum to US GDP growth. This is significant but far less earth-shaking than most expectations. If Dr Acemoglu is right, and similar effects hold across the globe, we could see a cooling off in AI investments as the reality becomes obvious. The other possibility is that Dr Acemoglu is wrong and he’s severely underestimated the positive nature of AI’s impact. That is what every investor is betting on.

Gaza truce will fail without US troops

Controlling the southern half of Gaza, disarming Hamas bitter-enders and providing humanitarian aid and medical support — all while putting into motion the first steps of reconstruction — will be a herculean task

When I led United States European Command from 2009 to 2013, Israel and the Levant were part of my geographic area of responsibility. I often went to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, the West Bank and, yes, the Gaza Strip. It was a daunting part of my remit, and I sought advice from a longtime mentor: Henry Kissinger, who knew a thing or two about the Middle East. He gave me a great deal of advice, but one thing he said has really stuck with me — and I think is very much of the moment. “The key to understanding the Middle East,” he said, “is understanding and accepting that every solution is merely the admission ticket to the next problem.” Even as President Donald Trump takes a deserved victory lap for working out a ceasefire and hostage release, he and his team need to bear that maxim in mind. Do the US, and its allies from the Arab world and Europe, have the required determination to buy that admission ticket and help implement the tenuous ceasefire? Are they willing to offer the required assistance — perhaps including blood and treasure — to help forge a permanent peace? Mr Trump has been clear that he is not enthusiastic about overseas troop deployments in general, and the use of US boots on the ground in Gaza may be a bridge too far. But there are lots of options for Pentagon planners short of that. Step one is actually not in Gaza, but at the US Embassy and consular posts in Israel. While the embassy in Jerusalem has a contingent of US troops assigned to it — for protection and to liaison with the Israelis and Palestinians — that force needs to be significantly increased for a potential operational surge. Adding a new diplomatic Joint Task Force (JTF), led by a one-star foreign-affairs officer and under the authority of Ambassador Mike Huckabee, would make sense. Sending five additional expert planners, one from each of

the Pentagon’s services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Space Force), and a couple of dozen supporting senior enlisted troops would be a good complement. Similarly, the in-country US security coordinator, a three-star lieutenant general posting, will need reinforcements. That team’s mission is to provide cooperation and communications between the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) in the West Bank and the Israel Defense Forces. The Palestinian Authority is already indicating readiness to take on tasks in Gaza, including operating the crucial Rafah gate crossing. Since elements of the PASF will presumably have a central role in any Gaza peace-keeping mission, increased coordination with the IDF will be required, despite the current high tensions. Thus the addition of several dozen US mid-grade officers as trainers seems prudent. Canada already contributes troops to the security-coordination team and could send more. Additionally, the US intelligence agencies (Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation overseas teams, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, Justice Department and others) should each send at least one top analyst for monitoring and providing early warning of backsliding by Hamas, which is all too predictable. For increased force protection, the Pentagon can deploy Marine Fleet Antiterrorism Security Teams, or FASTs, made up of several hundred Marines in half a dozen platoons. Whenever a crisis loomed in the region during my years at Central Command, I deployed the FAST teams, including in Libya when the war there ramped up in the early 2010s. These are elite groups prepared to “snap in” with embassy security forces. At least two FAST teams should be headed into theater now, one to be based in Jerusalem, the other in Tel Aviv.



JAMES STAVRIDIS

Lights, camera, Diwali

EYE CULTURE
ATANU BISWAS

A scene from the Diwali festivities — the fireworks, in particular — filmed in Calcutta was briefly featured in Jean Renoir’s 1951 drama romance film *The River* (French: *Le Fleuve*). Diwali was referred to as the “Hindu festival of light — hundreds and thousands of little lamps” therein. Young Satyajit Ray assisted Renoir on the film, and a Eurocentric view of Renoir might have helped Ray in his future endeavours. Nonetheless, it was perhaps among the earliest (if not the earliest) representations of Diwali for a global audience. Numerous Indian films and television series have featured Diwali over the years, many of which have also gained popularity outside India. However, the 2006 episode, “Diwali”, of the iconic American comedy TV series *The Office*, viewed live by 8.8 million people, may have been the most prominent cultural focus ever on Diwali in America. It was aired 12 days after the actual Diwali holiday. In the film, the Indian-American culture of Mindy Kaling’s character, Kelly Kapoor, is explored. Kelly extends an invitation to her family’s house for a Diwali celebration to the whole staff of the Dunder Mifflin office in Scranton. However, Michael Scott, played by Steve Carell, refers to Diwali as “the Hindu Halloween.” Funny circumstances and cultural misunderstandings result from this misconception, supported by Kelly’s own less-than-clear explanation! Nevertheless, the

episode was crucial in bringing Diwali to American attention. Since then, many have attempted to portray the annual celebration, often in a holiday-themed format but with added cultural sensitivity. NBC’s 2010 sitcom *Outsourced* featured a Diwali-themed episode titled “Home” for the Diwalidays, where an American novelty company has just outsourced its order processing to a call centre in Mumbai. The story revolves around Todd Dempsey, the American manager, who finds it difficult to comprehend the Diwali holiday and initially prevents his Indian employees from celebrating it, leading to a dispute that they eventually settle. The conflict between Indian and American cultures is highlighted throughout the episode. Disney’s 2020 animated series *Mira, the Royal Detective*, includes a special Diwali episode as well as a song called *Diwali*. While the song perfectly captures the festive spirit with its lyrics about feasts, family, and décor, the episode follows Mira as she searches for missing lamp oil to save the celebrations. Well, America has already been enlightened by the Indian festival of lights, as was seen in an episode about Diwali on the comedy-drama television series *And Just Like That*, a 2021 relaunch of the cult classic *Sex and the City*. Sarah Jessica Parker’s character, Carrie Bradshaw, goes shopping for Diwali while wearing a lehenga, which she mistakenly calls a saree. She enters a high-end South Asian boutique to help her realtor, Seema Patel, find a Diwali outfit. “Okay, these clothes, this

holiday, I need to know everything about it,” she says. Sarita Choudhury’s character, Seema, responds by taking a little breath and reciting a well-known explanation: “In India, Diwali is a Hindu celebration of light triumphing over dark.” However, many critics questioned how Carrie could remain blissfully unaware of the annual Diwali celebration despite being 55 and residing in New York City, home to one of the largest concentrations of South Asians in America and where Diwali is so significant that it would eventually become a citywide public school holiday in 2023. Then, during the Diwali celebration in the 2025 BBC drama series *Virdee*, Harry Virdee, the protagonist, tries to reconnect with his estranged Sikh family. To portray Bradford’s culture — a city with a sizable South Asian population — Virdee incorporates Diwali celebrations. Overall, during the past 20 years, international TV series certainly helped illuminate the Diwali lights outside India to some extent. However, *The Office* episode “Diwali” was the epitome of this, even if Kelly Kapoor was neither the de facto tour guide to her heritage nor the episode an Indian Culture 101 lesson. Nevertheless, those unfamiliar with the festival were immediately intrigued, while the enticing hints of the festivities appealed to those who already knew it. It continues to rank among Hollywood’s most deft depictions of Indian culture. The author is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

Public criticism of predecessors



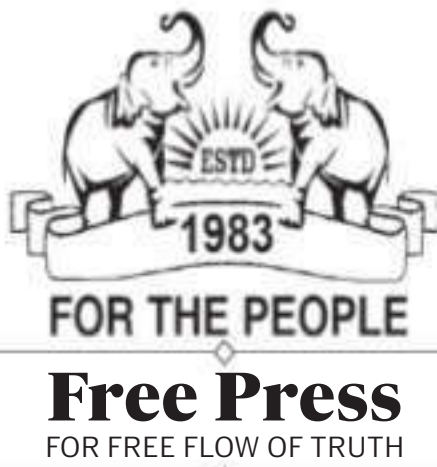
THE WISE LEADER
R GOPALAKRISHNAN

Leadership is complex. Trainers draw lessons from other leaders’ experiences and convert them into memorable rules — but they are mere mantras. For every rule articulated, there is an exception. For example, Steve Jobs of Apple fame was a Stanford dropout, wore turtlenecks, and was rude to colleagues. Aspiring entrepreneurs should not emulate these. Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos tried but is now languishing in federal prison. Despite this there are best practices. Every leader learns about how and what to speak publicly about predecessors and present colleagues. In one social-media post recently, I read a view (I thoroughly disagree) that JRD Tata was a fabulous and ethical leader but left a “leaky and unstable umbrella” for Ratan Tata. All leaders hand over unresolved problems to the successor, apart from a good record of accomplishments. What we should

think about is public disparaging of the predecessor. Does public criticism matter? Why would a leader do so? We see this occurrence both in national politics and in companies. Psychology suggests that it may work to some extent in politics but is rarely effective in a corporate setting. Adolf Hitler was fiercely critical of his predecessors in the Weimar Republic. He based much of his rise to power on blaming past leaders for Germany’s problems and made tall promises to return national greatness under his own rule. Of course, he failed to do so. Franklin Delano Roosevelt publicly criticised his immediate predecessor, Herbert Hoover, for his failure to address the Great Depression. Mercifully he did not criticise his long-ago predecessors dating back to the time he was born, which some political leaders do. FDR is thought to be a very successful American President. He was elected four times in a row. On September 30, a novice American Defence Secretary, Pete Hegseth, reportedly slammed his “fat generals” on fitness and grooming standards. “No more beards, long hair, superficial individual expression ... we are going to cut our hair, shave our beards, and adhere to standards,” he lectured to hundreds of generals and admirals. Then followed a

speech by his President: “If you don’t like what I am saying, you can leave the room. Of course, there goes your rank, there goes your future.” What do you think all of this did to the morale of the senior most generals? What about companies? On September 4, at a Barclays Investors conference, Unilever’s new chief executive officer (CEO), Fernando Fernandez, was reported to have stated that of his 200 top leaders, he would replace “a quarter to stamp out pockets of mediocrity. Unilever is a bloated organisation with an inconsistent performance culture ... we have lost focus on volume growth”. He may be right, and outsiders cannot judge. However, his predecessors never used such demeaning language though they too talked about organisational restructuring, agility, and responsiveness. In April 2023, Clearlink CEO James Clarke came under fire for criticisms he made publicly, questioning the ethics of his company’s remote workers and working mothers. Later he claimed that rudeness was not at all his intention. Why do leaders speak disparagingly of predecessors or publicly rebuke their own top team? The practice might appear to justify new initiatives but is widely regarded as an ineffective leadership strategy. Narcissistic leaders use blame-shifting to protect and inflate their self-worth. Some

attribute every grave ill to their predecessors, and in extreme cases, they slam their long-ago predecessors. They are driven by insecurity, a need for control, a longing to leave behind a distinct legacy, and personal ego. Such an approach also helps to create a “saviour narrative” where the predecessors are presented as having done such a hopeless job that they bequeathed the tough task of salvaging the situation to them. Constant griping at predecessors helps some leaders to feel more secure and elevate themselves in the eyes of their team. Blaming predecessors or current colleagues also reflects a lack of emotional maturity. Occasionally a predecessor criticises a successor publicly as when Jack Welch did in 2008 about his hand-picked successor, Jeff Immelt, breaking the golden rule of predecessors avoiding criticising later leaders. Barring in clubs, cooperative societies, and politics, public criticism is hardly reported among companies. This does not mean that India is free from this malaise; maybe it happens but it is not reported. Continuous care must be taken to minimise its incidence in the future. The author’s latest book, *JAM-SETJI Tata—Powerful Learnings for Corporate Success*, is co-authored with Harish Bhat. rgopal@themindworks.me



Tired forests release carbon

The startling and counterintuitive finding by Australian researchers, that the meagre tropical rainforests in the dry continent are turning into net emitters of carbon rather than acting as a sink, is a warning sign for all countries. What the scientists at Western Sydney University have found is that trees in the exhausted forests are dying at a higher rate due to heat, releasing stored carbon into the atmosphere, and more aggressive cyclones are felling trees at an unsustainable rate; regeneration efforts are simply unable to keep up. The research findings published in Nature underscore several home truths in the fight to stop dangerous climate change, the most important of which is to cut the rate at which globe-warming gases are emitted by major economies. Forests are simply not able to withstand the rising heat. Capping the warming is crucial, therefore, to give the world a chance to stabilise its efforts to mitigate climate change and vigorously pursue initiatives that capture the existing stock of atmospheric CO₂. There is little time left, and the Australian findings point to the fallacy of pursuing an incremental approach to stop global warming when the need is for radical cuts. The 2025 Forest Declaration Assessment, produced by three dozen credentialed organisations including IUCN, estimates that 8.1 million hectares of the world's forests were destroyed just in 2024, 63% higher than the limit set for deforestation; short-termism to expand commercial agriculture, such as palm oil that fuels cheap processed food, is responsible for a large part of this loss. In addition, 8.8 million ha. of tropical forests were degraded in one year, greatly reducing their productivity. Mindless removal of old-growth forests is a big blow inflicted on future generations, who must face a warmer world without the protective natural hedge available to those living in the present. If there is a single message from the Australian research finding, it is that forests are falling victim at an accelerating scale to mindless economic policies. Contrary to their resolutions, countries are working at cross purposes to the UN climate change goal of ending deforestation by 2030, agreed in Glasgow four years ago; unthinking consumerism is making things worse. A rational response to this unfolding catastrophe should lead to a better accounting system for economies in which losses are counted using the same methods as gains from commerce. The economist Amartya Sen called this the dashboard approach, in which environmental losses appear accurately. Insights such as those available from Australia must give pause to myopic plans to cut down forests to create infrastructure that could well be built in already degraded locations. India's Great Nicobar project to build ports, airports and shipping terminals in a pristine island, wiping out vast ancient forests, is a case in point.

If there is a single message from the Australian research finding, it is that forests are falling victim to mindless economic policies.

Trump preaches democracy

Political developments in Venezuela in recent months do not redound to the credit of that troubled nation. They do not show its democratic system in a good light. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to opposition leader Maria Corina Machado has shone an international spotlight on the charge that President Nicolás Maduro stole last year's election. There is little doubt that Maduro, whose regime has presided over political repression and economic collapse, lacks both the moral and, perhaps, even the legal authority to continue in office. Ideally, he should step down and allow an elected leader to take charge. Alas, that seldom happens anywhere in the world, least of all in Latin America.

That said, how Venezuela resolves its political crisis is a matter that must be left to the Venezuelan people. There are democratic ways to protest against the continuance of an illegitimate ruler; and nations in the neighbourhood can certainly exert pressure—diplomatic, moral or economic—to ensure democratic norms are upheld. In the extreme, they may even choose to limit cooperation with Maduro's regime, provided their actions do not harm the Venezuelan people or compromise regional stability. What is totally unacceptable, however, is the meddlesome role of the United States in what is clearly an internal Venezuelan affair. President Donald Trump's administration has been needlessly interfering, escalating tensions through sanctions and what is effectively a naval blockade in the name of fighting drug trafficking.

As reports suggest, the rumour mill in Caracas is abuzz with talks that the US may mount a military operation to overthrow Maduro. Washington's own officials have fuelled the speculation by describing the Venezuelan President as a "narco-terrorist" and doubling the reward for his capture to a staggering \$50 million.

Such actions are not only provocative; they are dangerous too. America is not the world's super-cop, entitled to decide which governments should stand and which should fall. The world has seen this movie before—most tragically in Latin America itself. It was Washington that orchestrated the fall of Salvador Allende in Chile, crushing the first democratically elected socialist government in the region. Later, in the name of "democratising" nations, it devastated Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving behind chaos and bloodshed. The world has learnt to dread the word 'democracy' when it falls from American lips. For all his bluster, Trump himself tried to cling to power after losing an election, a fact that disqualifies him from lecturing others on democracy.

The US would do well to stop treating Latin America as its backyard and allow the people of Venezuela to determine their destiny—free from coercion, interference, or the shadow of foreign boots on their soil. In other words, it should stop interfering.



Head On

RASHME SEHGAL

Will the women's vote prove decisive in the upcoming Bihar elections? Will they prove kingmakers? During the Bihar assembly elections of 2020, female voters had risen to 59.7 per cent compared to the male voter turnout of 54.6 per cent. This trend of higher women voters has been witnessed in the state for more than a decade now, and their vote definitely helped seal Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's victory.

But the situation is likely to change in November. The final electoral roll figures released by the Election Commission, following the contentious Special Intensive Revision drive, show that from the 7.43 crore voters, there are approximately around 3.5 crore women voters and 3.92 crore men voters. This works out to 892 women for every 1000 men. This is surprising because between 2015 and 2020, the number of women voters rose by 39.62 lakh as opposed to male voters, whose figure rose by 34.42 lakh.

Despite caste playing a key role in Bihar elections, there is little doubt that women's increased participation in electoral politics has

primarily been propelled by Nitish Kumar, who, since 2005, has taken key steps to ensure women's participation in decision-making at the village and panchayat levels. In fact, the last two elections were won by Nitish Babu on the ban on the sale and consumption of liquor across the state. Nitish had tied prohibition to women's empowerment, arguing that women suffered the most because of alcohol abuse.

Nitish Kumar's personal connect with the female voter is in many ways far more intense and deep-rooted than that of any other politician in India. Twenty-five years ago, he began cultivating women voters by distributing bicycles and uniforms to school-going girls. A move that was greatly appreciated by womenfolk. These girls today have become entrepreneurs and mothers, and their emotional connect with him has remained through all these years.

And so, despite the BJP-led NDA alliance winning both the Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra elections on the back of their Ladi Behana Yojna and the Ladki Bahin Yojana schemes launched a few months prior to the assembly elections, Kumar's strategy has paid off

because his bond has been more far-reaching with a greater impact.

A recent poll has indicated a dip in the Chief Minister's popularity amongst women, many of whom believe he should step aside and allow younger leadership to take over. It could well be the main reason why his son Nishant is being groomed to take on a more dominant political role. But though Nishant is spending a great deal of time in the Samastipur constituency under the guidance of the state minister of finance, he is not making a political debut in these elections.

In the upcoming elections, Kumar remains very much in the fray, and his recent announcement to transfer the first instalment of Rs 10,000 crore under the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana for women entrepreneurs is another shrewd step to continue his hold on the women voters. During the next six months, another Rs 2 lakh will be transferred to each woman entrepreneur. The total cost of this scheme is expected to be around Rs 21,000 crore.

Other schemes announced by him this September include Rs 5000 crore to provide 125 MW of free electricity to 1.89 crore con-

sumers, a social security pension scheme set to benefit 1.11 crore people and an increase in honorariums to Jeevika, Anganwadi and AASHA workers. This will cost the exchequer another Rs 9,300 crore. Obviously, money is of little consequence to our politicians because these newly announced allotments will involve an annual expenditure of Rs 40,000 crore for a state whose annual revenue is around Rs 56,000 crore.

Opposition leader Tejashwi Yadav questioned how Kumar hoped to fulfil these promises since the cost of these freebies is a staggering Rs 7 lakh crore. But he also did not waste too much time in announcing that if the Mahagatbandan came to power, he would ensure that one member of every family in Bihar was given a government job. Obviously, he had not considered the economics of this proposal, as the state can hardly afford this either.

Social activist Shabnam Hashmi has spent the last five weeks travelling across the length and breadth of Bihar, talking to women in both towns and villages. She has painted a grim picture of their condition, pointing out how they are reeling under loans with goondas coming

to their homes and taking away their possessions if they are not in a position to pay their haftas'. In many areas (especially north Bihar), women have been found to be living in dire poverty, and many of them complain that violence levels against them and their children have increased exponentially. A frequently voiced complaint by the women was how they were expected to pay bribes at every step, whether to get a ration card made or even to get an additional name added to the ration card. "Cases of suicide and mass migration amongst women have also risen," said Shabnam Hashmi, who insists the "narrative around Nitish Kumar's women-friendly schemes is a big hoax."

There is little doubt that a generational shift has taken place in Bihar, with both Tejashwi Yadav and Chirag Paswan being the torchbearers of this change. Prashant Kishor does not come from a political family, but through his Jan Suraj party, he has projected himself as a reformer-politician. The dice is up in the air. It is anybody's guess who the winner will be.

Rashme Sehgal is an author and an independent journalist.

Annual report on ranking of Higher Education Institutions

Though India rankings have now become a critical factor for HEIs in the country, they continue to have some significant limitations



Learning Curve

VRIYENDRA

Since 2016, the Ministry of Education at the Centre has been publishing an annual ranking of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the country, in different disciplines, under the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). I propose to summarise the NIRF report, 2025, released in September 2025, in two parts. Part 1 sums up the basic framework of this report and my brief assessment of this framework. In part 2, I will sum up the major findings of this report.

The 2025 report is the tenth edition of this exercise. Throughout this period, the scope of rankings has been gradually broadened to include additional categories and subject areas, leading to a consistent increase in both the number of participating institutions and those ranked across disciplines and categories. The number of institutions has increased from 3565 in 2016 to 7692 in 2025.

The established practice of providing a comprehensive 'overall' rank is maintained and complemented by specific rankings within nine key categories and eight subject areas. In addition, this year, a new parameter has been added based on institutional contributions to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to reflect their broader societal impact. Also, negative marks are

assigned to institutions based on the number of retracted publications.

To be eligible for ranking, an institution must have a total intake of at least 1000 students in UG and PG courses, except for a few highly focused institutions. Further, at least three batches of full-time students must have graduated from an institution for it to be eligible for registration. In any case, open universities and affiliating universities are not considered for ranking. Also, for the overall and discipline-specific rankings, weights assigned are slightly different for some parameters.

Each institution is required to submit the data in a given format on the NIRF portal. The NIRF is empowered to take up physical checks on data at its own discretion. For research and patents, the NIRF also collects data from internationally available databases.

To assess each institution, five broad parameters are considered as follows:

- Teaching, Learning and Resources (30) has the following sub-heads: Student strength, including PhD students; faculty-student ratio with emphasis on permanent faculty; faculty with PhDs and experience; financial resources and their utilisation; online education and combined metrics for multiple entry/exit; the Indian knowledge system; regional languages and sus-

tainable living practices.

- Research and Professional Practice (30) includes publications, quality of publications, IPR and patents (published and granted), projects and professional practice and executive development programmes.

- Graduation outcomes (20) include metrics for university examinations and the number of PhD students graduated.

- Outreach and Inclusivity (10) includes regional diversity, women's diversity, economically and socially challenged students, and facilities for physically challenged students.

- Perception (10) is the perception of employers and academic peers.

Rankings are assigned based on total scores across these parameters. Among these parameters, research and professional practice have the strongest correlation with overall rankings. Further, while parameters related to teaching, learning, and research environment align with global norms, parameters related to regional diversity, outreach, gender equity, and inclusion of disadvantaged social groups are India-specific. Also, Indian rankings are primarily data-driven, unlike global rankings, which focus more on perception and international participation as measured by international students and faculty. In the last ten years, India Rankings have signifi-

cantly influenced institutional practices among HEIs by encouraging benchmarking and data-driven decision-making. It has also encouraged institutions to engage in regular self-assessment.

All HEIs are assigned an overall rank independent of their discipline. There are also separate rankings for universities, research institutions, degree colleges and further discipline-specific rankings in engineering, management, pharmacy, law, medicine, dentistry, architecture and planning. Each list contains scores for a maximum of the top 100—in some specialised categories, it is less—HEIs.

Though India rankings have now become a critical factor for HEIs in India, they continue to have some significant limitations. For example, Outreach and Inclusivity is a critical element in a highly unequal and diverse society like ours, but it has been assigned a relatively low weightage: only 10 marks out of 100. This is further subdivided into Regional Diversity (RD), Women Diversity (WD), Economically and Socially Challenged Students (ESCS) and facilities for Physically Challenged Students (PCS).

RD represents the regional and international composition of students in an institution with a focus on the regional. The WD sub-heading is disappointing because of the recent debates regarding multiple

gender identities and the need to institutionalise them. Women's diversity does not incorporate this nuanced idea of gender diversity. Further, there is no explanation in the report for why 20% is assumed to be an adequate representation of women among the faculty and senior administration of an institution. Surprisingly, the number of students from SC, ST and OBC categories are not shown separately despite the specific constitutional mandate to have separate reservations for each category in public HEIs. Instead, they are clubbed together under the sub-heading 'economically and socially challenged students'. Further, the number of students who have fees fully or partially reimbursed by the state and central government, by the institution itself, and from private bodies are not considered for this parameter. Instead, this value is calculated solely in terms of the percentage of undergraduate students whose fees are fully reimbursed by the institutional funds to pursue their degree programmes. Again, we have no explanation as to why this is so. For PCS, there is no information about the number of physically challenged students and/or faculty.

Vriyendra taught in a Mumbai college for more than 30 years and has been associated with democratic rights groups in the city.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Silver Investment Risk

Silver surged over 69% in a year, attracting investors. However, selling or pledging silver is harder than gold, and ETF returns can diverge from market prices, trading at a premium. Investors should exercise caution, as volatility poses significant risks despite attractive gains.

P.Kamalakaran,
Chennai

Kishore Kumar Wedding

Only in India could a wedding and tribute coexist at Kishore Kumar's memorial. The couple celebrated amidst timeless melodies, with the legend as eternal guest. Such unique events blend culture, music, and memory humorously, showing creativity and love for iconic figures.

K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru

Durgapur Rape Outrage

The gang rape of a medical student in Durgapur exposes systemic safety fail-

There's Nothing Called Green Firecrackers

The Delhi government's attempt to reintroduce the so-called "green" firecrackers is indeed a retrograde step that undermines years of effort to combat Delhi-NCR's toxic air. The very notion of a "green" cracker is misleading. Even if these crackers emit 30% fewer pollutants, they still add to an already hazardous air quality index that worsens dramatically every winter. Past experience has shown how the market floods with counterfeit "eco-friendly" versions, rendering regulation meaningless. 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.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

ures. Blaming the victim, as CM Mamata Banerjee did, shifts responsibility from authorities. West Bengal's rising crimes against women demand urgent action: accountability, preventive measures, and enforcement. Justice must empower women to live freely and fearlessly.

Namrata DS, Tumakuru

Librarian Neglect

A Kalaburagi librarian took his life after months of un-

paid salary, highlighting how undervalued education custodians are. Librarians sustain literacy, knowledge, and learning, yet administrative apathy endangers them. Urgent reforms and accountability are essential to ensure no educator suffers such injustice again.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Flexible PF Withdrawals

EPFO now allows partial withdrawals up to 75% for



HASAN ZAIDI

education, medical, and marriage purposes, promoting financial flexibility. However, awareness in rural and semi-urban areas is low. Clear communication, simple guidelines, and employer support are vital to make this reform accessible and truly worker-friendly.

K R Gagan, Tumakuru

Teen Girls Guidance

Parenting teenage daughters requires patience and under-

standing as moods fluctuate. Supportive, adaptive guidance helps teens navigate challenges, fostering maturity and resilience. Parental engagement remains vital throughout adolescence and beyond.

Dorai Ramani Suresh,
Ghaziabad

Trump's Gaza Plan

Trump helped end the Israel-Hamas war, securing hostages' release. Yet long-term peace is fragile,

requiring demilitarization, international oversight, and negotiation. Both Israel and Palestine must compromise, with Trump as neutral broker. The ceasefire is a first step; sustainable stability demands persistent diplomacy.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Afghanistan Diplomacy

India cautiously welcomed Afghan FM Muttuq, balancing engagement with Taliban pragmatism. Strategic cooperation for the Middle East corridor is crucial despite regional tensions. Diplomatic caution is essential for sustainable ties.

Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur

Bagsy Explained

"Bagsy" is British slang meaning to claim or reserve something. Commonly used: "Bagsy the front seat!" or "He bagsied the last slice of pizza." It's a fun, everyday expression of claiming something quickly.

Avinash Godbole,
Dewas

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Digitally challenged

Public awareness, robust safeguards are a must

INDIA's digital dream is turning into a nightmare for more and more citizens. Digital India, a flagship programme launched by the Modi government 10 years ago with the aim of empowering the masses, is facing stiff headwinds in the form of frauds. The Supreme Court has taken suo motu cognisance of several cases of digital arrest, a fast-spreading scam in which money is extorted through deceit and intimidation. Fraudsters posing as law enforcement officials threaten to make arrests, freeze bank accounts or cancel passports; using this ploy, the callers force unsuspecting people to pay a 'fine' or 'security deposit' to avoid legal action.

Senior citizens, particularly empty nesters, are the prime targets. An elderly couple from Ambala has alleged that scammers used forged Supreme Court orders to defraud them of their life savings amounting to more than Rs 1 crore. This offence is of grave concern to the judiciary as it threatens to undermine public trust in the justice delivery system and the rule of law. The apex court has rightly observed that such a criminal act cannot be treated as an ordinary or routine matter of cheating or cyber-crime. It's disturbing that the audacity of cybercriminals is rising by the day. A 72-year-old businessman based in Mumbai was allegedly duped of a whopping Rs 58 crore in a digital arrest scam orchestrated by scammers posing as ED and CBI officials. These crimes are also widening the trust deficit between citizens and law enforcement agencies, which are struggling to stem the rot.

India's online march has been phenomenal in recent years. The country has more than 85 crore Internet users, who account for three-fifths of its population. Quick and convenient, digital payments are driving India's shift toward a cashless economy. However, there should be no compromise on the financial safety of consumers. Public awareness campaigns must be intensified to warn people about myriad allurements and traps. Robust, ever-evolving safeguards are needed to remain a step ahead of the fraudsters and prevent them from undoing big gains made on the digital front.

Procurement pain

Flood-hit farmers need all the support

IT is the paddy procurement season in Punjab and the after-effects of the devastating floods in August-September are playing out across the state, dealing another blow to the beleaguered farmers. Significant losses are being reported because of the high moisture content in the crop or discolouration of paddy grains. Farmers who went in for the early-maturing, low water-use variety with high yield are facing reduced output. The sowing window had been advanced this year to better manage the electricity demand, groundwater usage and moisture levels. The floods put paid to these efforts. There have also been instances of farmers alleging manipulation of moisture content by rice millers to deny full payment. After the crop loss, it's another testing time for farmers and they deserve all support by both the Central and state authorities.

A Central team has completed its survey of rain and flood-hit areas witnessing a drop in paddy yield and qualitative issues. In this hour of crisis, being denied even the minimum support price is a loss of faith. The Union government needs to take a favourable and generous view of the demand for relaxation of paddy norms. With wheat sowing round the corner, what the farming community deserves is an assurance of all-round backing and urgent attention to the concerns being raised. The Union Agriculture Minister, during his visit to Ludhiana, sought directions against forcing farmers to buy additional products along with subsidised fertilisers. The Opposition has asked for details of the certified wheat seed that was promised to the flood-hit.

Blame game is the last thing required at this juncture. Those in power must be open to constructive criticism, and lend an ear to any suggestion that can help the farmers. Their well-being has to be the top priority.

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1975

Peking & Tibet

IT is not surprising that the arrival in the US of a Tibetan song and dance ensemble should have provoked China into sending what has been described as the most strongly worded protest to Washington after President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. The Chinese note said that it was "most clear" that the US Government "openly connived and supported the Tibetan activities using the US Constitution and the law as pretexts." The implication of the note evidently was that the dance troupe was sponsored by supporters of the Dalai Lama, whom the Chinese continue to regard as a dangerous and wily enemy. While rejecting the Chinese note, Washington has sought to underplay the episode. A spokesman for the State Department has said that none of the US policies had as a premise that Tibet was not part of China, and that the Chinese statement was apparently based on a misunderstanding of the American political system. Not all Americans, however, are inclined to take the Chinese note lightly. Senator Goldwater, for instance, has urged President Ford to drop his plan to visit China and go to Taiwan instead. In recent times, China has been becoming increasingly sensitive about Tibet. Early this month, Chinese Vice-Premier Hua Kuo-feng paid a visit to Lhasa and called upon all Tibetans to be in "readiness at all times to wipe out all enemies that dare to intrude." The Vice-Premier's statement came at the 10th anniversary celebrations of Tibet's formal integration with China. Although he did not specify who the potential intruders were, it was assumed that he meant the Russians. The Soviet media had been directing its attack lately against Peking's policy of repression in Tibet.

Pak threat brings India, Taliban closer

Delhi has advanced step-by-step normalisation of its ties with Afghanistan by hosting Muttaqi



JAYANT PRASAD
EX-AMBASSADOR TO AFGHANISTAN

THE Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) paid a price for the week-long visit of its Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to India. Within hours of Muttaqi's arrival in New Delhi, Pakistan carried out attacks on Kabul, targeting the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Taliban retaliated two days later, resulting in vicious military clashes and about 250 deaths along the Durand Line. Although skirmishes have continued, major military operations have ended following mediation by Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan was triumphant when the IEA was established. *The Economist* described the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan as a "strategic setback and stinging humiliation" for India. By inviting Muttaqi, India has advanced the calibrated, step-by-step normalisation of its relations with Afghanistan. External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar announced the upgrading of India's Technical Mission in Kabul, established in June 2022, to the status of Embassy of India. New Delhi decided to engage with the Taliban as they consolidated their power.

India had no presence in Afghanistan during the previous Taliban rule and wanted to prevent a hiatus in the India-Afghan contact. Moreover, encounters in Jammu and Kashmir involving Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed operatives have revealed their use of US-made M4 and M16 rifles. It becomes necessary, therefore, to keep engaging with the Taliban to ensure that anti-India terror groups do not use Afghan territory.

Besides humanitarian and relief supplies, India has decided to recommence development



TALIBAN OUTREACH: It's vital for Delhi to ensure that anti-India terror groups do not use Afghan territory. PTI

cooperation projects, especially in healthcare, public infrastructure and capacity-building. The joint statement noted that while online scholarships continue, the pursuit of studies by Afghan students at Indian universities under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and other scholarship programmes is under active consideration.

The EAM announced that India introduced a new visa module for Afghans in April and that "we are now issuing a greater number of visas, including in medical, business and student categories" — a long-standing Afghan demand. There is potential for greater cooperation in water management, irrigation and mining. To promote trade, airfreight corridors connecting Delhi, Mumbai and Amritsar to Kabul and Kandahar will begin operating soon.

Muttaqi received a tumultuous welcome when he visited Darul Uloom Deoband, which also led to a controversy in India. There is a close connection between the Sufi traditions of India and Afghanistan and of the Taliban with Deoband, which was opposed to the Partition and remained focused on education and religious teaching (the Pakistani Deobandi madrasas deviated from the Hanefite moorings of Deoband and turned to

India must fulfil its visa promises if its people-to-people ties with Afghanistan are to thrive.

Wahabbism and Salafism). The most popular Sufi tradition followed in South Asia, the Chishti Silsilah, has its roots in Chisht-e-Sharif, near the Hari Rud India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam. Mujahideen leader and former head of the Naqshbandi Sufis, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, had more of his ancestors buried in India than in Afghanistan.

There were two sideshows during Muttaqi's visit. The first was the public relations disaster for the IEA that followed his first press conference at the Afghan Embassy, which excluded women journalists. The Press Club of India "strongly condemned" such exclusion, and the Editors Guild of India called the decision "blatant gender discrimination on Indian soil". Muttaqi had received women journalists before, in Dubai and Moscow. He made amends and held a second press conference, in which women journalists were not just numerous,

they occupied the front rows and asked blunt questions.

The second was the escalating Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict. Muttaqi said Islamabad had been wrongly accusing Afghanistan of helping the TTP carry out strikes against Pakistan, which must set its house in order instead of blaming the Afghans. The Taliban and the TTP have organisational as well as ideological linkages and have fought together. They believe that if Pakistan considers an Islamic Emirate to be good for Afghanistan, it should be an equal-rational choice for Pakistan.

The Taliban have always been wary of Pakistan. One of their co-founders, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, noted his assessment of Pakistan and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in his autobiography, *My Life with the Taliban*. He called Pakistan a "two-faced country" and described how the ISI has spread in Afghanistan "like a cancer which puts down its roots in the human body". Zaeef added that the ISI was famous in Taliban circles for its treachery: "It is said that it can get milk from a bull".

There has been criticism about India welcoming the representative of an Islamist regime. The Taliban's head, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, has reassessed a harsher orientation of governance, vindicating the charge

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A Western-style democracy in Afghanistan is a dream. —Khaled Hosseini

Make a clean sweep on Dhanteras

SANTOSH JATRANA

AH, Dhanteras! The enchanting day that marks the official start of the five-day Diwali festival, complete with its own shopping frenzy that could rival Black Friday in Australia. Think of it as the day when impulse buying is not only accepted but encouraged. The tradition? Buy something new, whether it's sparkling gold, shiny silver or that new utensil that's destined to sit alongside last year's unused purchase. But there's a catch: no sharp objects allowed. No knives, no scissors, not even a safety pin! Apparently, sharp things cut through your luck.

Like all good traditions, Dhanteras is rooted in a legendary story. It's said that during *Samudra Manthana* (the cosmic churning of the ocean), the *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons) were engaged in a tug-of-war over *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, when Dhanvantari, the divine physician (and an incarnation of Vishnu), appeared with a jar of *amrita*. This divine event makes Dhanteras the perfect time to celebrate wealth, health and a very clean house!

While most festivals are about sweets, lights and prayers, Dhanteras has its own unique touch — it's also about bringing home a new broom. Yes, you heard it right. Legend says a new broom can sweep away all your troubles. Is that so? In the spirit of the festival, let's give the humble broom some credit — at least symbolically, it has its place. One good sweep and you're not just dusting cobwebs; you're welcoming prosperity and positivity. Honestly, who doesn't need a bit of extra luck and less clutter?

Now, as much as I respect traditions — and Dhanteras being no exception — I often find myself pondering the deeper meanings behind these rituals. Why no sharp objects? Why a broom? It feels like there's more to these customs than mere superstition.

Sharp objects can cut and split — both literally and symbolically. The real message could be about avoiding anything that brings harshness or discord into our lives, especially during a festival that celebrates prosperity and peace. It's a gentle reminder to embrace the softer, gentler side of life.

As for the broom, if a new one can symbolically sweep away troubles, then maybe it's time to add a contemporary spin to these age-old rituals. Why not sweep away bad habits, negativity or even that overwhelming to-do list while we're at it? After all, traditions can evolve while still holding on to their core.

So, while you're hunting for the perfect buy, remember that Dhanteras isn't just about purchasing shiny things. It reminds us to clear away the clutter, both physical and emotional. This Dhanteras, clean your home, light those lamps and maybe pick up a broom that sweeps away more than just dust. Who knows you might clear a path for Goddess Lakshmi to walk right in!

Happy Dhanteras, everyone! May your homes sparkle, your hearts stay light and your wallets remain full (or at least replenish quickly after all that shopping!).

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AI must not overgrow convenience

Apologies of 'From Net to AI, a story of non-regulation', the rapid rise of artificial intelligence mirrors the unregulated expansion of the Internet. Allowing it to run unchecked may soon wipe out individual autonomy and social balance. Innovation must not be allowed to spiral out of control in the name of progress. It is time for global leadership to step in, lay down minimum ethical rules and rein in reckless experimentation. Instead of debating whether regulation will slow down innovation, nations must scale up cooperation to build a shared code of conduct. AI must not grow as an overpowering tool of convenience, but as a conscientious tool. We cannot hand over our future blindly to algorithms.

ASHOK SINGH GULERIA, HAMIRPUR

True authority does not scream

Refer to 'The CJI's restraint and the media's reckoning'; the restraint shown by the Chief Justice has set a dignified benchmark for how institutions should respond to provocation — not with power, but with calm conviction. In doing so, the judiciary has shown that true authority does not scream; it stands firm in quiet confidence. Freedom of expression is not an unlimited licence — it is a responsibility to inform with integrity. Outrage may fetch attention, but only credibility earns trust. And in a democracy, conviction is the one currency neither the judiciary nor the media can afford to lose.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

Rot in the police force

The arrest of Punjab DIG Harcharan Singh Bhullar by the CBI, along with the seizure of Rs 5 crore and 1.5 kg gold, is a chilling reminder of the rot in the policing system. When guardians of the law morph into traders of conscience, public faith is shaken. The audacity to demand bribes for 'settling' FIRs exposes a deep moral collapse. This episode is not a solitary aberration — it is symptomatic of institutional decay bred by impunity and political shielding. Punjab's fight against graft demands not ritualism in the form of outrage but reform that pierces the armour of rank, lineage and influence. Let this arrest not end at headlines; let

it ignite cleansing from within the force. Let us not just whisper, but roar against corruption.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Corruption-free workforce needed

IAS & IPS officers, who run the administrative machinery of the country, get huge salaries and facilities, besides status that only government servants enjoy. It is shocking to note that many of them are corrupt in intellectually and practically. It is a worrisome situation and poses a serious challenge. Efficient, transparent and corruption-free workforce is an essential requirement to take the country forward. Speedy and concrete action must be taken against such public servants. Politicians who pester them to amass wealth through corrupt practices should also be taken to task.

RAVI BHUSHAN, KURUKSHETRA

Don't respond to Trump's pinpricks

Apologies of 'Trump claims Modi agreed to stop buying Russian oil'; True to his nature, the US President has again dropped a bombshell that has been strongly denied by the Indian government. It seems that he is trying all kinds of tricks to make India capitulate to his unfair demands. Yet, India hasn't budged. The US must come to terms with the fact that it cannot dictate terms to any country. New Delhi can ill-afford to put a spanner in its relationship with other countries. It is prudent not to respond to Trump's pinpricks.

AANYA SINGHAL, NOIDA

Security, autonomy important

The issue of India's oil imports from Russia, highlighted by US President Trump, reflects the complexity of India's energy and diplomatic balance. While global pressures persist, India must continue prioritising its energy security and strategic autonomy. Any shift in oil procurement should be gradual and pragmatic, not reactionary. Diversifying sources is wise, but decisions must stem from long-term interests rather than external influence. With trade tensions rising and alliances shifting, India must ensure stability in energy supply while reinforcing an independent foreign policy.

CHARU SHARMA, HOSHIARPUR

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	17:49 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	06:27 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	18
New Delhi	33	19
Amritsar	30	18
Bathinda	34	18
Jalandhar	30	20
Ludhiana	32	18
Bhiwani	31	18
Hisar	33	18
Sirsa	33	19
Dharamsala	28	13
Manali	24	09
Shimla	25	12
Srinagar	25	08
Jammu	30	18
Kargil	20	01
Leh	16	-01
Dehradun	31	17
Mussoorie	24	14

TIME FOR DIPLOMACY TO END UKRAINE WAR, EASE OIL PAIN

AFTER claiming success in brokering a ceasefire in Gaza, US President Donald Trump is now turning his attention to the Ukraine war. Following what both sides described as a “very productive” phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday, the two leaders agreed to meet in Budapest, Hungary, possibly within a fortnight. The conversation came a day before Trump’s meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, where a deal for long-range American Tomahawk missiles was under discussion.

Such weapons may not end the war, but their ability to strike deep inside Russia could complicate an already tense equation. Yet Trump’s fresh diplomatic effort deserves attention—not least because the prolonged conflict has disrupted global supply chains and kept energy prices volatile. For India, which imports over 85 per cent of its crude needs, stability in oil markets is crucial to containing inflation and sustaining growth.

Washington’s recent decision to impose an additional 25 per cent tariff on Indian goods, reportedly in response to New Delhi’s continued purchase of discounted Russian oil, shows how easily global rivalries can spill over into trade and policy. Ahead of his talks with Putin, Trump claimed Prime Minister Narendra Modi had assured him that India would phase out Russian oil imports. The Ministry of External Affairs swiftly rejected this, clarifying that no such conversation had taken place and reiterating that India is expanding and diversifying its energy basket. Whether the claim stemmed from the recent visit of US Ambassador-designate Sergio Gor to Delhi is unclear.

Trade data, however, show a gradual moderation in Russian oil purchases. Indian Oil Corporation sourced 4.62 million barrels in September, compared to 10.35 million in January. Even so, India’s energy appetite remains vast, driven by rapid economic growth and rising consumption. If the proposed Trump–Putin talks in Budapest lead to even a partial easing of tensions, the benefits will be global—but particularly felt in energy-dependent economies like India. After years of conflict, it is time for diplomacy, not weaponry, to take the lead.

PROTECT ELEPHANTS FOR A HEALTHIER ECOSYSTEM

INDIA’S elephant population has fallen by 17.8 percent since 2017, according to the latest report from the Wildlife Institute of India. The total count now stands at 22,446—a sobering reminder that the country’s most iconic species is under mounting pressure. The Western Ghats, India’s largest elephant habitat, recorded 11,934 elephants, down slightly from 11,960 in 2017. But the drop in the Northeast Hills and Brahmaputra plains—from 10,139 to 6,559—is alarming. The Shivalik Hills saw a marginal decline, while Central India and the Eastern Ghats recorded a sharp fall from 3,128 to 1,891.

The latest census, which began in 2021, used DNA-based mark-recapture, a more scientific and precise method that identifies individual elephants through their biological samples. While this could partly explain the statistical drop, it does not alter the grim reality: elephant habitats are shrinking, and threats are multiplying. Deforestation, encroachment, expanding infrastructure, and human-elephant conflicts are steadily eroding the species’ space to live and roam. Rail and road networks now crisscross traditional corridors, leading to frequent and often fatal collisions. Electrocutions, poaching, and diseases transmitted through close human contact add to the growing list of dangers.

India cannot afford complacency. The new census provides a more accurate baseline for the years ahead, but the response must go beyond data collection. The Centre and the states must treat this as an environmental emergency. Speed restrictions along known elephant corridors, seismic sensors to detect herds, and safe underpasses are urgently needed. Forest-dwelling communities should be incentivised to assist forest personnel and act as the first line of defence against poachers and encroachers. Most crucially, elephant corridors must be legally protected and restored. Conservation cannot depend on ad hoc projects; it needs long-term planning, steady funding, and unwavering political will.

The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), classified as endangered, is not merely a flagship species — it is an ecosystem engineer. Elephants shape forests, disperse seeds, create water-holes, and help sustain biodiversity. Their disappearance would weaken entire ecosystems and diminish the planet’s capacity to absorb carbon. Saving India’s elephants is not just about preserving wildlife—it is about safeguarding the very balance of nature that sustains us. A country that cannot protect its elephants risks losing far more than a symbol of its wild heritage; it risks losing the health of its land, its forests, and its future.

QUICK TAKE

LET’S GO DUTCH

VEN as we swing between an outright ban on crackers — and limiting their use, we are on the weekend when dogs will be scared of popping fireworks and humans will be scared of the smoky air. The day after Diwali will pose another headache, with mounds of garbage strewn around. For both troubles, we can learn a lesson from the Dutch. The Netherlands, with a population about one and a half times Chennai’s, allows crackers to be burst only once a year—between 6 pm on December 31 and 2 am on January 1. The first day of the new year is marked by community members cleaning nearby streets. The tradition teaches us a mantra for sustainable living—use only what you can clean up after.

UNCERTAINTY, fear of the de-basement of purchasing power through inflation, and the comfort of real things are driving investors to invest in commodities. Gold has been one beneficiary alongside oil and gas, as well as transition-critical minerals such as copper, nickel, cobalt, lithium and rare earths.

The focus is scarcity-driven due to stagnant investment in new production. But investors, both direct and those seeking exposure through funds, face challenges in investing in these assets.

There are two main ways of investing in commodities—shares in resource firms or in the minerals themselves. Both present unique complexities.

Investment in shares of resource companies is complicated by multiple factors. Pure exposure to the desired commodity is difficult to obtain. Many miners are diversified. BHP, the world’s largest mining company by market capitalisation, is a producer of iron ore, copper and metallurgical coal. Storied Anglo-American has operations covering diamonds, copper, iron ore, coal, nickel, manganese and platinum group metals.

Asset portfolios are constantly changing through mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and divestments. In 2022, BHP shifted its oil and gas assets into a joint venture to reduce involvement in carbon-based fuels. After rejecting a takeover offer from BHP, Anglo-American proposed a complex restructure to focus on copper and iron ore. Oil and gas firms have vacillated about renewable energy investments.

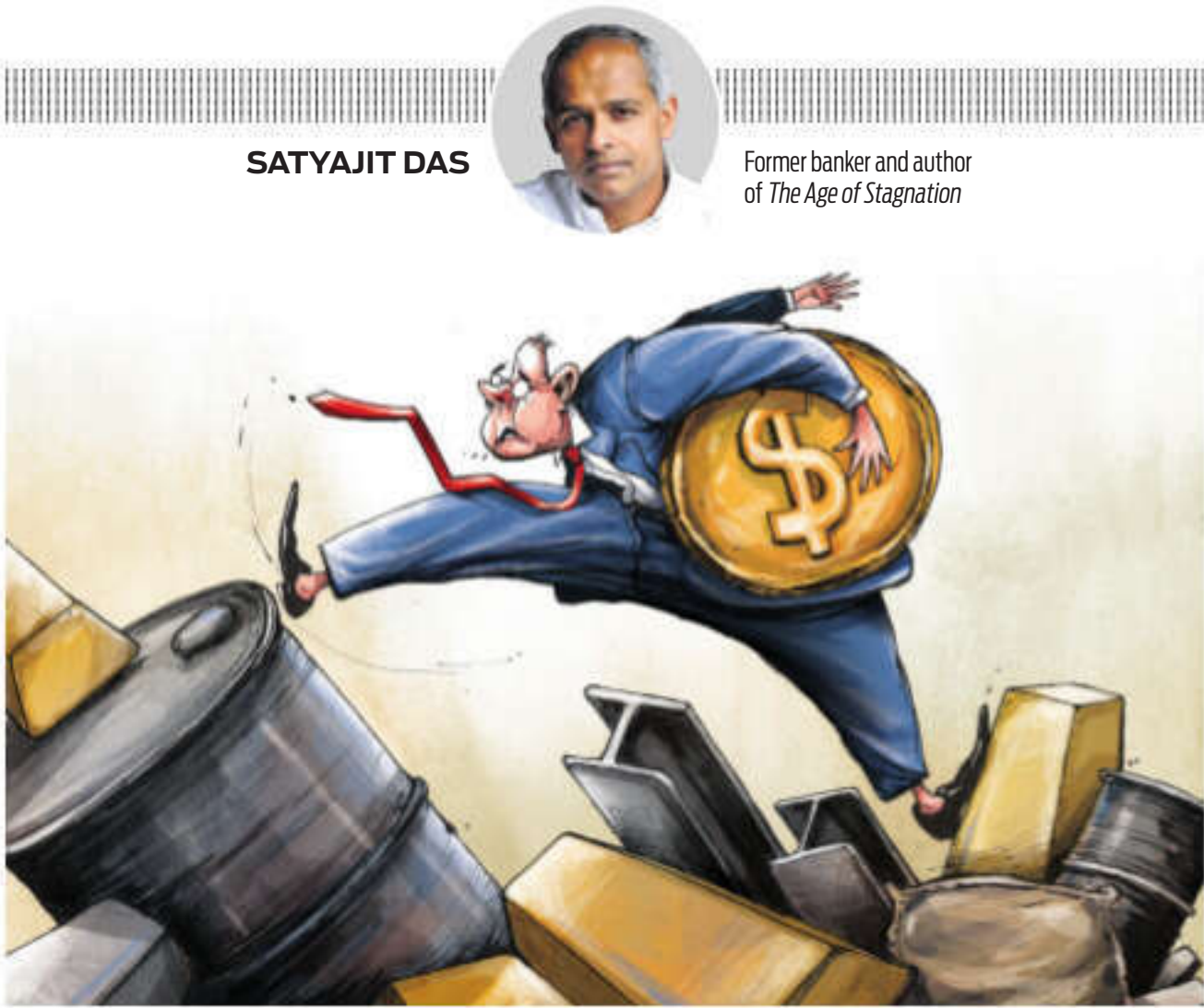
Even where a ‘pure play’ exists, there are other issues. Estimates of reserves may be incorrect. In 1997, Bre-X Minerals, a major Canadian miner, collapsed with large losses to investors after fraudulently contaminating core samples with gold derived from other sources. An old definition of a mine is ‘a hole in the ground with a liar standing next to it’.

The exposure may be diluted by currency effects as resource companies operate in different jurisdictions. Many firms hedge their commodity price exposure to ensure revenues are sufficient to ensure satisfactory returns. For an investor seeking exposure to price appreciation of the commodity, this alters the investment dynamics. A hedged producer does not necessarily benefit from higher prices.

Hedging introduces new risks. A number of companies have faced financial distress as a result of increased margin requirements on hedges. In 1999, a sharp rise in gold prices drove Ghana’s Ashanti Gold, which had locked in the

Uncertainty has driven investors to commodities, pushing up prices of gold and other metals. Investment in critical minerals is seen as an alternative. But the shift poses steep challenges

WHY ALL THAT GLITTERS NEED NOT BE GOLD



SATYAJIT DAS

Former banker and author of *The Age of Stagnation*

metal’s price, to near bankruptcy.

There are other problems too. Production difficulties, including weather factors, may dilute commodity price effects. Lower output from one producer may adversely affect shareholders. The risk of accidents and legal liabilities—such as the Brazilian tailing dam failure which affected BHP and Vale, or BP’s Mexican Gulf oil spill—is ever present. Increasingly, political risk—sanctions, expropriations, trade restrictions—and changing local regulations are also rising concerns.

Corporate financial engineering—the amount of leverage, refinancing risk, borrowing costs—affects the share price performance of individual firms. The US shale oil industry is heavily dependent on the cost and supply of credit. Exposure to the stock may not translate

into exposure to the commodity sought.

Direct investment in the commodity itself is equally fraught. Commodities are not traded in the same way as financial assets making it difficult to obtain exposure. There is frequently no spot market with most transactions undertaken under long term contracts. Physical ownership is difficult due to issues like storage, transportation, insurance, logistics and risk of fraud. The risk of confiscation is real. In 1933, the US forbade hoarding of gold, requiring all persons to sell their holdings to the Federal Reserve at a fixed price.

In practice, investors use funds or other collective investment vehicles which concentrate on liquid instruments to cover fund redemptions. Most track indicators such as the Goldman Sachs Commodity Index which are heavily

SIZING UP SWADESHI AMBITION



PRATIK KANJILAL

Senior Fellow, Henry J Leir Institute of Migration and Human Security, Fletcher School, Tufts University

SPEAKEASY

Reforms don’t go all the way because of ancient fears, especially of foreigners, their hidden hand and the dollars it clutches. I remember a conversation long ago in the Norwich home of the Tamil translator Lakshmi Holmström and her husband Mark, who had pioneered work on aspects of Indian labour. The conversation turned from the borders between languages to ones that hem in our economy.

Messaging app Arattai’s sudden growth shows Indians are open to suggestions from the government. The preference seems to be for a clutch of large companies—an American pattern. In contrast, China cut Jack Ma to size to make space for lesser entrepreneurs



“Do you seriously think that India should still have a controlled currency?” asked Mark. The 1997 East Asian financial crisis was still vivid in memory. Ten nations had accused George Soros and financial shamans of rigging currency markets in order to bring down their governments, while India remained a safe zone because of RBI controls. “Yes, please,” I replied. Rarely have I seen a man as exasperated with human stupidity as Mark was with my opinion.

Looking back, I wonder if I sought safety because of nebulous fears of barbarians at the gate. Keeping them out is generally a good idea, but globalisation is an even better idea. Nations can’t maximise its benefits without exposing themselves to its risks, which they must learn to manage. And governments have no business restricting people’s freedom of choice on

the pretext of keeping them safe.

That seems to have happened in the case of Arattai, which was talked up by ministers as a swadeshi alternative to WhatsApp—which it isn’t, because the level of privacy is different. What lies ahead? Arattai could repeat the story of Koo, the *swadeshi* Twitter that the government embraced when the original refused to follow its diktats. After an initial surge, it dwindled to nothingness.

The Indian government has a history of relations with the corporate sector which differs from that of other major Asian economies. After World War 2, Japan scaled up rapidly because it had a culture of agreement between its government and corporations, whose goals converged via the business body Keidanren. Earlier, family-owned *zaibatsu* like Sumitomo and Mitsubishi controlled industry tightly and could speak directly with the government. Their power was diluted after World War 2 to democratise markets.

But South Korea’s *chaebol* like Samsung and Hyundai retain a similar role even today. China has developed a kind of party-controlled capitalism which retains communist goals. For instance, it downsized Jack Ma because the state wanted to see a lot of lesser entrepreneurs succeed, instead of a small number of immense corporations. That’s a characteristic of American business, which India is following. And yet most Indian enterprises are in the small, medium and unorganised sectors, which never interface with the government and have no way of being on the same page.

The success of Arattai suggests that people are susceptible to nudges from the government and aligned corporations. But historically, Indians have had a healthy suspicion of both. Maybe it’s because the world’s biggest transnational corporation also served as the government of India for a long time—the East India Company. That experience of organised loot remains in the memory, and usually prevents Indians from trusting too much, too foolishly.

(Views are personal)
(Tweets @pratik_k)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Olympic ambition

Ref: *Ahmedabad CWG can be much more* (Oct 17). India has a chance to showcase responsible planning to match ambition. Learning from Delhi 2010’s mistakes, the focus must be on transparency, efficiency and legacy-building. Beyond infrastructure, CWG 2030 should nurture a vibrant sports culture and strengthen India’s case to host the Olympics.
Avinashiappan Myilsami, Coimbatore

Mamata’s games

Ref: *Stop blaming victims of sexual violence* (Oct 17). How painful must it be for the victim(s) and their family to be subject to insult and blame by their woman leader? Instead of being involved in the political games, Mamata Banerjee should have taken concrete no-tolerance measures after the two earlier incidents.
Bijumon PN, Idukki

Migration reality

Ref: *Opportunity hunting as brain drain* (Oct 17). The author’s balanced and thought-provoking analysis of the ever-evolving idea and its nuanced link to global academic mobility was deeply enlightening. I particularly appreciated the way he connected historical trends with present socio-political realities and framed the discussion beyond simplistic binaries.
Saswat Mishra, Ganjam

Ref: *America’s politics, Norway’s medal* (Oct 17). The peace prize has always been political, with the West calling the shots. Norway has been, for long, used by the US as its agent for ‘peace’ in conflicts. What’s colloquially called the ‘piss prize’ is worth only toilet paper.
Philip Fowler, email

Recovering bodies

Ref: *Gaza’s fragile peace to hold if Trump stays the course* (Oct 17). One was hopeful to see the truce reach a flashpoint, yet fragility lingers on with claims and counterclaims on the toll of released hostages and recovered dead bodies. On top of that, the opening of Rafah crossing is repeatedly being delayed.
R Sampath, Chennai

Sovereign choices

Ref: *Govt denies Trump-Modi phone call* (Oct 17). Coercive statements by US President Donald Trump reflect an unacceptable interference in India’s sovereignty. His remarks reveal an outdated mindset that must be firmly rejected. India must continue to act according to its interests and welfare.
Mohd Arbaz Alam, Haveri

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Indian IT firms continue to hire despite AI-led automation

Headcount of the top five Indian IT services companies grew at a slower pace during July-September period of FY26 compared to last year. With AI-led automation replacing human workers, the numbers have surprised the industry watchers quite a bit. Except Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), the employee headcount of other four companies have gone up. For instance, Infosys added 8,203 employees in Q2FY26, making its fifth consecutive quarter of headcount addition. The third largest HCLTech added 3,489 employees in the second quarter, while Wipro added 2,260 employees, and the headcount at

Tech Mahindra went up by 4,197 staffers by the end of September quarter. However, TCS' headcount went down by 19,755 during the period. A combined addition of the top five IT services companies saw a drop of headcount by 1,606 during the September quarter. While aggregate numbers may look grim, barring TCS, the headcount of the other four IT firms has increased. So, the anticipation of mass layoffs happening in the Indian IT industry due to rising AI adoption seems like a far cry, at least for the moment. Even companies like HCLTech have started providing standalone AI revenue for the first time.

This is encouraging news as it reflects Indian IT players are increasingly looking confident about leading the AI wave. Not only overall headcount addition, but even fresher hiring also continues, albeit at a slower pace. Most companies have given numbers of freshers absorbed during the second quarter of FY26. For instance, Infosys has hired 12,000 freshers for the first half of the fiscal year 2026 and is on track to reach its 20,000 fresher hiring targets for the fiscal year. Similarly, HCLTech hired 5,196 freshers in Q2 and 7,180 in Q1 of the ongoing financial year. It means fresher hiring is going on though compa-

nies are cautious in their overall headcount addition plan. Not only hiring but also the deal pipeline of top five companies indicates enterprises' spending on technology continues. TCS reported a robust \$10 billion order book, while Infosys' large deal TCV (total contract value) stood at \$3.1 billion with 67 per cent being net new. Total contract value (TCV) of new deals remained robust for HCLTech as the company reported a pipeline of \$2.57 billion during the quarter. Deal bookings of Wipro also remained sound with total bookings at \$4.68 billion for the September quarter.

Out of this, large deal bookings were at \$2.85 billion for Wipro. Such deal bookings show that Indian IT firms are expected to be back on the growth path once the economic uncertainty following Trump tariffs wanes. Meanwhile, AI-led development will certainly replace many workers, but it seems Indian IT companies are able to shift their workers to other productive positions through upskilling. Of course, silent firing is happening across many companies with several employees being asked to go. However, this is not widespread. Interestingly, the emergence of GCC (global capability

centres) as a credible alternative to IT services companies on the hiring front has eased the pressure quite a lot. Analysts are of the opinion that though revenue growth forecast of top IT firms for FY26 remains tepid, it is likely to recover in the next financial year. Once uncertainty owing to Trump tariff settles down, the recovery will be swift. Another striking feature of Q2 earnings is that most companies are of the view that H1B visa restriction will not have much material impact on their operations or workflow. Indian IT firms' resilience is at display as they navigate the uncertain times.

LETTERS

Surekha's ire tip of the iceberg

Minister Konda Surekha's ongoing rift with Minister Ponguleti Srinivasa Reddy and Congress leaders seems to have intensified, with fresh allegations from her daughter sparking concerns. A few months back, Surekha faced criticism for interfering in the personal matters of actor Nagarjuna and BRS leader K T Rama Rao and for accusing Srinivasa Reddy of irregularities in the Medharm contract. With ongoing legal proceedings and internal differences, the situation may escalate, potentially causing trouble for Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad

A defining moment for AP's digital future

Google's announcement to invest \$15 billion in an AI data centre at Visakhapatnam is a transformative step in India's digital and economic journey. This initiative positions Andhra Pradesh as a global technology hub and reflects India's growing prominence in artificial intelligence and data infrastructure. The collaboration between Google, Bharti Airtel and AdaniConneX will not only enhance technological capabilities but also create employment opportunities, drive innovation, and strengthen India's digital ecosystem. The government's proactive role in facilitating this partnership's continued focus on such projects will ensure India remains at the forefront of the global digital revolution.

Uttam Kumar Das, Bengaluru

Kharge's remarks against Google @ Vizag disgusting

GOOGLE'S decision to establish a large-scale AI data Centre in Visakhapatnam, its biggest investment outside the United States highlights that the leadership of Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and deputy CM Pawan Kalyan coupled with favourable industrial climate in the state are drawing fresh investments. This obviously will not only take the state towards a higher growth trajectory but serves as a signal to entrepreneurs to invest in the state. In this context, it is disgusting that Karnataka minister Priyank Kharge has been finding fault with the whole move by passing sarcastic remarks that expose his desperation at having missed the bus due to Bengaluru's deteriorating infrastructure and faculty policies. Many IT organisations are planning to move away from the state.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad-3

Focus must be on civic facilities

THIS has reference to the 'Vision Andhra' key to Viksit Bharat as announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Srisailem. He is optimistic that the 21st century belongs to India. To realise this Modi must encourage planting of trees, avoid pollution caused from vehicles and industries, creating green roofs and solar panelled roofs. The Prime Minister must instruct state administrations to use technology and create canals so that the rainwater flows through them into reservoirs and rivers. Attending civic facilities needs to be prioritised to achieve Viksit Bharat.

G Murali Mohan Rao, Secunderabad-11

Call for ban on RSS is incredulous

THIS has reference to the Karnataka government, planning to put roadblocks in the routine and daily activities of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Minister Priyank Kharge has sought a ban on RSS and its affiliated organisations. Apparently, the Congress government seems to be pointing an accusing finger at RSS for its own dismal performance across segments, whereas RSS activities are in no way creating hurdles nor proving cantankerous. Like his father Mallikarjun Kharge, Priyank is hell bent on berating RSS for no valid reasons.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

'Curbs' on RSS are politically motivated

As propos "Govt adopts Tamil Nadu model, tactical move to avoid direct confrontation" (THI, Oct 17). The Karnataka Congress Government's move to impose curbs on Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is politically motivated and lacks any substantive rationale. The Sangh has for decades been engaged in social service, educational initiatives, disaster relief and nation-building activities across the country. Its contribution to society is significant and widely acknowledged. By attempting to restrict its activities, the Congress government risks alienating a large section of the public. Such measures, driven by political considerations rather than genuine administrative need, are likely to backfire. The move could enrage opposition forces and strengthen public support for the RSS, ultimately turning against the ruling party. History has shown that attempts to curb organisations with deep social roots rarely succeed. The decision is therefore poised to boomerang, and the Congress government may have to bear a heavy political price for this faux pas.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru-56

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

MLA urges CM to ban namaz without prior permission

BENGALURU: BJP MLA from Vijayapura, Basanagouda Patil Yatnal, has written to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah urging the government to prohibit namaz being offered in public places or government premises without official permission. Recently, the state government had clarified that conducting any religious or political event in government buildings, educational institutions, or public spaces requires prior approval. Reports had also emerged about the drafting of the Regulation of Use of Government Premises and Properties Bill - 2025.

In his letter, Yatnal stated that instances of namaz being performed on roads and within government premises without permission are causing inconvenience to vehicular traffic and pedestrians. He argued that such practices violate citizens' fundamental rights to free movement and safety guaranteed under Articles 19 and 21 of the Indian Constitution.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Opposition's hate-driven politics is fuelling BJP's strength



INDIA'S economy is dead, RSS has taken over education; 'vote chori' is rampant; Modi hates Dalits; the Constitution is in danger; institutions are collapsing, development has stopped, and only two or three of Modi's friends control the economy."

This is the running script of Rahul Gandhi and the fragmented INDIA bloc. Their strategy seems simple — paint India black, spread despair, and hope that anger will bring them to power. But every election tells them otherwise.

It's not that all is perfect. There are many issues that remain unresolved, and not everyone enjoys the fruits of development. Gaps remain to be filled. But the tragedy is that the Opposition refuses to introspect, change course, or offer a constructive alternative. Instead, it feeds on a diet of hate and denial — hatred for Modi and denial of India's progress. Ironically, this very negativity helps the BJP consolidate further.

The Opposition formula is "Hate Modi, appease minorities, and grab power by hook or crook." Criticism of the ruling party is a democratic right. But it should come with a sense of responsibility towards the nation. Why does the Opposition ignore positive developments like Google's \$15 billion investment in Andhra Pradesh — the company's biggest FDI outside the U.S. — or projects worth over

₹13,000 crore taking shape across India? They prefer to see only gloom.

Some ignorant YSRCP leaders, including former ministers, who clearly lack even basic understanding of maths or economics are now criticising the TDP government by tossing around figures on power and water spending without context or comprehension. Shame on those who speak without grasping the fundamentals of investment or the economy.

This stems from one central flaw: they have no alternative vision of development. Their governance model seems to revolve around using temple funds, looking away when temple lands are encroached, and invoking "unity" merely as an anti-Modi alliance. Their hypocrisy is evident even in Bihar, where they could not agree on seat-sharing. Tejaswi Yadav filed his nomination without a single INDIA bloc leader — not even Rahul Gandhi — by his side.

They claim democracy is under threat, yet they flout democratic norms within their own parties. They refuse to acknowledge the IMF's growth projection of 6.6 per cent for India, far ahead of the United States (two per cent), China (4.8 per cent), or the United Kingdom (1.3 per cent).

When confronted, they parrot the same tired lines: "RSS is divisive, RSS promotes Hindutva, RSS killed Gandhi." Rahul Gandhi once asked if anyone had seen women at RSS shakhas wearing shorts. He added, "as soon as a woman speaks out, they (RSS-BJP) silence her."

For the benefit of the ignorant—or those pretending to be so—let me inform them



India's Opposition has trapped itself in a vortex of negativity — seeing only gloom where there is growth and crisis where there is progress. Instead of offering a constructive alternative or a credible model of development, it survives on rhetoric, Modi-bashing, and divisive slogans. While projects like Google's \$15 billion investment or innovative rural models like Andhra's Bull Power initiative show India's resilience, the Opposition continues to deny reality. Its obsession with "vote chori" and "RSS phobia" reflects frustration, not leadership. Unless it abandons cynicism and embraces vision, the INDIA bloc will remain stuck in denial. In today's India, negativity no longer wins elections — performance and positivity do.

that there exists a parallel organisation to the RSS, called the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. On October 25, 1936, Lakshmbai Kelkar, noticing her two sons regularly attending RSS shakhas, decided to see for herself what they were doing. Impressed by the discipline and spirit that she witnessed, she met Dr Keshav Baliram Hegdewar and suggested that women, who constitute half the population, should also be part of such nation-building activities.

Dr Hegdewar agreed but advised that the women's organisation should remain independent—like a separate school for boys and girls.

Lakshmbai Kelkar then founded the women's wing that was based on three core principles —Matrutva (universal motherhood),

Kartrutva (efficiency and social activism) and Netrutva (leadership). Though smaller in number than the RSS, the Sevikas include homemakers, professors, doctors, and postgraduates in fields like criminology and political science. Just as some RSS men joined the BJP, many Sevikas too became active in the party. It has a presence in 22 countries and has almost four lakh members.

The problem with the Opposition is not lack of energy but misplaced focus. They believe in power play, not the power of ideas. For them, rhetoric matters more than results. They do not realise that if they present a credible roadmap for development — showing how they can improve lives faster and better — people might actually listen. Instead, they cry

"democracy in danger" while enjoying all the freedoms democracy provides.

Why can't they see India's growth story as a glass half full instead of half empty? Why this chronic cynicism? If they acknowledge achievements first and then outline what more must be done, they can actually enhance India's global brand — and their own credibility.

As one analyst quipped, "India's economy isn't dead — it's the brain cells of those who oppose it that are."

The start-up boom, tech innovation, and renewable energy progress are visible everywhere. But the Opposition refuses to see them. Take, for example, the latest experiment in Bull Power — an initiative that blends tradition with modern sustainability.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Chinta Sasidhar Foundation has launched a pioneering project that uses bull-driven treadmills to generate electricity. Located at Nanda Gokulam Centre, Nellore, the initiative demonstrates how innovation and inclusion can coexist with culture and compassion.

Here's how it works: a single bull working for four hours produces about 4 kW of electricity, enough to power several rural homes or small farms. The project prioritizes animal welfare — with hydraulic lifts, veterinary supervision, and nutritious feed. It also renews indigenous breeds, especially the iconic Ongole bull, under its "Save the Bull" campaign.

The "Power of Bull" initiative is not merely about energy; it's about reviving values, empowering rural communities, and combining traditional wisdom with modern

technology. It's a perfect example of how India can chart its own model of sustainable development — rooted in culture, yet forward-looking.

If governments, corporates, and nonprofit organisations across the country replicate such models, they can generate rural employment, reduce migration, and build sustainable communities. This is the kind of innovation the Opposition should celebrate and scale up. But it won't. It will mock such efforts, dismiss them as "gimmicks," and continue to indulge in dynastic arrogance — clinging to the belief that they are "born to rule."

They must realise that India has changed. The voter is no more swayed by outdated rhetoric or blind hatred. People want performance, not posturing. They want roads, jobs, innovation, and pride — not perpetual protests and empty slogans.

If Rahul Gandhi and his bloc truly want to reclaim relevance, they must abandon this self-destructive narrative of despair. They must replace negativity with constructive competition — tell people how they can govern better, not merely how Modi governs. Until then, their politics will remain a chorus of complaints, their vision blurred by bitterness.

India today needs an Opposition that builds, not one that breaks; that debates, not denounces. Until they learn this basic principle of democratic maturity, every new election will only reinforce the same verdict: Negativity doesn't win votes — vision does.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

AP and Telangana must house world-class public libraries

A strong public library system is not a luxury—it is an investment in human capital

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one — George R R Martin

Public libraries are more than spaces filled with books; they are gateways of opportunity, hubs of knowledge, and centres of community life. Sadly, both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana lag behind in nurturing such world-class public libraries.

In Andhra Pradesh, the absence of a significant library in the capital city of Amaravati highlights a cultural void. Though Hyderabad, as Telangana's capital, boasts of the City Central Library and State Central Library, their infrastructure has not evolved to match international standards.

The closure of the British Library in Hyderabad, established in 1979, initially located on Secretariat Road, was subsequently moved to a new location in Jubilee Hills in April 2016. It has since shifted to a digital-only model, with its physi-

cal space on Road No. 36, which was closed in 2020 due to Covid pandemic. The library now offers online resources but there have been no further efforts to reopen the library.

The closure of the once-prestigious British Library in Hyderabad contrasts our scenario with internationally acclaimed libraries such as the Boston Public Library, New York Public Library, and Cumberland Public Library in Rhode Island, which I had the good fortune to visit.

During my travels abroad, I witnessed what libraries can truly become. I spent memorable days at the Boston Public Library, the New York Public Library, and the Cumberland Public Library in Rhode Island. These institutions are vast, welcoming, and dynamic, offering not just access to books but also to seminars, workshops, and cultural exchanges. They allow borrowing without restrictions, host weekend programs for all ages, and provide facilities like coffee houses and relaxation spaces. They are places where



learning blends seamlessly with leisure.

I would often travel by Amtrak from Providence to Boston and New York, simply to spend entire days immersed in these libraries, returning home close to midnight. For me, it was nothing short of a pilgrimage—proof that libraries can transform lives and communities.

Back home, steps are being taken, though on a modest note. The recently opened Coforge Public Library in Hyderabad's Kon-

dapur IT corridor, with 15,000 books, is a welcome initiative. Yet, for a city of Hyderabad's stature, much more is needed. Likewise, in Andhra Pradesh, the announcement by HRD Minister Nara Lokesh about establishing the digital library in Visakhapatnam is encouraging. If realised, it could mark a turning point in the State's intellectual and cultural landscape.

But announcements alone are not enough. We need libraries that are open round-the-clock, foster in-

ternational partnerships, and evolve into vibrant public spaces. They should be designed to cater to children, youth, professionals, and senior citizens in equal measure, ensuring inclusivity at every level.

At a time when digital distractions dominate our lives, libraries remain one of the few public institutions where people of all backgrounds can gather for free, seeking both solitude and community. A strong public library system is not a luxury—it is an investment

Announcements alone are not enough. We need libraries that are open round-the-clock, foster international partnerships, and evolve into vibrant public spaces. They should be designed to cater to children, youth, professionals, and senior citizens in equal measure, ensuring inclusivity at every level.

in human capital. The Telugu states now stand at the crossroads: either to allow libraries to fade into irrelevance or to reimagine them as the cultural and intellectual anchors of society. The choice should be clear.

It is time policymakers, philanthropists, and society realise that world-class libraries are the foundations of enlightened communities.

Libraries are not a luxury, but one of the necessities of life — Henry Ward Beecher.

(The writer is former OSD to former Union Civil Aviation Minister)

DECCAN
Chronicle

18 OCTOBER 2025

Fact, fiction or fantasy...
let Trump have his say

In the geopolitical puzzle that the world has become since January 20, India finds in the US President a riddle wrapped up in an enigma. What does one make of a realty mogul who becomes an accidental politician and who finds nothing strange in living sometimes in an alternate reality? Donald Trump may have established his claims as a global peacemaker, but his persona is such that he has never desisted from uttering half-truths and falsehoods or wrapping facts in bravado.

The import of Russian oil is only a microscopic piece that several players, including Europeans and even Nato countries, have moved on a chequer-board of energy sources. And yet, only India has faced “Tariff” Trump in all his fury but couched in the language of “love” and “friendship”. The one lesson that India may have learned already is that it is best to let the US President have his say until he finds the key to getting Vladimir Putin to the table for negotiating an end to the Ukraine war.

The Ukraine war is the key to the puzzle in stopping which the world may move back to nearer a post-pandemic normality. It is best that Mr Trump’s peace moves over Ukraine lead the way rather than replay his 50 claims on stopping India’s nuclear neighbours from stepping up their conflict into a full-scale war. In the Trump playbook, repetition is often a way of establishing any claim as a fact, much like his four-year-long rant that the 2020 US elections were stolen from under his nose.

The India-US trade negotiations may be resuming to try and unravel the knots, but India can never assume that stepping down purchase of Russian oil or stopping it altogether will lead to peaceful trade because other US demands like buying their corn and their dairy products are likely to crop up. The tariff is a pawn that Mr Trump has used as a weapon of war. Curiously, while he “fights” to stop wars and conflicts, he is also sustaining a trade war against China even though no tariff has been imposed on China because it is Russian oil’s biggest customer.

There is no Nobel Prize for stopping trade wars, which means there may be a lot more of Trump swagger about tariffs ironing out the world’s problems. India has seen its exporters lose a not-insubstantial billions since the US tariffs came into play, but India cannot sacrifice millions of its dairy and food grain farmers for a few dollars. It has chosen a path of not acquiescing to US demands much as China has done, and Brazil.

Apart from asserting that its energy security may include the option of continuing to buy Russian oil, while selling goods that Vladimir Putin has promised to get his people to buy to address the trade surplus, there is little for India to do towards ameliorating the effects of Mr Trump’s theatrics, certainly not when he threatens to wreck the career of a Prime Minister democratically elected by the people.

As Mr Trump alternates between friendly overtures and threats, India may at least tell him that the country has had only three Prime Ministers in the last 26 years in which time the US has had Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joe Biden and now Mr Trump in his second term. The numbers would suggest India is as stable a democracy as the oldest.

3rd growth ‘engine’ for Andhra?

The Narendra Modi-Amit Shah combine has coined the “double-engine sarkar” poll slogan to instil confidence among voters in the Centre’s assured support to propel the growth engine in their respective states. The theme of the slogan can be broadly explained as this: When the same party governs both the Centre and a state, development is not just assured — it is accelerated.

The BJP leadership has been succeeding in installing NDA governments in state after state, with a few exceptions, by ensuring that the slogan does not remain mere political rhetoric, but by implementing infrastructure and industrial projects in NDA-ruled states so that they can convince voters in the next poll-bound state.

Septuagenarian political stalwart N. Chandrababu Naidu rode back to power in Andhra Pradesh in 2024, banking heavily on the “double-engine sarkar” slogan. To everyone’s surprise, a third engine — not Pawan Kalyan’s Jana Sena — seems to have been added in the recent past to finally put the residuary state of Andhra Pradesh, which suffered greatly due to the bifurcation and thereafter, on the track of development. It is Prime Minister Modi’s newfound affection for Mr Naidu’s son and heir apparent, Nara Lokesh, that is consolidating the state’s position as the new global destination for advanced technologies in IT — the latest being the ₹80,000-crore Google AI data centre in Visakhapatnam, with many more lined up. An interest-free ₹13,000-crore loan to build Amaravati and extended help to complete the Polavaram project are just a few examples.

A conscious decision by Mr Lokesh not to repeat the mistake the party made between 2014 and 2019 — painting Mr Modi as enemy out of frustration that arch-rival Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy was being spared — and announcing well in advance the intent to continue the alliance for 2029 — also may have done the trick. Looks like finally Andhra Pradesh is headed for strong growth!

Subhani



Sex, religion, politics and
Army: Taboo at lit fests?



Shobhaa’s Take

To reach Kasauli, one drives through three states (Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh) after landing in Chandigarh. To “outsiders”, this seems bizarre. But for Kasauli’s residents, the reality is still more bizarre. The two-hour drive from a spick-and-span airport, up the mountainous, hazardous, narrow road that leads to Kasauli, is an eye-opener for trusting and wary first-timers to this charming colonial hill station created by the British, for the British, back in 1850.

I was headed there for the 14th edition of the Khushwant Singh Lit Fest, after skipping a few. Seven years on, little had changed along the route, apart from ugly “resorts” that had proliferated, cutting into picturesque hills and destroying acres of pine and deodar forests that were once the main attraction for retired desi brigadiers, still longing for the “Koi Hai” comforts of old.

Kasauli is a world in itself, controlled and overrun by the notorious Kasauli monkeys, aggressive enough to grab food from sturdy grown men with *lathis*. Locals warn: It’s best to throw away whatever eatables you are carrying than take on these monkeys. Well, these armies of simians aren’t the only fierce monkeys around. There are enough two-legged ones, to make city folks nervous.

Despite these challenges, Kasauli is attracting *Dilliwallas* in droves: well-heeled arms dealers with shady reputations promoting fancy villas as investment opportunities. I fear for Kasauli. For decades it was a genteel, gentrified getaway for geriatrics looking for the good life amidst sylvan surroundings. Unfortunately, loud *Panjus* are muscling their way into this serene destination, eyeing highly-coveted

real estate, and behaving like those Mall monkeys on the rampage.

Talking to shop owners and other stakeholders in and around the mall, one discovers a few significant changes. The popular Tibetan Market doesn’t exist. But the old signage does. The once vibrant Tibetan community is invisible today. Apparently, the Army wasn’t very happy about their continued presence. Given Kasauli’s strategic location, the strong *fauji* numbers are hard to miss. It’s bristling with Army brass, being a heavily military-influenced area, administered by a Cantonment Board, now headed by CEO Himanshu Samant. On a clear day it’s possible to get a glimpse of Kashmir from the historic Kasauli Club, founded in 1880.

Chandigarh-wallahs refuse to take any chances when they drive up for the LitFest — they hire armed guards, insisting the roads are unsafe. Given the Wild West situation in Haryana and Punjab, it’s best to err on the side of caution, as my good friend confided, after sharing hair-raising stories of aggro behaviour of burly bullies out to intimidate single, unescorted women. There is much that’s going on in this part of our country, that remains under wraps. In the past editions of the KS LitFest, one heard unfiltered, strong voices of powerful opinion shapers freely discussing and debating national concerns. Not anymore. Conversations at most lit fests have turned stilted, muted, self-conscious and self-censored. Unfortunately, I missed former Army Chief Gen. M.M. Naravane’s session on his new book. His unreleased memoir *Four Stars of Destiny* has been waiting for the Central government’s approval for over a year.

The general candidly states it was his job to write

In the past editions of the KS LitFest, one heard unfiltered, strong voices of powerful opinion shapers freely discussing and debating national concerns. Not anymore.

the book, but getting approvals from the defence ministry was the publisher’s responsibility. Meanwhile, his fictional work, *Cantonment Conspiracy: A Military Thriller*, was avidly discussed at the lit fest, with Rear Adm. Nirmala Kannan (Retd) leading the session. Apparently, the much-awaited memoir that has yet to see the light of day contains sensitive revelations about military operations and government policies. The general refused to get drawn into the controversy, and stuck to repeating: “The ball is in the court of the publisher and MoD.”

My own session was a complete riot! I enjoyed it thoroughly, as did the audience. Even though 10.30 am was too early a time to discuss sensuality/sexuality, and a special session should have been created at 10.30 pm, there was record attendance braving the strong glare and unusual heat. The venue was overflowing, to my delight. An 89-year-old gentleman from the audience was determined to discuss the “Big O” (orgasm), frequently pointing out he was not referring to “organism”. It took a while to calm him down! There were earnest schoolkids in the audience, and I didn’t want their teachers to demand earplugs from Niloufer Billimoria or Rahul Singh — the dynamic duo behind the lit fest.

Politics, sex, religion and military topics are endangered subjects at lit fests across India. Despite the attempts to curb, inhibit and curtail such dialogues, I was vastly amused when a former diplomat from Pakistan (a regular at KS Lit Fests in the past), sent me a WhatsApp message a few hours after my ram-bunctious session designed

around my new book *The Sensual Self: An Exploration of Love, Sex and Romance*, saying he had relished the lively session. How the hell did he know what had transpired while he was relaxing at his Lahore home? He sent a laughing emoji and naughtily shared that our guys on both sides of the border haven’t yet figured out how to block livestreaming! How deliciously wicked!

Back in Mumbai, I started following the viral story of a 10-year-old little boy called Ishit Bhatt whose cheeky interactions with the legendary Amitabh Bachchan on *Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC Junior)* had landed him in boiling water on social media platforms. That Mr Bachchan conducted himself the way he did, faced with the boy’s bratty attitude, is in itself a masterclass in maturity, displaying enormous presence of mind. The real question is not about the kid’s insolence, but our response to it. Ishit was labelled the “most hated kid on the Internet” and savagely mauled and trolled across platforms. The cyber-bullying is still on. I was puzzled by the boy’s hyper behaviour myself, and seriously bugged, till I watched a reel by a doctor who suggested the child could be suffering from ADS (Attention Deficit Syndrome). If so, should parents push kids to participate in such shows where participants face either excessive adulation or exaggerated hate? Can any child handle such pressure, and emerge emotionally unscathed? What happens to this Class 5 kid from Gandhinagar once he gets back home? Will losing in that critical KBC round damage his psyche permanently? Reality shows are harsh enough for adults; but grown-ups can make their own independent choices. It’s kids who are thrust into the spotlight, who need our support and understanding.

Happy Diwali, readers. Let the new year be filled with sparklers and patakas. Time to go “Thamma Thamma”!

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

PRESS FREEDOM IN PERIL IN US

It appears Mr. Trump wants to have a committed press and journalists who will praise him sky high even if he acts like a despot, hence his harangue that ‘the press is very disruptive in terms of world peace, and it is very dishonest’. For decades, Pentagon reporters have informed the public how wars are fought, how defence funds are spent and how decisions are made that put American lives at risk. The journalists who had returned their press- passes rather than abide by the new rules should be appreciated. Since press freedom is in danger, Democrats should force the Trump administration to rescind the regressive rules, uphold the 1st amendment of the American constitution which guarantees free speech and a free press.

A.SESHAGIRI RAO
Chennai

TELL TRUMP OFF

Trump does not use the names of other world leaders as he uses Modi’s in the furtherance of American interest. A strong leader does not outsource his country’s key decisions to the leader of another country. No self-respecting leader allows his name to be invoked by the head of government of a foreign country to utter falsehoods and humiliate him. The MEA must tell Trump to stop speaking and acting like India’s attorney or Super-PM and respect India’s sovereignty. What Trump means by saying that he does not want to destroy Modi’s political career defies understanding.

G. David Milton
Maruthancode

GOOD MONSOON NEWS

According to the India Meteorological Department, the 2025 northeast monsoon, which has arrived early, is predicted to bring above-normal rains. This should significantly boost agriculture in the southern peninsula. This is particularly good news for farmers who depend on these rains to cultivate rabi crops. If monsoon distribution remains steady, India could see lower food inflation, stable agri-input demand, and stronger rural spending, which are positive signs for both the economy and consumer sentiment. However, one cannot rule out the climate change-induced unpredictability, which always remains a looming threat during the northeast monsoon. As India gears up for the sowing season, farmers’ eyes will be on the skies and on the soil.

R. SIVAKUMAR
Chennai

Mail your letters to chennnaidesk@deccanmail.com

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



“Why do we call these pathetic creatures ‘trolls’? They are lonely, lost and intellectually-challenged souls
Who pass their hours inventing some abuse Or conspiracies, both vengeful and abstruse. They ignore the proverb of sticks and stones Believing their words can break skulls and bones We hoped social media would be solidly integrating Not reckoning human viciousness was in the wings, waiting?”

— From Bet Ago

Why was Donald’s
claim overlooked?
Many have missed
out on the Nobels!

Nobel Prizes? Two jokes: “Why did V.S. Naipaul have a knocker on his front door?” A: “Because he won the No Bell prize!” (Rejected by the Christmas Cracker joke commissioners — *fd*)
Second: “Why didn’t Trump get the Nobel Peace Prize?” A: “Because the Nobel committee are not deaf, blind, dumb or demented.”

Ah well... jokes aside, what can the Nobel judges have been thinking of, giving the prize to a Venezuelan fighter for democracy rather than the criminally-convicted, racist, misogynist, Epstein mate?

He who stopped the war between Azerbaijan and Albania; put invader Vladimir Putin firmly in his place; liberated Crimea; stopped the slaughter in Sudan, Somalia and Myanmar where the evacuated

Rohingya territories are to be converted to the Riviera of the Bay of Bengal with Trump hotels and golf courses?

Even Maria Machado, who won the prize, has, according to the White House, called Donny to acknowledge that the Trumpet should have got it. He has of course been blowing his own and probably believes that he did win for all his achievements, including ruining the American and global economy, claiming Greenland, Panama and Canada as American territory and putting China firmly in its place by imposing impossible tariffs on Dim Sum.

Why didn’t the Nobel judges take into consideration the man’s infinite modesty, his shying away from all publicity, his charming attitude to wanting to “grab” cats, possibly to stroke and feed them?

The world won’t be surprised if, now that the Venezuelan winner of the prize has sort of conceded to Donny, he claims that he is the actual winner and will fly in the private plane gifted to him by Dapur to Osmanabad to collect it and give, as the world’s primary benefactor, shunning all immodesty in his acceptance speech, advice on how to drink bleach to cure all variants of Covid. The thought of this icon’s modesty reminds me of another moment in which a Nobel prize figured. In 2001 I happened to be working for an animation firm in Bangalore when the office phone rang. It was for me. The caller said she was calling from the BBC radio programme *The World at*

One, and did I have a mobile phone on which they could call me in a few hours’ time.

I asked what this was about and she said, “It’s about your friend V.S. Naipaul”. My heart sank. Had something tragic happened? I asked her: “About what? Is he...” “No, no, he’s just won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and we thought we’d like your comments.” I couldn’t wait to put the phone down. I gave her my Indian mobile number. I then dialled Sir Vidia’s home in Wiltshire and Nadira, Lady Naipaul, a friend who always refers to me as her brother, answered. She said the place had gone wild with reporters and TV cameras from all over the world hanging around the house, the gardens and the country lanes outside.

I said I had heard the good news, that the BBC would be interviewing me for comment on the afternoon’s radio programme and asked her to convey my heartfelt congratulations.

“No, no, no”, she said, “If he knows you called, he’ll want to answer the phone. He’s doing an interview but I know he’ll want to come away... I’ll go and get him.”

In moments Vidia was on the phone. “You’ve heard of my little piece of good luck,” was the first thing he said.

Of course, the Nobel committees don’t solicit recommendations, but if they did, I have two possible nominations in mind.

I would like to persuade them to award the Literature Nobel to Salman Rushdie. It’s about time. Not only is his work unique in its content and form, he has suffered and sacrificed in the cause of literature. I know the latter is not a legitimate criterion, and I won’t deny being sentimental about it.

Another person and another incident comes to mind. Soon after Bob Dylan won the Nobel for Literature, I was with Vidia Naipaul, who asked me quite sincerely whether I thought he should have been awarded it. I said he certainly should have, as his composition of lyrics would undoubtedly fit an expanded definition of “literature”.

Following from that, I would ask the Nobel *wallahs* to expand the definition of “peace” on the grounds that humans don’t only fight wars against each other, they also fight wars against disease. One of the people who has been a philanthropic warrior in these essential wars is Cyrus Poonawalla, the initiator and owner of the Serum Institute in Pune, India, who, apart from manufacturing the “Astra-Zeneca” vaccine against Covid-19, has donated millions of doses of vaccines to fight diseases from polio to malaria, to Africa and the poorer nations and populations of the world.

And Gaza? Did Donald Trump’s persuasive powers result in peace there? Or was it threatening pressure from the families of the hostages and the vast majority of Israeli citizens who support them?

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